

## Humanities

## Why a human-centred shift matters for those studying Social Work

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Humans are resilient and have adapted to sudden and unexpected events such as COVID-19. And, as is characteristic of our work, the Department of Social Work and Criminology responded quickly and shifted our academic course work and practical community work to virtual platforms.

At the time, the forced shift seemed like an ideal opportunity for students and lecturers to explore the possibilities of available digital tools. Looking back, however, a different story emerges. The nature of our work means we must train in person within the lived environments of the communities we serve—this tactile imperative is something a virtual setting simply cannot replace.

Clearly, there are limits to what a digital environment can afford, and our department specifically needed to find a balance between technology and advancing human well-being. To do so, we had to remind ourselves what it means to be human!

We learned that connectivity means different things to different people on an online platform. We allowed students to switch off their video cameras to save on data costs and to stabilise our classes' Internet connection. Unfortunately, this meant that communication was one-sided, with lecturers missing essential visual cues indicating whether students were engaged.

Moreover, hearing without seeing people's expressions and body language does not help students learn how to observe and respond to people's emotions. Advanced technology certainly allows students to access their study material and participate in class. But while virtual class discussions do develop a solid knowledge base, students were unable to apply this knowledge and respond to real-life situations. We also

found that the digital platform affected the students' well-being. Their anxiety about online learning and their sudden isolation contributed to their mental distress.

It was only when lecturers adopted a more human approach to the digital shift by using low-tech platforms such as WhatsApp text messages and WhatsApp video calls that students experienced a sense of community and comradery. It enabled them to share their fears and experiences, even sharing their hesitance to show their classmates where they lived and their difficulties in managing background noises in their environment. But by sharing their lived experiences, our students learned that no one's homes are perfect and that background noises are a regular part of life—even for their lecturers! This is something our criminology students decided to share in their Jerusalema dance video production.

Our students, who are generally more digitally literate than their lecturers, were exceedingly patient with their 'elders' and even shared jokes as they helped our staff navigate the peculiarities of various virtual platforms. They learned to tap into their natural empathic abilities and taught themselves a lesson that takes most people a lifetime to learn—what it means to be human!

In this human-centred context, challenges create opportunities. As with all other things in life, we choose our reality and, in this case, what we learn from our online experience. Our

students learned more about themselves by nurturing their human relationships with their peers and lecturers who lived in different parts of the country. These relationships also helped our students learn to trust one another, which in turn helped bolster their own self-confidence and willingness to embrace new experiences.

The switch to digital alternatives taught us, as a department, how to balance technology's advantages with its limits. Our students, for instance, trained as tele-counsellors; however, to return to their practice placements within a community, they still need to meet and engage with their clients in person. After all, our social work students are acutely aware that they must use their skills to help society respond to situations such as COVID-19.

Digital tools and virtual platforms in social work are here to stay. In our experience, digital tools cannot entirely replace what students learn from real-life situations. Humans need to connect to one another in real, live environments.

We, as humans, drive technology. And we, in the Department of Social Work and Criminology, choose to use low-tech tools to teach our students about real-life situations and prepare them for the humans that await them!

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