

BUILDING AN MSW VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE  
AND COLLABORATION

A Project Presented to the Faculty  
of  
California State University, Stanislaus

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of Master of Social Work

By  
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May 2017

CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

BUILDING AN MSW VIRTUAL COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE  
AND COLLABORATION

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## DEDICATION

To my little family: Mom, Dad, and Ricky, los quiero mucho. Thank you for supporting me as I pursue my dreams, and for sacrificing so much of you for me. To Joshua, my human: thank you for holding my hand and reminding me that I am smart, beautiful, and can conquer anything that comes my way! To my cats: Hamilton, Jackamo, and Simon for being by my side through long nights of writing and researching. Dr. John A. Garcia and Dr. Leyva: so, thankful for ALWAYS believing in me and my writing! To the co-creator of this graduate project, Leslie: I couldn't have asked for a better project partner, cheers my friend, we did it! To my CSU Stanislaus MSW community of practice: keep learning, engaging, and organizing to pursue social justice.

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## ABSTRACT

Students and alumni in the Master of Social Work program at California State University Stanislaus, have identified a need to create a virtual community of practice. Through conversations with students, the author of this project created a virtual community of practice (VCoP) that is accessible to CSU Stanislaus MSW students and alumni. The creation of a virtual community will help continue the exchange of learning between its members and support their educational and career development. Informal feedback from students and alumni was solicited by creating a suggestion box, and requesting what would members like to see in their virtual community of practice. Through this communication, forums were developed that contain themes important to students and alumni. The virtual community was guided by community of practice characteristics to ensure an active and successful website. Detailed research on other VCoPs and pilot testing it to the members help make last few adjustments. The virtual community can be found at [www.socialjusticemsw.com](http://www.socialjusticemsw.com), and it is a virtual environment grounded in social work practice and where members can pursue dialogue, learning, and engagement.

## CHAPTER I

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The purpose of this graduate project was to create a virtual community of practice for students in and alumni of the Masters of Social Work program at California State University, Stanislaus. This graduate project was created to serve the CSU, Stanislaus MSW community, which includes the two-year cohorts, three-year cohorts, hybrid program, and alumni. The project produced a website that will enhance skills that students learn throughout their social work education and careers. The design of the website makes information easily accessible and encourages colleagues to stay connected. Virtual communities of practice have become a convenient and powerful way for peers to connect and evolve in their practice of social work.

Community of practice (CoP) was first introduced by Etienne Wenger who identified CoP as, “face-to-face learning, where a group of professionals gained knowledge about practices in their field in a social environment” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, Li et al., 2009, as cited in Davis & Goodman, 2013, p. 86). The advancement in technology has made it easier for people to have access to resources, and this is stimulating a new version of CoP. Virtual communities of practice are starting to become important tool for the social work profession. Rheingold, the pioneer of VCoPs stated, “Virtual communities as social aggregation that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient

human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Adedoyin, 2003, p. 359). Building relationships through a virtual community can encourage unity and commitment to a strong social work profession and education.

Social work professionals continuously develop and grow as they remain current with and actively engaged in policy, evidence based practice, community development, and social justice. This project created several forums that will allow students to continue their learning in all these categories. The forums focus on: community and student resources, applying policy to practice, how to become a licensed clinical social worker, employment opportunities, and activism that is developing within local communities or on campus. The topics discussed within the forums help identify further topics that students and alumni find meaningful to their virtual community of practice. The forums provide students and alumni the opportunity to engage with each other and form a highly active online community that provides support to social work practice on a community and individual level. The goal of the forums is to provide a space for students and alumni to create academic discussion on information learned in class and how it is being integrated in the field.

To create a virtual community of practice that will encompass a variety of forums, this project engaged in collaboration with another graduate student. Lewis (2017) concentrated on gathering information and developing forums to address compassion fatigue. Lewis used existing research to support how a virtual community

can help provide peer support and a safe space for students and alumni to share their lived experiences.

The MSW program at CSU, Stanislaus provides the ideal social environment that include classrooms, seminars, and field placements. This social environment helps students create dialogue that produce knowledge and ideas that can make social work meaningful for the students. Often the ideas, concerns, and knowledge that are created in the classroom are forgotten or not used to its full capacity. The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008), states that social workers have a responsibility to continuously learn, be proactive, and collaborate with other social workers to enhance the social work profession and meet the needs of our clients. The virtual community created in this graduate project is intended to support the NASW's Code of Ethics and offer a space for students and alumni to share their ideas and knowledge. It supports alumni as they begin their social work careers with new tools and allows them to continue to remain engaged by asking questions and sharing knowledge. The virtual community of practice will provide a digital tool that can be used as an accessible resource for past and present students.

It was important that the website be built on best practices to encourage students and alumni to engage online and mirror an "in-class setting" where dialogue is constantly being produced. Virtual communities of practice are advancing social work in various ways, such as, "Sharing the latest knowledge, advances proven social interventions for the betterment of clients in the different social services agencies, improves pedagogy, and drives cutting edge research in the academia" (Adedoyin,

2016, p. 360). The creation of the website seeks to make it easier for students to contribute to social work knowledge and to share knowledge with others.

## CHAPTER II

### OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT

To produce an MSW virtual community of practice, this project had four objectives, which consisted of: 1) Creating a virtual community of practice/website that can be easily accessible and will engage students and alumni to have discussions; 2) Providing updated and accurate information on topics concerning policy, evidenced based practice, community development, and social justice; 3) Developing and putting into action a plan to help sustain a virtual community of practice; 4) Launching a virtual community of practice to the CSU, Stanislaus MSW community by May 2017.

The first objective in this project was to create a website that can help MSW students and alumni easily navigate themselves through topics and resources related to social work practice, education, social justice, and communities. The website was designed to help students and alumni access information quickly and be encouraged to contribute information into the forums. Through student interactions the creator found that students are sensitive to time and often need access to immediate information that is current, evidenced based, and resourceful. The social work profession is continuously evolving with new information, and it is vital to provide this new information to MSW students and alumni. The website has a space for students to post any questions related to the CSU, Stanislaus MSW program and inform them of any activism or educational events. The CSU, Stanislaus MSW

program's mission statement promotes social justice and the desire to be part of activism within our local communities. The mission statement helped carve a space in the website where students can share their struggles and success with social justice in the social work profession. This project created a collective location where students can feel safe, supported, and informed about the community they serve, live, and are active in.

The second objective is to maintain and continuously update information that the website offers to the MSW community. Community resources such as phone numbers, addresses, business hours, or services provided are subject to change, and they should be assessed at least three to four times a year for current information. Information on the new academic year or forums pertaining to the MSW program must also be updated for future and present students. The website provides current information on evidenced based practice and policy that is related to social work, because these topics are constantly evolving. Providing information and resources that are accurate, current, and accessible will help students to engage, trust, and continue to use the website as a tool.

The third objective is to develop a plan that helps sustain this virtual community of practice. Updating and monitoring the website will require time, effort, and collaboration. This sustainability required the creators of the website to identify students and alumni that will be facilitators. Students and alumni that volunteer to be facilitators will keep forums updated with current information and mold the virtual community according to the MSW community needs. The creators of this graduate

project will dedicate time after graduation to come back to new student orientations and guide students on how to use the website. Also, the creators will connect with the MSWSA in Fall 2017 to discuss how they can use and maintain the VCoP.

The fourth objective of this project is to produce a website that can be used by students and alumni by May 2017. Students' immediate need for community resources and information on the MSW program, urges the project to have the website ready by May 2017. The creation of this website required multiple steps and informal feedback from MSW students. Completing the steps in a timely manner and incorporating student feedback into the creation of the website contributed to a successful launch.

## CHAPTER III

### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

Building a virtual community of practice plays an important role in sharing knowledge with peers and maintaining community. Currently, students in the CSU, Stanislaus MSW program use social media to express concerns regarding the program or topics related to social work. Conversations with alumni have confirmed that there is no space for them to ask questions, express concerns, or share their thoughts once they start working in the social work field. The goal of this project is to bring every member of the MSW community together by creating a tool that is accessible at any time. Building a virtual community of practice in collaboration with students, alumni, and other resources resulted in an online tool that allows access and a safety net to the MSW community of CSU Stanislaus.

This project seeks to break down barriers that students and alumni experience during and after the MSW program. One barrier is that members of the MSW community belong to different cohorts and there is a lack of unity between each cohort. The program is home to two-year cohorts, three-year cohorts, and a hybrid program. Members of each cohort have diverse schedules, which make it difficult to communicate with everyone or create a time and space for everyone to come together for events. Creating a virtual community of practice will help build cohesion among all cohorts and it will be a central location for everyone to access information about

the program and inform members of what each cohort is experiencing in their classrooms, internships, and student lives.

Having a tool that will link each cohort together will help build identity as an MSW community and strengthen relationships among students and alumni. Building relationships and forming an identity outside the classroom will help students and alumni in their learning process and in their practice. Wegner (1998) mentions, “Rather than mistrusting social relationships and interests, as traditional learning institutions often do, a learning community incorporates them as essential ingredients of learning in order to maximize the engagement of its members” (p. 272). This virtual community of practice is an environment to immerse MSW members with opportunities to learn from each other by using evidenced based resources and their individual experiences. In addition, this project supports alumni by providing research and current knowledge that will help them in their social work career in areas such as direct practice, teaching, and community mobilization. Adedoyin (2016), summarizing claims of various scholars, highlights the importance VCoPs and the use of digital tools to support evidence-based practice:

The use of virtual technologies to enhance evidence-based practice (EBP) social work teaching, research, and social service delivery has been on a steady rise. More than ever before, there is an urgent need to expedite the translation and transmission of cutting-edge research findings and empirically validated best practices in social work interventions, from researchers to practitioners, and vice versa. (p. 361)

The virtual community of practice will allow evidence-based practice to be accessible and encourage alumni and students to stay connected to the MSW community and help their community of practice grow.

Creating a space to practice and advocate for social justice is the final component that makes this virtual community significant. Social justice is what cultivates MSW students to advocate, transform, and engage with individuals and communities. The CSU, Stanislaus MSW program promotes social justice, and it is integrated into each course. Students who are currently in the MSW program have a passion to learn from each other and experience a learning environment that creates meaningful dialogue. In the journey to discover what social justice is and how it can be practiced in the social work profession, students unite and form an identity within their community of practice. This project wants to grow the community that is created among students and alumni and encourage the pursuit of social justice and learning.

## CHAPTER IV

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Overview**

In the early 1990s, the collaborative studies between Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger produced the idea of a community of practice (CoP). Through their observations and studies, Lave and Wenger (1991) identify a learning theory which they coined as situated learning. Situated learning states that learning does not happen alone; instead, learning is cultivated through interactions with other people and communities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning theories surrounding community of practice have developed to understand how members learn from each other and their practice. Over the past decades, further studies on community of practice have revealed that CoPs are integrated into every part of a person's life and learning experience. Prior studies have identified factors that make CoPs a successful learning framework to apply in different environments such as education, business, or online. A review of the literature will explore the structure and theories behind CoP, the continuous evolution of virtual community of practice (VCoP), and resources or examples that portray a thriving CoP. These factors are a driving force for this graduate project and aid in the design of the CSU, Stanislaus MSW virtual community of practice.

## **The Structure of Community of Practice**

Throughout Wenger's literature, he reminds us that CoPs are a phenomenon that is generated naturally through human interactions and throughout human evolution. In the last few decades, the concept of CoP has been analyzed to identify core characteristics within a CoP. In a brief introduction of CoP, Wenger (1998) identifies three characteristics as domain, community, and practice. It is important to understand and identify these three elements because, "Not everything called a community is a community of practice" (Wenger, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). By getting a clear understanding of these characteristics, one can identify a CoP and evaluate if it is meeting the needs of the members within the CoP.

The first component, domain, is developed around identity and how identity is linked to the membership of the group. According to Wenger and Wenger-Trayner (2015), "Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" (p. 2). People outside the membership might see a domain unimportant, but that does not affect how the members collaborate to handle their domain. The second characteristic is community, and it is defined as a group of people who exist, work, or live together and have things in common with each other (Wenger, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Community alone is not enough to be considered a CoP; instead members of a CoP do not have to live, meet, or interact on a consistent basis but there must be active learning and dialogue between members over a common interest for an extended period (Wenger, 1998). The final characteristic is practice, and Wenger defines

members of CoP as practitioners within their community (Wenger, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Practitioners of a CoP are collecting data and adding it to what is known as their knowledge base. This shared practice is done in informal or formal settings and often produced organically through conversations between the members.

The three characteristics that Wenger identify as being the core of CoP are working together within the community, and it can take on different forms of CoP. Wegnar and Wegnar-Trayner (2015), has categorized these forms as education, organization, government, associations, social sectors, international development, and the web. This project focuses on the education and web forms and ensure that the CSU, Stanislaus MSW virtual community of practice is created under the guidelines that Wegner and other subscribers have identified in their studies.

Wegner and Wegner-Trayner (2015) claimed that there are three dimensions one must look at in creating an educational CoP: internally, externally, and over the lifetime of its students. The internal characteristic looks at how a CoP, “Can organize a student’s educational experience that will anchor school learning through participation in communities around subject matters (Wegner, & Wegner-Trayner, 2015, p. 5). The external dimension will attend to connecting the student’s experience to practice in other forms outside of the school setting (Wegner, & Wegner-Trayner, 2015). The final dimension is the heart of this project because it will work on serving the needs of students and alumni and providing subjects of interest that are relevant to the members after they have graduated from school (Wegner, & Wegner-Trayner, 2015).

Community of practice is a complex social structure that can produce many benefits for its members. It provides an abundance of learning but most importantly it creates a feeling of belonging to a community that shares important values within each member. "The value is not merely instrumental for their work. It also accrues in the personal satisfaction of knowing colleagues who understand each other's perspectives and of belonging to an interesting group of people" (Wenger, Mcdermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 5). This graduate project follows and uses these characteristics to establish a CoP that keeps its members engaged, solves problems, and creates tools to help them in their careers and education in social work.

### **Learning Process Within a Community of Practice**

Communities of Practice have been a foundation for learning theories to emerge and frame how members are gaining knowledge within their CoP. The work of Lave and Wegner (1991) on situated learning theory started a journey of which learning theory best describes the engagement and knowledge sharing phenomenon that occurs within CoP. This project is mindful of all the learning theories that are reflected within a CoP. Acknowledging and identifying the learning theories help recognize if members are struggling to learn within their CoP. Social work is grounded in evidence-based practice and continuous learning of policy and resources. A VCoP is an ideal environment to support the learning responsibilities that MSW students and alumni have because it will nurture their evolving knowledge base. A review of the learning theories that have developed within CoP encourages this nurturing environment and design of the VCoP.

In its pure form situated learning, "Contributes to a growing body of research in human sciences that explores the situated character of human understanding and communication" (Lave & Wegner, 1991, p.14). Lave and Wegner (1991) interpreted situated learning through a different paradigm and viewed it as a person engaging in a process to acquire skills instead of acquiring the skills and then applying it later in their practice. Also, situated learning states that meaningful learning takes place, "Through the relationships between people and connecting prior knowledge with authentic, informal, and often unintended contextual learning" (Situated learning, 2017, para. 3). Traditional learning occurs alone through books or a direct lecture from an instructor, but situated learning challenges what is customary and states that learning happens within participation and is shared among peers within the community, not alone in an individual's mind (Lave & Wegner, 1991). Also, the characteristics that identify a CoP are very similar to defining situated learning. David (1998) states these features as, content, context, community of practice, and participation. All four elements of situated learning are needed so members are in an environment where they can critically reflect on and interpret their meaning of lived experiences (David, 1998).

Lave and Wegner (1991) take it a step further and define this analytical viewpoint on learning as legitimate peripheral participation. Lave & Wegner (1991) define legitimate peripheral participation in CoPs,

By this (legitimate peripheral participation) we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. (p. 29)

This unique viewpoint defines the engagement piece between new members and old members, and it describes how learning is happening between new and old members. This theory sheds light on the new learning process and how people learn through different styles and within communities.

### **Evolving Virtual Community of Practice in Social Work**

Virtual community of practice is a branch of CoP, and it has developed into a sophisticated social structure for people all around the world. VCoPs rely heavily on information and communication technologies (ICT) such as e-mail, the internet, social media, and any common virtual space (Dube, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2006). Adedoyin (2016) describes the virtual world as an umbrella that covers the technology platform and digital tools used to further the practice of a CoP. VCoPs have made it easier for people to find their interest or domain and integrate themselves with individuals who share a common interest. CSU, Stanislaus MSW students and program currently use social media such as Facebook to communicate any needs that they might have, but Facebook has its limitations. This project is striving to create a VCoP that will provide little to no limitations for its members and create a more private and professional setting to post about topics strictly related to social work practice and the MSW program.

In the early 1980s, through his personal experiences, Rheingold (1993) articulated the importance of online communities that were rapidly evolving. He explained how a virtual community of practice could sustain meaningful relationships around topics that are important to a group of people. Rheingold (1993) expresses,

The technology that makes virtual communities possible has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost-intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage. But the technology will not in itself fulfill that potential, this latent technical power must be used intelligently and deliberately by an informed population. (pp. 4-5)

Rheingold (1993) provided a peak into the fast development of cyberspace culture, corporations VCoPs, and technology advancements in other countries. Rheingold (1993) used WELL (Whole Earth Lectronic Link), a computer conferencing system to form relationships with people from different parts of the world on a specific topic. The experiences from WELL was a documented example of a rich VCoP and how it thrived on the exchange of mutual engagement, relationships, learning, and community. Rheingold set the platform for people to start diving into the virtual community world and there has been further research on the development of VCoPs.

As technology advances, VCoPs are rapidly being self-organized or organized with a structure in place. There have been detailed studies conducted on the evolving nature of VCoPs and how to sustain the development of a VCoP. Garber (2004) states that building a digital tool for people to use does not mean that people will automatically use it or learn from it. Social factors need to be integrated into the design of a VCoP for it to capture and nurture a growing virtual community of practice (Garber,2004). Bourhis, Dube, and Jacob (2006) have identified that "VCoP has a greater chance at being launched and successfully developed if its mission is in line with the overall mission of the organization" (p. 76). A set purpose will help members find commitment and solidify their membership within the community. Another distinguishing factor is leadership and the assignment of roles or

responsibilities to members (Bourhis, Dube, & Jacob, 2006). The leadership role can be continuously negotiated across time and space of a VCoP. Also, Rovai (2002), states that members must feel that there is a sense of community which includes a momentum of information, support, goals, commitment, and overall satisfaction with their VCoP.

The growth of Web 2.0, which brought social media and user generated content, paved the way for people to start exploring the digital platform through different scopes of practice. Adedoyin (2016) advocates the importance of VCoP in the context of social work practice and the various ways social work uses the digital platform to advance the social work profession. Community-based development, community organization advocacy, and the translation and transmission of evidenced based practice are a few major areas of social work that have advanced from VCoP (Adedoyin, 2016). The demand from different professional groups and information technology tools pushed social workers to agree to start sharing their knowledge through a digital platform. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) have produced ethical standards to help social workers use digital tools and protect clients and workers (NASW & ASWB, 2005). Adedoyin's (2016) study on social work VCoPs reflected improvement in peer support, cognitive development, development of indigenous knowledge, and bridging the gap between professors and frontline social work managers. VCoP has enhanced the social work profession and made it easier for social workers to be immersed in their profession.

## Resources

The foundation of this project is built from countless resources and examples of VCoPs. It was critical to understanding the structure, rhythm, and characteristics of a VCoP to identify best practice in creating a virtual community. Methods such as online searches for websites that contain VCoP characteristics, studies on virtual communities of practice, and looking at the CSU, Stanislaus MSW community of practice were used to identify the needs. These resources and examples provided creativity, a roadmap, and endless options for the construction of the VCoP.

One of the first examples of a highly developed VCoP was [mimenter.org](http://mimenter.org), an online community dedicated to medical professionals and students pursuing a medical profession. The VCoP created an intricate structure to capture members from across the country while creating space to find peers within a member's local community. Members can choose themes that they identify as important, and the site will automatically notify them when there is new information on their chosen topics. Members can post, ask questions, and find information whether they are medical students or medical professionals. The interaction between members is seamless, and their practice is shared through their engagement with each other. This web community gave the author ideas of how to construct forums, connect members, and provide information relevant to the profession. [Mimenter.org](http://Mimenter.org) captured thousands of members across the country, and the CSU, Stanislaus MSW VCoP will take a different path and only make the website available to members of our local CSU, Stanislaus MSW community.

Another significant example was studies conducted that reflected the success of VCoPs such as VCoPs in Social Group Work Education. The Social Group Work Commons was a VCoP created to help students, "generate their own topics and learning solutions, build on each other's experiences, and communicate about events in an online virtual common; the intent was to complement classroom learning" (Davis & Goodman, p. 4, 2013). Davis and Goodman (2013) found that students socialized and learned from others' experiences and contributed to a knowledge base that was created online and easy to access. This study reflected that in the early stages of Commons the instructors provided the themes for students but over time students started to contribute to their themes, provide guidance, and critically think through problems. This project mirrors Commons objectives by choosing a platform where members can chat, share photos, videos, create their forums, and have privacy settings. Davis and Goodman (2013) invited instructors into the Commons VCoP, but the CSU, Stanislaus MSW VCoP will not extend the invitation to professors because that need was not identified through dialogue with students and alumni. The Social Group Work Education study gave the facilitators of this project an idea on how students can use a digital tool to advance their education and professional development.

Other resources that helped model this project were VCoPs that strictly related to social work practice and social justice. Web sites such as [creativesocialworker.com](http://creativesocialworker.com) was an exciting example of space where social workers and therapists engage with each other in mental health, therapeutics activities, and resources. Another resource

engaging in social justice is [notesfromanaspirlinghumanitarian.com](http://notesfromanaspirlinghumanitarian.com) (N.A.H). The authors post about issues surrounding social justice and readers can participate in critical thinking and their identities around power and privilege. The final website was [socialworkerhelper.com](http://socialworkerhelper.com), and they also built an app for people to access on their mobile phones and have instant access to information about self-care, policy, and local events surrounding social worker practice. These virtual communities of practice are all resources that can benefit the growth of social workers as they pursue their careers and complete their education.

The essential resource for understanding and building a virtual community of practice was Etienne Wenger and his research on CoP. Wenger's work on CoP is the stepping stone to building a CoP that cultivates a learning environment for its members. A combination of Wenger's research and a glimpse of other VCoPs contributed to the creation of [socialjusticemsw.com](http://socialjusticemsw.com). It is a tool that will fulfill the needs of the CSU, Stanislaus MSW community and encourage students and alumni to come together and grow in their professional development and education.

## CHAPTER V

### METHODOLOGY

Several phases were completed to design a virtual community of practice that meet the needs of CSU, Stanislaus MSW students and alumni. The steps to create a virtual community of practice is a collaboration with another student and informal feedback from the MSW community. The stages for creating this project included: a) requesting input from MSW students and alumni and discussing what they would envision their virtual community to look like, b) researching examples of VCoPs that have best practices and have demonstrated a successful or non-successful community, c) attending to issues regarding privacy, safety, and member terms of use, d) pilot testing the website and requesting that members of the MSW community navigate the website and report back any recommendations, and e) devising a time sensitive plan for constructing, launching, and sustaining a virtual community of practice.

The CSU, Stanislaus MSW program promotes students to learn from each other and create a learning environment where knowledge is being shared and evaluated together. The creators of this virtual community of practice sustained this unique learning style by identifying the needs of the MSW community and incorporating those needs into the website. Through informal conversations with students and alumni and providing a suggestion box in the MSW lounge, the creators have identified a variety of topics for the virtual community of practice. These topics were the foundation for the first forums that were posted within the website. The

engagement of students will generate new topics that can be added on to the virtual community of practice. Furthermore, once the forums were created, the creators piloted tested the website to ensure that the site is accessible and to receive feedback from the CSU, Stanislaus MSW community (see Appendix A).

An important component of this project was to discover and research other virtual communities of practice which reflect characteristics that contribute to making a highly active website or a website struggling to engage members. Exploring a variety of VCoPs has sparked ideas and creativity for the creator. It has encouraged the creator to look at different scopes of VCoPs such as medicine, education, and social work. The list of websites that have been researched include, [mimmentor.org](http://mimmentor.org), [socialworkerhelper.com](http://socialworkerhelper.com), and [notesfromanaspiringhumanitarian.com](http://notesfromanaspiringhumanitarian.com). A few of the elements from these websites resonant with the creator such as private membership, forums that engage members and produce dialogue, and a design that is captive and easily accessible. Most importantly, as one navigates through the website the user can easily contribute to any discussion that the website offers.

In developing this website, the creators found a hosting company that has an approachable foundation to set up or take down forums, flexibility in designing, and that is inexpensive to maintain. [Prophpbb.com](http://Prophpbb.com) was the ideal hosting company for the CSU, Stanislaus MSW virtual community of practice and contained practical features that make it easy to maintain and navigate. The hosting company offers free hosting but the creators invested in the premium membership to access all the benefits offered through [Prophpbb.com](http://Prophpbb.com). The benefits included removing ads from the forums, control

of what content is viewable to non-register users, a database backup, uploading attachments, and ownership of a domain. Also, the hosting company provides premium users a support forum where they can post questions or search tutorials on how to use the website. Socialjusticemsw.com is the domain name chosen for this virtual community. As students journey through the MSW program, they become aware that social work practice aligns with social justice. It was important to include social justice in the domain name to remind students and alumni of their pursuit for transformative change through their practice.

Mightybell.com is a hosting company that helps launch virtual communities of practice such as mimentor.org, an online community for medical professionals. This hosting company was not chosen as the CSU, Stanislaus MSW hosting site because it was expensive compared to Prophpbb.com. The creator used Mightybell.com as an example of how the MSW virtual community can construct a privacy policy and member terms of use. Using best practices that are seen on Mightybell.com will help ensure safety, create protocols, and sustain the website for future years to come. The creators will ensure to make the member terms of use and privacy policy to meet the needs of the CSU, Stanislaus MSW community. Once the website has launched, amendments to the terms of use and privacy policy will be expected, as the virtual community grows with members and topics.

Constructing, launching, and sustaining a new virtual community of practice demanded the creators to prepare for deadlines, obstacles, and solutions. There was a time frame for building and launching this graduate project, and it held the creators

accountable to complete each phase in a timely manner. The first phase was to have the written portion of this project approved by UIRB by December 12, 2016. Once this project was approved by UIRB the creators started working on the construction of the website. The goal is to have the website completed and ready to introduce to the MSW community by May 1, 2017. Another vital step was to pilot test the website before formally launching it to the MSW community. The creators pilot tested the website in April, 2017 allowing enough time to receive feedback from students. The pilot testing was an important piece for this graduate project because it included collaboration from MSW students and provided necessary feedback on the accessibility, forums, and overall design of the website. In their guidebook for website development, Plumley and Wyrostek (2011) mentions, "I emphasize the importance of testing your site in various ways before launching, but it's also important to conduct tests in the best ways possible" (p. 118). The guidebook was a useful tool for the creators to test the website and receive constructive feedback from the MSW community.

The creators of this graduate project are committed to facilitate and aid MSW students to use the website to its full potential. From the beginning, the creators decided that this MSW virtual community is not affiliated with the university. This separation will create the opportunity for MSW cohorts to have control of the website, and it will require the creators to invest time in the maintenance and growth of the website. The creators of this project will graduate in May 2017 from the MSW program, but will come back on campus and stay connected with students to maintain

the website, and encourage students and alumni to use the website as a platform for communication. During the creation of the website the creators could not reach out to the MSWSA, but will connect with the student association in Fall 2017. The authors of this project want to ensure that the MSWSA can contribute to the virtual community and have an active role. Plumley and Wyrstek (2011) warns creators to not stray away from a website once it is launched because issues will drive away users and the website can become inactive. Monitoring the site to ensure that issues are being caught and fixed will be crucial to keeping this virtual community of practice thriving. The creators of this graduate project are committed to the success of the CSU, Stanislaus MSW virtual community of practice and plan to be involved for the next few years.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

It was significant to test the virtual community with students and alumni to receive feedback and make changes based on the suggestions. This pilot test was conducted in April, 2017 with students and alumni. Instructions on how to register on to [www.socialjusticemsw.com](http://www.socialjusticemsw.com) were emailed and printed, so they could register and start using the virtual community immediately. Once a student or alumni has registered onto the website, he or she agrees to community guidelines and to use the site respectfully amongst other members. Members will have the freedom to create threads, add forums, pictures, videos, and live chat with other members online. The creators of this project will be facilitators within the virtual community and will help members navigate the website.

The pilot testing provided some valuable feedback for the CSU Stanislaus virtual community of practice. The feedback from students provided the creators with a variety of topics for forums. For example, a student emailed the creator asking if we can add a forum to display all the current MSW projects and dates of presentations. An archive of projects for each cohort can help students attend them and provide ideas for future projects. Through pilot-testing students requested to use the website as a tool to complete a project for the communities and organizations class (SW5034). Through this request, the creator made a forum to post any information related to the communities and organizations class. Another student approached us stating that

navigating the website was easy, and he posted a video on the forum. Pilot testing spread awareness of the VCoP to other cohorts which encouraged students to sign up. Feedback will be continuous as students and alumni continue to join the virtual community and start using the tool for their educational and professional needs.

Through the pilot testing, the creators of this project identified students to help facilitate forums and encourage other students to be a part of the virtual community. The authors believe that students and alumni should be facilitators within their virtual community and not one person has power over the website. The facilitator role is transparent and will change and transition to different members to reflect diversity and power within. The student and alumni facilitators will help keep forums updated with current information and provide a soft reminder to members not being mindful of the community guidelines. If members are having trouble with posting information or creating forums, they will have 24/7 access to ProphpBB Support Forum ([support.prophpbb.com](http://support.prophpbb.com)). This support forum has tutorials and general help for members struggling to navigate the website or not being able to reach a facilitator (see Appendix B). Also, because the MSWSA is currently undergoing changes to their structure, the creators will reach out to the MSWSA in Fall 2017 to discuss how they can use the VCoP and provide a facilitator dedicated to updating any information from the MSWSA and MSW program.

The lessons learned during this graduate project have helped this author grow in knowledge and admire the power of a community of practice. The beginning of this project brought an overwhelming amount of ideas and feedback from students,

resources, and brainstorming with a co-creator. Keeping things simple and building a foundation for others to build from was an important reminder in the creation of this website. Before building this virtual community, this author was challenged on how to create a website that will engage members in social work, social justice, and meet the needs of students and alumni. As the author researched community of practice and its characteristics, it became apparent that CoP was the structure required to create a virtual community for the CSU, Stanislaus MSW program. Community of practice is everywhere, and it is disguised within conversations in classrooms, internships, and individual conversations with peers. This complex structure has the power to bring people together who are passionate about a common theme. This graduate project was a unique opportunity to embrace CoP and shed light on its potential to enhance the art of pedagogy between students and alumni. The virtual community is an environment constructed on CoP characteristics, and the author will be mindful that these features are occurring within the virtual community.

The limitations experienced during this project are few, and the feedback received was vital to building this virtual community. Students become progressively busier as the school year comes close to an end. Pilot testing close to the end of the school year could overwhelm students with new information and more work. Testing the virtual community early in March 2017 could have produced more feedback for the website and a little more engagement from students and alumni. Also, the creators failed to connect and pilot-test with the CSU MSW hybrid program. Linking with the hybrid program could have provided information on their experience using the hybrid

virtual community program. The creators will reach out to the hybrid program and encourage their feedback for the virtual community website.

The CSU, Stanislaus MSW virtual community will need to be sustained over the next few years and cultivated according to the CSU, Stanislaus MSW community needs. By collaborating, students and alumni have the freedom to make changes to the website that align with the current interests of the MSW program; this will be critical to keeping it thriving and members engaged. The feedback from students and alumni will be essential to the growth of the virtual community and form unity among cohorts. The project creators will present the CSU, Stanislaus MSW virtual community of practice during orientations for incoming MSW students and spread awareness to the hybrid program and to alumni who have already graduated the program.

This MSW graduate project reflects the core values of social work. Social work is rooted in engagement, dialogue, community, and social change. The relationships and awareness that have sprouted from this project are implications of social work. The virtual community can be used to advocate on social issues that are affecting the MSW program or local communities. The purpose of this virtual community of practice is for members to pursue their passion for social work and to continue to fill their practice with accurate knowledge and collaborate with peers. The CSU, Stanislaus MSW program is a flourishing community of practice that will use [www.socialjusticemsw.com](http://www.socialjusticemsw.com) as a tool to enhance their learning experience and social work profession.

This graduate project has built a website that allows CSU, Stanislaus MSW students and alumni to register with a username and password onto a site that will provide a space to engage, search, and collaborate with members. The website has forums that will spark dialogue between members on topics such as mindfulness, evidenced base practice research, policy, and resources within each county. The creators of this project chose forum themes based on the needs of MSW students and alumni. These topics were selected because they fuel critical thinking, conversation, and learning. Also, to be mindful of CoP culture, there is space created to post questions or concerns that members might be experiencing and want to resolve. These characteristics are the core of CoP, and they must be active within the virtual community to be considered a thriving community of practice. The virtual community serves a role to bridge the gap between cohorts, time, geographic location and to form a cycle of learning for generations to come.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### A VIEW OF THE WEBSITE AND FORUMS

SocialJusticeMSW.com    FAQ    Members    Search this forum...    Q    **Uncard**

**SOCIAL JUSTICE**

CSU Stanislaus MSW Program: Virtual Community of Practice & Collaboration

View unanswered posts    View unread posts    View new posts    View active topics    Mark forums read

Please Start Here		Topics	Posts	Last post
	Community Guidelines and Questions	3	11	Last post <a href="#">Ple: Testing Testing</a> Posted by <a href="#">sarenapig</a> Tue Apr 18, 2017 7:19 pm

Forum		Topics	Posts	Last post
	Alumni Area	1	1	Last post <a href="#">Alumni Chat-Welcome to YO...</a> Posted by <a href="#">Leslie</a> Sun Mar 19, 2017 10:35 am
	Community Events	1	1	Last post <a href="#">Community Unity Event Apr...</a> Posted by <a href="#">Leslie</a> Fri Apr 21, 2017 3:50 pm

The team    Delete all board cookies    All times are UTC - 8 hours    Powered by Prohibit Premium | Report Abuse | Privacy

SocialJusticeMSW.com    ? FAQ    👤 Members    Search this forum...    🔍    👤 Uncandi ▾

 Resources - Stanislaus County	0	0	No posts
 Resources-State Wide	0	0	No posts
 Social Work Articles/Media/Resources	3	3	Last post Resources recommended by ... Posted by Leslie Fri Mar 31, 2017 8:47 pm
 Textbooks to Sell/Borrow <small>Please state if you have a textbook for sale or can loan one out for a semester</small>	0	0	No posts
 Wellness and Preventing Compassion Fatigue	3	3	Last post MSW Students & Alumni. Ho... Posted by Leslie Sun Apr 30, 2017 10:41 am
 2017 MSW Projects	1	3	Last post Re: Tapestry of Social Ju... Posted by Uncandi Tue May 02, 2017 7:37 pm

👤 Who is online

Registered users: Uncandi

📊 Statistics

Total posts 37 • Total topics 25 • Total members 34 • Our newest member [news4ivan](#)

👤 The team    🗑️ Delete all board cookies    🕒 All times are UTC - 8 hours    🔌 Powered by Prohibit Premium | Report Abuse | Privacy

## APPENDIX B

## A VIEW OF THE SUPPORT FORUMS FOR PROPHPBB

The screenshot shows the ProphpBB Support Forum website. The header includes the ProphpBB logo, the forum title "ProphpBB Support Forum", and the subtitle "Official ProphpBB Support Forum, PhpBB 3 Free Hosting Service". There are navigation links for "FAQ" and "Search", and user options for "Register" and "Login". A banner at the top promotes ProphpBB for \$5/mo and upgrading forums. Below the banner, there are links for "View unanswered posts" and "View active topics". A "Board index" link is also present. The main content is a table listing forum categories with columns for "Forum", "Topics", "Posts", and "Last post".

Forum	Topics	Posts	Last post
<b>Support Forum</b>			
<b>Announcements</b> Official, important announcements and updates will be posted here. If there's anything new, you should probably read it.	88	1067	Increase phpBB Max Charac... Posted by <b>redvallosta</b> April 28th, 2017, 2:01 pm
<b>Tutorials</b> Find detailed tutorials to do many of the things you were probably going to ask about. Please read this section prior to asking for help. Subforums: Administrating and Moderating Your Forum, BBCode, CSS & Styles, Functions, Headers and Logos, How to Advertise, Modifications and Modules, Misc. Guides	111	823	Re: [FF1] proBB User Post... Posted by <b>jamex73</b> March 24th, 2017, 6:08 pm
<b>General Help</b> If you've read through our tutorials and searched (unsuccessfully) for your answer, feel free to ask your question here and someone will try to assist you. Subforums: Setting Up, Forum Management, Styling	2358	18422	Re: Updating Posted by <b>Patish</b> May 2nd, 2017, 1:10 pm
<b>Premium Member's Support</b> Private forum for those who contribute financially to ProphpBB.	720	4739	Re: A few issues Posted by <b>Patish</b> May 2nd, 2017, 9:26 pm
<b>Lounging Around</b>			
<b>Introductions</b> New to ProphpBB? Introduce yourself to the community!	104	2321	Re: 18 forum! Posted by <b>so55facedika</b> April 12th, 2017, 9:18 am
<b>Showcase</b> Showoff your ProphpBB forum! A place to advertise or show others what you've built.	206	1674	Re: Photography Posted by <b>Soys2019</b> April 17th, 2017, 10:34 am
<b>The Lounge</b> For general off topic chat type stuff. Subforums: Politics, Entertainment	400	2861	Re: How to word a no admi... Posted by <b>Nitendo-Advisor</b> April 28th, 2017, 7:49 pm