

University of Dundee

A kind of magic? Artificial intelligence-assisted recording: developing principles for an AI-informed social work curriculum

Ingram, Richard

Published in:
Social Work Education

DOI:
[10.1080/02615479.2026.2669634](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2669634)

Publication date:
2026

Licence:
CC BY-NC-ND

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

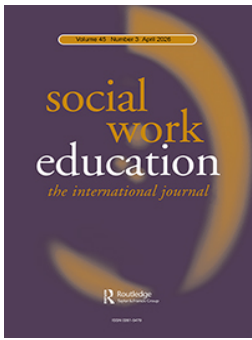
Ingram, R. (2026). A kind of magic? Artificial intelligence-assisted recording: developing principles for an AI-informed social work curriculum. *Social Work Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2669634>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



A kind of magic? Artificial intelligence-assisted recording: developing principles for an AI-informed social work curriculum

Richard Ingram

To cite this article: Richard Ingram (11 May 2026): A kind of magic? Artificial intelligence-assisted recording: developing principles for an AI-informed social work curriculum, Social Work Education, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2026.2669634](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2669634)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2669634>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 11 May 2026.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 235



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

A kind of magic? Artificial intelligence-assisted recording: developing principles for an AI-informed social work curriculum

Richard Ingram

Education and Society, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

ABSTRACT

The deployment of AI tools in social work practice settings is advancing at a pace that social work education has yet to match. Drawing on baseline findings from an independent evaluation of Magic Note, an AI-assisted recording tool deployed across a Scottish Local Authority social work department, this paper uses the empirical experiences of a workforce encountering AI in practice as a window into the underdeveloped implications for qualifying education. The evaluation, which involved 152 practitioners surveyed, seven in focus groups, and over 255 free-text responses, surfaced five core tensions: administrative relief versus the reflective value of writing; AI assistance versus professional judgment; efficiency versus relational practice; accessibility and inclusion versus deskilling risk; and enthusiasm versus ethical complexity. The paper develops each tension into substantive educational implications and proposes five curriculum principles for social work programmes to engage with AI proactively rather than reactively. The argument is that students need to arrive in practice already equipped with the critical, ethically grounded capacity to engage with AI as agents rather than subjects.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 March 2026

Accepted 22 April 2026

KEYWORDS

Artificial intelligence; AI; social work education; practice; recording

Introduction

Social work is a profession defined by its relational, human, and values-driven character (Ingram and Smith, 2018). Its core purpose is to enhance human wellbeing, challenge oppression, and support the most vulnerable members of society, and this is achieved primarily through relationships: between practitioner and service user, between professional judgment and organizational context, between the individual case and the structural forces that shape it. It is a profession, in other words, that by nature resists reduction. And yet, across practice settings in the United Kingdom and internationally, social workers are now routinely deploying AI tools as part of their everyday practice. The question of what this means for how the profession prepares its next generation of practitioners is one that social work education has not yet fully confronted.

CONTACT Richard Ingram  r.d.ingram@dundee.ac.uk  Education and Society, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

The pace of AI development across all spheres of professional life has been striking. Gardiner et al.(2026) observe that even a cursory glance at the recent literature on AI and social work highlights the volume of publications in this area and note, vividly, that many of these already speak to a previous era of development. The profession is, they argue, traveling in partnership with a phenomenon that is evolving faster than any single paper can capture. In the higher education context, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2024) has argued that we are well beyond the point at which there is any meaningful choice about engaging with AI, and that attempts to avoid or outrun it through the reinstatement of traditional assessment forms such as pen and paper examinations or the development of AI-proof questions represent a desire to hold on to rapidly outdated orientations rather than a coherent educational strategy.

This paper does not attempt a comprehensive account of AI in social work. That task has been undertaken elsewhere, with increasing sophistication and insight (Gardiner et al, 2026, Hodgson et al., 2022, Goldkind, 2021). Rather, this paper uses the findings of an empirical study, namely a baseline evaluation of Magic Note, an AI-assisted recording tool deployed by a Scottish local authority social work department, as a window into the experience of a real workforce encountering AI in a practice setting. Most participants had not yet used the tool with service users at the point of the baseline data collection, which means the findings capture something particularly valuable for an educational audience: the expectations, hopes, concerns, and values that practitioners bring to AI *before* they have adapted their practice to accommodate it. Briefly, the Magic Note tool is an app that is located in a device (typically a mobile phone) which records, saves and in turn transcribes the contents of discussions into predetermined formats such as case notes, reports and minutes in a secure cloud space. Thus, in terms of in-person interactions, it has a physical presence.

The paper develops five social work educational implications from five tensions surfaced by the evaluation and concludes with a proposed framework of curriculum principles for social work programmes. It is primarily addressed to social work educators and practice education coordinators, though its argument is relevant to professional standards bodies, practice educators, and supervisors in the field. The core argument, simply put, is this: AI has arrived in social work practice settings faster than social work education has been able to respond, and the gap between them matters, not because AI is a threat to be managed, but because students or newly qualified practitioners who arrive in practice without the critical, reflective, and ethically grounded capacity to engage with AI will be shaped by it rather than shaping it.

Methodology

The empirical basis for this paper is a baseline evaluation of Magic Note, an AI-assisted recording tool commissioned by a Scottish Local Authority social work department. Magic Note uses voice-activated recording and artificial intelligence to generate a draft case note from a practitioner's visit or contact with a service user, presenting it to the practitioner for review, editing, and submission. Similarly, it can be used for a myriad of practice-based meetings, such as professional supervision and case conferences. The technology sits at the administrative, transcription end of the AI spectrum in social work and (as yet) does not generate analysis, risk assessments, or recommendations. That

said, I would suggest that the process of extracting and prioritizing salient points from recorded data constitutes a form of analysis that, in turn, influences subsequent action.

The evaluation was commissioned by the Local Authority and conducted independently by the University of Dundee. It is designed as a longitudinal, three-data-point study, with baseline data collected before widespread use of the tool, midpoint data at six months, and end-of-year data at twelve months. The baseline data on which this paper draws comprises: a survey of 152 social work practitioners across four service areas (Children and Families, Criminal Justice, Adult Social Care, and miscellaneous specialist teams); two focus groups involving seven participants; and 255 free-text survey responses drawn from the completed surveys. The survey was circulated to all social work practitioners in the local authority, with respondents required to provide informed consent and to indicate in a separate online form whether they would be willing to take part in a focus group, hence separating their survey data from their focus group participation. The design is mixed methods, with quantitative survey data analyzed descriptively and qualitative focus group and free-text data analyzed thematically. The thematic approach adopted was rooted in the reflexive thematic framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involves a sequential process including familiarization, coding and reflection. This was largely inductive in nature, given the paucity of literature in this area, but was also rooted in longstanding conceptions of social work and the emerging literature on AI.

An important interpretive caveat applies to the baseline data: most participants had not yet used Magic Note with service users at the point of data collection. The findings of the original study therefore, explores the point of an initial encounter with AI, which is itself educationally significant. The paper draws selectively on these findings to develop an educational argument rather than comprehensively reporting the evaluation. The inductive nature of the thematic analysis of the original evaluation helps to integrate the perspectives of practitioners alongside the implications for social work education, which are the focus of this paper. The tensions and themes which emerge in this paper are rooted in the aforementioned thematic analysis alongside established understandings of social work curriculum and practice.

Introduction to the context

The administrative crisis in social work

The problem of administrative burden in social work is not new, and the practitioners who took part in the Magic Note evaluation were not saying anything that the literature has not been saying for two decades. Describing case notes as ‘the bane of SW’ and ‘the main stressor’ of the working week, they were voicing a frustration documented extensively in the research literature. Broadhurst et al. (2010) demonstrated through detailed time-use studies that social workers in front-line children’s services spent more time on administrative tasks, including recording, than on direct work with families, a finding that has been replicated and updated across multiple studies and jurisdictions. Munro’s (2011) influential review of child protection in England placed bureaucratic overload at the heart of her critique, arguing that excessive compliance and recording requirements had

undermined the conditions for relational practice rather than supporting them. Rogowski (2012) situated this within a broader managerial turn in social work, arguing that the dominance within practice environments by audit, documentation, and performative accountability had displaced the relational imperatives of the profession. Pascoe, Waterhouse-Bradley and McGinn (2023) highlight that this bureaucratic imbalance continues by echoing the thesis that the current picture is detrimental to high-quality direct practice, yet the route out of this context remained unclear and elusive at the time of their publication.

Into this well-documented and seemingly entrenched crisis, AI-assisted recording tools like Magic Note arrive with a straightforward and genuinely compelling promise: let the technology handle the recording and transcription of interactions and give practitioners back the time and cognitive space to focus on the relational aspects of practice and to also accommodate the increasing need for attention to well-being. The appeal is not hard to understand if one considers the alarming attrition rates in the profession (Department for Education, 2023), and was highlighted within the Magic Note evaluation, which found that 81% of participating practitioners expected the tool to save them time. If this is delivered via AI tools, it is possible to see how the poor working environment, limited relational practice, and the constrained context of support highlighted in studies on attrition may be addressed (Newcomb, 2025, Ravalier, 2019). A further practice reality in which these innovations are located is the growing gap between available resources and increasingly complex social issues facing the profession globally (Molala & Mbaya, 2023). Indeed, Chen and Lin (2023) identify a range of AI-assisted tools which can help to redistribute the focus of social workers' efforts toward sustained relational work and narrow the resource gap. The question for social work education is *not* whether this is a legitimate response to a real problem, because it clearly is, but what it means for how recording, reflecting, interpreting and editing, as a professional *practice*, is understood, taught, and developed.

AI in social work: the current landscape

The deployment of AI in social work spans a wide spectrum of applications, and Magic Note occupies a relatively straightforward position within it, focused as it is on administrative support rather than professional decision making. At the more complex and contested end of that spectrum, tools such as predictive analytics are being used in child welfare contexts to assess and score risk, a development that has prompted serious questions about the relationship between algorithmic outputs and the exercise of professional judgment (Cuccaro-Alamin et al., 2017).

The unease that surrounds AI in social work is not difficult to understand. Social work is a profession built on human connection, and its core activities depend on qualities that are not easily replicated by technology: the ability to form trusting relationships, to respond to emotional complexity, and to read the subtle signals that emerge in face-to-face encounters (Ingram, 2015). Løberg and Egeland (2023) argue that empathy and compassion are irreducibly human, and that, however convincingly AI tools can simulate these qualities, simulation is not the same as genuine understanding. This concern echoes a wider tension identified by de Lange and de Waal (2019) between the perceived warmth of human interaction and the perceived coldness of technological mediation. The

relationship-based practice tradition is particularly clear on this point: skilled social work depends on emotional attunement, awareness of non-verbal communication, and a form of embodied practice wisdom that develops through experience rather than programming (Hennessey, 2011; Ingram and Smith, 2018).

At the same time, the idea that social work and technology are fundamentally incompatible does not reflect the profession's actual history. Over the past three decades, digital tools have been progressively integrated into practice and service delivery, and social work has shown itself capable of critical and thoughtful engagement with these developments (Watling & Rogers, 2012). Technologies that once seemed disruptive, including virtual care platforms, speech recognition systems, and remote assessment tools, are now relatively unremarkable features of the practice landscape.

The more recent development of AI chatbots capable of natural language processing has taken this further. Chen and Lin (2023) show that in Chinese social work contexts, such tools have moved well beyond mechanical question and answer formats, engaging users in ways that feel genuinely conversational and responsive. Molala and Mbaya (2023) add that these systems can also identify patterns in language that may signal risk or unmet need, offering possibilities for earlier and more targeted intervention. These are not trivial developments. And yet, a significant limitation persists in that current AI systems tend to respond to what is immediately presented rather than attending to the wider social, structural, and environmental context in which a person's difficulties are rooted. The kind of familiar systemic thinking that Wright-Mills (1959/2000) captured in the concept of the sociological imagination remains largely absent from AI models, as does the ecological perspective that underpins much of social work's approach to complex need. This shortfall is of course in part linked to AI's inability to replicate human perception and insight in relational work, but is also constrained by the algorithmic straitjacket that current research suggests is beset with ingrained discriminatory and dominant narratives (McQuillan, 2023).

Emotional responsiveness presents a similar challenge. Despite the development of affective computing and tools such as the mental health app Woebot (Reamer, 2023), the QAA (2024) concludes that a meaningful emotional intelligence gap remains. This is not an argument against AI but a reminder that its role in social work practice is best understood as complementary rather than substitutive, supporting human judgment rather than replacing it, and doing so within a framework of clear ethical accountability.

Social work education's current relationship with AI

Social work education's engagement with AI is developing, but unevenly and largely reactively. Hodgson et al. (2022) identified a significant gap between the pace of AI deployment in practice and the development of coherent pedagogical responses in qualifying programmes, noting that most programmes had begun addressing AI at the level of awareness and digital literacy but had not yet developed substantive approaches to preparing students to practise in AI-assisted environments. Singer et al. (2023) highlighted practical uses of AI that social work academics are beginning to explore, from case study generation to quiz creation, but again noted the relative absence of curriculum frameworks that address AI as a feature of future *practice* rather than merely a tool for academic production. Ray et al. (2026) note that over the past four years their research

into social work academic attitudes toward AI in the United States has tracked a shift from resistance and anxiety toward a more active process of incorporation. They caution, however, that this shift has been uneven and has relied heavily on innovators within staff teams rather than reflecting a systemic or institutionally driven response. Their research does not explicitly address the practice context, which limits its direct applicability to the argument developed here. Walker et al. (2026) offer a related contribution, reporting on the variable accuracy with which students are using AI for studying and learning, and making a clear case for the educational importance of developing critical awareness and a constructive tolerance of uncertainty when engaging with AI-generated outputs.

Pinazo-Hernandis and Carcavilla-González (2026) provide evidence that is perhaps more directly relevant to the concerns of this paper. Their social work students are described as already recognizing the changing reality of practice, in which AI tools are becoming increasingly prevalent, and as actively calling for this to be reflected in their curricula. Crucially, they do so while maintaining a strong emphasis on the relational dimensions of social work practice. This is a significant finding. It suggests that the impetus for curriculum change is coming not only from educators and researchers but from students themselves, who are experiencing the gap between their training and the practice environment they are entering. It also points to an emerging bridge between what began as largely pedagogical debates about AI in higher education and a more practice-facing conversation about what social work qualifying programmes should contain in curricula terms.

Key findings: five tensions for social work education

The Magic Note evaluation surfaced a rich and nuanced picture of a workforce engaging thoughtfully with a new technology. Practitioners were broadly positive about the tool's potential, with 81% anticipating that it would save them time. However, this optimism was accompanied by a sophisticated range of questions, concerns, and reservations, revealing the ethical and professional depth of the workforce's engagement. Rather than presenting a single, straightforward narrative of technological adoption, the data points to a set of underlying tensions in how AI-mediated recording intersects with the values and practices of social work. The five tensions outlined below emerge inductively from the evaluation data. While they are rooted in practitioners' experiences in the field, they also raise important questions that will later be developed into implications for social work education.

The first tension is between administrative relief and the reflective value of writing. Practitioners welcomed the prospect of time-saving, yet experienced workers also expressed concern that the act of writing a case note is itself a professional skill and a form of reflective practice. Delegating this task to AI, they suggested, may risk eroding something important. As one practitioner noted: *'When typing them it makes me think back to the moment again—as I recall body language and tones of voice.'* The educational question this raises is fundamental: what does recording mean within the curriculum when AI can generate the first draft?

The second tension is between AI assistance and professional judgment. Practitioners drew a firm and largely consensual line: AI may generate drafts, but social work professionals ultimately decide what their notes and reports contain.

Maintaining that boundary, however, may become more challenging under conditions of workload pressure and with increasingly capable AI tools producing ever more plausible outputs. One practitioner articulated the risk succinctly: a newly qualified worker, exhausted at the end of a long week, might simply accept what the AI tool has produced. The educational question, therefore, is how we cultivate the professional dispositions that make reviewing and critically engaging with AI-generated text a matter of accountability and role responsibility, rather than something that may be treated as optional.

The third tension is between efficiency and relational practice. Magic Note may enable workers to be more present during visits, as they are less distracted by note-taking and can prioritize eye contact and engagement. However, the presence of a recording device also introduces something that some practitioners and service users experienced as distancing, surveillance-like, or corrosive of the conditions required for honest disclosure. One service user compared being recorded was akin to *‘being at a police station.’* The educational implication here is how we prepare students to navigate this genuine structural tension between administrative efficiency and relational practice.

The fourth tension is between accessibility and inclusion on the one hand, and the risk of deskilling on the other. The evaluation found that practitioners with neurodivergent conditions, such as dyslexia and ADHD, reported particularly significant benefits from the tool, describing it as transformative for their ability to undertake recording tasks effectively and equitably. At the same time, experienced practitioners expressed concern that newly qualified workers who rely heavily on AI from the outset may not develop the full range of observational, analytical, and recording skills that traditionally emerge through the processes of writing, editing, and prioritizing information. This raises the possibility of a generational divide, with more experienced practitioners engaging with AI from a foundation of pre-AI professional experience, while current social work students encounter AI in both practice and learning environments without that prior grounding. These concerns are not contradictory and both can be true at the same time: the technology may simultaneously expand accessibility for some practitioners while potentially narrowing developmental opportunities for others.

The fifth tension is between enthusiasm and ethical complexity. Practitioners were broadly welcoming of Magic Note but also expressed unresolved questions about issues such as consent and capacity, surveillance and power, data security, commercial dependency, and the longer-term trajectory of AI within public services. This is not a workforce that is ethically naïve; rather, it is one navigating genuinely complex questions without necessarily having shared frameworks or prior preparation to draw upon. The educational question that follows is how social work education can foster critically informed and ethically grounded engagement with AI before students encounter such technologies in practice.

Implications for social work education

The issues and tensions noted above highlight several important questions for the social work education community to consider and address. We now turn to a closer examination of these implications, drawing further ballast from the findings of the

study alongside reflections on existing conceptions of social work educational content and delivery.

Rethinking recording: from administrative task to reflective practice

The concern expressed by experienced practitioners in the Magic Note evaluation that writing up a case note is not merely an administrative act but a cognitive and reflective one points to an area that social work education has only partially theorized. Recording is often treated within qualifying curricula and practice learning contexts primarily as a competency: something students must be able to do to meet professional standards and pass assessments.

Running parallel to this, but arguably with less emphasis, is the recognition that professional writing is also a site of professional sense-making. It provides an opportunity for practitioners to revisit events, exercise judgment about what matters, notice what they might otherwise miss, and construct an account that reflects analysis rather than mere description.

In this study, the characterization of Magic Note as a ‘first draft’ underscores the need to layer additional analysis and detail onto recorded material. Important aspects of practice such as sounds, smells, atmospheres, and emotional climates, can evade capture in initial recordings and require reflective elaboration. Geddes et al. (2025) explored the place of case recording in social work education and found it to be unevenly addressed, often lacking alignment with more traditional didactic approaches to teaching and learning. They highlight the need for innovative reconstructions of practice to bring recording to life as a meaningful learning process. This area of learning appears increasingly crucial as new graduates enter an AI-assisted practice environment.

A practitioner who noted that typing a case note ‘*makes me think back to the moment again body language, tones of voice*’ was describing a process that Schon (1983) would recognize as reflection-on-action: a deliberate, retrospective process of analyzing past experiences, actions, and decisions after they have occurred. More broadly, this connects to Schön’s account of reflective practice as a recursive, generative process through which practitioners think through their actions, both during and after practice. In this example, recording is the site of thinking. Fook’s (2021) edited account of critical reflection in social care makes a related point: the capacity to examine and reconstruct one’s own practice is not an innate disposition but a cultivated skill that requires structured support and deliberate development. If AI now generates the first draft of a case note, an important question follows: what becomes the equivalent occasion for reflection? Returning to Schon (1983), his concept of reflection-in-action may also be reshaped in the context of AI-assisted recording. Respondents in the Magic Note evaluation anticipated that, with the burden of note-taking reduced, they would be able to attend more fully to the relational aspects of their practice, potentially deepening in-the-moment reflection.

The answer the Magic Note evaluation suggests, and which the paper argues should be explicitly cultivated in social work education, is the act of reviewing and supplementing the AI’s draft. The practitioner’s norm of treating AI output as ‘first draft only’ is, in principle, precisely the right relationship between technology and professional judgment. The problem is that this norm is emerging by chance and through cultural negotiation

within teams, rather than being established through professional education. Students entering practice settings where AI recording tools are in use need to arrive already equipped with an understanding of what the reflective dimension of recording is for, what it contributes that the AI cannot, and how to practise it deliberately rather than incidentally.

Ingram's (2015) account of relationship-based practice highlights the importance of what can be seen as emotional management and containment and the reflective distance that allows practitioners to process their emotional responses to practice, notice their assumptions, and make sense of complex and often distressing situations. Recording, understood as a reflective practice, contributes to this thinking space: it is one of the mechanisms by which practitioners hold and process the affective and cognitive complexity of social work. It is the arena in which emotional responses are located within a cognitive sphere and linked to wider knowledge, and in turn feed into decision-making. Whilst the role of emotions in social work decision making is complex (Ingram, 2015, Keinemans, 2015), their role as a moral marker and stream of information to inform professional judgment is undeniable and potentially marginalized and missed if it is not brought to bear on decision making. If AI removes the occasion for that reflective writing and critical thinking, or reduces it to an editing and approval function, something significant may be lost, not necessarily irreplaceably, but in ways that social work education needs to consciously address.

Practical curriculum implications follow from this analysis. First, recording should be explicitly theorized and taught as a reflective practice in qualifying training, which is distinct from a professional competency. Students should understand why recording matters beyond compliance, what its reflective and analytical functions are, and how to practise those functions regardless of whether AI is generating the first draft. Second, curricula should include supervised practice in annotating and supplementing AI-generated notes: students need to develop the habit and skill of treating AI output as a starting point for professional thinking, not an endpoint. Third, assessment designs should reward analytical depth, observational precision, and reflective engagement rather than descriptive accuracy, and in doing so, signal clearly to students what kind of recording social work education values.

Professional judgement in the age of AI assistance

The most emphatic consensus in the Magic Note evaluation was that AI-generated analysis and recommendations are unacceptable, while AI-assisted transcription is welcome. Practitioners drew this line with conviction, and in doing so were exercising exactly the kind of professional judgment that social work education aims to develop. But the capacity to draw and hold that line is not a passive quality but is the product of a well-developed professional identity, a grounding in values, an understanding of accountability, and the confidence to say, in the face of a sophisticated and plausible AI output. As one respondent put it *'this is my judgement, not the machine's.'*

The risk identified by one Team leader, that a newly qualified worker, under systemic stress, might take the path of least resistance and accept what the AI has produced, is not hypothetical. It describes a foreseeable outcome of the interaction between workload pressure, professional inexperience, and a technology designed to make compliance easy.

In the context of professional judgment, this means equipping students with the dispositional quality that makes reviewing AI output a matter of professional role and identity rather than optional procedural compliance.

Moorhead et al (2019) argued that the development of professional identity in social work requires active cultivation through the conditions of practice and that students become social workers not by absorbing a body of knowledge but by inhabiting a professional role in a supervised relationship with experienced practitioners. Ingram (2013) in his account of supervision as a learning relationship: supervision, it is argued, is the primary site in which the professional self is formed, explored, tested, and developed. Both accounts point toward practice education and supervision as a crucial site for developing the capacity to maintain professional agency in the face of AI assistance.

This has direct implications for how practice educators approach their role in an AI-assisted practice environment. A practice educator supervising a student who is using Magic Note needs to be able to model the appropriate relationship between AI output and professional judgment to demonstrate, in their own practice, what it means to treat AI as a tool rather than an authority. What does a supervision conversation about an AI-generated case note look like? What questions should a practice educator ask? How should they respond if a student's written account too closely mirrors the AI's draft? These are not questions that current practice education frameworks have been developed to address, but they are questions that the arrival of AI in practice settings now makes urgent.

This paper argues for the inclusion of AI-related scenarios in practice education frameworks and in continuing professional development training. Students and newly qualified workers need explicit preparation for the experience of practising in AI-assisted environments, and not only the technical competence to use the tools, but the professional capacity to maintain their own judgment in relation to them. Additionally, in the continued professional development space, there is a need for responding to the new environment in which more established practitioners now find themselves operating.

Relational practice, presence, and the risk of technological distance

The Magic Note evaluation produced an apparent paradox that is educationally significant: the tool may make workers more present during visits, freed from the cognitive demands of note-taking while simultaneously introducing a recording device that some service users and practitioners experience as distancing, surveillance-like, or corrosive of the conditions for honest engagement. These two effects are not in contradiction: they reflect the genuine structural tension between the administrative rationale of AI efficiency and the central relational aspects of social work practice, and that tension is not fully resolvable by better explanation or clearer consent procedures alone.

Ingram and Smith (2018) identify the therapeutic relationship as the primary vehicle through which social work achieves its aims, not incidentally or instrumentally, but fundamentally. Rogowski (2026) develops this through the concept of relationship-based practice: the argument that the quality of the relationship between practitioner and service user is itself a medium of intervention, not merely a precondition for it. Ferguson's (2010) vivid account of the embodied, atmospheric, and sensory dimensions of child protection home visits, which include the smells, the silences, the body language,

the arrangement of furniture, makes the point powerfully: what a social worker knows from being present in a situation cannot be fully captured by any technology. The Magic Note evaluation echoes this: practitioners worried specifically about the risk of missing non-verbal cues, environmental signals, and the kind of felt sense of a situation that accumulates over the course of a visit and that a transcript cannot capture and may also be fostered by experience and practice wisdom. Inevitably, if these environmental observations and the associated emotional and cognitive sense-making are absent, then the efficacy and accuracy of recordings for in-case decision-making or subsequent revisiting of previous notes becomes untethered from the depth and clarity expected.

The service user in conversation with their social worker, who compared being recorded to *'being at a police station'* was naming something important about the experience of surveillance in a helping relationship. Social work has an uncomfortable proximity to state power, and the conditions that allow service users to speak honestly to disclose abuse, to acknowledge difficulty, and to ask for help are conditions of trust that are easily disrupted (Edmonds-Cady & Wingfield, 2017). The introduction of a recording device, even a consent-based one, changes the dynamic of a visit in ways that practitioners in the evaluation recognized and worried about. One practitioner noted *that 'recording can make conversations feel staged, reducing the natural flow of dialogue.'* On the other hand, there was a clear view that the recording of an interaction allowed the worker to maintain greater levels of eye contact without recourse to note-taking, and also be much more present in the moment.

O'Leary and Tsui (2023) make the related point that there are aspects of relationship-based practice that AI cannot model or reproduce because they are held within the inter and intrapersonal dimensions of engagement. Bender et al. (2021) reinforce this from a technical perspective: generative AI systems produce linguistically fluent outputs without genuine understanding, and this fundamental limitation matters in a profession whose core work involves making sense of complex human situations in real time. The practitioner's body, their attention, their emotional attunement, and their capacity to notice and respond to what is happening in the room remain irreplaceable.

Social work education needs to equip students to hold and navigate this tension consciously, rather than to resolve it in advance by treating AI either as straightforwardly benign or as straightforwardly threatening. Practical curriculum implications include: role-play and simulation exercises in which students practise seeking consent for AI recording in scenarios involving different levels of capacity, power, and relationship; explicit curriculum attention to body language, environmental observation, and non-verbal communication as elements of professional assessment that AI cannot substitute; and critical discussion of what 'presence' means in a digitally mediated practice environment, and what skills practitioners need to maintain it.

Neurodiversity, inclusion, and the uneven terrain of AI's benefits

One of the most striking findings in the Magic Note evaluation was the response of practitioners who identified as neurodivergent. Workers with dyslexia, ADHD, and other conditions described the tool as transformative and not merely convenient, but genuinely enabling. Several described the capacity to practise on equal terms with colleagues for

whom writing and recording comes more easily as profoundly significant. This finding has two distinct implications for social work education, each of which deserves attention.

The first issue concerns qualifying training itself. If AI recording tools can enable neurodivergent practitioners to work more effectively and equitably, this raises important questions about whether social work education, through its recording requirements, written assessment demands, and practice learning expectations, currently creates unnecessary barriers for neurodivergent students.

Clouder et al. (2020) argue that higher education has been slow to move beyond a deficit model of neurodivergence, tending to focus on accommodation and adjustment rather than redesigning learning and assessment environments to be inclusive by default. Hence, students may be offered time extensions or proofreading provision, rather than considering tools which have a direct impact on the performance of students. The social model of disability, central to social work's value base, requires educators to examine the extent to which structural features of programmes may themselves produce the disadvantages they subsequently attempt to mitigate through individual adjustments. In this context, the emergence of AI in social work practice and education may offer a productive opportunity to advance such thinking.

The second implication concerns how AI is framed in the curriculum. The dominant framing in much of the emerging literature on AI and social work education is one of risk management (Ray, Shklarski and Jacob, 2026). This is a legitimate and important framing but one which is now shifting to accommodation. Goldkind (2021) note the democratizing potential of AI systems more generally, including their capacity to transcend literacy barriers and enable forms of access and participation previously unavailable. Social work education's engagement with AI needs to include this dimension alongside the risk analysis.

The counterpoint identified in the evaluation is that newly qualified workers who rely heavily on AI from the outset may not develop the full range of professional recording and observational skills, which is real and should not be dismissed. But these concerns are not in contradiction: they are different aspects of the same complex situation, and education's task is to hold them both. The same tool can expand access for some while narrowing skill development for others, depending on how it is used and what professional education and supervision surround it. This is precisely why engaging at a curriculum design level matters.

Developing ethical literacy for the AI age

The Magic Note evaluation surfaced a wide and sophisticated range of ethical concerns among practitioners and the longer-term trajectory of AI in public services. This is not a workforce that is ethically naive. It is a workforce navigating genuinely difficult questions about usage, ethics and relationships without shared frameworks, without clear organizational policy in most areas, and without having been prepared for them in qualifying training.

The ethical questions AI raises for social work practice are not wholly new, and as they are new forms of old questions the profession has always grappled with. Questions about consent and power are foundational to social work ethics; the difference is that AI introduces new scenarios in which they arise. Questions about data, surveillance, and

the use of personal information are not invented by AI; but AI makes them more immediate, more consequential, and more technically complex. Questions about accountability and who is responsible when AI produces an inaccurate or harmful output extend longstanding debates about professional responsibility in bureaucratic contexts. Social work has long grappled with and accommodated the tension between minimum intervention, surveillance and relational work (Wroe and Lloyd, 2020). The rise of AI tools, and in this context Magic Note, it is clear that the ability to capture verbatim the content of interactions whilst stripped of wider contextual dynamics adds a new layer to how this is managed and experienced. Additionally, AI and digitalization amplifies the issue of *sousveillance*, which refers to the increasing ability of individuals to record the actions and interactions of social workers and share publicly without consent, a phenomenon which, on one hand can be viewed through a lens of a rebalancing of power and accountability, whilst also introducing a new environment of risk and compromised confidentiality for workers and service users alike (La Rose and Mule, 2025). The ethical literacy that social work education needs to develop for the AI age is, therefore, not a separate module bolted onto an existing curriculum. It is an extension and application of the ethical literacy that social work education has always sought to develop.

Garrett (2022) has argued that social work's engagement with digital technologies needs to be critically examined through the lens of digital capitalism by attending to the commercial interests, power relations, and structural inequalities that shape how digital tools are designed, deployed, and marketed. This is a particularly pointed observation in the context of AI tools like Magic Note, which are developed by commercial entities and deployed by public authorities in services for vulnerable populations. Social workers need to understand not only how to use such tools appropriately, but to ask as Garrett urges, who benefits, who is at risk, and who decides. Thus, signaling a need for consultation and partnership between service providers and users when adopting such a substantial shift in service delivery.

Reamer (2023) identifies a range of specific ethical issues raised by AI in social work, including threats to confidentiality, the risk of bias in algorithmic decision-making, concerns about the erosion of the therapeutic relationship, and questions about accountability when AI systems make errors. The study also raises a question of governance. Several practitioners in the Magic Note evaluation worried about data security, about what happens to recordings when they are stored on commercial servers, about commercial dependency and the implications of a public authority's practice being mediated by a private technology company. These are questions that individual practitioners cannot answer or resolve, and indeed, asking the question places many of us into an unknown arena. However complex, they must be organizational and governmental questions. But social work education can develop in students and academics the habit of asking them: the disposition to look beyond the tool itself to the governance arrangements that surround it, and to understand those arrangements as ethically significant.

The paper argues that AI ethical literacy needs to be embedded across the social work curriculum rather than addressed in a standalone module. The following suggestions are to give a sense of the breadth and depth of this argument and the implications. It clearly belongs in ethics and values teaching, where the specific scenarios AI creates, such as consent under pressure, surveillance in the helping relationship, algorithmic bias can be

examined with the analytical and philosophical tools students already possess. It belongs in law teaching, where the legal dimensions of data protection, confidentiality, and consent in an AI-assisted context require attention. It belongs in practice skills teaching, where the specific competencies of reviewing AI output, maintaining professional judgment, and communicating clearly with service users about AI recording need to be developed. And it belongs in placement learning, where students encounter AI in the context of real practice and need the support of practice educators who can model and discuss its appropriate use. It should be noted that the current picture in practice is uneven and uncertain in terms of the incorporation of AI in the broad range of contexts in which social workers operate. Ray et al. (2026) make this point at a strategic level, arguing for a curriculum framework that equips social work students and practitioners to develop the skills to navigate and operate effectively in a digital world. The present paper's contribution is to ground that aspiration in the specific, empirically derived tensions that AI is already generating in the workplace.

Toward an AI-Informed social work curriculum

The five educational implications developed in the preceding section point toward a set of curriculum principles that social work programmes can adapt to their own contexts. These are offered not as a prescriptive curriculum model but as a framework of orientations or starting points for programmes that are already thinking about AI and want to develop their response in a principled and educationally grounded way. The following figure illustrates the principles of an AI-informed curriculum and is then followed by further explanation to encourage its use.

The following propositions arise from Figure 1.

Proposition One is that AI literacy is key. It should be threaded through social work curricula rather than being viewed as a discrete topic or modular area. The ethical, relational, and professional questions that AI raises are continuous with the questions

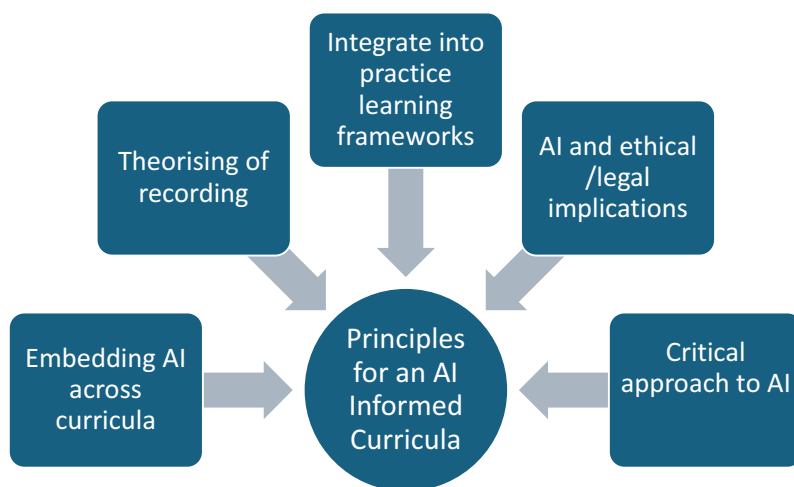


Figure 1. Principles of AI-Informed social work curricula.

that social work has always addressed. Treating AI as a discrete topic risks both under-engaging with its pervasiveness and overloading any single module with more than it can carry. As noted above, it belongs in ethics and values, in law, in practice skills, in research methods, and in placement learning and is developed cumulatively and with explicit connections across the curriculum.

Proposition Two is that recording should be explicitly theorized and taught as a reflective practice, not only as a professional competency. The analytical and observational dimensions of recording that AI cannot replace, such as the practitioner's capacity to notice, to feel, to make sense of, and to construct a professional account must be deliberately cultivated. This requires curriculum time, taught content, and assessment designs that reward analytical depth rather than descriptive accuracy.

Proposition Three is that professional identity and accountability in AI-assisted environments should be addressed explicitly in practice education frameworks and professional development programmes. Practice educators are now working in environments where AI tools are present, and students will arrive in placements already using or about to use such tools. Practice education frameworks need to equip supervisors to model and discuss the appropriate relationship between AI output and professional judgment, and to create the reflective conditions in which students develop this capacity.

Proposition Four is that consent, capacity, and power in AI-mediated practice contexts should be included in law and ethics teaching, with scenario-based learning that engages with the complexity the Magic Note evaluation reveals. The evaluation surfaced scenarios such as the service user who felt like they were '*at a police station*,' the practitioner who worried about the implications of refusal on statutory orders, and the team member who observed that recording makes conversations feel staged. These are scenarios that students need to have thought through before they encounter them in practice.

Proposition Five is that social work curricula should promote a critical approach to the expansion of AI in social work rather than an unquestioning adoption. One that has a keen eye for the benefits, limitations and unknowns that will emerge. Additionally, the differential benefits and risks of AI, including for neurodivergent practitioners and students, should be critically addressed in ways that move beyond the efficiency narrative to engage with questions of equity and inclusion. Social work's own value base demands that education attend to the ways in which the same technology can both enable and constrain different groups of practitioners, and that this complexity be reflected in how AI is taught and how learning and assessment are designed.

Conclusion

Social work education faces an uncomfortable reality: the technology has arrived in practice settings faster than the curriculum has been able to respond. Magic Note is not an isolated case as it is one instance of a broad and accelerating deployment of AI tools across social work and human services, and the practitioners who took part in the baseline evaluation were encountering, in concentrated form, the questions that the whole profession is beginning to face. Such questions are global in nature, and whilst this study was located within a Scottish context, the messages contained within are

transferable across international contexts. The pace and nature of AI in social work may vary, but the issues it raises are universal.

This paper has argued for five educational implications grounded in the empirical findings of a small empirical evaluative study, not as abstract possibilities but as documented features of how a workforce is actually encountering AI. The concerns that experienced practitioners raised about recording as a reflective act, about the conditions for professional judgment under pressure, about the relational costs of recording devices in helping relationships, about the uneven distribution of benefits for neurodivergent workers, and about the ethical complexity that enthusiastic adoption can too easily obscure. They are the concerns of a profession engaging thoughtfully with a genuine challenge. They are balanced by an overwhelming relief and gratitude for a tool which demonstrably alleviates the burden of paperwork that impacts upon the volume of face-to-face relational work as well as practitioner wellbeing and retention.

Ray et al. (2026) argue that the task for social work is to travel in partnership with AI rather than to observe, respond to, or resist it, to move from a reactive to a proactive orientation in which the profession helps to shape the future of AI deployment rather than simply inheriting it. What the Magic Note evaluation adds is the ground-level texture of what this means in practice: the voices of practitioners who are already navigating the relationship between AI and professional judgment, and whose experience points directly to what qualifying education needs to do. It is of course important to note that future students will likely be immersed in an AI-informed environment in their personal lives and display a significant degree of technical expertise and ease; however, the criticality and reflexivity that the arguments in this paper propose must not be obscured by the omnipresence of AI across all spheres of the lives of social work students and practitioners.

The limitations of this paper are important. The Magic Note data is baseline in which some participants had not yet used the tool with service users, and the midpoint and end-of-year findings will add important texture to what is currently a picture of expectations rather than sustained experience. The differences and nuances across characteristics such as practice contexts, gender, age and ethnicity will need to be part of the subsequent phases of the evaluative research. The paper draws on one evaluation in a single Scottish local authority and cannot claim representativeness. The educational argument it develops is therefore a call to begin rather than a claim to have resolved the questions AI raises for social work education.

But the beginning is, at this point, what is needed. The practitioners who contributed to the Magic Note evaluation were not passive recipients of a technological change; rather, they were thinking carefully, drawing on their values, and insisting, with conviction, on the limits of what AI should do. Social work education's task is to ensure that students arrive in practice with the same critical, ethically grounded capacity already developed so that they can engage with AI as agents rather than subjects, shaping how it is used in the service of the people social work exists to support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Bender, E. M., Gebru, T., McMillan-Major, A., Shmitchell, S. (2021). On the dangers of stochastic parrots: Can language models be too big? In *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAccT '21)* (pp. 610–623). ACM.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Broadhurst, K., Hall, C., Wastell, D., & Pithouse, A. (2010). Risk, instrumentalism and the humane project in social work: Identifying the informal logics in risk management in children's statutory services. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(4), 1046–1064. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcp035>
- Chen, J. J., & Lin, J. C. (2023). Artificial intelligence as a double-edged sword: Wielding the POWER principles to maximize its positive effects and minimize its negative effects. *Contemp Issues Early Child*, 25(1), 146–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491231169813>
- Clouder, L., Karakus, M., & Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M. V., Fierros, G. A., & Rojo, P. (2020). Neurodiversity in higher education: A narrative synthesis. *Higher Education*, 80(4), 757–778. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6>
- Cuccaro-Alamin, S., Foust, R., Vaithianathan, R., & Putnam-Hornstein, E. (2017). Risk assessment and decision making in child protective services: Predictive risk modeling in context. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 79, 291–298. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.027>
- de Lange, M., & de Waal, M. (Eds.). (2019). *The hackable city: Digital media and collaborative city-making in the network society*. Springer.
- Department for Education. (2023). *Children's social work workforce 2022*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childrens-social-work-workforce-2022>
- Edmonds-Cady, C., & Wingfield, T. T. (2017). Social workers: Agents of change or agents of oppression? *Social Work Education*, 36(4), 430–442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1291802>
- Ferguson, H. (2010). Walks, home visits and atmospheres: Risk and the everyday practices and mobilities of social work and child protection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40(4), 1100–1117. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcq015>
- Fook, J. (Ed.). (2021). *Practicing critical reflection in social care organisations*. Routledge.
- Gardiner, B., O'Donoghue, K., Yeung, P., & Jewel, Z. I. (2026). Social work practice and artificial intelligence: A scoping review. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 38(1), 9–21. <https://doi.org/10.11157/anzswj-vol38iss1id1267>
- Garrett, P. M. (2022). 'Surveillance capitalism, COVID-19 and social work': A Note on uncertain future(s). *British Journal of Social Work*, 52(3), 1747–1764. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab099>
- Geddes, E., O'Keefe, R., Vincent, S., & Davies, P. (2025). 'We need to give it more attention'. Educators', students', and social work apprentices' experiences of teaching and learning child-centred recordkeeping. *Social Work Education*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2025.2563169>
- Goldkind, L. (2021). Social work and artificial intelligence: Into the matrix. *Social Work*, 66(4), 372–374. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swab028>
- Hennessey, R. (2011). *Relationship skills in social work*. Sage.
- Hodgson, D., Goldingay, S., Boddy, J., Nipperess, S., & Watts, L. (2022). Problematising artificial intelligence in social work education: Challenges, issues and possibilities. *British Journal of Social Work*, 52(4), 1878–1895. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcab168>
- Ingram, R. (2013). Emotions, social work practice and supervision: An uneasy alliance? *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 27(1), 5–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2012.745842>
- Ingram, R. (2015). *Understanding emotions in social work: Theory, practice and reflection*. Open University Press.
- Ingram, R., & Smith, M. (2018). *Relationship-based practice: Emergent themes in social work literature*. IRIS.
- Keinemans, S. (2015). Be sensible: Emotions in social work ethics and education. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(7), 2176–2191. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcu057>

- La Rose, T., & Mule, J. (2025). Behind closed doors: Sousveillance in mandated social welfare interventions. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 34(2), e12720. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijsw.12720>
- Løberg, I., & Egeland, C. (2023). 'You get a completely different feeling' – an empirical exploration of emotions and their functions in digital frontline work. *European Journal of Social Work*, 26(1), 108–120.
- McQuillan, D. (2023). ChatGPT: The world's largest bullshit machine. Transform soc. <https://www.transformingsociety.co.uk/2023/02/10/chatgpt-the-worlds-largest-bullshit-machine/>
- Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination* (40th anniversary ed.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1959)
- Molala, T. S., & Mbaya, T. W. (2023). Social work and artificial intelligence: Towards the electronic social work field of specialisation. *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review*, 6(4), 613–621. <https://doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i4.1206>
- Moorhead, B., Bell, K., Jones-Mutton, T., Boetto, H., & Bailey, R. (2019). Preparation for practice: Embedding the development of professional identity within social work curriculum. *Social Work Education*, 38(8), 983–995. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2019.1595570>
- Munro, E. (2011). The Munro review of child protection: Final report - a child-centred system. Department for Education.
- Newcomb, M. (2025). Using care ethics to support staff wellbeing in social work: A conceptual model. *British Journal of Social Work*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcaf189>
- O'Leary, P., & Tsui, M. (2023). AI and social work. *International Social Work*, 66(5), 1353–1354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728231199801>
- Pascoe, K. M., Waterhouse-Bradley, B., & McGinn, T. (2023). Social workers' experiences of bureaucracy: A systematic synthesis of qualitative studies. *British Journal of Social Work*, 53(1), 513–533. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac106>
- Pinazo-Hernandis, S., & Carcavilla-González, N. (2026). Are future social workers ready for AI? Fears, barriers, and learning needs in higher education. *Social Work Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2631708>
- QAA. (2024). *Navigating the complexities of the artificial intelligence era in higher education*. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.
- Ravalier, J. M. (2019). Psycho-social working conditions and stress in UK social workers. *British Journal of Social Work*, 49(2), 371–390. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy023>
- Ray, K., Shklarski, L., & Jacob, S. (2026). From resistance to integration: AI in social work education. *Social Work Education*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2638396>
- Reamer, F. (2023). Artificial intelligence in social work: Emerging ethical issues. *International Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 20(2), 52–71. <https://doi.org/10.55521/10-020-205>
- Rogowski, S. (2012). Social work with children and families: Challenges and possibilities in the neo-liberal world. *British Journal of Social Work*, 42(5), 921–940. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr129>
- Rogowski, S. (2026). Towards critical child protection: For a relationship-based and humane practice with children and families. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 40(1), 117–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2025.2480078>
- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Singer, J. B., Báez, J. C., & Rios, J. A. (2023). AI creates the message: Integrating AI language learning models into social work education and practice. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 59(2), 294–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2023.2189878>
- Walker, A. P., Gibbs, D. J., Banks, L., Lee, H. Y., Frazier, K. D., & Lee, J. (2026). Innovating social work pedagogy: Generative AI for critical competency development in evidence-based practice. *Social Work Education*, 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2026.2617512>
- Watling, S., & Rogers, J. (2012). *Social work in a digital society*. Learning Matters.
- Wroe, L. E., & Lloyd, J. (2020). Watching over or working with? Understanding social work innovation in response to extra-familial harm. *Social Sciences*, 9(4), 37. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9040037>