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Mara Sanfelici, Andrea Bilotti

Abstract: This article presents the theoretical framework and the evaluation process of an educational project, designed to encourage and train social work students to use digital media for macro practice interventions. In our Digital Advocacy Laboratory we involved students in a project-work that asked them to be leaders of an advocacy campaign to promote social rights of individuals or communities. The aim was twofold: on the one hand, fostering awareness and critical reflections on social issues that require collective responsibility; on the other hand, to share and increase competencies in the use of digital technologies to promote social justice. A wider theoretical framework oriented the design of the project, through an hybridization of concepts from the ecological-system theory, the strengths perspective and an anti-oppressive approach. Moreover, to guide the educational program, we found useful to combine two models: the Hobbs's model on digital and media literacy competencies and the Bliss' social work advocacy practice model, with concepts drawn from the social work literature. The project's strengths and limitations that emerged from the evaluation process will be discussed, as well as the main lessons learned in designing and carrying out digital advocacy campaigns in social work.

Keywords: Social advocacy, Digital social work, Macro practice social work, Digital advocacy, Social work education

1. Introduction

This article presents the theoretical framework and the evaluation process of an educational project, designed to train social work students to use digital media for macro practice interventions.

As teachers of two social work programs at the University of Siena and the University of Trieste, we designed a Digital Advocacy Laboratory, in which the students were asked to be leaders of an advocacy campaign to promote social rights of individuals or communities.

The aim of the project was twofold: on the one hand, fostering analyses and critical reflections on social issues that require collective responsibility; on the other hand, the goal was sharing and increasing competencies in the use of digital technologies to promote social justice. The laboratory also offered the opportunity to reflect on social issues originated in virtual spaces (for example, cyberbullying or pro-anorexia groups), increasing awareness about the fundamental role of social work in tackling these new challenges.

Teaching students to work effectively with digital media is of paramount importance to understand emerging forms of technology and their ethical use in micro and macro practice (Council of Social Work Education, 2015). Generally, nowadays students are more aware of technology capabilities and skilled in using digital media. Valuing their competencies was one of our purposes, through a project oriented by a collaborative learning approach within a process of constant evaluation of results achieved in practice.

A wider theoretical framework oriented the design of the project, through a hybridization of concepts from the ecological-system theory, the strengths perspective (Scourfield, 2021) and the anti-oppressive perspective (Dalrymple & Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 2002).

The evaluation stage was considered as a key strategy of the process of co-construction of meanings and the best means for learning. An overarching research project had the aim to assess the outcomes of the educational project from the students' perspective.

This contribution is structured into three sections. The first part discusses how education and practice in social work have been influenced by digital technologies in the last decades, describing the particular characteristics of the Italian context in which this project was carried out. The second part focuses on the theoretical framework and the methodology applied. The last section discusses the findings from a qualitative research project that supported the evaluation process.

2. Digital technologies in social work practice and education in Italy

In the last two decades, social work practice has been substantially influenced by advancements in digital technologies and media.

A well-established body of literature describes the history of technology in social work and the potentially transformative impact of digitization on professional practice. Digital media can be useful to help deliver and enhance communication with service users and facilitate the access to services (Hill & Ferguson, 2014; Guri-Rosenblit, 2009). Technologies are being used to engage hard-to-reach and more marginal populations, such as precarious migrants. Emerging online resources and technologies (telepresence tools, phone applications, and personal assistive devices) offer opportunities for the wellbeing of people with disabilities, and to enhance older persons' ability to age in place (Kwon, 2017). Moreover, digital media can be effective to foster the active participation and inclusion of community members as equal partners in designing services or action-research projects and interventions (Hassouneh et al., 2011; Komaie et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the process of digitization. Organizational transformations that would normally have taken decades have been implemented in a matter of weeks (López et al., 2020). However, several challenges arose in different workplaces, often due to a lack of preparation and digital inequalities as widespread issues.

Referring to the Italian context, Di Rosa et al. (2018) highlighted that the majority of social workers have been trained in a time in which digital technologies did not exist or were not fully applied yet. A study carried out during the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic to analyze its impact on the Italian social services (Sanfelici, 2021) showed how technologies helped professionals, providing virtual bridges and building connections, in a time in which working remotely had been necessary to contain the spread of the virus. Nevertheless, the introduction of digital tools was not a planned and supervised process, and several agencies seemed not prepared to support these transformations to foster organizational learning. Moreover, professionals were divided among those who were mainly skeptical about the potential usefulness of digital tools, and those who discovered innovative ways of doing social work practice.

Digitization processes transform the way of interacting with service users, as well as their demands and needs (López Peláez & Marcuello-Servós, 2018). A digital environment creates a different context in which processes of inclusion and exclusion are redefined, so that it is necessary to develop new strategies and techniques in all the stages of the helping process. Not only should the social workers be updated on emerging technologies and

their potentials for the wellbeing of service users, but they also need to reflect on the ethical implications of their usage, being competent about design bias and aware of barriers that can hamper equal access to these resources (McInroy, 2019). This requires education, training, a constant reflective practice and the evaluation of potentialities and critical issues.

More recently, the use of web-based media for social change efforts has substantially increased (Edwards & Hoefler, 2010; Dunlop & Fawcett, 2008; McNutt, 2006). Digital media in macro practice serve different functions, such as increasing public awareness and education, building cyber communities and on-line activism, organizing and coordinating both on and offline communities, pressuring and influencing decision makers (McNutt, 2006; Homan, 2011). Nevertheless, research which systematically evaluates the use of social media interventions in practice is limited.

Another area for improvement is in the integration of discussion of these activities into social work education; rather than simply observing the explosion of web-based advocacy projects, teachers can work to integrate them into their classroom activities (Hill & Ferguson, 2014). Social work education can play an important role in preparing future professionals in understanding and applying techniques involving digital technologies, to strengthen relationships with clients and support collaboration and integration among professionals.

The unprecedented access to digital technology has also introduced opportunities for innovative teaching and learning strategies across disciplines (Kunz & Cheek, 2016). More than half of institutions of higher learning in the USA offer some forms of distance education degrees or include online education (Kilburn et al., 2016). Social work programs in several countries are increasingly implementing online or blended courses (Reamer, 2013), integrating traditional teaching methods (Phelan, 2015).

In Europe, most online training responds to corporate and business needs, and has been less focused on providing academic instruction (Racovita et al., 2018). In Italy, at least until before the pandemic, e-learning in social work education was uncommon. However, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed rapid changes and all the universities have introduced the use of platforms for online teaching, learning the potentials and opportunities brought on by online courses (Fargion et al., 2020).

This period of rapid and sudden transformation presents novel opportunities, and risks as well. In the debate among academics and educators concerns have emerged regarding educational outcomes, opportunities for real life socialization, and student engagement in the online classroom (Phelan, 2015). It is therefore essential to develop change capabilities, to help institutions, professionals and students to learn while experimenting new activities carried out to cope with changes imposed by the wider social transforma-

tions. This can also help to foster a culture of evaluation, to avoid simplistic discussions on the value or risks of digital media in both social work practice and education, and encouraging the assessment of each technology and its own potentials and shortfalls in specific contexts for specific tasks.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to this effort, presenting the design and the evaluation of an educational project to experiment the use of web-based media to advocate for social change.

3. The conceptual framework

Our aim was to bring digital and media literacy into social work education, co-constructing knowledge on the risks and the potentials of digital technologies. Students need to improve their ability to access, analyze and engage in critical thinking about the use of digital media in social work. Moreover, as future practitioners they need to critically reflect on the professional duty to tackle “e-exclusion” and, in an age of information overload, to increase their awareness about the power of the contents we collectively produce.

Several scholars have written about the new literacies that emerged from digital use. In particular, media production is recognized as a powerful tool to promote students’ social, emotional, and cognitive learning (The Aspen Institute, 2010).

Our Digital Laboratory has been proposed as an optional six-months course to the students of a BSW degree at the University of Trieste and a MSW at the University of Siena, attended respectively by 50 and 30 students, some of them already working in the field.

The first component of the course, in line with the overall program, casted knowledge and values regarding social workers’ ethical commitment to promote social justice and advocate for the rights of more marginalized groups. The ecosystem approach and the human right perspective served as the theoretical framework for understanding the ethical rationale for advocacy engagement. The anti-oppressive perspective offered useful conceptual tools to share discussions with the students about how social issues are co-constructed within wider social and cultural processes that can produce oppression and discrimination. This lens helps to highlight how people have the power and the right to give voice to their perspective, while social work is committed to find and generate spaces to foster participation and real inter-dialogue in social contexts, including virtual realities.

To structure the assignment, we combined two models: the Hobbs’s model about digital and media literacy competencies (The Aspen Institute, 2010), and the Bliss’ social work advocacy practice model (Bliss, 2015), with concepts drawn from social work literature.

Hobbs has proposed a model that orients the educational processes and practices to promote students' literacy skills holistically. She explains how the following five digital and media literacy competencies address the need for students' learning in a media environment:

1. "Access", as choosing and using media technology tools skillfully, as well as sharing appropriate and relevant information with others;
2. "Analyze and evaluate", as comprehending messages and using critical thinking to analyze messages' quality and points of view, while considering the effect of such contents;
3. "Create", as generating contents using creativity and confidence in self-expression, while being aware of goals, audience and composition techniques;
4. "Reflect", as applying social responsibility and ethical principles to one's own identity and lived experience, communication behaviors and conduct;
5. "Act", as working individually or collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in different social contexts, and participating as a member of a community at local, national and international levels.

Hobbs states how "these five competencies work together in a spiral of empowerment, supporting people's active participation in lifelong learning through the processes of both consuming and creating messages" (The Aspen Institute, 2010:18), within an approach which is consistent with a constructivist approach to education.

The Bliss's (2015) social work advocacy practice model is based on a systematization of practice and expertise in advocacy interventions, and guides the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating diverse types of advocacy campaigns. In particular, we adopted it to orient the students in formulating and reflecting on questions about five components of the social work advocacy process (Bliss, 2015), namely:

Cause: What is the cause we are interested in and why? Do we have an adequate background information about this issue? Who are the people affected by the issue we want to address? Which perspectives about the issue should we consider?

Outcome: What outcome would we like to see? Which changes do we expect in attitudes, behaviors or assumptions, and how will we be able to observe them?

Target audience: Which audiences need to be influenced to achieve the desired outcome? What sources of potential support and resistance do these audiences have?

Strategies and tactics: Which are the tasks and the more effective digital tools to engage our audiences? How are we going to create our contents?

Evaluation: What is effective or non-effective in engaging our audience (contents, tools)? How are we using the feedback from our audience to influence our plan? Which kind of participation are we activating? Which ethical implications have arisen? Which are the pros and cons about the use of digital tools for doing social work macro practice?

Drawing on the concepts provided by these models allowed us to more explicitly weave an emerging conceptual framework that oriented the construction of our “Digital Advocacy Laboratory” and the design of the students’ assignment.

4. The Assignment

Students learn by applying not only theoretical concepts, but also by living the experience, and using and producing tacit knowledge and competences. In our laboratory they were asked to refer to the wider theoretical concepts described above, and use and improve their skills in digital media, while actively reflecting on the impact they might had on the practice field, which in our case was a virtual space.

Table 1 synthesizes the chosen model on which we based the design of the assignment for the students’ project-work:

Table 1. The Digital Advocacy Laboratory assignment

Digital Social Advocacy	Digital and media literacy competencies
Select your cause and pick your digital tool	Access
Apply critical thinking and the AOP lens to analyze different perspectives on the social issue you want to address (literature, data, public debate, other digital campaigns) and decide what is your desired outcome	Analyze and evaluate
Collaboratively create your contents, being aware of the outcome you are trying to achieve and the audience you would like to reach	Create
Share reflections on the impact and ethical implications that can emerge while acting in the virtual environment, monitoring your own and peers’ work	Reflect
Implement and evaluate the impact of your social advocacy plan on the target population that you are trying to reach, and monitor and assess your own and peers’ work	Act

Access. In the first stage, students were free to select the topic of their campaign they were more familiar with, or more interested in, or an issue impacting their local community. We invited the participants to form groups of 4-7 people, stimulating them to simulate heterogeneous teams in terms of educational backgrounds. Another suggestion was to search for other organizations or groups (online and offline) working on the same issue. Locating

the task of advocacy in this way made it more relatable, meaningful, and, in some cases, something that they considered important also at a personal level.

No prerequisites involving skills in digital media or advocacy was required for participating in the Laboratory. Some students were initially concerned for not having any prior experiences with digital media platforms; peers' work solved this concern in a short time, since students shared their knowledge and competencies, teaching to each other different strategies to produce videos and images, but also skills for planning and organizing, that for someone were clearly more developed. Networking with experts and activating resources and knowledge external to the small working groups was another successful strategy. In one meeting, all the groups joined together to share their knowledge and research about the potentials of different social media (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Spotify, Youtube, Clubhouse).

Analyze and evaluate. In the second step, applying critical thinking to the analysis of other online campaigns was a useful exercise, which allowed to distinguish different ways of voicing social issues. A powerful experience was the one shared with the experts of Agevolando, a national association of the Care Leavers Network in Italy, that discussed examples of how off-line and online spaces were created to give voice to their own experience and advocate for their rights.

This stage was also useful to raise awareness about how digital media can be a source of risk: for example, pro-anorexia websites or pages that spread messages of hate against minorities.

Create and reflect. The assignment was mainly thought as a mean to foster an active engagement in actions of advocacy, beyond less participatory learning modes via lectures and reading assignments. Coherently with this aim, students were invited to produce their own media messages (through texts, images, videos, music, podcast), using a creative process, while working in a collaborative team.

The effort was to imagine which were the more effective contents to reach their selected audience, in relation to the way in which they decided to talk about the issue and the characteristics of the people they were trying to involve. Choosing the "right words" to talk about sensitive issues was a powerful experience in itself: compromising and discussing with others in the group, comparing their point of view with external sources of information, reflecting on their language and their ways of making sense of the social issue, fostered self-reflection and critical thinking capacities.

One of the most difficult tasks was to put themselves into the shoes not only of those who were directly impacted by the phenomenon, but also peo-

ple who did not know much about it, simply ignored it, who were just not interested in it, with the goal to raise awareness in the public audience.

Act. When acting and implementing their plan in real life, students were able to share knowledge interacting with a wider public, seeing how they could have the power to foster changes in the ways in which problems are thought, and participating as members of a community, practicing aspects of social responsibility.

5. The Learning Centre

From an educational perspective, our collective experiment of media production has been a translation into a digital environment of the principle variously termed as “active learning” or “experiential learning” (Kolb, 1984), or “learning by doing”, an educational methodology that traditionally inspire social work education in Italy and elsewhere.

What we called “Learning Centre” was both a physical and a digital space, and one of the tools that supported the ongoing evaluation of the outcomes, as a key strategy of the process of co-construction of knowledge.

Class time was organized to guarantee every week a space where to discuss - together students and teachers - about doubts, critical aspects, solutions found, emotions that arose through the involvement in the campaign in all its stages.

The Learning Centre’s discussions were focused on four main areas, as sources of learning, but also potential dilemmas: a) ethical implications, b) laws and regulations about privacy, c) digital skills and competencies in place or missing d) how to create the conditions for the engagement in a virtual space.

Several reflections were spent on what “participation” and “individuals or community involvement” mean, when acting in reality. For example, while analyzing other advocacy campaigns, it became more apparent how some organizations give voice to problems of other people, mainly more marginalized groups, presenting data and analysis to raise awareness; other associations adopt different strategies, being able to create spaces where service users or people directly impacted by socially constructed issues speak for themselves.

The risk of assuming one’s own perspective as the right one is always there, even for experienced professionals, and in this “learning space” students were prompted to reflect on themselves and challenge their own and assumptions. It also worked as a space to share emotions; for example, negative feelings arouse when they were exposed to contents harmful for them, for example behaviors of the police with migrants in the Balkan route, or

messages misinforming people, or diminishing highly impactful social issues.

Lastly, the Learning Centre had been useful to share new knowledge and discoveries about the potentials of digital tools and social media in spreading messages. The Universities' platforms were the digital spaces where several documents were collected and shared.

6. Evaluating learning: method and findings

6.1. Method

A qualitative research project supported the evaluation stage, with the aim to assess the learning process and its outcomes. Two focus groups were organized, with 8 participants from the University of Siena and 7 from the University of Trieste. The average age was 25 for the students in Siena, and 20 for those in Trieste. 2 students were male, the others were female.

The focus groups were conducted by two researchers, following a guide that had the aim to explore two macro areas:

- a. the students' perception about their learning outcomes, in terms of new knowledge and skills achieved, the challenges that arose in different stages of the advocacy campaign and what they learned through facing such challenges. They were asked to reflect in particular on what worked or did not work, referring to: engagement techniques, means to vehicle messages suited to their cause and their target audience, strategies to reach their overall outcomes related to social change.
- b. the students' opinion on the "learning-by-doing" approach, and their overall satisfaction about the method and the contents of the laboratory, highlighting strengths and weaknesses.

Data collection and data analysis followed the principles of the Singapore Statement on Research Integrity.

Each focus group was audio recorded, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Given the descriptive and exploratory nature of the study, analysis of the qualitative data was carried out using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), that aimed to identify and analyze themes emerging from the data gathered through the focus groups. The analysis was carried out in an inductive manner: themes were developed through the analysis process rather than being defined beforehand. This process involved generating initial codes, cross-referencing codes for salient or recurring themes, and reviewing these themes until a thematic map emerged.

Our findings are useful to systematize the knowledge we gained together with the students and to indicate future directions to improve our educational model.

6.2. Findings

6.2.1. *What the students have learned*

The first section of the focus groups allowed us to explore the students' perception about what they learned.

The analysis generated three intertwined overarching themes:

- a. engagement in virtual spaces
- b. personal involvement (pros and cons)
- c. discovering the power of social networks

a) Theme 1. Engagement in virtual spaces

One of the most engaging and challenging tasks for the students was how to use their experience and creativity to imagine strategies to reach their target audience through digital means of communication. Some groups decided to choose a target they knew better, namely adolescents and young adults. Others challenged themselves in trying to reach the overall population, without selecting in relation to class ages. Some used different platforms to test their effectiveness in engaging different populations, evaluating the impact through the number of people reached and their level of interaction.

Almost all the students highlighted that they realized how, as in physical settings, also in virtual spaces building trust is the fundamental step for the engagement.

First of all, authenticity mattered: when the perception of the audience was that the people who were spreading the message really cared, were “really involved”, “authentically trying to do something”, the message arrived in a more powerful way.

Involving people who directly experienced the problem, learning from them the best way to talk about it, was found successful by the students who chose this way.

Another strategy that according to the participants worked was the mix of a-synchronic communications (online posts) and virtual live events: for example, a group organized live interviews to talk about the problem of bullying with people who experienced it, and the level of interaction on the page grew by far.

Secondly, what helped in engaging people was to build a safe space also in a virtual environment. Some students tried to use platforms that allowed them to create private groups where access was controlled, as well as the

type of messages spread. These groups became a place where to be listened to and where it was possible to trust the others.

The students reflected on how sometimes it was easier to share with people that were more physically distant: in some ways, the virtual space seemed to create a sense of being less exposed, a “safe space at distance” (FG1- S3). These digital groups became a source of knowledge to orient the wider campaign, amplifying the voice of those who directly experienced the issue.

According to the students, another way of building trust was through the capacity to become a point of reference, building a virtual space (for example, a Facebook page), that was recognized as “a source of information that can be trusted” (FG2-S7), because of its credibility and reputation, based on both competence in dealing with the topic, and the way of doing it.

Several students also realized the importance of creating “emotional resonance” (FG2- S3) with the social issue the campaign was trying to address. It was felt that the denial and disengagement they observed in the general population about their topics fundamentally stem from a lack of personal attachment or experience. To this purpose, some students experimented the use of online questionnaires, as a means to involve people about a topic; nevertheless, what they found more effective was pulling the audience into “real” stories and experiences, using digital storytelling.

b) Theme 2. Personal involvement (pros and cons)

The laboratory made it apparent the challenges involved in building engagement, not only for the involvement of personal values, but also for the difficulty to set clear borders between the self and the other, especially in public spaces.

First of all, this effort requires one to be ready to confront and challenge one’s own ideas and assumptions with those of other people, that not necessarily share the same values. The course dealt with this topic as one of the core social work competencies, but dealing with it in an online environment and in macro practice interventions was never experienced before. The first challenge was to realize that “many people do not really care about the issue” (FG1- S4), or they do not even want to hear about it. The initial experience when receiving no feedback to their communications was of frustration, that sometimes led to judgment of people that “are just superficial” (FG1-S5; FG2-S2), not sensitive to social issues. Also feedbacks that they perceived as diminishing their efforts were described as unpleasant: hearing to talk in a non-competent way about a problem that involved them had also an emotional impact.

In an attempt to create emotional resonance, some students choose a topic that was involving them personally: for example, bullying or psychological

vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic. This had positive results, but also carried potential negative consequences. Two students described how narrating one's own personal story worked as a "sounding board" (FG1-S1): it got the attention of other people that contacted them, "feeling more allowed" to share their own experience (FG1-S1). Another student described her different point of view on this topic; in particular, during the laboratory, she reflected on how going public could have triggered a range of negative feelings or lead to live again with difficult emotions she experienced in the past. Even just talking about the problem can reactivate these feelings, if the person is not leaving in a perfect balance in relation to the selected topic. The discussion with colleagues and teachers was helpful for her; discussing together and supporting a decision-making process led to an atmosphere of authentic collaboration, strengthening solidarity within the working group, allowing everybody to reflect about a crucial topic in social work online and offline. The student's final choice was to share her knowledge in the group, avoiding her to interview other people, and collaborating in choosing the more effective contents.

All the students agreed about the importance of valuing personal backgrounds, since it can help in finding the right words, asking the right questions, and using the right images to communicate on sensitive topics.

c) Theme 3. Discovering the power of social networks

The students became more aware about the power of social networks, also in the virtual environment, in challenging cultural assumptions that are the base of discriminatory processes.

First, they pointed out their efficacy in breaking taboos. They underlined how disengagement can stem from a culture of silence, that inhibits open dialogues and discourages voicing alternative perspectives, even among close groups of friends. This environment easily creates discomfort and unwillingness to talk openly about personal or collective problems, when they are considered not important or when mainstream discourses lead to "turn a blind eye" on them (FG1-S3), or transform them into unpleasant "heavy topics" that nobody wants to hear about.

This culture of denial leads to leave people that experience the issue even more alone, voiceless and sometimes to feel shame. Being allowed to talk about ones' own problem, or a topic perceived as important, was considered an empowering experience that was made possible by their campaign; it gave the possibility to share, construct different meanings and introduce alternative words, more respectful of different identities and perspectives. The students learnt how some narratives can reinforce stigma and silence, or justify denial; at the same time, they could see how a campaign, based on a deep knowledge of both facts and experiences, can powerfully counteract these

discourses. Some students agreed that even those who did not feel like being involved in voicing the issue or actively interacting with the campaign's messages, might have had a chance to be exposed to different perspectives and reflect about their own.

The participants also highlighted the power of social online networks in growing new networks that can channel messages to promote social change and empower people. In carrying out their project work, they realized how it was easier at first to reach their own networks, but this also led to linking "networks of networks" in a very fast way. Activating, fostering and empowering social networks was recognized as one of the core tasks of social work, and digital tools as powerful allies in this effort.

A strategy that was considered successful was to use social media also to connect and involve virtual groups already present online for discussing and raising awareness about the same topic. The students reflected on how these tools could be useful in their future as professionals, sharing knowledge and good practices among colleagues and promoting collective actions for social justice.

The majority of the students agreed that social media are powerful, also to support campaigns 'on the ground', but not enough for social work practice, if used as the only tool. Many highlighted a risk of what in the literature is called "slacktivism", when relying upon awareness as the primary goal of the advocacy campaign, without translating it into more concrete actions.

6.2.2. What the teachers have learned: strengths and limitations of the educational project

The second part of the focus group asked to the students their opinions about the method and the contents of the laboratory.

Not surprisingly, learning by doing was unanimously confirmed as one of the most impactful and efficient ways of learning new competences, while experimenting. Trying one's hand at fieldwork gives students opportunities that are unlikely to be available through more traditional ways of teaching (Sunirose, 2013). This method allowed the participants to see how theoretical concepts can orient practice, to apply critical thinking on the contents and the issues addressed, and to "better understand ourselves while doing" (FG1-3). As the students reported, "in the field you learn and experience at the same time" and "it makes you learn a lot about yourself as a person as well" (FG1-3). Through learning by doing "you can understand what you want to do, what you want to be, and what you want to focus on" (FG1-4) and "you can know yourself better, even by virtue of what you do not want to be as a future professional" (FG2-3).

The high level of involvement of the students in this laboratory was considered both a strength and a limitation. On the one side, the impact that the

project-work generated was in some ways surprising for both the teachers and the participants. Being leaders of the advocacy campaign, being directly involved in producing the contents and assessing their impact on people, not only stimulated their ability to apply critical thinking on issues responsible of forms of oppression and discrimination, but also made them feel more responsible, and increased their perception of having the power to foster social change. This process triggered also their emotional involvement, as well as their capacity for creativity and innovation, allowing several new ideas developing and flourishing. However, they also highlighted downsides of such a high level of involvement. First, this activity revealed to be highly time-consuming, with the risk of not being able to structure their time in an adequate way. Moreover, when the “cause” they wanted to address called into question also their personal experience, they run the risk of potential harmful effects. The Learning Center was a space to reflect on themselves and emotions involved, and the group was really powerful in fostering a collective sense making process. Ethical issues in using digital tools and different ways of carrying out advocacy campaign were the object of the theoretical section of the course, but when acting and interacting with people new concerns arise and the complexity is even more evident. The logbook kept by the students was one of the tools to trace discussions and learn together in a process of constant reflexivity and self-evaluation.

In most of the cases the group was a source of power to increase creativity and to improve learning. Overcoming difficulties together, training themselves to coordinate activities and to carry out plans jointly made them grow also personally. At the beginning, many students felt that their capacity to act in the digital space were lacking, but the process of sharing quickly revealed how fast their skills grew.

A limitation of the laboratory was not having a connection with experts of digital media within the two Universities involved. Two groups of students used their own personal networks to reach communication media managers and shared useful tips.

7. Reflections for the future of social work education in the digital era

This experimental program was created in response to the need to increase the students’ capacity to critically reflect on social issues, as well as competencies in the use of digital technologies to promote social change. Students have seen in practice how online advocacy campaigns are useful to spread information and raise awareness about social problems, to promote cultural changes, and to foster engagement while integrating the strategies

of offline campaigns. Digital advocacy has been also used to promote interactions among stakeholders, fostering the construction of online communities.

E-skills are considered one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning for all European citizens (EC, 2006). Moreover, they are increasingly required by frontline social workers for micro and macro practices interventions. Several authors, both in the international and the Italian literature, emphasize the necessity to update social workers' training pathways, considering the emergence of changing trends and needs, new welfare organizations entering the public arena, new ways of assessing and taking care of individuals, groups and communities, and expanding national boundaries (Sajid et al., 2020; Lorenz, 2021).

Referring to the Italian context, what does not seem sufficiently investigated is how digital media can support educational and training programs in social work, as well as their risks, challenges and potentials in the practice field. The process of designing, implementing and evaluating the laboratory presented in this contribution allowed reflections that can be useful to broaden this debate.

As Lopez et al. (2020) stated, "if digital skills are to meet future needs, new training initiatives are required". Sharing innovative and experimental practices with students has meant asking them to be proactive and also ready to embrace the unknown (Cabiati & Gómez-Ciriano, 2021).

The creativity of the students involved in our laboratory made evident how they have the capacity to create their own contents and strategies, and reach their selected target audiences, experimenting different types of digital advocacy for "causes" they are passionate about, because of their professional or personal experience. The course was an occasion for them to see how these kinds of interventions are powerful to tackle cultural and structural processes, impacting on more marginalized groups, and how digital technologies can be an ally in social work practice.

This laboratory provides the evidence that digital media can be used for innovative teaching in social work, while applying a learning-by-doing method. Like other educational projects involving experiential learning, that value students experience and knowledge, as well as peer education, this project has enhanced the students' voice and their sense of power. Acting as the leader of the campaign led to enthusiasm and high commitment; they felt the power to affect social change and social reality, which sometimes is lacking even among professionals. Responsible of their learning, they felt themselves as expert, as someone that can express their own knowledge, and expertise; they became more competent in using digital media and they were able to teach to their peers.

Building contents (written post, images and drawings, interviews, videos, storytelling, etc.) for the online campaigns has created a transformative pro-

cess, where both the teachers and the students were able to learn with each other through the information and the stories that were being shared. By actively participating in the selection and construction of these contents, hearing and watching them live, created the opportunity to reflect on different representations of social issues, their impact on the lives of more vulnerable people, finding deep connections with the subject matter.

Students highlighted, and we observed, the utility of this experience for both their personal and professional development, concluding that this strategy can be used effectively within the discipline of social work.

Creating digital contents while applying an anti-oppressive perspective holds significant potential for individual and group empowerment, by including and valuing different experiences and knowledge.

We believe that the model presented in this contribution could become a teaching tool both for social work students and professionals, giving an opportunity to reflect on the use of digital technologies in practice to address issues of oppression and social justice.

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