

Internet-based technologies in social work education: experiences, perspectives and use

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As e-learning grows in use among institutions of higher learning, social work educators continue to debate the role of internet-based technologies in social work education. While studies about this issue have been conducted in developed countries, there is a dearth of relevant literature in the Caribbean. A grounded theory approach was employed to obtain data from social work educators, with emphasis on understanding their perspectives on the use of internet-based technology, their actual usage of internet-based technology and the factors that influence their perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight social work educators from four tertiary institutions in Trinidad and Tobago that offer degrees in social work. Results indicate that prior experience with internet-based technology influenced the perspectives of social work educators and ultimately the range and mode of technologies used. Although the debate about the role of such technologies in social work education is not resolved in Trinidad and Tobago, this research found that there is a movement toward consensus about the utility of internet-based technologies.

Key words: internet-based technologies, e-learning, social work education, Caribbean

Introduction

The term ‘paradigm shift’ best describes the volcanic changes in education that have been influenced by the entrance of internet-based technologies. The possibility of providing education unrestricted by boundaries of geography and time is an attractive prospect for students as well as institutions (Garrison, 2009; Petracchi, Mallinger, Engel, Rishel & Washburn, 2005) and the collaborative nature of online learning has the potential to foster the critical thinking that is an essential aspect of higher education. However, debate persists about the ability of online learning to suitably prepare students for professions that aim to develop affective competencies, such as theology, social work and nursing (Hockridge, 2013).

The evolution of technology in education has been accompanied by a range of words and phrases to describe the union of technology in education (Guri-Rosenblit & Gros, 2011; Moore, Dickson-Deane & Galyen, 2011). Njenga and Fourie (2010) suggest that the variety of terms reflects the cultural and organizational

differences within which educational technologies are employed. Other authors (Guri-Rosenblit & Gros, 2011; Sangra, Vlachopoulos & Cabrera, 2012) propose that the various terms indicate that the field of technology in education is still evolving. Sangra, Vlachopoulos and Cabrera (2012), in their review of literature defining e-learning, identified four categories of definitions: technology-driven, delivery-system-oriented, communication-oriented and educational-paradigm-oriented definitions. Educational-paradigm-oriented definitions tend to be used by persons in the education sector and reflect a perception of e-learning as “a new way of learning or as an improvement on an existing educational paradigm” (p. 149). For the purpose of this paper, the definition that will guide the discussion will fall within the educational-paradigm-oriented definition. Internet-based technologies (IBTs) refer to the various tools used in tertiary education that are disseminated and accessed via the internet (Nichols, 2003; Ayala, 2009), such as discussion forums, online journals, wikis and online debates. These technologies are undergirded by a constructivist orientation. The term, ‘face-to-face class’ describes the traditional approach in which the educator meets in a classroom setting with students while ‘blended learning’ refers to the integration of the face-to-face and the web-based approach (Ayala, 2009).

Bulut (2003) aptly notes that social work education is “informed by humanistic values and (encompasses) knowledge of social problems, an understanding of individuals and their environment in interaction, and method (sic) of intervention into social and human difficulties” (p. 128). Consistent with its focus on intervention with people, social work education has traditionally favoured a face-to-face format, in which educators play a mentoring and modelling role to students, who are socialised into the knowledge and skill base of social work (Siegel, Jennings, Conklin & Napoletano-Flynn, 1998). In keeping with the global trend in education, the use of IBTs in social work education has grown steadily and significantly (Ayala, 2009; Macy, Rooney, Hollister & Freddolino, 2001; Ouellette, Westhous, Marshall & Chang, 2006). Some authors have embraced this development, citing the critical importance of accepting technological advancement in the profession of social work, assuming responsibility for shaping the role of technology in education and remaining current with the technologies used by students (Harris & Parrish, 2006; Sandell & Hayes, 2002). Others (Siegel et al., 1998) have adopted a more cautious approach.

Although social work education emerged in the early 1900s (Glick, 2011), it did not commence in Trinidad and Tobago until 1986, when a part-time certificate course was introduced by the School of Continuing Studies, The University of the West Indies, and the social work undergraduate programme was later launched in 1990 (Cambridge, 1999). Currently social work degrees are offered by five institutions in Trinidad and Tobago: The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine; The University of the West Indies, Open Campus, the University of the Southern Caribbean, the College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean Nazarene College. Students have the

option of pursuing certificate, undergraduate as well as graduate programmes. Each of these institutions has a platform for internet-based technology. However, research into the perspectives of social work educators on the use of internet-based technology and the extent to which they use the technology has not been conducted. In light of the increasing role of internet-based technology in education, this research sought to understand the perspectives of social work educators on the use of internet-based technology and their actual usage of internet-based technology. The research questions are:

1. *What are the perspectives of social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago about the use of IBTs in social work education?*
2. *To what extent and in what ways are social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago using IBTs in social work education?*

This study sheds light on the extent to which the debate about the role of internet-based technology in social work education has been resolved in Trinidad and Tobago and explores the implications for the further development of social work education.

Internet-based technologies and social work education

In a seminal article, Siegel et al (1998) identified three main barriers to IBTs: the cost of establishing such a programme; social work educators' resistance to the loss of the face-to-face approach and the need for (and attendant costs of) technical support. Kreuger and Stretch (2000) delineated several negative consequences of technologies in education, including the lack of evidence of enhanced student outcomes, the negative impact of the reduction of "social integration, role modelling, and the mutual monitoring of behaviour" (p. 106) and potential breaches of confidentiality. They stated that electronic communication "cannot favourably compare to the all-important sharing of streams of consciousness available in face-to-face interaction in traditional social work education" (p. 106).

With the spread of technology, positive perspectives about its use in social work education have increased. Proponents of the use of IBT in social work education highlight the increased access to education that is available for persons who experience barriers such as residence in rural communities, financial challenges or caregiving responsibilities (Sarnoff, 2003; Sarnoff, 2005; Vernon, Pittman-Munke, Vakalahi, Adkins & Pierce, 2009). Access to education is considered to be particularly significant for social work, as it reflects the profession's values of empowerment and inclusion (De Boer, Campbell & Hovey, 2011). Additionally, IBT has been found to enhance complex thinking skills and reflectivity (Bellefeuille, 2006) and develop skills in the use of technology (Moore, 2005). Other authors accept the role of IBT in some areas of social work education (such as social policy or research), but are cautious about its usefulness for the teaching of practice skills (Moore, 2005; Siebert, Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). Still others (Kilpeläinen,

Päykkönen & Sankala, 2011), view the use of blended learning as a resolution to the conflict about the role of IBT in social work education.

Research by Faux and Black-Hughes (2000) initially found that social work students preferred face-to-face instruction and performed better when taught using face-to-face methods rather than solely via internet-based technology. More recent research (Wilke & Vinton, 2006; York, 2008) has found that student satisfaction and academic outcomes are comparable in online and face-to-face settings. Furthermore, Faul, Frey and Barber (2006) have observed greater satisfaction among the students who pursued the web-assisted programmes than those who attended face-to-face instruction. In response to the concerns raised about the effectiveness of IBTs for teaching practice skills, research (Ouellette et al., 2006; Petracchi et al. 2005) has revealed comparable outcomes for students taught in traditional settings and web-assisted settings. Although the concerns about the use of IBT in social work education are less forceful, they still persist. In this context, some authors (Macy et al., 2001; Sarnoff, 2003) encourage a move away from the comparison of the modes of instruction to an analysis of the conditions under which each mode is most effective.

Methodology

Research design

Qualitative research uses an inductive approach to analysis in order to understand the experience of individuals from their perspective (Yegedis, Weinbach & Morrison-Rodriguez, 1999). The paucity of research on the attitudes of social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago to the use of internet-based technology in education influenced the decision to adopt a qualitative approach in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. The use of a qualitative approach reduced the risk of imposing concepts and perspectives from other socio-cultural contexts on the Caribbean experience.

Grounded theory, a qualitative approach, was used for the purposes of the study. Grounded theory highlights the discovery of hypotheses, concepts and theories from participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (Franklin, Cody & Ballan, 2010). This approach is unique in that it does not focus on the testing of existing concepts and theories but develops theories that are grounded in the experiences of participants.

Sampling and recruitment of participants

Theoretical sampling is a central component of grounded theory methodology, in which sampling decisions are driven by the analysis of data and the emerging theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The selection of research participants and the process of focusing subsequent interviews (Coyne, 1997) are influenced by the goal of identifying similarities and variations among concepts and the densification of categories that are highlighted in the analytical process. Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommend that a general target population be identified and sampling be

continued within that population. Thus, the target population for the purposes of this study was defined using the following criteria:

- *Participants were to be part-time or full-time social work educators at a tertiary institution in Trinidad and Tobago;*
- *Participants must have taught at least one social work course during the academic year 2012–2013;*
- *Participants should be willing to participate in the study.*

Analysis of the interviews led to hypotheses about emerging concepts, which influenced the process of data collection in subsequent interviews. As the properties and dimensions of the categories were being filled, it became necessary to return to some of the participants for a further interview to clarify or obtain information on specific aspects of the emerging theory (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). No further participants were sought after theoretical saturation had been achieved.

Eight educators, who represented four of the five institutions that offer undergraduate degrees in social work in Trinidad and Tobago, were interviewed. One institution was excluded owing to the time constraints. All participants were female, as attempts to incorporate a male participant proved futile. The challenge in securing male participants may be explained by anecdotal information that suggests that there is a greater percentage of female than male social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago. The participants' experience in social work education ranged from one year to 14 years. Given the small population of social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago and the small sample size, more specific details about the institutions and the participants are withheld to preserve their anonymity.

Data collection

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with participants at locations identified by them as convenient (Creswell, 2007). These locations were all at their places of employment. Research participants were invited to read and discuss, when necessary, an informed consent form, which addressed ethical issues, such as confidentiality, anonymity and the protection of the rights of the research participant, before the start of the interview. Participants signed the form to indicate their agreement with the conditions of the research. The interviews included open-ended questions about the participants' views about the use of e-technology in social work education, their use of internet-based technology and their experience of using these technologies.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded using NVIVO 10 software. Initially, open coding, in which codes were assigned to discrete units of data, was conducted. The method of constant comparison was used in which the information shared in

each succeeding interview was systematically compared with previous transcripts. Categories were created by grouping together codes that shared similarities. Axial and selective coding were conducted. The core category and the surrounding categories were identified and the relationships among the categories established. The methods of constant comparison and theoretical sampling continued until theoretical saturation was achieved and no further properties emerged.

Credibility and dependability

Strategies to address the credibility and dependability of the findings included member checks, peer debriefing and negative case analysis. During member checks, the views of participants were sought throughout the interview process (Creswell, 2007). This process afforded participants the opportunity to confirm or disconfirm the interpretations of the researchers. Transcribed interviews were shared with participants for their feedback regarding their accuracy. Additionally, the findings of the research were shared with the participants for their reflection on the fit with their experiences. The developing theory was discussed with a “disinterested peer” (Nguyen, 2008), who was not directly involved in the study. This peer probed for justification of the decisions made about relationships between categories and explored the assumptions that were reached. Negative case analysis involves the active search for data that does not fit the assumptions and hypotheses that the researcher is making (Brodsky, 2008). This strategy was used to refine and broaden the theory as it emerged, so that it was able to account for the observed variation.

Findings

A three-stage process model emerged from the analysis of the data to explain the perspectives and use of internet-based technology by social work educators. This model is presented below as Figure 1:

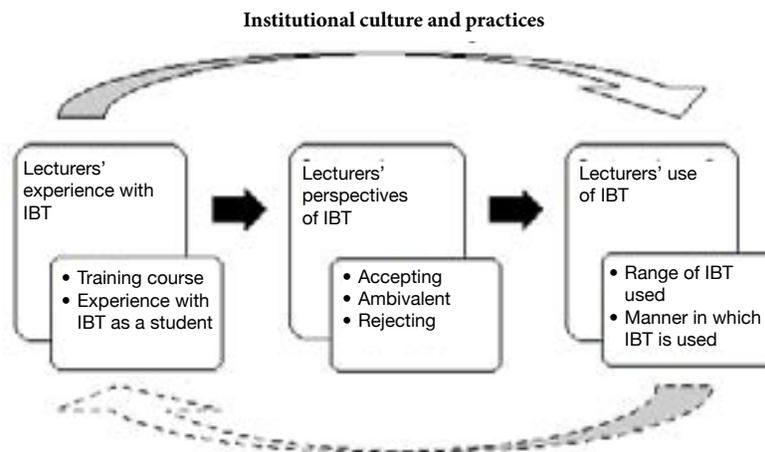


Figure 1. Model of relationship between educators' perspectives of internet-based technologies (IBT), educators' experience with IBT and educators' use of IBT

Perspectives of e-technology

'Perspectives of e-technology' emerged as the core category, to which the other categories were related. Educators' perspectives about the use of e-technology in social work education ranged from accepting through to ambivalence and rejecting. The varied attitudes toward internet-based technology reflected the extent to which educators perceived the technology as a viable option for the presentation of social work knowledge and skills. Educators spoke of the necessity of face-to-face contact with social work students. The code of 'interaction' was heavily saturated, as all participants highlighted the centrality of interpersonal interaction between educator and student in the development of the social work student. The high value placed on interaction was related to their perception that face-to-face classes are needed to model social work skills, to teach practice skills, to assess students' emotional responses to the process, to evaluate progress in skill development, to ensure immediacy of feedback and to build relationships.

I don't think we should totally go to internet and online teaching...because there is a dynamic that's missed. It's not a holistic assessment of the student or the person that we're trying to produce in society.

Some of the straight theories...could possibly be delivered on line...but some of the other aspects that would tap into the affective, responsorial and behavioural aspects of our being – I would prefer to...have those face to face.

Concurrently, educators expressed an appreciation of the value of e-technology. Study participants identified benefits for students and educators. The benefits for the students included increased accessibility of the instructor due to the immediacy of feedback, engagement beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom and the convenience of accessing education from one's home without disruptions to the family life. The benefit of access to education was identified as particularly significant in the context of the Caribbean region, due to the small numbers, in some countries, of persons interested in social work. The access of such persons to social work education was identified as potentially contributing to the maintenance of indigenous social work practice in the region. Participants were of the opinion that IBT was useful to them as educators, as they were able to post information for students, record synchronous online sessions for later viewing by students, assess students' writing skills, provide feedback, check for plagiarism, readily access and assess internet-based material identified by students as useful and readily access students' assignments and grades.

One of the things about online education . . . is that students . . . have greater access to their tutor/coordinator than they have face-to-face. . . . My phone is hooked up to the e-mail and course page, so once a student posts, I know what is happening and I can respond almost immediately.

But the convenience also is when I have internet, I have their grades on Moodle, I have access to what their grades are when I'm home . . . versus having their grades on my desktop at work. So internet is great for that.

The majority of educators identified the value of both face-to-face sessions and internet-based technology. Consequently, the concept of blended learning, i.e. courses that combined both IBT and face-to-face education, was saturated.

(The internet) could take away from that personal touch so I believe . . . there must be both; you can't just get away from it, but there should be that personal touch- the interaction - and use the internet where appropriate.

Although the educators expressed appreciation of the concept of blended learning, their attitudes to the role of blended learning in the context of social work education were not always aligned. One participant noted "I do use technology quite a bit." This position was contrasted with the views of another participant who stated, "So for me to go that way (use of internet-based technology) as a preferred way of delivery, it wouldn't happen because I haven't bought into it myself". Between these positions, there were ambivalent views in which educators commented that the technology might be useful for other educators or appropriate for social settings but they were not fully comfortable with its use for social work education.

My students need to be with me in process. They need to be able to ask the questions that come to their minds immediately . . . What I need to instill in my students is confidence and I feel as if I can only do that in person and I also want to build relationship, to enhance learning . . . It can happen on line but I really want to be there.

I guess e-technology can work because it has been working – it's a proven method, medium or strategy worldwide. I am the one who has difficulty with it.

Experiences in internet-based technology

A relationship was observed between participants' experiences with IBTs and their perspectives on the role of internet-based technology in social work education.

Participants who had had strong, direct experiences in internet-based technology, either as a student whose instructor used IBTs or as a trainee in a course on IBTs in education, held significantly more positive attitudes toward such technologies than other persons. At the other end of the spectrum, participants who had little or no experience in using IBTs held ambivalent or rejecting perspectives of the technologies. Table 1 compares the spontaneous comments made by persons with IBT experience with those with little or no IBT experience.

Table 1. Comparison of experience with internet-based technologies (IBTs) with perspectives of IBTs in social work education based on average number of spontaneous comments made per interview

Educators' Perspectives of IBTs	Experience with IBT	Limited/No experience with IBT
Support for role of IBTs	5	2
Identifies need for face-to-face education	1	4
Ambivalence about the role of IBTs	0	1

Use of internet-based technology

Participants, as a group, used a wide range of IBTs. Table 2 classifies the technologies which were used by educators.

Table 2. Internet-based technologies used by social work educators

Communication/ interaction between educator and students	Communication/ interaction among students	Provision of information/ receipt of assignments	Communication with wider world
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web conferencing tools (Blackboard Collaborate and Skype) • E-mail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion forum • Lounge • Online debates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook • Journal entries • Posting information (for example, journal articles) • Students' e-mail response to question(s) posed by lecturer • Uploading of assignments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posting of position statements online

Participants who expressed more accepting perspectives of IBT used a wider range of technologies than those whose attitudes favoured face-to-face interaction. Similarly, those who had experience with IBTs used a wider range of technologies than other participants. Participants with experience and more accepting attitudes were more likely to use the technologies in a manner that facilitated online interaction and collaboration among students; while participants with attitudes that favoured face-to-face interaction tended to use e-technology primarily for the posting of information. Table 3 compares participants' experience and perspectives with patterns of use.

Table 3. Comparison of participants' experience, perspective and use of technology

Participant	Experience	Dominant perspective	Interaction with student	Interaction among students	Provision of information/ Receipt of assignments	Communication with wider world	Total no. technologies
1	Yes	Accepting	3	3	2	1	9
2	Yes	Accepting	2	2	1		5
3	Yes	Accepting	1	1	2		4
4	No	Ambivalent			3		3
5	No	Ambivalent	1				1
6	No	Accepting	1				1
7	No	Ambivalent			1		1
8	No	Rejecting					0

It was observed that participants tended to use the technologies to which they had been exposed in training or as students in education. This code was not, however, saturated. It is, therefore, suggested that the use of internet-based technologies would influence increased experience, which would re-start the process in the model.

Organisational culture and practices

The category 'Organisational culture and practices' was identified as aspects of the organisation, which influenced the experience and perspectives of educators and their use of IBTs. It was observed that participants who expressed more accepting perspectives of IBTs also identified the influence of one or more of the following: the presence of colleagues at the institution who inspired them to use the technologies, formal or informal support and an organisational climate that encouraged them to participate in training.

It was coming into teaching; I want to do what's current. I want to do what other lecturers are doing and I had lecturers who were much older and who were all over the e-classes and the Moodle and I was just like – I ought to be doing this. . . .

Participants who expressed ambivalent or rejecting views were less likely to identify organisational practices as positive or expressed a lack of knowledge about the existence of an institutional mandate.

It feels like a mandate and not an option and so it's stressful rather than easy.

[The institution has] never said [anything about the use of IBTs] or maybe they did and I just chose not to listen.

Participants identified the important role of support in their ability to use IBTs. They primarily identified the formal support, but also spoke of the role of informal support from colleagues.

[We have] online support – like a lounge now – for tutors and coordinators.

My colleagues [were busy] so the best they could do was e-mail me resources . . . and say “go”.

Thus the presence of identified institutional practices was observed to be related to an increase in the expression of accepting perspectives and actual use of internet-based technologies.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the perspectives of social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago about the use of internet-based technology in social work courses as well as their actual usage of such technology. A grounded theory was developed from the data collected, which revealed relationships between the prior experience of educators with IBT, their current perspectives and the range and mode of technologies used, within the context of institutional practices.

The observed relationship between experience with IBT and perspectives is consonant with previous research in this area (Aksalan & Law, 2012). Similarly, the observed relationship between educators' perspectives and their use of IBT in social work education coheres with Al-Zaidiyeen, Mei and Fook's (2010) study - although that study used different ICTs than the current study, the finding of a positive correlation between attitude and the ICT used by teachers supports the findings of this study.

The significant contribution of this study is the finding that educators who had prior experience were more likely to use internet-based technology in a manner that facilitated interaction among students in addition to educator-student interaction, thereby incorporating the dynamic interaction that is considered to be essential to social work education. Educators who had gained experience in the use of IBTs, particularly through training, were likely to have also benefited from the underlying constructivist principles governing the use of these technologies. Educators who had no experience or limited experiences were more likely to limit the use of the technologies to the transmission of knowledge to the students. Although they emphasised interaction as an integral part of the process of learning, the classroom was considered as the context for engagement.

The debate about the use of internet-based technology in social work education in Trinidad and Tobago is consistent with the debate in other parts of the world (Ayala, 2009), which has not yet been resolved. Of significance in this study is the fact that although there were divergent views about the relative balance of face-to-face and online learning, there was general concurrence on the viability of blended learning in social work education. Ayala (2009) sees blended learning as the “new approach to social work education” (p. 282) that will provide the benefits of internet-based education while maintaining “what we value most about face-to-face educational opportunities for our professional education” (p. 282). The general concurrence among participants is of interest and begs the question of whether the incorporation of blended learning may signal a nudge toward the resolution of the debate in the context of Trinidad and Tobago.

Limitations

A small sample size was used to provide the data for the analysis mainly because the field of social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago is small. However, because a qualitative study approach was used the small size was a function of the emerging data rather than mathematical formulae. Nevertheless, the size of the sample, drawn in a non-probabilistic manner hinders the generalisability of the conclusions that are drawn. These observations, however, provide a platform for quantitative research to test the identified patterns and a backdrop against which further research can be conducted. In using grounded theory methodology, the goal here was to densify categories through theoretical sampling. Categories were saturated for the purpose of the study and formed the basis of the model. However, repeated efforts to identify additional educators who had had negative experiences with internet-based learning as a student or as a trainee were unsuccessful. Strauss and Corbin (2008) note that “the ideal form of theoretical sampling might be difficult to carry out if a research does not have unlimited access to persons or sites . . . Realistically, the researcher might have to sample on the basis of what is available” (p. 155). Thus although the extent of experience was a significant category, it was not possible to densify the impact of negative experiences, which were hypothesised (on the basis of one experience) to also influence perspectives. Further exploration of such experiences could have led to a more complex analysis.

Conclusion

Given the current role of IBTs in tertiary education, it appears inevitable that these technologies will increasingly influence social work education. It is imperative that social work educators in Trinidad and Tobago grapple with and resolve the role of these technologies in education; as failure to do so may result in *ad hoc* or unsystematic implementation, potentially hampering the professional development of students.

The model indicated that experience shapes perspectives and practice. Thus, the experience of an educator and ultimately his/her attitudes and use of

internet-based technologies, can be impacted directly through training and an organisational mandate and indirectly through the influence of colleagues who are supportive of IBTs. The provision of training opportunities (online, blended and face-to-face) will open doors for an expansion of knowledge in IBT. Incentives may need to be attached to training programmes to motivate participation in such activities. Additionally, visits to institutions that have successfully implemented the use of various technologies can provide a visual template of the possibilities of IBTs (Sife, Lwoga & Sanga, 2007). Studies of best practices in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean should also be conducted and shared.

The observation of the role of the institutional mandate is significant. Institutions that establish policies embracing IBT as part of their mode of delivery are more likely to implement supportive structures that facilitate the implementation and maintenance required for these technologies. The combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches is likely to enhance the implementation process (Thurab-Nkhosi, 2013). Given the extent to which participants saw social work education as unique, implementation of IBTs may be facilitated by the provision of opportunities for social work educators to grapple with the changes in the educational environment and to develop principles for the effective implementation of blended learning within the Caribbean context. Such discussions can be the opening wedge among educators who are currently closed to the role of IBTs in social work education.

The perspectives and experiences of social work educators about IBTs are important in understanding the process of change that is occurring in social work education in the Caribbean. Future research about the perspectives and experiences of social work students in the Caribbean would complement the current study and provide a more holistic interpretation about the perceived role of IBTs in social work education.

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