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Digitalizing social work education: preparing students to engage with twenty-first century practice need

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ABSTRACT

This study, designed to surface student conceptions of digital development throughout their professional training, concluded mid-2019. Whilst mentioned in brief in a previous publication, this paper reports the work in full. The learning from it is important to formulating a response to practice changes driven by Covid19. Practice shifts that forced the profession to do social work at a distance, at speed, and largely through a screen. While not to dismiss efforts to adjust to the restrictions put in place to mitigate the spread of the virus, the lack of digital capabilities across the profession meant that the pivot to online practices presented significant and avoidable challenges. Informed by student descriptions of an educational experience devoid of digital development, this paper offers a solution. The 'Digitalising Social Work Education Framework' provides a context in which to review the facilitation of digital capabilities development. It is a means to ensuring that curriculum design, content, and delivery equips students to use technologies for their learning and in practice. It avoids reducing digital professionalism to a set of technical skills and promotes the need to engage with the realities of sociotechnical practices, including those that erode people's privacy, rights and freedom from interference.

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Introduction

This phenomenographic study, referred to in brief in a previous publication (Taylor, 2017), was designed to surface social work students' experiences of digital development throughout their course of their professional training. It was developed at a time when the relationship between technological solutions and technological harms was becoming much more visible (Ess, 2013; LaMendola, 2010; Naughton, 2012), at a time when the unintended consequences of technological innovation were becoming more pernicious and oppressive for particular populations and for particular people. While critical discussions regarding platform design ethics were too beginning to gather momentum (Boyd et al., 2014; Floridi, 2013; Wigan & Clarke, 2013), there was a distinct lack of clarity about how this criticality was filtering into social work education and practice, or how much impact these emerging understandings were having on digital

practice preparedness and practice responses. There were however some clear markers that social work in England had not engaged fully in its digital development, evidenced by a steep rise in the number of digitally orientated errors within practitioner and student populations. Investigations by the regulator at that time, the Health Care Professionals Council (HCPC), found errors of judgement, value conflicts and a lack of translation of the professional standards and codes of practice by those involved in these very public incidents (McGregor, 2011; Schraer, 2015; Stevenson, 2014).

Around the same time, although not directly related, the efficacy of English social work education to prepare students for contemporary practices was once again being debated (Taylor & Bogo, 2014). Surprising however was the lack of acknowledgement of the digital within the reviews of social work education that followed (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). Professional issues associated with digital innovations of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' (Schwab, 2017, p. 3.) were starkly absent from review recommendations. An anomaly that served to confirm that technological developments continued to be viewed 'as rather esoteric and distanced from the true nature of the caring professions' (Toole, 1987, in Ballantyne, 2017, p. 3). This was Despite warning calls from a small group of social work academics (Glastonbury, 1985; LaMendola, 1987; Perron et al., 2010; Rafferty, 1998; Rafferty & Steyaert, 2009; Rafferty & Waldman, 2006), who, for well over 30 years, had been urging the profession to concern itself with technological developments, as related to 'human problems, human values, human ethics' (Ballantyne, 2017, p. 4). Calls for change continue to be made from those of us working at the social work and technologies intersection (see, for example, Rafferty in Westwood, 2014; Taylor-Beswick, 2019; Zgoda & Shane, 2018).

The current health crisis has served to further illuminate how technology acceptance and digital criticality remains problematic across the profession (Taylor-Beswick, 2021). Notwithstanding the gargantuan efforts made by social work educators, students and practitioners to adjust practices in fulfilment of their professional responsibilities, the profession cannot deny how the lack of digital development hindered and is hindering education and practice effectiveness (BASW, 2020; Goldkind et al., 2020; Turner, 2021). The current risk, as the world returns to more proximal interactions, is a reversion to the sole reliance on analog methods, an issue that will be detrimental to the professions post-pandemic progression. The most recent study commissioned by the current regulator for social work in England, Social Work England (SWE), lays bare the extensiveness of digital knowledge and skills gaps in the student, academic and practitioner populations (Pentaris et al., 2021), there is however little mention of how this circumstance is in direct conflict with the expectations set out in the professional standards for education and practice, standards that were transferred from the HCPC to SWE (Social Work England (SWE), 2019). Requirements which have been in place for a significant period, that outline the technological expectations of social work education and practice (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012; Health Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2014).

A more robust review of the requirements for education and practice is needed, and it is for this reason that this phenomenographic work, more specifically the 'Digitalising Social Work Framework', is important. Developed in response to the digital deficits in social work education, as described by a group of students' who had experienced their

programme of learning in its fullness. It was designed as a context within which social work programmes can review curriculum design, content and delivery, so as to make clear how students are being facilitated to not only use technologies for their learning but also in their practice. Furthermore, as a means to examining how students are learning about the issues associated with twenty-first century digital technologies and socio-technical innovation; about how each can both support and at the same time oppress the people they will go on to work with and for. Learning from this work is not only applicable to students in England, it is translatable to social work programmes globally. The fact that digital errors and errors involving the digital continue, and that they continue to outdate the completion of this doctoral study provides further evidence that digital development continues to lag across the profession and, unsurprisingly, not solely within the English jurisdiction (see, for example: CPS, 2021; Locum Today, 2017, 2018; Pennington, 2021; Roche, 2019; Turner, 2019).

Twenty-first Century Practice Preparedness

Social work education is the medium through which students are socialized (Weiss, Gal, & Cnaan, 2004 in Miller, 2010). It is the gateway to professional qualification, underpinned globally by sets of regulatory requirements, aimed at informing curriculum design, content, and delivery (Grant et al., 2017; Webb, 2017). The programme of learning that is realized out of an interpretation of the regulatory requirements and benchmark statements should provide opportunities for students to achieve practice readiness. However, despite there being 'no simple truths about what constitutes readiness to practice' (Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002, p. 8) and 'limited consensus about how to measure this' (Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011, p. 1340), there remains an expectation that practice readiness, or practice preparedness will occur, and that students' will transfer easily and naturally from the educational context into the practice context (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). The work of Le Maistre and Paré (2004), clearly shows how 'the often difficult transition between the two' (p. 44) can lead to a reduction in early career practitioner confidence. While feelings of unpreparedness are not unusual on entering professional practice (Wilson & Kelly, 2010) practice effectiveness can be compromised when the transition is left to chance or not sufficiently bolstered (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Moore & Morton, 2017). Effectiveness in the context of this work is related to the preparedness of students to practice in a digitally saturated world, one in which almost everyone and everything is 'connected' (Scardilli, 2014, p. 1).

Even though social work in England has a fairly new regulating body, the need for education providers to evidence how their programmes of learning are 'relevant to current practice' remains an expectation (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012, p. 7; Social Work England (SWE), 2019). As does the requirement to outline how the educational offer predicts and reflects change 'in practice and its organisation, changes in the law and changes in service users' needs', as well as 'developments in the profession's research base and advances in technology' (Health Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2014, p. 39; Social Work England (SWE), 2019). At the point of study design, there were a clear set of technological requirements and benchmark statements, deemed sufficient for informing social work education for how to prepare students for digital practices (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2008, Health

and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012, and Health Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2014). What remained unexamined was how these requirements were impacting on a student's digital development. Given how the profession grappled to pivot online during the acute phase of the pandemic and how there is an ongoing and marked increase in digital practice failings, the need to understand how social work education is preparing students of social work to engage with a digitally saturated world continues to feel urgent. The outcomes of this phenomenographic work are more relevant than ever. Now, as was the case at the point of study design, student-centric approaches are the most authentic way to go about understanding student experiences of and within the educational landscape.

Methodology

The decision to take a phenomenographic approach to this work was influenced by its educational origins, and due to how in taking 'a student-centred understanding, academics' attention is focused on what the students are experiencing' (Akerlind, 2008, p. 634). Unlike, for example, phenomenology where the focus is on getting to the essence of a particular phenomenon, phenomenographers aim to reveal or surface conceptions or descriptions about how a phenomenon is conceived of or experienced by the population experiencing it. Phenomenographers explain this as the second-order perspective, which is different from the first-order perspective where 'we orient ourselves towards the world and make statements about it' (Marton, 1981, p. 178). In the second [order] perspective, 'we orient ourselves towards people's ideas about the world (or their experience of it) and we make statements about people's ideas about the world (or about their experience of it)' (Marton, 1981, p. 178). In this work, statements are made about and using final-year social work students' described experiences of digital development to illuminate how their programme of learning was facilitating learning of this nature in adherence with the professional standards relevant at that time.

Despite the use of thick or rich descriptions of experience when reporting, phenomenographers report on 'the collective experience' (Leadbetter & Bell, 2018, p. 469). Phenomenographic findings are not individual specific, even though the outcomes of a phenomenographic study derive from the identification and analysis of variation in experience across the population of focus (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Sin, 2010). Thick or rich descriptions are provided as part of phenomenographic reporting, so as to offer access to a sample of the described experiences from which conclusions have been drawn. A method that Sandberg (1997) refers to as 'communicative validity' (p. 14). Thus, in keeping with the phenomenographic approach this paper uses rich descriptions of experience to make statements about how digital development was conceived of by a group of social work students' in England who were nearing qualification. It provides insights into the significance of the phenomenographic approach for examining how social work education is experienced, through outlining the processes that led to learning more about the relationship between curriculum design, content and delivery, student practice preparedness and the needs of the practice landscape—here relating to the digital.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this work was granted by the university where both the participants and the doctoral candidate were enrolled for study. Due to a period of sabbatical absence the researcher had limited academic or pastoral responsibility for this particular cohort of social work students. Involvement in the study was explained to the final-year student group, who were on campus for a final placement recall event. Data processing, storage, consent, confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study was included in the presentation, as was the fact that engaging in this work would have no impact on academic achievement or success.

Methods

Gaining perspectives on digital development from student social workers as recipients of social work education involved ‘listening to and learning directly from them’ (Hessenauer & Zastrow, 2013, p. 20), through the creation of spaces where they could consider their experiences and articulate their points of view. Semi-structured interviews, a method consistent with the phenomenographic approach, involved 11 final year, final semester student social workers, given that it is this cohort of students who will have had the opportunity to engage with and experience the curriculum to its fullest.

Sampling

There are significant differences in opinion amongst phenomenographers about sampling methods and sample size. Trigwell (2006) for example, suggests somewhere between 10 and 30 participants to be an appropriate amount, while Larsson and Holmström (2007) lean towards 20. Dahlgren (1995) makes reference to 10, whereas at the complete other end of the scale, Thomson (2016) discusses 4 to be a sufficient amount. Reed (2006) however, focuses less on volume and more on achieving ‘as much variation as possible’ across the sample group (p. 7). Trem (2017) helpfully draws on the work of Mann (2009) to highlight the ‘importance of there being a shared experience ... on which to reflect’ and on the work of Reed (2006) to conclude that ‘research subjects are ... selected for their relationship with the specific aspect of the world that is being studied’ (p. 9). All of which is in keeping with the thinking of Sin (2010) and Yates et al. (2012) who believe that it is a combination of things, when thought about together, that are ‘likely to uncover the variation’ in phenomenographic work (2012, p. 10). It was thinking of this nature that guided the sampling decisions in this work, because it is hard to imagine how, without a reasonable number of participants, variation across a sample could reliably be achieved (Sandberg, 1997, p. 206). While the number of participants borders on what is thought to be sufficient, comparing the demographics of the sample to statistical data relating to the social work student population across England around that time provided reassurances regarding variation (Skills for Care, 2016).

Data generation

In qualitative research the semi-structured interview tends to involve a series of carefully crafted questions, organized to extract experience (Coe et al., 2017). Whereas in phenomenography, the semi-structured interview includes both interactive and non-directive methods (MacMillan, 2014). Study participants were invited to complete an introductory activity, or ‘spark’ event, as Turner and Noble usefully describe it, that served ‘to provide an anchor for reference points for both participant and interviewer’ throughout the duration of the interview process (Turner & Noble, 2015, p. 1). Even though not originally designed for research purposes, the ‘Visitor and Resident’ (White & Le Cornu, 2011) pedagogic device was chosen because of its digital orientations; because of how well it lends itself to reflecting on and the mapping of digital usage, choices and experience. The centrality of reflection and the frequency with which social work students are expected to engage with it also shaped this decision (Papell & Skolnik, 1992; Schon, 1983). As a means of becoming more familiar with the proposed methods an example Visitor and Resident map and a blank copy of the interview Reflective Mapping Tool (Appendix 1) was forwarded to study participants in advance of the interview, along with guidance outlining the tool, its origins and purpose. Once within the interview space students were invited to complete the mapping exercise, but only after they had confirmed that they were clear about the method and its purpose. There was a notable sense of usefulness, and retrospection post-task completion:

‘I wish we’d of had this in first year’

“If I’d had this in my other degree I maybe wouldn’t have got into a bit of bother with something I posted on Facebook”

“If it’s ok with you I might take this [the interview mapping tool] to my new workplace, I don’t think they know about this stuff there either”

Examples student digital professionalism mapping below (Figures 1–4), are a selection from those completed, embedded to illustrate the spark activity method.

What also surfaced at this early stage of the interview process, was how described experiences revealed an unfamiliarity with the subject matter. As can be seen in the below descriptions, this was the first time that students could consciously recall reflecting upon the digital, as related to the professional:

“You know what I’m thinking, just reflecting on it now, I’ve probably got some of this [when discussing changes made to behaviours and presence online] since I’ve started uni - most of it in fact. I hadn’t really thought about it till now. I only changed my name about a year and half ago, because people could search and find me easily. Maybe I’m realising my own transition from being a support worker to a social worker, a professional - don’t know if that makes sense?”

“No idea, [when responding to questions about why new technologies had been adopted whilst engaged with social work education] you can text and call and email and stuff, but it is just to keep up with society I suppose. Keep up with trends. I don’t use them. I can just say I’ve got it. So, if people on my course ask if I’ve got Twitter I say yeah but just don’t ask me to tweet anything”.

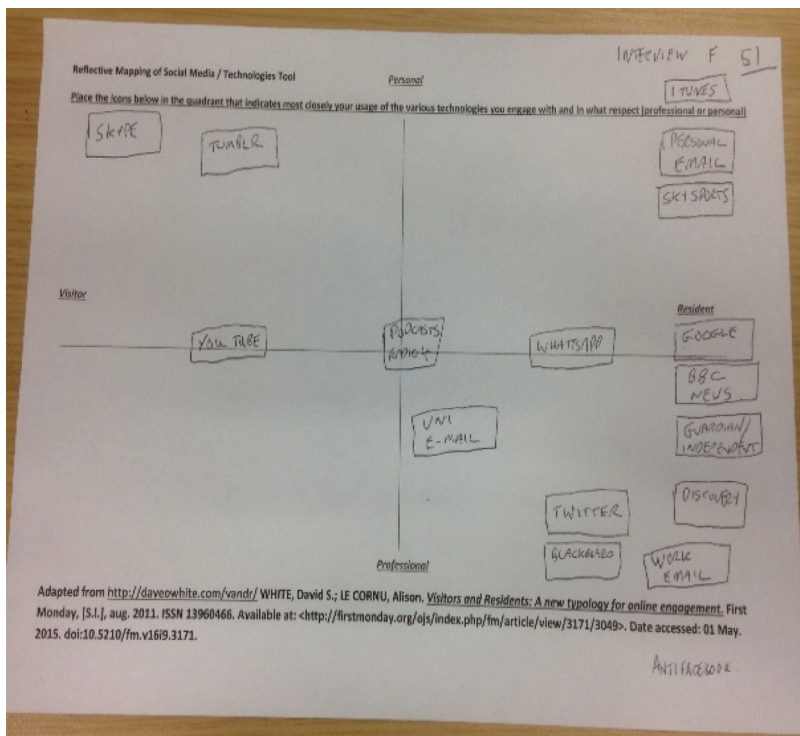


Figure 1. Examples of student digital professionalism mapping as in the original submission.

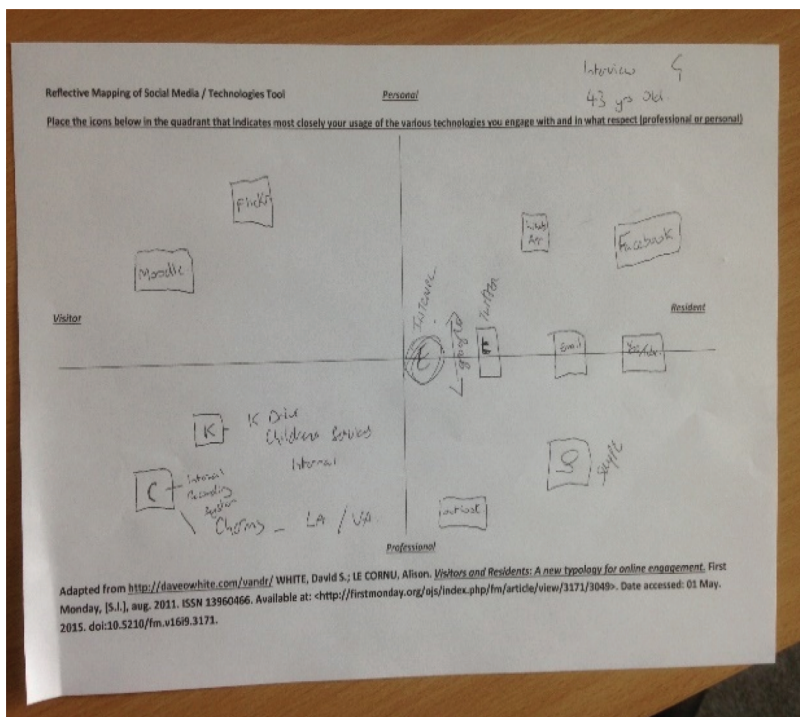


Figure 2. Examples of student digital professionalism mapping as in the original submission.

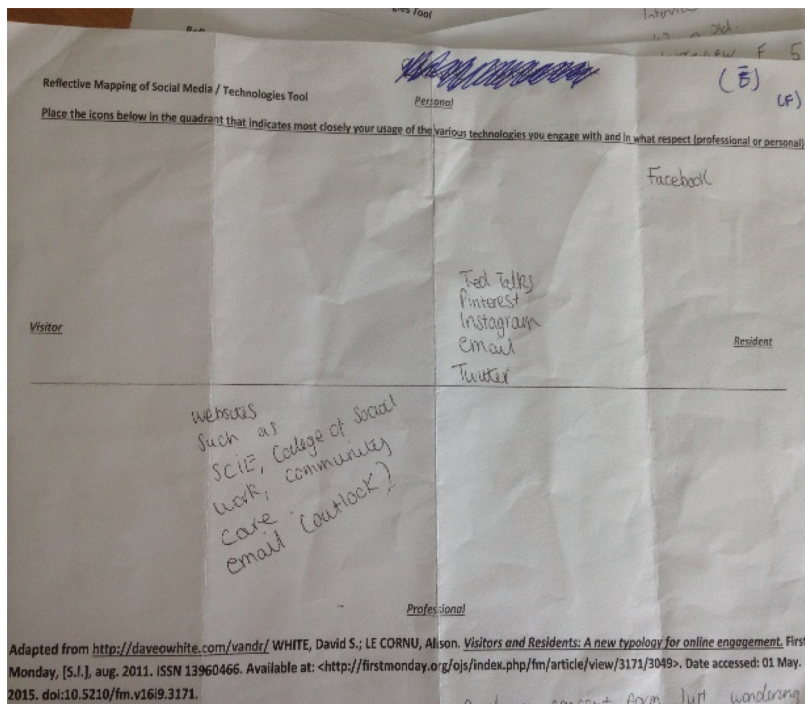


Figure 3. Examples of student digital professionalism mapping as in the original submission.

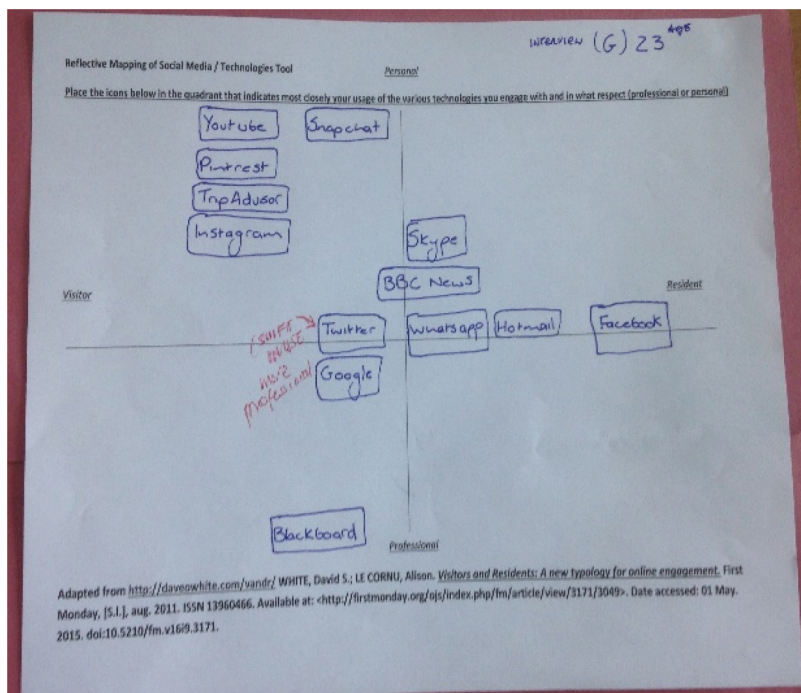


Figure 4. Examples of student digital professionalism mapping as in the original submission.

What can also be seen is how effective the spark activity was for surfacing experiences, or the lack of them, and how it did in fact serve as an ‘anchor’ and ‘reference point’ for the semi-structured interview that followed on (Turner & Noble, 2015, p. 1). There was a significant amount of toing and froing, by all participants, who were keen to further explain the mapped content, including which digital technologies they were or were not using, in which contexts and why. Interestingly, within these reflections students sought to understand how connections were being made between the digital and the professional, or how these two things had become enmeshed:

“I don’t really know [referring to why adjustments had been made to presence online] - no one really told us. I think I must just be applying being a social worker across everything”

“I’d not thought about it [when asked about technology usage/ presence online] until now . . . I probably will have a little bit more of a think about it now, after this, about how I use different things. I’m going to go back again, have a look at it all, and sort it out because I’ve seen that it can be used for jobs and people can see you on there. It might ruin my career. You see I didn’t see that there was any difference between being careful in real life and careful on what we say online until now”.

Linked to this were concerns about assumptions that were perceived to have been made about the digital capabilities students bring to their course, and how helpful it would have been to have had formal digital instruction as part of the professional learning experience:

“No, none at all [referring to formal teaching and instruction] and that meant you didn’t really know how to use them [technologies] properly”

“There are far too many assumptions made about what we know [with reference to digital technologies] and what we can do with all this stuff”

“It really would have helped to have known how to keep yourself safe and then in practice we can keep other people safe”

“People aren’t equipped, [discussion about digital skills] and we need it [digital knowledge] to support our learning. Most of this can be done at home too. There should be homework tasks using social media and things and an assessment too”.

One particular description of experience totalled a theme consistent throughout this work:

“When I came on this course no one told us much, if anything at all, about technologies. There was no formal training”.

The significance of this comment became further apparent through the data analysis, and when considering the findings in the context of technological requirements of a social work course. Retrospection of a similar nature continued on into and throughout the research interviews; surfaced further and in additional depth through the analysis.

Analysis and Findings

Supported by the inclusion of rich or thick descriptions, the findings, or outcomes of phenomenographic work are presented as ‘categories of description’ and an ‘outcome space’, constructed from fragments of experience that are collated into meaning pools, developed through the highly iterative analysis that involves engaging with all transcripts simultaneously. The approach taken to the analysis of student transcripts followed the advice of Bruce (1998):

Becoming familiar with the transcripts; determining the qualitatively differing meanings associated with the varying experiences of . . . [the phenomenon]; determining how people’s awareness of . . . [the phenomenon] was being structured in order for the meaning to be experienced; creating the categories of description; and identifying the relationships between the categories in order to develop an outcome space. (p. 28)

Categories of description

In phenomenographic work, a single transcript can and often does, contain more than one category of description (Akerlind, 2005). As noted earlier, a category does not necessarily reflect a single participant experience, it is composed from the development of meaning pools, collated from descriptions of experience generated through the research interviews. Categories are constructed to show variation in ways of experiencing something in the world at a collective level. It is for this reason thick or rich descriptions are included, to ‘give some *sense* of the conception they are illustrating’, however as Ashwin goes on to point out, in phenomenographic work it is ‘unusual to find single quotations that perfectly illustrate each conception’ (Ashwin, 2005, p. 635) (Table 1).

Table 1. Categories of description.

Digital development, for this group of social work students, was described to involve the following:
(1) the expectations of the course
(2) being on the course
(3) observing others on the course
(4) applying learning to the course.

The categories of description developed through this work have been constituted from student conceptions about how digital development was experienced through and throughout the course of their professional training. Each category represents a way that digital development was described to have been experienced, ‘a “conception” of the phenomenon’ (Davey, 2014, p. 1), according to this particular group of students, at this particular point in time. It is important to point out, as explained succinctly by Tight, epistemologically, ‘phenomenographers operate with the underlying assumption that, for any given phenomenon of interest, there are only a limited number of ways of perceiving, understanding, or experiencing it (Tight, 2016, p. 320). There are also longstanding debates about whether or not that categories of description should be hierarchical (Marton, 1981, 1994; Yates et al., 2012). What appears to be more important and valued

within the literature, is that they are relational (Marton & Pang, 2008; Pang & Ki, 2016), that they show how each relates to the other in a way that can inform a pedagogic approach (Webb, 2017).

Categories in this work were more relational than hierarchically inclusive. They are presented to reflect, as closely as is ever possible, the world as it appeared to this student group. The following is an outline of each of the categories of description, including examples of the described experiences from which the categories were constructed and the relationship between each worked out.

Category 1. ‘expectations of the course’, refers to conceptions that show digital development to have been influenced by the need to independently navigate the digital expectations of the course. Conceptions are largely located in descriptions of preconceived ideas, or ‘assumptions’ made about the digital abilities students’ bring with them to their course:

*“This was my first real experience of this stuff [technologies required for accessing academic materials and resources online] and that was a real baptism of fire. They [academic staff] make assumptions that we can use these things you know, then when we say we can’t they give us an online link that’s supposed to show us how to *laughs*”*

“Using Blackboard, again this is self-taught. So, it’s like this is your space get on with it. You’ve got to learn how to upload an essay for submission . . . not only were there issues about getting around the thing itself, there were also difficulties with having to say I don’t know how to do this. There are general presumptions, I think, particularly for mature students that you know what you are doing. It’s not everybody that has a background in this stuff”

Category 2. ‘being on the course’, reflects how digital development was influenced by engagement with the programme of learning more broadly, how ‘being on the course’ exposed students’ to information that caused them to examine the digital and their engagement with it:

“It’s just by being here. This course really hammers home that you can ruin your career, it can go to pot if you’re not careful and that’s before even thinking about all the internet stuff”

“Well it’s just from being here, on this course you know, it makes you think about everything. It isn’t that you get taught it, I think it’s kinda subliminal, like it just goes into you somehow”

“I think it’s because of having professional awareness of what to put on [referring to posting online]. We haven’t had direct teaching about it really, you just hear things in passing”

Category 3. ‘observations of others on the course’, include conceptions that show how digital development was conceived of as having been influenced through the observation of others on the course:

“I’m still trying to learn for myself. I don’t know enough and I see my peers getting it wrong all the time and I don’t want to. I think I’ve just got risk on my mind a lot”

“I watch my peers as well. Sometimes I notice others, like if they put something a bit dodgy and I think, should you really be putting that - but maybe I’m just being a bit over cautious. I mean on Facebook there has been a couple of incidents”

"I've noticed how it leads to problems. I think maybe it's because I'm not in control of what other people write and don't want to be responsible or part of anything that maybe get me into trouble, so it worries me. You can learn a lot from watching what other people are doing – even when it's not really right".

Category 4. 'applying learning to the course' showed digital development to have involved the application of more general professional learning to encounters of a digital nature engaged with while on the course:

"I knew some stuff from before. There was an occasion on Facebook where I put something and a colleague on my nursing course got in touch with me and said have you had a look at the nursing guidelines, because he thought what I wrote might cause me a problem. So, through reading the guidance back then and after a process of reflection I realised where I'd gone wrong. That hasn't really left me"

"Ironically getting in trouble then has helped me here. I'm really careful now"

"I've always been cautious about what I am putting online but I would have been more blasé about it before the course because I now understand no matter what you do there can be a way somebody can find it if they really wanted to. I guess my knowledge and my understanding of what you need to do to keep yourself safe has grown"

"Anything I'm prepared to say and how I need to listen is the same online. It [presence online] has to be in a manner that I am accountable for. You have got to think of the harm we can cause to others if we are not skilled social workers. I don't see them [interactions online] any different than face to face in terms of being a professional anymore. You know I think I took that learning and applied it. I think maybe because I had a fear about getting it wrong".

Outcome Space

The 'outcome space' aspect of reporting phenomenographic work, is a diagrammatical representation of the categories that serves to provide insights into the structural and referential aspects of the described experiences. Marton and Booth (1997 in Akerlind, 2005) 'present three primary criteria for judging the quality of a phenomenographic outcome space':

- (1) that each category in the outcome space reveals something distinctive about a way of understanding or experiencing the phenomenon;
- (2) that the categories are logically related, typically as a hierarchy of structurally inclusive relationships;
- (3) that the outcomes are parsimonious—i.e. that the critical variation in experience observed in the data be represented by a set of as few categories as possible (p. 323).

The outcome space below shows: the four categories of description (the expectations of the course; being on the course; observing others on the course; applying learning to the course); the overarching external structural aspect of the described experiences, what the experiences where foregrounded in (digital exposure); the internal structural aspects of the described experiences, the contextual aspects of the described experiences (technical; professional; practice); and the three referential or awareness aspects of the described

experiences, what was in the forefront of students awareness (navigating the digital; examining the digital; reimagining the digital) surfaced through the research interviews and structured through the data analysis. The described experiences illustrate how digital development occurred independent of formal instruction, how it was incidental, how it happened by chance. It was a by-product of digital exposure, encounters or digitally orientated experiences that occurred when students were engaged with their course (Table 2).

Table 2. Outcome Space: a diagrammatical representation of the categories of ways of describing experiences of digital development.

Referential aspects of the described experiences			
Structural aspects of the described experiences	Navigating the Digital	Examining the Digital	Reimagining the Digital
	1. expectations of the course		
Professional Orientation	2. being on the course	2. being on the course 3. observing others on the course	
Practice Orientation			4. applying learning to the course

Experiencing Digital Development in Social Work Education

The qualitative difference between Category 1 and Category 2 description is that conceptions were found to be less technical in nature, associated more with learning to become a professional and learning about what being professional means. The qualitative difference between Category 2 and Category 3 is signified by the shift beyond the ‘expectations of the course’ *‘what you have to do’* and ‘being on the course’, the idea that *‘it just goes into you somehow’* to a more critical and deliberate approach to the digital, achieved here through *‘watching’* and reflecting upon *‘what other people’* were doing online. The qualitative difference between Category 4 and all other categories includes and shifts beyond the technical orientation of Category 1 and professional orientation of Categories 2 and 3. A more sophisticated appreciation of and active engagement with the affordances and hindrances of new digital knowledge, practice values and practice skills and attempts to apply digitally orientated thinking to professional learning and development were seen.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates the potential of phenomenography for surfacing experience, through outlining the methods a phenomenographic researcher employs to enter into the life world of those experiencing a particular phenomenon, so as to make statements about how it has been experienced. It demonstrates the depth with which experience can be explored and examined, and the insights that can be gained through the robustly iterative data analysis processes.

With regards to what has been surfaced, there is little in the literature to indicate that students across England, or indeed other jurisdictions, are having experiences of digital development that differs from what this group of students' have described. Indeed, a study carried out during the latter stages of this work (NHS Digital, 2018) and another carried out after it was concluded, asked qualified social worker practitioners if they felt that they had been adequately prepared for practice in a digital world (BASW, 2020). The overwhelming outcome of each is captured succinctly in the findings of the NHS Digital work, that social work professionals in England 'receive no specific training on digital' during and beyond their foundational professional training (NHS Digital, 2018, np).

In offering a response to the findings, it must first be acknowledged that while qualifying programmes in England have historically been the subject of scrutiny and review, there is no simple fix when considering the future of the profession at this stage in its history because the future is becoming increasingly difficult to predict (Keen, 2018). Digitalization, or 'progressive virtualization' as Westera (2013, p. 6) describes it, continues to alter the social world. It is this that regulatory bodies need to be attentive to and work with, if social work education and practice is to be 'equipped with the capacity to adapt' to the issues that are likely to emerge (Crisp, 2019, p. 254). Actors influencing social work education and practice:

can't assume that what has been appropriate in the past will be so in future decades . . . bold decisions may be required to maintain the relevance of social work qualifications in coming decades, to ensure graduates in the 2020s will be equipped with the capacity to adapt their skills and knowledge for practising in the 2060s. (Crisp, 2019, p. 254)

However, before any 'bold decisions' can be made, an understanding of how social work education is preparing students for the now Fifth Industrial Revolution must be secured, and this work, more specifically the experiences of this group of students', offers a robust contribution to this. They are important, and needed to be heard, because:

Looking forward, some of our current students may still be practising in 40 years' time, in a world that is difficult to imagine, except that many of the problems that social workers address, such as poverty, social exclusion, violence, abuse and chronic illness, will almost certainly still be present . . . the need for social workers to be able to critically reflect on situations and respond appropriately is critical (2019, p. 3).

This study shows, digital criticality must now form part of this.

In addition to Digital Capabilities Framework, referenced earlier (BASW, 2020), an outcome of this work, the 'Digitalising Social Work Education Framework', offers a solution to facilitating digital development specific to social work education. This framework is designed to be used where this type of curriculum development has not taken place or where the facilitation of digital development requires review. It is a three-dimensional framework that works with and at the intersections of 'curriculum design', 'curriculum content', and 'curriculum delivery', to review and subsequently articulate how or if curriculum design, content and delivery are appropriate for equipping students to feel prepared to engage with twenty-first century practices and practice needs, including, for example, how the professional course of learning provides students with opportunities to understand the digital and digitalization, to grapple with new and more mediated forms of communication; to conceptualize how technology is reshaping human development and socialization, and to apply data and information protections

that are now enshrined in law. All of which is based upon a less reductionist approach to digital development that involves not only teaching ‘with’ technologies but also teaching ‘about’ technologies. It is also a useful starting point for a review of the regulatory requirements, including questions about how the requirements are being interpreted and enacted, so that professional socialization is in tune with the emergent, and digitally saturated, social world.

Conclusion

It is impossible to ignore how the current global pandemic has altered social works position to technology adoption and acceptance (Pink, Ferguson, & Kelly, 2022; Turner, 2021). The restrictions put in place to manage the spread of COVID19 forced the profession to reconsider its approaches and its methods. The fundamentals of relational practice, proximity, presence and physicality, were largely upended. Remote, digital or screen relations were needed, and employed to mediate social interactions. While the urgent requirement to adapt must not be underestimated, none of it took place without issue or tension. Social works problematic relationship with technologies resurfaced. The degree to which digital knowledge and skills gaps continue to cause problems across the profession was once again illuminated (NHS Digital, 2018; SCIE, 2020; Pentaris et al., 2021). Social work, like a number of other human service professional groupings, struggled to find and implement effective, efficient and ethical technological solutions to service continuity, meaning that problematic popularist platforms have become a more pervasive feature of the social work education and practice landscape (Goldkind et al., 2020). The professions digital turn remains fraught with difficulties. Technology-mediated methods and approaches often operate dangerously close to compounding existing power relations and oppressions. It is this that the profession and social sciences research needs to concern itself with going forward (Taylor-Beswick, 2021), adding to a growing body of literature examining socio-technical injustices (Benjamin, 2019; Eubanks, 2017; Noble, 2018). With regards to the magnitude of technological change occurring in the social world and the magnitude of the response social work will need to offer it, I am left wondering how many of us might share the surfaced view of this particular student participant:

‘There is so much in my head now, to think about—in short we need to know much more than we do [referring to digitalisation more broadly]—it can only get worse out there! Until today I’d never really thought about all of this’.

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Notes on contributor

Dr A M L Taylor-Beswick's research interests focusses on digitalization, social work and professional education. Research projects include: the preparedness of students for practice in the connected age; navigating digital contact for children in out of home care; the feasibility of a wearable device to reduced drug deaths in high risk populations; a youth-co-research project designed to test out activism as a mental health intervention. Dr Taylor-Beswick has a list of digitally orientated accolades to her credit, including the UK Government EdTech 50 award (2019); the UK Gov Top Three Women in Tech Award (2018); and the JISC Top 50 in Higher Education (2016) award. She is a board member of husITa. Org – an international group of social work academics working to promote the ethical use of technologies in social sciences.

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Appendix 1

Research Interview Mapping Tool

Chart technology usage, presence, purpose.

Figures 1–4: Examples of student digital professionalism mapping

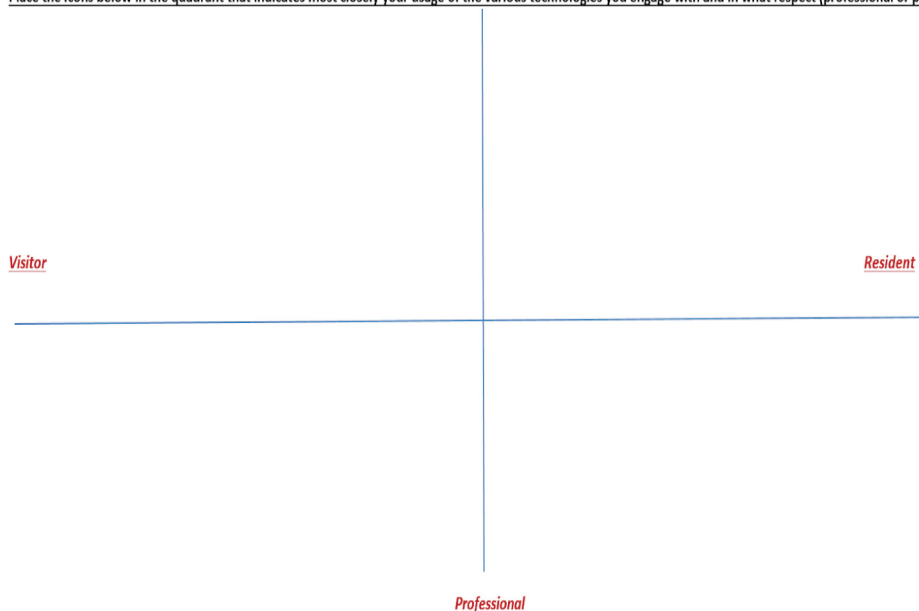
Appendix:

Appendix 1: Research Interview Mapping Tool

Reflective Mapping of Social Media / Technologies Tool

Personal

Place the icons below in the quadrant that indicates most closely your usage of the various technologies you engage with and in what respect (professional or personal)



Adapted from <http://daveowhite.com/vandr/> WHITE, David S.; LE CORNU, Alison. *Visitors and Residents: A new typology for online engagement*. First Monday, [S.l.], aug. 2011. ISSN 13960466. Available at: <<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3171/3049>>. Date accessed: 01 May. 2015. doi:10.5210/fm.v16i9.3171.

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cover letter

future of social work education and practice methods in social works experience pandemic driven pivot into the online, for education and practice. A practice context that was largely articulated a phenomenographic doctoral study designed to describe social work students' experiences of digital development throughout the duration of their programme of learning. Furthermore, to consider how students' conceptions of digital development aligned with the technology specific regulatory requirements in place at the time (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2012; Health Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2014). Participant recruitment involved students in a single university in England; final year final semester students, because it is students nearing qualification who will have had the opportunity to experience a curriculum in its fullness and will therefore be more equipped to comment upon it. The analysis of interview transcripts worked to surface four qualitatively different categories of digital experience, foregrounded in types of digital exposure. Significant within student conceptions was the emphasise on the lack of formal digital instruction, which they described as having left them to 'navigate', to 'examine' and to 'reimagine' the digital in relation to the professional throughout the duration of their course. This study concluded in 2019, however, the relevance of the learning from it has come further to the fore, due to social works pivot into online, for learning and practice, driven by the global health crisis (Author, 2020; 2021). A time in which social work's troublesome relationship with technology once again surfaced. An outcome of this work, the 'Digitising Social Work Education Framework', offers a starting point from which to address the difficulties with the digital in social work.