

# Using Weebly to Teach Policy Analysis in Today's Classroom

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## Abstract

Policy professionals increasingly use the internet and social media in order to conduct daily business. While popular blogging has discussed policy issues from launch, today even Brookings scholars' blog about their research and RAND may be "liked" on Facebook. Because of this new reliance on online communication, think tanks, government agencies and community based organizations want professionals who are tech savvy. An online course is an opportunity to meet those needs and deliver web ready professionals.

In order to be more accessible to working students across a large metropolitan region, Wayne State University School of Social Work offers many of its courses online, including social policy. Some sections are fully online, some are classroom only and others are a combination of classroom and online instruction. Online instruction at Wayne State is "asynchronous." In other words, there is no set online meeting time. The instructor coaches students one-on-one and requires students to interact with each other online by reading and responding to each others' work. The university subscribes to the proprietary online classroom management system, Blackboard, to manage assignments, but this system does not have an intuitive web development feature needed to train future blog and social media savvy professionals.

We have found Weebly.com to be an effective tool for project-based learning that promotes online interaction with other students (Website for Presentation: <http://martinandsmith.weebly.com/index.html>). Weebly.com is an online "web creation tool" that provides an opportunity for project-based learning that will integrate your curriculum with 21st century skills. Project-based learning is the primary framework in this course in which students learn policy analysis skills. It is not merely an extension of

the curriculum. Projects form the core of the curriculum. Faculty can use [Weebly](#) as a tool to teach policy analysis, deliver lessons and integrate lectures. This new learning can be used immediately in the development of original projects that students can create and sustain.

Weebly provides professors an opportunity to teach students to complete thorough and responsible research and to post information online while remaining compliant with relevant copyright laws. It also provides an opportunity for students to network with other students, but also to have students share work with the greater audience of the World Wide Web (WWW).

The first section of the presentation will review the policy competencies required for social work education. Next, we will share lessons learned using different technologies in the classroom. Finally, we will demonstrate how we engage students to use [Weebly](#) to build their own website for the class and use it to deliver assignments. In the workshop we will pay particular attention to how interactive technology can promote critical thinking, enhance the research experience, and ensure professional standards and ethics in web publishing.

Learning Objectives (BTOTC, SWBAT):

- Name three ways Weebly technology can enhance teaching
- Participants will be able to describe/explore a situation where they can have their students build a website that will allow them to participate as internet citizens in a safe and ethical way.
- Discuss the use of 21st century social media tools in the curriculum
- Utilize project-based learning for responsible research and policy analysis

## **Introduction**

Policy professionals increasingly use the internet and social media in order to conduct daily business. While popular blogging has discussed policy issues from launch, today even Brookings Institution scholars' blog about their research while RAND may be "liked" on Facebook. Because of this new reliance on online communication, think tanks, government agencies and community-based organizations want professionals who are tech savvy. An online course is an opportunity to meet those needs and deliver web-ready professionals.

The first section of the presentation will review the policy competencies required for social work education. Next, we will share lessons learned using different technologies in the classroom. Finally, we will demonstrate how we engage students to use [Weebly](#) to build their

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### **Social Work Education at Wayne State University**

In the mid-19th century, friendly visitors from the upper middle class decided that the poor needed “moral uplift” and founded the Charity Organization Societies. Meanwhile, evangelicals influenced by the social gospel movement visited Toynbee Hall and Oxford House in England and replicated these settlement houses in the United States. The emphasis of the settlements included the three R's: residents, research and reform (Trattner 1998). These organizations each standardized their activity to form the New York School of Philanthropy in 1898 and the Chicago School of Social Administration in 1894 (Shoemaker 1998). As the New Deal began to emerge so did programs of social economics, as found at the University of California at Berkeley to train young women to work in the social administration of grant-in-aid programs (School of Social Welfare UC Berkeley 2011). These different professions and their respective training programs in higher education eventually combined efforts to form the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) in 1952 (Council on Social Work Education 2011). CSWE is the body that sets Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for social work programs in the United States. The normative position of social work stems from its conflicted origins: one emphasizing the responsibility of citizens to their community and conversely the reformist attitude of the responsibility of the community to the citizens. Because of the heavy reliance of social work on public policy and the historic connection to social reform, almost all schools of social work require a policy history or policy analysis course.

[Wayne State University School of Social Work](#), located in the Cass Corridor of Detroit, Michigan, recently celebrated its 75th anniversary (School of Social Work Wayne State University 2011a). Today we have approximately 900 students and 65 faculty. Two key faculty members of note for social policy history include Charles Lebeaux, the co-author of *Industrial Society and Social Welfare* with Wilensky (1965). Another policy practitioner who served on the Wayne State Social Work faculty was Maryann Mahaffey. She served on the Detroit City Council from 1974 until 2005. She was also the first elected female president of the National Association of Social Workers in 1975 (City of Detroit 2007). As part of a tradition of public education and service to the City of Detroit, Wayne State University, and in particular the School of Social Work, has a mission to serve urban populations and offers a variety of field placements in the city and the greater metropolitan region.

## **Programs**

The Wayne State University School Social Work has [five program areas](#) (School of Social Work Wayne State University 2011b). We offer a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) that offers a liberal arts education specifically designed as preparation for a Master of Social Work (MSW) program. Students with a BSW may save approximately one semester from their MSW coursework. Wayne State offers a MSW program with both full-time and part-time options at five campuses and online. There is a concentration in community practice and social action (CPSA) that draws approximately 20 students each year to prepare for careers in foundations, community-based organizations, and in policy advocacy. Graduates of our program have also held elected office in metropolitan Detroit. The MSW program also has concentrations in psychodynamic therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and family systems therapy. We are

currently in the sixth year of our Doctoral Program in social work. We also offer a graduate certificate program in social work research that is made available to social workers in the community who are interested in “trying” the doctoral program or who wish to obtain continuing education in a position where they serve as a professional program evaluator. Finally, Wayne State School of Social Work also offers regular non-degree courses to fulfill continuing education requirements for social work licensure.

### **Policy Courses and Competencies**

For each of the three degrees offered at the Wayne State University School of Social Work, there are [policy courses required or made available](#). In the BSW program there are two policy courses. The first course is a history of social welfare policy and the social work profession. The second course covers current social policy programs in the United States. MSW students are also required to take two policy courses. The first course covers social welfare policy history (Trattner 1998) and current social welfare programs (Barusch 2011). The second course is taken in the second year of the MSW program and covers policy analysis and reform (Jansson 2010; Hoefler 2006). The policy analysis assignment presented in the Jansson text borrows heavily from Bardach (2008). This class is taken by all MSW students including those who concentrate in direct services. Because social work is a competency-based vocation, these policy courses are structured as opportunities to use practice tools that are expected in their professional careers. Key competencies relevant to the policy sequence require social workers to "apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments," "advance human rights and social and economic justice," "engage in research-informed practice and practice informed research," and "engage in policy practice to advance social economic well-being and to

deliver effective social work services." The primary motivation embedded in the phrase "policy practice" stems from social work's history of reform during the settlement house movement and the contemporary reality that services for low-income families are funded by the public sector or provided by a partnership between community and faith-based organizations and public sector.

### **Online Pedagogy**

The late 20th Century saw the rise of the networked society and a range of information and communication technologies (ICT). These technologies provide for a new debate about the normative implications regarding labor and capital trade-offs. The traditional Marxists would argue that the deployment of new technology improves efficiency, makes skilled or professional labor irrelevant, or de-skills them in a process called digital Taylorization (Rideout 2008). In other words, labor is further alienated from capital. The alternative perspective promoted by Manuel Castells (2000), argues that the availability of low-cost, networked ICT enhances freedom of information and expands the capabilities of labor for new and creative information intensive industries. In other words, labor is liberated. This debate is of particular interest in social work because it is a face to face, interpersonal and institutionally regulated profession. The social work literature has been interested in the impacts of ICT in child welfare (Moses et al. 2003) and mental health in particular (Rideout 2008). The social work education literature has also been discussing the prospects for using technology to re-professionalize rural social workers through distance education (Benton and Mathias 2009). There are concerns, of course that it may be challenging to train students to work face to face with clients if these students have never experienced being face to face with faculty.

Saving time and money in social work education is critical because our signature pedagogy is in our structured field work. One key difference in social work education, as compared to other professional degree programs, is that the professional internship is conducted concurrently with coursework. In other words, we do not have a summer internship. Rather, the internship is conducted on the days in which there is no classroom activity. For example, students may have coursework Mondays and Tuesdays and then are in their internship Thursday and Friday. If it is not uncommon for students to have a full-time job, take coursework at night and schedule a two day internship at a second location within their organization or another organization. In other words, online instruction could be a critical time saver for students who are paying for graduate education out of pocket in an institutional environment where financial resources for higher education are shrinking.

In order to be more accessible to working students across a large metropolitan region as well as underserved areas of Michigan, Wayne State University School of Social Work offers [many of its courses online](#), including social policy. Some sections are fully online, some are classroom only and others are a combination of classroom and online instruction. Online instruction at Wayne State is “asynchronous.” In other words, there is no set online meeting time. The instructor coaches students one-on-one and requires students to interact with each other online by reading and responding to each others' work. Wayne State University embraces Peltz's (2004) three principles of effective online pedagogy: a) to engage students in online content; b) to promote student-to-student and student-to-professor online interaction, and; c) to strive for an online presence. These principles of asynchronous interaction are focal points for highlighting the comparative advantage of an online environment. The on-line environment allows students to

be engaged at their own pace. It also provides opportunities for interaction around the student's work schedule and provides tools for interaction that are both simultaneous and asynchronous. In the 21st century, it is very important to build an online reputation not only for the purposes of a career, but also to achieve broader professional goals. These schools could be as simple as the marketing of one's skills but also are promoting ideas and values.

The university subscribes to the proprietary online classroom management system, Blackboard, to manage assignments, but this system does not have an intuitive web development feature needed to train future blogger and social media savvy professionals. Blackboard is closed to members of the class and materials are no longer available after the class is over. Concerning our presenters today, Dr. Smith teaches traditional lecture and discussion classes with an online component on Blackboard to manage grades and online discussion boards for readings and to deliver instructional content. Dr. Martin teaches all of her classes online using Blackboard but also has students delivering assignments using [Weebly](#), a public site that anyone may view. This allows students to continue blogging after graduation.

## **Assignments**

In order to provide consistent quality control among the 65 faculty teaching courses on five campuses to, we employ a master syllabus system that contains benchmark [assignments](#) which the Associate Dean requires all instructors to use in their classrooms. Instructors may choose from a menu of recommended assignments and readings. The benchmark assignment for the policy history course is a 20-page policy analysis that may be assigned as a group project. Students define a social problem, consider its impact on two vulnerable populations and then

trace how social policy has responded to the changing definitions of the social problem. They close with a normative recommendation based in social work values. For example, in Dr. Smith's current course, a group is studying the changing definitions of poverty and how that informs social policy shifts from an emphasis on income transfers to an emphasis on human, social and financial capital building. The benchmark assignment for the [advanced policy analysis and reform course](#) is to develop and present a Kellogg Foundation style logic model for an advocacy plan. This assignment helps students understand which level of policy engagement would be appropriate: local, state, Federal or international. It also gives them a chance to plan for the kinds of strategies available to engage the policy process: education, mobilization, ballot initiatives, court challenges, executive orders, regulatory authority, or legislative change. Supplementary assignments include weekly blogs on current events and course readings, an essay on social policy history, debates, sound bites and an annotated bibliography.

### **What Is Weebly?**

We have found Weebly.com (2011) to be an [effective tool](#) for project-based learning that promotes online interaction with other students. Weebly.com is an online “web creation tool” that provides an opportunity for project-based learning that will integrate your curriculum with 21st century skills. Project-base learning is the primary framework in this course in which students learn policy analysis skills. It is not merely an extension of the curriculum. Projects form the core of the curriculum. Faculty can use Weebly as tool to teach policy analysis, deliver lessons and integrate lectures. This new learning can be used immediately in the development of original projects that students can create and sustain. Weebly provides professors an opportunity to teach

students to complete thorough and responsible research and to post information online while remaining compliant with relevant copyright laws. It also provides an opportunity for students to network with other students and share work with the greater audience of the World Wide Web (WWW).

### **Weebly Examples and Lessons Learned**

Students and student organizations at Wayne State [have enjoyed using the Weebly](#) in their educational process. For example, Dayrell Gibson (2011) is a minister in the salvation army. He came to the MSW program to transition from case management to mental health work. He was a student in Dr. Martin's 7620 course, which was a summer bridge course for MSW students who had already obtained a BSW. As such, the assignments were shorter than what would be found in the equivalent social work 7720 course for those who did not already have a BSW. Gibson's policy analysis was about the Michigan Medical Marijuana Act of 2008. He notes that this policy had come under intense scrutiny by the state legislature and the Attorney General's office. He used the criteria of clarity, effectiveness and beneficence to assess the normative goals and the impact of the policy. He argued that much of the legislative activity stemmed from lack of clarity in the language of the ballot initiative. He also analyzed the loopholes identified by the Attorney General and concluded that they allow for abuse by allowing people under the influence of marijuana to operate a motor vehicle. In summary, he decided that this act was not an effective policy to promote beneficence in the population. Reflecting on his experience with Weebly, Gibson wrote, "It was also nice to know that the instructor was just as involved as we were and responsive with concerns in a timely matter." This is evidence of engaging the Pelz principle to

promote student-to-professor interaction.

Another student, Maricar Tan (2011) wrote her policy brief on the problem of HIV/AIDS. She analyzed Michigan's statute that requires persons who are HIV positive to inform potential sexual partners prior to penetration. She used criteria of applicability, adequacy, clarity and fairness of the policy. She argued that the policy was inadequate because it did not come with sufficient resources for education and outreach about preventing HIV/AIDS and because the language was not sufficiently clear. For example, it did not clarify whether using a barrier penetration could be done in lieu of informing the partner. She also felt that it was unfair because it did not apply to the sharing of needles which could also transmit HIV nor did it apply to other known sexually transmitted diseases that may put life at risk. About the Weebly, Tan notes, "Creating a website was completely new territory for me. I found Weebly to be very useful in communicating with other students and developing online my research skills." She practiced the Pelz principle to engage in student-to student-interaction.

Student organizations also are using the Weebly in their are advocacy work. For example the School of Social Work CyberMentors (2011) have partnered with local high schools to provide resources to prevent cyber bullying. Their website has a list of relevant model state statutes, which currently have not passed in Michigan. They also have posted hot links to educational materials which teach students about the ethics of online activity. They also provide information for school social workers in their work on cyber bullying. In short, students not only get engaged in content, they interact routinely with the instructor and each other to bring knowledge into the community.

## **Research Skills Using Weebly**

Preparing a policy brief using Weebly also allows students to practice several [research skills](#). The first set of skills involved information retrieval. Our school's social work librarian maintains a page with links to the many academic and government websites where students can access information about social policy and evidence-based practices. She is also available for online chatting in realtime. Students learn how to retrieve Federal legislation by using the Library of Congress web site, Thomas (2011). They also learn how to access state and local legislative information. Students also learn how to present and format their research papers using the style of the American Psychological Association 6<sup>th</sup> edition (2009). The Wayne State University Writing Center also has information about preparing research papers.

The foundation of any research project is critical thinking and it is also a core competency for social work education. One of the way students practice critical thinking is by dialoguing with each other while blogging about readings. Weebly's blog package allows students to make comments, Tweet or like other student work on Facebook. They write posts about various policies under discussion in the course. For example, Gibson discussed the Social Security Act on his blog. While he appreciated President Roosevelt's passion for social welfare, he expressed frustration about loopholes people use to collect Supplementary Security Income (SSI) or Supplemental Security Disability Income (SSDI). Students are able to join the discussion. For example, one student wondered how private social insurance options would play out over the long term.

## **Future Directions: Flipping the Classroom**

What is the future of the classroom for students of social policy? One concept heavily promoted by the technology industry and certain circles within education is “[flipping the classroom](#)” (Bergmann, Overmyer, and Wille 2011). Primary schools from Ludington to Port Huron, Michigan have been awarded grants to purchase iPads for classrooms (Garcia 2011; Urka 2010). This is both a labor capital trade off in that the iPad arguably displaces tutors and teacher's aides. Using iPad also takes advantage of the increasing availability of eBooks for schools that are cheaper and less weighty than tree-based textbooks. The eBook format allows for multimedia presentation of information and iPad also has interactive educational activities. Students collaborate with each other on assignments that involve a range of media choices from video to writing.

Information communication technology offers the possibility of “flipping the classroom”. In this paradigm of education, one takes the lecture portion of class, which historically has efficiently delivered information from one expert to many students by bringing them all into one auditorium. With ITCs like iPad or other mobile devices, a lecture can be broadcast to where the students live to be assigned as homework in addition to readings. This frees up class time for face-to-face interaction in the form of discussions and planning group projects. Wayne State University School of Social Work is currently writing grants to purchase iPads and create a video production studio so that instructors can adapt tools currently being used in Michigan elementary schools for graduate education social work. Some faculty are capturing lectures for the purpose of eventually flipping their classroom in order to give students more time in class for working on group assignments.

While it remains to be seen if the profession of social work is experiencing digital

Taylorization, or in the case of Detroit, digital Fordism, or if the availability of online instruction and ICT in the work place will free up social work time to be devoted to the core mission meeting clients face-to-face. While we both are technophiles, we recognize that there are ethical implications to the use of technology that relate not only to online privacy but also to the change in relationships between workers and their supervisors, between workers and co-workers, and between workers and their clients. Nuances in communications can be lost when they are mediated by ICT and experienced out of context. We have also learned from the experience of cyber bullying, that ICT, like Milgram's experiment, can facilitate counterproductive forms of communication because some people are willing to make inappropriate or even threatening comments online that they would not make face to face. In short, the master's tools must be harnessed with care when used in the pursuit of critical thinking and social reform.

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