

## A Reflective View of the Introduction of Technologies in Social Work Fieldwork Modules within the South African Context

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### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to prepare students for emergency online learning and teaching. The blended-learning approach that includes online learning and teaching options in social work theoretical modules has been described as valuable in providing students with a variety of modes of learning and teaching. However, its use in fieldwork modules requires further research. This article aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of undergraduate student social workers and their supervisors regarding the inclusion of technologies in the first-year fieldwork module, and how this affected their online experiences during the pandemic. The activity theory served as a theoretical framework. A qualitative approach was followed with an explorative-descriptive research design. Participants were selected through purposive non-probability sampling. Data was collected through written reflection sheets that were analysed through thematic content analysis. Ethics included voluntary participation, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. The findings indicate that all the components of the activity theory were present, while challenges experienced prior and during the pandemic were identified as a lack of previous exposure to the use of technology and of access to technological resources, socioeconomic challenges, the need to become skilled in becoming independent scholars, a need for direct interaction among students and between students and supervisors/lectures, and the importance of a variety of role-players to support learning. The findings provided a foundation to draw conclusions and make recommendations regarding what is needed to effectively use the activity theory's components in fieldwork modules and to prepare students for technology-based learning and teaching in higher education settings.

**Keywords:** activity theory, blended learning and teaching, fieldwork modules, social work education and training.

## Рефлексивный взгляд на использование ИКТ-технологий в практических модулях направления «Социальная работа» в условиях Южной Африки

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### Аннотация

Пандемия COVID-19 выявила необходимость подготовки студентов к онлайн образованию. Смешанное обучение, включающее онлайн обучение и очное преподавание теоретических модулей по направлению подготовки «Социальная работа», показало свою эффективность. Но применение смешанного обучения в практических модулях требует дальнейшего исследования. Цели настоящей работы – во-первых, изучить опыт студентов бакалавриата, обучающихся по направлению «Социальная работа», и их кураторов в использовании ИКТ-технологий во время практики первого курса; во-вторых, выяснить их мнение о том, как это повлияло на опыт онлайн работы во время пандемии. Теория деятельности используется в качестве теоретической рамки. Качественный подход определил поисково-описательный характер работы. Участники были отобраны с помощью целевой детерминированной выборки. Сбор данных осуществлялся с помощью рефлексии в письменной форме. Для анализа данных был использован тематический контент-анализ. Этические аспекты проведения исследования (добровольное участие в исследовании, информированное согласие, защита личной информации, конфиденциальность и анонимность) были соблюдены. Полученные результаты содержали все компоненты теории деятельности. Среди сложностей, которые участники испытывали до и во время пандемии, было отмечено следующее: недостаток опыта в использовании изучаемых технологий, отсутствие доступа к техническим ресурсам, социально-экономические проблемы, необходимость приобретения специальных навыков исследовательской работы, потребность в организации прямого взаимодействия между студентами, между студентами и научными руководителями / преподавателями, а также определение роли участников образовательного процесса в поддержке обучения. Результаты исследования позволили дать рекомендации относительно того, что необходимо для эффективного использования компонентов теории деятельности в практических модулях при подготовке студентов к обучению и преподаванию.

**Ключевые слова:** теория деятельности, смешанное обучение и преподавание, модули по практической работе, характеристики выпускника, подготовка специалистов в сфере социальной работы.

### Introduction

The term ‘previously disadvantaged university’, within the South African context, has to do with disadvantages suffered during the apartheid years. It refers to discrimination against universities, such as the University of the Western Cape (UWC) where this study was conducted, which was designed to only serve certain marginalised groups who

were defined by ethnicity (Chinyamurindi, 2017). Therefore, these universities were marginalised in terms of resources and provided higher education to disadvantaged people. Sonn (2016) postulates that the challenge for these universities in present times is, among others, to develop academic capacity, while also providing a learning and teaching (L&T) environment that supports students from disadvantaged communities. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (South Africa, 2013) was developed to address the above challenges, and aimed at enabling South African citizens to engage in lifelong learning through L&T practices that lead to applicable and appropriate knowledge, insight and skills.

Lifelong learning is a process in which learning and development occur constantly through formal, non-formal and informal/unintended opportunities to learn and grow to adapt to life challenges and to a constant changing world (Ates & Alsal, 2012; Laal, 2011), such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. Education aimed at lifelong learning is flexible and made available through a variety of learning opportunities aimed at different levels of functioning of each student (Laal, 2011), acknowledging the diverse context of the South African student body. The UWC, through its L&T practices, aims to encourage lifelong learning and places specific emphasis on L&T through a socially responsive, people-centred approach to empower students to address educational and personal challenges, and to contribute to an equitable and sustainable society. The importance of student experiences through a learning environment that encourages the innovative use of technologies through multiple academic and digital literacies is accentuated (UWC, 2016). As such, the UWC, as most South African Universities, makes use of blended L&T methods, which consist of online platforms and traditional classroom methods (Bosch, Mentz & Reitsma, 2020; Ubah, et al., 2019).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional residential social work L&T made use of a blended approach through the use of a combination of online tools and traditional face-to face instruction (Stein & Graham, 2020; Dziuban et al., 2018; Kintu, Zhu & Kagambe, 2017). Pillay and Gerrard (2011) report on student social workers' experiences of blended-learning in a theoretical module and found that it requires technical competence and awareness of pedagogical opportunities, which requires further research. Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016) add that further research is needed for the inclusion of technology in fieldwork modules, and ask for research that focuses on what is needed for effective use of technologies in fieldwork L&T. The reflective review on the use of technologies described in this article was informed by the mentioned need for further research, and further motivated by the relevance of technologies in fieldwork modules through emergency online L&T during the pandemic.

Zimba, Khosa & Pillay (2020) focused on the use of blended-learning to foster student engagement, but voice a concern that while this approach provides student social workers with a variety of options to support their learning preferences, the inequalities between South African students impact on successful outcomes. Linked to the latter, Moloi, Mkwanazi & Bojabotseha (2014) emphasise that challenges of previously disadvantaged universities include structural problems emanating from under-preparedness of students due to primary and secondary education systems that were exposed to inequality during the apartheid years, which continues to affect students from disadvantaged communities. Similarly, Chetty and Pather (2015) refer to the interdependence of educational systems where a dysfunction in one system affects the other systems. Continued inequalities in primary and secondary education systems, referred to as disadvantaged schools, in the post-apartheid era results in, among others, a lack of access and exposure to technological resources in disadvantaged communities.

L&T at a previously disadvantaged university should also acknowledge the contextual realities of the students. Van Breda (2017) identified vulnerabilities and challenges prior to the COVID-19 pandemic among student social workers as poverty, exposure to crime and violence, death among friends and family, substance abuse of family members, and HIV or AIDS in the family. These vulnerabilities and challenges prolong study completion, and in some cases make it difficult for students to complete their studies. The acknowledgement of these challenges requires that L&T practices are aimed at not only academic content, but also at personal development. Similarly, and in further support, Dykes and Green (2015) identified a need among student social workers to participate actively in learning activities, and to relate academic work with real-life social issues. Pointing to the role of supervisors and lecturers in fieldwork modules, students reported a need for lecturers and supervisors to respond to their emotional reactions to social topics that might relate to their real-life experiences, to create debriefing opportunities, and to be empowered to engage effectively with self-assessments of strengths. Curriculum developers acknowledged the above needs through the inclusion of personal development of student social workers as an essential part of L&T in the new curriculum for the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) (Council for Higher Education, 2015). The need to include informal learning for personal and professional development informed the choice of the activity as a theoretical framework.

### Theoretical Framework for Learning and Teaching in a Fieldwork Module

The activity theory is grounded in Vygotsky's cognitive development theory that includes social interaction as a core cognitive development component. According to the activity theory, the "who is doing what, why and how" (Hasan & Kazlauskas, 2014:1) to move from and between the subject (who) to the object (what and how) to the outcome (why). Theories that supported the choice to use the activity as theoretical framework include theories of experiential, flexible, Universal Design (UDL) and blended-learning. These theories will be summarised in terms of a description and their relation to the activity theory in the table below.

Table 1. Supporting theories

<i>Supporting theories</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Link to activity theory</i>
Experiential learning	Kolb's framework for experiential learning (Olsson & Roxå, 2012) emphasise the integration of theory and practice. Fieldwork modules inform the integration of theory and practice through a platform that encourages effective and meaningful learning through experiencing, thinking, reflecting, and doing (Roberson, 2019).	Experiential learning includes the who, what, why and how of the activity theory to build on knowledge, while structures are being developed to draw links between theory that will inform understanding. In fieldwork modules, experiences are turned into learning through the restructuring of what students know and how it impacts on their understanding and skills (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2009).
Flexible learning	Flexible learning supports lifelong learning. It has to do with a variety of options to encourage learning opportunities and platforms that align with the needs of practice (Joan, 2013; Palmer, 2011).	The outcomes are attained through practices focusing on the pace and place in which L&T takes place, therefore providing for different needs and contexts of a diverse student body (Andrade & Alden-Rivers, 2019).

UDL	The aim is to move away from inflexible learning opportunities towards a flexible learning experience, based on the perspective that the way people interact with others and the culture they live in shapes the way they learn (Mishra, 2013). In a diverse classroom, it does not only mean to understand what students know and what they need to learn through L&T activities, it also means to understand how they know this, and whether they know this through positive or negative previous experiences.	L&T practices focus on ‘what’ students must learn, ‘how’ they could learn this in a variety of ways, and ‘why’ they must learn it through linking the content with real-life experiences and social work practice (Hall & Murray, 2010).
Blended-learning	It makes use of a combination of modes of L&T to provide students with a variety of learning experiences and options that combine traditional classroom L&T activities and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Bryan & Volchenkova, 2016). Some advantages of the inclusion of technologies are that students have more time to engage with learning material through online options, and that they can also develop digital skills (Lalima & Dangwal, 2017).	This theory supports the option of including a variety of tools, role-players and interactions to support effective L&T to address students’ diverse learning needs, and to provide opportunities for informal learning to take place.

The above theories underpinned the choice to make use of the activity theory from a Vygotskian perspective (Engeström, 2015) as a framework for the planning of the inclusion of technologies in the L&T activities of a fieldwork module, as well as a reflective review by students and supervisors (Vahed et al., 2018). In support of this choice, Kaptelinin and Nardi (2018) assert that technology can be viewed as of specific interest to this theoretical framework, due to the focus on mediation and tools. The authors of this article considered 1) how the L&T components inform one another to create a meaningful learning experience, 2) how technologies can be included as effective tools, 3) how informal learning outcomes can happen when technologies are included (cf. Herrington & Oliver, 2000), and 4) how the prior exposure to technologies affected L&T experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The components of activity theory that informed the reflections are L&T tools, subject, object, rules, community. The implementation of technologies in terms of these components will be described next.

### **Introducing technologies in the fieldwork module through the components of the activity theory**

Lecturers coordinate the fieldwork modules in the social work curriculum. These lecturers develop a module guide that aligns with the BSW standards. The theoretical modules inform the fieldwork modules for students to develop an understanding of how theoretical knowledge forms the foundation of the planning of interventions, and develops skills to integrate theory and practice. Furthermore, in line with experiential learning, the modules build on each other. During the first three years of study, all social work modules on each year level are prerequisites of the fourth-year modules. This means

that each year level is a gradual development towards the fourth-year modules, which prepares students for the completion of their social work qualification.

Registered social work practitioners are employed as supervisors in the fieldwork modules to guide students to integrate their theoretical knowledge and understanding with skills to use in practice. Each supervisor is assigned to a group of students that meets once a week, while individual supervision sessions are arranged when needed. The supervision sessions are aimed at creating a space where students can actively engage in discussions on how to use what they know in practice, to identify what they need to know more about, and to strengthen their practical skills. The fieldwork lecturer is responsible for equipping supervisors with the theoretical frameworks, assessment methods and tools needed for supervision of students. The lecturer further has to ensure that supervisors have the knowledge and understanding of the learning outcomes needed to move from the first year to the completion of the qualification. The summative assessment of the fieldwork module is conducted through a Portfolio of Evidence where students portray how, in line with the BSW standards, they integrated theory and practice. They also have to reflect on how the L&T contributed to informal learning, what was learned, what is still needed to improve knowledge and skills, and the learning experience.

When planning to introduce technologies in the first-year fieldwork module, the lecturer engaged with the lecturers of the second, third- and fourth-year fieldwork modules. Students would learn how to use technology to develop an E-Portfolio of Evidence as an electronic document aimed at engagements with a reflective learning process to facilitate professional development (Amaya et al., 2013), and to use technologies to support supervision. The portfolio becomes the platform from which students would engage with the next year's fieldwork module. In this way, the portfolio will evolve over the four years, and students can experience how learning takes place and how their knowledge, understanding and skills developed.

The introduction of technologies was done through a collaboration between the Department of Social Work and the UWC Centre for Innovative Education and Communication Technology (CIECT). The CIECT was responsible for the training of the lecturer, supervisors and students on the use of the online platform, IKAMVA. The following options were made available to suit the structure of the fieldwork module:

- *Announcements*: Sharing of information pertaining to L&T activities.
- *Resources*: Providing students with lecture notes to include the theoretical content in fieldwork activities, further reading material, the timetable, the module outline, and a description of how the fieldwork activities relate to the BSW standards.
- *Discussion forum*: Students and lecturers/supervisors can engage in discussions on a specific learning outcome at times that suit them best.
- *Assignments*: Formative assessments can be uploaded, marked and feedback can be provided.

The components of the activity theory, as discussed by Engeström (2015) and Vahed et al. (2018) were implemented as follows:

- *Tools*: Tools refer to the equipment and resources used to plan and implement the L&T activity (Hashim & Jones, 2007). The resources used as L&T tools included the CIECT to train the lecturer, students and supervisors to use the online platform, as well as to develop an E-Portfolio of Evidence. Guidelines for practical activities, theoretical information to use during the practical work or supervision sessions, and announcements regarding L&T activities were uploaded. The tools were used so that students could provide supervisors with reports and other practical assignments, and that supervisors could provide students with feedback and guidance. In addition, the discussion forum platform supported students to engage with their supervisors or among themselves to

discuss ideas, and to collectively identify challenges and find solutions. The forums also served as an online supervision platform in addition to the formal face-to-face sessions. It was envisioned that the online platform could provide supervisors with a tool to monitor student engagement and development, and to become aware of students who needed extra support or encouragement to participate in the module activities through individual supervision sessions.

- *Subject*: The subject focuses on the lecturer, student body and engagements (Abdullah, 2014). Student engagement through technologies entailed that they accessed the module guide, the activity guidelines and theoretical resources to engage with resources. They uploaded their work and received feedback from supervisors via this platform. This was used in combination with face-to-face contact with the lecturer and supervisors. The forum further ensured the option for regular engagements between students and with supervisors and the lecturer. It was envisaged that these engagements could result in informal learning outcomes, such the development collective problem-solving skills.

- *Object*: This has to do with the purpose of the module, which directs the content and outcome (Hashim & Jones, 2007). The intended learning outcomes of the module were:

- Orientation to the meaning of social work practice
- Preparation for the practice environment
- Development of communication and listening skills
- A volunteer placement during the June vacation; observing and shadowing of social work-in-action
  - Demonstration of competence in understanding the different phases in the development of the professional relationship in social work
  - Demonstration of competence in communication skills
  - Demonstration of competence in beginning skills in professional report writing

- *Rules*: Rules provide structure in the module through clear descriptions of the requirements of the module and how lecturers and students will engage with the module (Hashim & Jones, 2007), including the use of feedback (Abdullah, 2014). The module outline provided students with the rational, purpose and focus of the module, the alignment with theoretical modules to be included in activities, BSW standards to achieve, the L&T schedule, and assessment information aligned to the University's assessment policies. This served as a framework within which they, the lecturer and the supervisors were supposed to engage with L&T activities. The assessment frameworks consisted of rubrics that provided students and supervisors with a list of specific learning outcomes related to the assessment activities.

- *Community*, referring to all key role-players (Hashim & Jones, 2007): The key persons were identified as the lecturer, supervisors, CIECT staff, the students, and practice settings stakeholders.

- *Division of labour*: The relationships between the role-players in the community are mediated through a clear division of labour (Hashim & Jones, 2007). The CIECT staff was responsible for the activation of the online platform and the training of all other role-players. In order to make use of the online platform, and to engage effectively with the L&T activities, the lecturer's role and responsibilities were to ensure that students received the needed training, and to coordinate supervision content, as well as the L&T activities. The supervisors' role and responsibilities were to provide students with guidance and feedback to integrate theory and practice, to prepare them for activities, and to provide them with a platform to further explore what they need to know and do to successfully

engage with the L&T activities. The students' role and responsibilities were to access the resources, to make use of the platform provided to them, to respond to feedback, and to complete the assessment activities in the prescribed timeframe. The practice settings' role was to provide students with real-life examples of social work practice. This was communicated in the module guideline and on IKAMVA.

Two years after technologies were introduced in the fieldwork module, the supervisors, students and lecturers embarked on a reflection on how this supported, or not supported, the learning process. The table below illustrates the chronological sequence of events that informed this article.

*Table 2. Sequence of events to inform the reflective review*

Year 1: Planning the inclusion of technologies	The lecture collaborated with other fieldwork module lecturers and the CIECT at the UWC to prepare for the inclusion of technologies as a part of blended-learning in the first-year fieldwork module with the idea that it would be included in the second-, third- and fourth- year fieldwork modules.
Year 2: Introducing technologies in the first-year fieldwork module	Students and supervisors were trained to use the online platform and tools as a part of the L&T practices in the fieldwork module.
Year 3: Continued inclusion of technologies in the second-year fieldwork module	The second-year fieldwork module built on the inclusion of technologies in that the same framework was used to achieve the outcomes of the second-year L&T practices.
Year 4: Continued use of technologies, but moving to an emergency online platform during in the third-year fieldwork module	The third-year fieldwork module was planned to further build on the inclusion of technologies, but had to be amended to a fully online approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, the students and supervisors reflectively reviewed the inclusion of technologies, which are presented in this article.

Next, the research problem, question and aims that informed the research reported on in this article will be discussed. The research methodology to conduct a reflective review will be explained, and the findings will be presented. Conclusions by the authors, who are lecturers in the social work degree programme, will be presented, and recommendations based on lessons learned will be made.

### **Research problem, question and aims**

Social work education has primarily made use of a blended-learning approach prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Stein & Graham, 2020), which provided some exposure to online L&T activities. Pillay and Gerrard (2011) reported that the inclusion of technology in social work theoretical modules requires knowledge and skills to ensure effective L&T. Zimba, Khosa & Pillay (2020) acknowledge the value of technology in social work education, but raised a concern that the inequalities between students and universities in a post-apartheid era might impact on the effective implementation of technologies (cf. Czerniewicz et al., 2020). This concern is echoed by Kaminer and Shabalala (2019) who argue that the different socioeconomic backgrounds of students might affect access to resources and skills needed for online learning. In theory, it is argued that online L&T improves education access, since it is not limited by time or place while the students and lecturers only need a device and internet connection to be able to access course content (Pham et al., 2019). In practice, prior exposure to technology, as well as access to data, devices and study spaces might impact negatively on online L&T experiences (Dwolatzky & Harris, 2020). In terms of fieldwork modules, Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016)



identified a need to explore how technologies can be included to effectively support online L&T in social work fieldwork education. This, then guided the research reported on in this article. The research question was: How do student social workers and their supervisors experience and perceive the inclusion of technologies in a first-year fieldwork module? The aims were to explore and describe how:

- The components of the activity theory informed L&T activities,
- Technologies can be included as effective tools in fieldwork modules,
- Informal learning outcomes can happen when technologies are included, and
- Prior exposure technologies affected L&T experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The aims informed the choices of research methodology, as discussed below.

### **Research methodology**

From an interpretive paradigm, the researchers were interested in the experiences and perspectives of student social workers and their supervisors. This paradigm is human driven as it encourages the inclusion of the social reality of people (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). From this paradigm, the qualitative research approach allowed for descriptions by the participants' regarding their experiences and perceptions (Creswell, 2014). To support this approach, an explorative-descriptive research design was used to direct the choices of methods and techniques throughout the research process (Ormston et al., 2014).

The population was aimed at finding those individuals that would best be able to contribute to rich data (Alvi, 2016), namely undergraduate student social workers and supervisors in the fieldwork modules at the UWC. Purposive non-probability sampling was used as participation was voluntary, and inclusion in the sample not pre-determined (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2013). The inclusion criteria were undergraduate third-year students registered for the BSW programme and supervisors in the first-year fieldwork module who was also supervisors during the introduction of technologies to years prior to this study. It was envisaged that findings of similar research conducted in other disciplines or at other universities could later be compared to obtain a fuller picture of student experiences and perceptions. Students and supervisors were invited to participate via e-mail through information sheets explaining the purpose and nature of the study. Forty-eight of 96 students and four out of five supervisors agreed to participate. They were requested to write reflection sheets on questions guided by the four research aims. For privacy reasons, the reflection sheets were uploaded on the university's online portal for the researchers to access. Thematic data analyses took place within the framework for qualitative data analysis by Tesch (as cited in Creswell, 2014) to ensure a scientific eight-step framework from which the main themes and sub-themes could be identified.

The qualitative data was verified through D'Cruz and Jones' (2014) description of verification criteria. The credibility of the data was determined by the use of reflexive practice to ensure that the researchers' viewpoints were not included in the presentation of the data, and that their positionality as researchers, and not as lecturers, was made clear to the participants. The sampling method and technique were aimed at obtaining data from participants who were able to answer the research questions best, and the reflection sheets ensured that the verbatim input of the participants was used to interpret the findings. Transferability and dependability were ensured through a thorough description of the implementation of the research methodology, so that the study could be replicated in other settings, or compared to other similar studies. Confirmability was aimed at the

neutrality of the findings, which was supported by the use of the reflection sheets to ensure that the participants' direct words were used for data analysis.

Ethical practice included that the reflective reviews were done voluntary at a time and place convenient to the participants (Sanjari et al., 2014). To decide whether to participate or not, the participants received all relevant information regarding the research (Neuman, 2014). No pressure was placed on prospective participants to sign consent forms, to participate or to complete participation (Creswell, 2014). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the reflection sheets received numbers linked to the personal details of the participants. All information was stored on a password protected computer, and will be stored in the UWC research data repository for a period of five years (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). Furthermore, the findings are presented as a collective story to prevent identification of individual contributions.

## Findings

Participants were asked to reflect on the components of the activity theory in terms of the first three research aims. The participating students were also requested to reflect on how this affected their academic experiences during the pandemic to address the fourth aim. The findings resulted in descriptions related to the components of the activity theory, as well as negative and positive L&T experiences during the pandemic.

## Reflective Reviews on the Components of the Activity Theory

### Tools

The participating supervisors emphasised the fact that adequate training supported them to make use of the online tools available on the platform effectively. *"The training was important as I had never used online tools before."* *"I found it user-friendly and it gave me more than one option to use, depending on students' needs"*. They could therefore make use of a variety of tools to encourage student engagement (cf. Lalima & Dangwal, 2017; Palmer, 2011).

Students who participated discussed the value of a variety of types of assessments that were included on the platform, which supported their different learning styles, and provided them with an interesting learning experience. *"It was less boring, because we were assessed in different ways. Some works better than others for me, but I think it is fair to all the students"*. Both the student and supervisor participants were of the opinion that all the tools on the platform were effective, and did not suggest other tools to be included (cf. Lalima & Dangwal, 2017; Herrington & Oliver, 2000).

Participating students reported that the variety of resources on the online platform provided for a more conducive learning experience. *"It worked for me to have different sources online, such as the module guide and articles. I could then use them as I needed them"*. *"You can go to IKAMVA and find what you need without having to travel to the library"*. A student mentioned that it was an empowering experience as technological skills were developed (cf. Vahed et al., 2018; Bryan & Volchenkova, 2016). *"At school we did not have computers. I really liked to learn how to study online, and think it helped me to become more technologically advanced."*

In terms of challenges, both students and supervisors reported that making use of online consulting was new to them and that they were not able to make use of this optimally. A supervisor said that *"online consultations is more impersonal and it was a challenge to create a trusting atmosphere and to get to know students"*, while a student supported this viewpoint by stating *"I did not know my supervisor and the online contact makes it difficult to build a relationship. At school, we got used to direct contact with*

teachers”. Student participants also reported that they initially struggled to understand the module guide in terms of the link between the activities and the BSW standards, and mentioned that face-to-face discussions with the lecturer and supervisors provided clarity. *“This was my first experience with fieldwork and with studying at a university. It was difficult to understand the standards and how it must be used in the activities. And also, I did not really know in the beginning what I must do with the different documents that were on IKAMVA. Luckily we also had personal contact with the lecturer and supervisor so that they could explain it better”*. They initially found it difficult to make use of the online resources effectively and independently. Both the supervisor and student participants reported that the development of the E-Portfolio of Evidence was initially a challenge. The students, however, reported that this provided them with a skill to use in the second year of studies. *“It was nice to see how my portfolio became better in my second year. Then it also started to make more sense”*. Supervisor participants supported the latter viewpoint, and discussed how the content of the E-Portfolio could be used as the foundation for the second-year fieldwork module to build on the previous learning experience (cf. Olsson & Roxå, 2012). *“I think this is good to show students how they develop over the years. They can also use what they already have in their portfolios to see how all fits together”*.

The students reported that they learned about their own responsibility to engage effectively with resources. *“I had to learn that it is up to me to use IKAMVA and all the documents”*. *“It helped me to be more independent and to use the supervisor’s comments to improve my work”*. *“I had to become more open to not expect my lecturer to tell me everything”*. They identified accessing and using the resources more often, reading and summarising of the content, engaging more with the online consultation option, making use of formative feedback in follow-up activities, and to be more 'open-minded' to use new learning tools as aspects that they could improve on.

The reflections point to a need for blended-learning, using the tools together with traditional face-to-face L&T.

### *Subject*

The supervisor participants all spoke about the value of the announcement function on the online platform as a way to provide students with regular and spontaneous guidelines and information. However, they indicated that students’ communications to them through the online tools available to them could be improved (cf. Vahed et al., 2018). *“It was nice to contact students when I needed to, and to not only be dependent on the supervision sessions. And students who missed sessions could also get the information”*. *“I found that students did not really contact me; it was more one-way communication”*.

All participating students reflected that the introduction to technologies in this module contributed to their ability to engage on the IKAMVA platform more effectively in other modules during the consequent two years (cf. Olsson & Roxå, 2012; Palmer, 2011). *“I think it would have been more difficult to use IKAMVA if we did not have the training and the experience in the fieldwork module. Now I know where to go and how to use it for my other modules”*.

Some participating students spoke of the value of feedback on the platform, while others felt that the blended-learning method contributed to a better experience of feedback. *“I could look at the feedback again to make sure of things”*. *“I liked it more when the supervisor or the lecturer could explain things to me”*. While feedback on the platform was valued, the face-to-face feedback added value (cf. Lalima & Dangwal, 2017).

A minority of student participants agreed that the online platform created a space for active participation, but did not feel that it contributed to independence, or to become able to critically reflect on what they were learning and how it relates to practice *“On the*

*forum I could talk to other students and the supervisor, but it did not help me to study better because I needed the supervisor to explain things to me".* The majority described how the online platform required them to become active in the L&T activities, and that this contributed to their abilities to engage independently with study material (cf. Herrington & Oliver, 2000). They described that the online engagement stimulated the development of independent work and the ability to critically reflect on what they were learning through each activity. Therefore, they became able to understand how knowledge informed practice (cf. Roberson, 2019). *"It made me realise that I must read what is on IKAMVA and that I can use it without the supervisor telling me what to do the whole time". "It was my responsibility to read the instructions, to look at the theory, and then to do the activity. This helped me a lot in my second year to understand how we must use our academic work to plan for fieldwork"*.

Informal learning that took place was described by the participants as learning to engage in discussions, to work with other students, and to include diverse perspectives in the learning process as benefits of the inclusion of technologies in this module. *"When you use the forum, it is easier to say something, especially if you are shy or unsure. It was interesting to see what the other students wrote". "I think it helped that all the students could say something, also the quiet ones"*. Some students, in referring to the above, explained that it contributed to self-assurance. Another informal learning outcome was the ability to better manage time and workloads, and therefore to learn independently. *"I had to plan when I will do the online work and it helped me to work better with my time"*.

Challenges described by the student participants included a need for personal interaction with supervisors and the lecturer at the same time. *"Often the supervisor and the lecturer repeat the same thing and then it confused me. I think they should work more together, and they should not only give feedback online"*. They again asked that online feedback should be complemented with individual face-to-face feedback. They also contemplated that they need to take responsibility for their own learning; therefore, using online consultation more effectively and developing a work schedule to ensure that they can better manage their time and plan activities better. *"I think I can still work on my time-management, but it is better than in my first year. And I think it is important that students must contact supervisors online if they do not understand something. It is your responsibility to ask"*.

### *Object*

All of the participating supervisors mentioned that the module guide provided them with a clear understanding of the focus and purpose of the module, as well as of the link between the activities and the exit level outcomes. *"It really helped me to know what must happen in this module"*. While some students felt that the outcomes of the module were not clear to them, the majority reported that outcomes were clearly related to the activities in the module. They could therefore understand the goal behind activities (cf. Vahed et al., 2018). *"If you read the module guide and rubrics, all your questions are answered"*. The findings pointed to an awareness of the goals of the L&T content of the module (cf. Engeström, 2015).

The intended learning outcomes that were mentioned in the reflections include the fact that the activities in combination with the volunteer placement provided students with an orientation to social work practice and prepared them for field placements in the second year. The students described how their communication skills improved and explained how working in diverse groups contributed to their ability to listen to the perspectives of others. They also spoke about developing skills to make use of literature sources and to write reports, but mentioned that referencing was a challenge for them.

The supervisor participants alluded to the fact that the students needed more guidance and learning opportunities regarding report writing and referencing. *“I picked up that, even with the guidelines we gave them, they continued to struggle with professional writing and with referencing”*.

The participating students continued to report that they learned about the importance of looking at the content of theory modules to guide their fieldwork modules, but requested that they needed more exposure to fieldwork settings in this module. *“I think we needed to practice what we learned more by working at organisations”*. The supervisors added the development of a professional identity, as part of the orientation to social work practice, as an outcome that was achieved. *“It was interesting to see how they developed professionally in the way they communicated.”*

### Rules

All the participating students felt that the module guide’s content provided them with enough information to know what the module was about, what was expected of them, and how assessments would take place (cf. Engeström, 2015). *“I cannot think what else could be added”*. The supervisors emphasised that the training to use the online tools effectively assisted them to be clear about what was expected from them and the students (cf. Vahed et al., 2018). They indicated that the instructions related to each activity were clear and served as a guide for them and the students. This, then, contributed to an understanding of what was expected of them, how to use the online tools, and how activities would be assessed through the inclusion of rubrics. *“The students and I knew what we had to do, and what tools to use and how to use it for each activity”*. *“The rubrics were good to use as a guide”*. A majority of students explained that they learned to adequately use the module guide, and that this provided them with a platform to understand the outcomes of the module, while the rest felt that they could have engaged better with the guides.

When reflecting on the rules of the module, the students explained on the one hand that the workload was at times too much for them. On the other hand, they acknowledged that they learned that they needed to take responsibility to implement time management skills and to plan their academic responsibilities across modules. *“I sometimes felt overwhelmed with all the work, but it helped me to plan better. I can see how it helped me in other modules too”*. A specific challenge was to work within groups, while attempting to follow the rules. *“My problem is that some group members do not participate and then the others do all the work to make sure our activity is done in time”*.

### Community

The students could identify the lecturer, supervisors and the students as the key persons involved in the L&T in this module, but did not mention the practice setting stakeholders and CIECT.

The reflections point to a need for all of the key persons to be linked more clearly. A student, for example, mentioned that *“the lecturer should also be involved in the supervision,”* pointing to an unawareness of the collaboration between the lecturer and the supervisors (cf. Engeström, 2015). Another suggestion by students was that tutors should become a part of the L&T community to support students to better engage with the online platform, as well as with the activities. *“I think tutors can help us when we do our activities and also to help us to work better in groups”*. The supervisors further mentioned writing coaches at the UWC Writing Centre as another resource to include to support professional writing and referencing skills.

*Division of labour*

Reflections from the participating students portray a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, as also illustrated their ability to identify how they can take more responsibility for their learning experiences (cf. Engeström, 2015). One aspect that was identified as a challenge was the previously mentioned group activities, and the fact that a lack of participation by some group members impacted negatively on the learning experience of the larger group (cf. Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2018). Their reflections pointed to a lack of awareness of the responsibilities of the other role-players. In contrast, the supervisors could describe the roles and responsibilities of the CIECT, practice settings, lecturer, themselves and the students (cf. Vahed et al., 2018).

Only the student social workers reflected on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their academic experiences.

**Reflective Reviews on L&T Experiences during the Pandemic**

Focusing on negative experiences, a student spoke about the emotional impact of the pandemic. *“I am constantly stressed about the virus, and then I am tired and cannot concentrate on my work”*.

The participants referred to a preference for blended-learning: *“I find it difficult to learn without physical interaction”*. *“It is hard communicating online only and knowing that there is a big possibility that the lectures will never understand your questions”*.

The participating students explained that they were not able to swiftly move to online L&T due to connectivity problems and a lack of data and devices, as well as financial challenges. *“We get data from the University, but I am constantly nervous that I will not have enough data to do all my assignments. And I cannot afford to buy data”*. A lack of devices has an emotional impact. *“It has only brought stress and anxiety, because I cannot do online learning. I have to work on my cell phone, because I do not have a laptop”*. Although solutions are found, the participants' descriptions point to a feeling of dependency, which impacts on the sense of Self. *“We had access to computers and data on campus. Now I have to share a computer with five siblings and my father”*. *“I don't have the proper device to do my assignments on and asking around all the time makes me feel like a burden”*. Other aspects that impacted on online L&T activities were internet instability and load shedding, which refers to a lack of access to electricity in the South African context.

Socioeconomic circumstances further affected the participants. *“I was also the first person in my family to go to university, so no one really understands the pressure and the workload”*. In addition, not going to campus meant that participants had to engage with household activities that had a negative impact on their ability to focus on academic work. *“Not going to campus, I feel a lot of strain as I need to do all household chores and cook for a family of ten each day as well as have time for my studies”*. Crowded households also affected the participants' ability to engage with online L&T, resulting in them not being able to connect online during lecture slots and having to work during the night. *“We live in a shack, there are so many of us, and the noise levels are so high, so I have to work when the others are sleeping”*.

Positive experiences had to do with the value of having more time and working at their own pace. *“Now that I am not at campus I have more time to spend on tasks. Even though lectures provided more information on what to do, it's still possible to email lecturers if we are unclear on what to do”*. The participants described how they adapted to online L&T, and how they found creative alternatives and developed new skills. *“It has forced me to create new strategies and routines. I feel good about how I was able to adapt and make*

plans". "At least this teaches us how to be more independent and technology wise". Online support was experienced from fellow students, supervisors and lecturers: "The students stay in contact with each other. We help and support each other and it helps a lot to cope". "If I have any questions, then I have no problem emailing a lecturer or my supervisor for clarification". Technical support from the University was also viewed as a valuable aspect that contributed to students' ability to adapt to online L&T. "We have a helpdesk that you can mail if you do not know what to do". "On IKAMVA, there was often some tips of how we can use the site better. And this site does not use data".

The participants again emphasised the importance of taking responsibility for academic work. "This lockdown has made me realise how important my studies are for me and that I need to learn to start putting in more effort to succeed in my studies. So, I learned to take responsibility for my own future".

The authors used the above findings to reflect on what worked and what did not work, framed within the components of the activity theory.

### Discussion and conclusions

The findings highlighted a need for blended-learning and how online learning, particularly during the pandemic, was challenged by socioeconomic factors. While prior exposure to technologies indeed supported the students L&T experiences during the pandemic, the socioeconomic challenges continued to affect their learning.

Participants referred to similar experiences under the different components. Therefore, we have found that the interrelatedness of the different components should not be underestimated when one aims to create meaningful and interactive L&T experiences. The following key aspects were highlighted:

A variety of online tools poses the opportunity to provide for different learning styles and students' contexts. Training on the use of the online platform and the different tools, and an ongoing option to obtain technical support, is essential to prepare students for online L&T activities. Importantly, it must be considered that all students must have access to devices, data and internet to ensure fair and equitable L&T practice. Blended-learning supports the students and other role-players to build relationships that could support online engagements. The lack of direct interaction during the pandemic was reported as a challenge by the students. Informal learning should be discussed with students during the orientation of the module. For example, alerting them to how time-management, independent learning and communication in diverse groups can develop into personal and professional skills. Critical reflections on what is learned, how it is learned, why it is learned, and how it contributes to the qualification can further stimulate scholarship that could support L&T in consequent years of study. Role-players and their roles must be clarified during orientation, and continued joint reflections can support the way in which role-players can contribute to the learning experiences. It is important to include tutors, writing coaches and practice settings as active role-players in the L&T community for fieldwork modules.

This figure guided our recommendations regarding those aspects that should be considered when planning the inclusion of technologies in fieldwork modules. It should be noted that these recommendations are made within the understanding that technology will be introduced to students on a first-year level, and utilised as a building block for further L&T (cf. Olsson & Roxå, 2012).

The figure below highlights those aspects that were identified to be included in the different components of the activity theory.

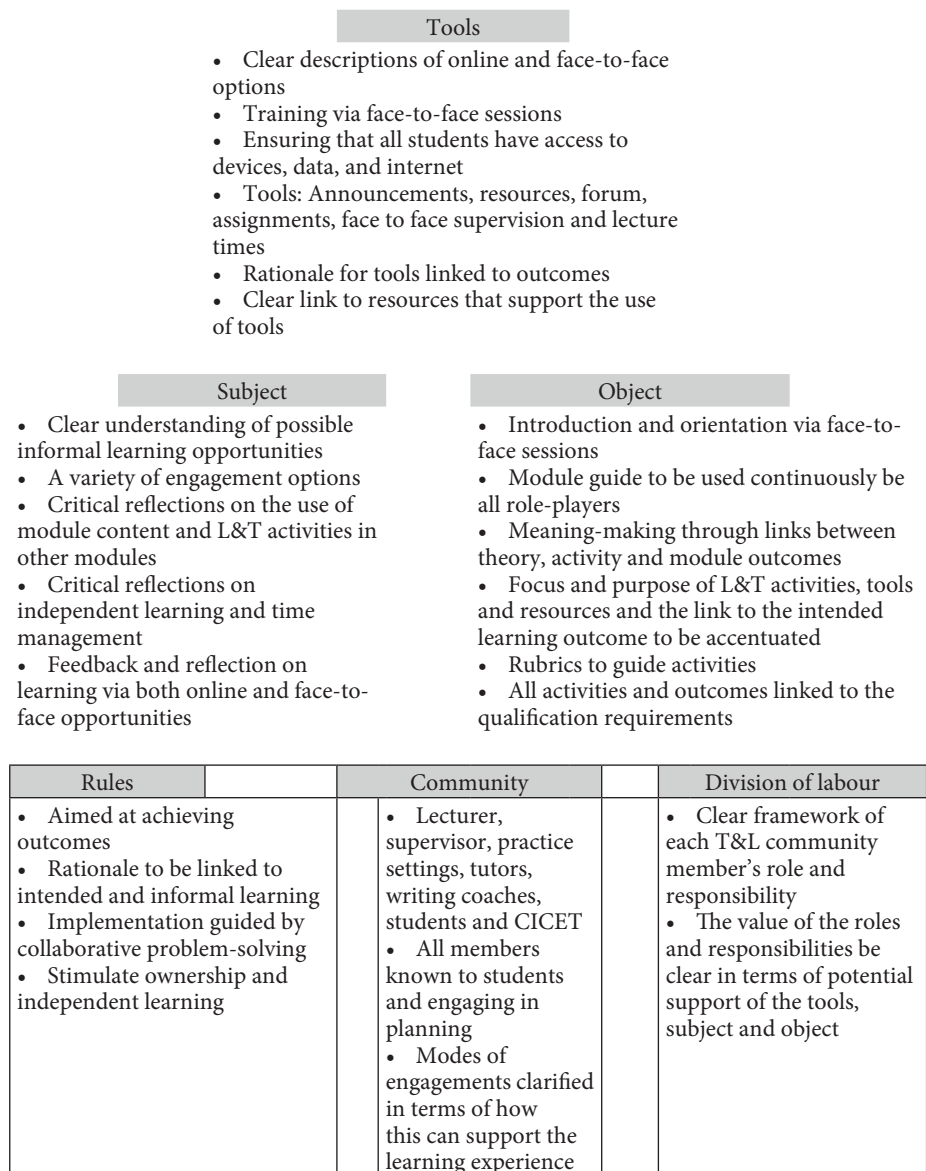


Figure 1. Blended learning in fieldwork modules according to the activity theory (as adapted from Engeström, 2015)

### Recommendations

*Tools:* When the module is introduced to the L&T community, time should be allocated to ensure training on the online platform, the rationale behind the inclusion of technologies, as well as how the different tools can support learning. It is important that the tools serve a specific purpose, and be related to the outcome (object) of the module.



This must be clear to the L&T community members. The resources and how it should be used to encourage a meaningful learning experience must receive attention. Importantly, all the community members should receive adequate time to practice the utilisation of tools and resources to support L&T and avoid confusion. This includes practice in how engagements between students and with supervisors and lecturers could be used optimally. The blended-learning framework should also be clarified in terms of what tools can be used for face-to-face and for online L&T. The tools' relation to the subject, object, community, roles and rules should be made clear to all role-players.

*Subject:* Engagement options should be introduced in line with the rules of the module. The possible informal learning that could take place through the L&T activities should be presented to students, meaning that an awareness should be created from the onset. The possible informal learning opportunities can be presented in terms of the link to lifelong learning, scholarship, critical citizenship, and creative and collaborative problem-solving through deep and broad engagements. It could also be a good practice to encourage students to reflect purposefully on what else they have learned, where they can use what they have learned, and the long-term value of what they have learned after each activity. The purpose of feedback, and how students can make use of this to improve the learning that takes place, should be clear to both students and those who provide feedback.

*Object:* The focus should be on a meaningful learning experience that encourages students to understand how they can learn, what they must learn, and why they should learn the content of the module. Module guides should include a description of the goal of the module, and the link between activities, resources and the intended learning outcomes must be clear. Students should have clarity on how L&T tools support the intended outcomes the qualification requirements. The latter highlights the interrelatedness between the subject and the object.

*Rules:* Rules focus on what is needed to ensure that students can achieve the learning outcomes of a module. The rationale behind rules should be linked to the intended and informal outcomes. These rules should therefore be introduced together with the introduction to the tools, the subject and the object. All the community members must be able to discuss areas where the implementation of rules is being challenging, and as such encourage collaborative problem-solving and taking ownership of the learning process to support the development of independent learning skills.

*Community:* Community members need to be identified, together with the division of labour and descriptions of how each member can support students' learning experiences. When evaluating modules, lecturers should be open to identify other members that need to be included to support effective L&T. Students must be aware of who the members are, and how they can engage with members to support their learning experiences. In this study, we found that the inclusion of tutors and the university's Writing Centre as community members can contribute to the overall L&T experience in fieldwork modules.

*Division of labour:* The introduction of L&T community members must include descriptions of their roles and responsibilities, and it should be clear how these roles and responsibilities contribute to the learning experience. The potential value of each member's role and responsibilities should be linked to the use of L&T tools, the subject and the object, as well as the rules relevant to the module.

*The use of technologies during a pandemic:* While the inclusion of technologies in the first-year prepares students for online L&T activities, it must be acknowledged that blended-learning supports students from disadvantaged communities to develop skills and understanding through face-to-face L&T opportunities, as well as to have access to technologies on the campus and not necessarily in their home environments. A move from blended to online L&T during a pandemic cannot only be viewed in terms of students' prior exposure to technologies on campus. Their socioeconomic circumstances that impact on their ability to utilise technologies must be considered during the planning of emergency L&T conditions.

In conclusion, we found that apart from what we have learned, as presented above, the evaluation of modules within the activity theory framework can serve as an important tool to reflect on module development. This places a focus on what students should learn (object), what they can learn (subject), how they can learn (tools), the boundaries of the L&T activities (rules), who can support the learning experiences (community), and how learning is supported by the different community members (division of labour). The module evaluations should therefore be done by all the community members, and be aimed at continuous development of L&T practices that will support student success.

### Declaration

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