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Using Field Assignments to Enhance Student Contributions and Program-Setting Relationships

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Introduction

Field directors are challenged to accommodate competing demands from students, administration, and placement agencies (Buck, Bradley, Robb, & Kirzner, 2012). Logistics of commuting, cost, caregiving needs, and needs for flexible scheduling are all common limitations that field directors consider (Bradley & Buck, 2014). As the broker and main point of contact for placements, field directors are also responsible for developing and maintaining strong relationships with agencies in their community (Bradley & Buck, 2014). With an increase of students entering field and competition from other local colleges, options can be scarce.

Additionally, it is a time-consuming process for field directors to develop new placements, recruit and orient field instructors, and negotiate affiliation agreements (Buck et al., 2012). Maintaining relationships long term reduces field director workload in searching for new placements. The positive effect of student contributions through well-structured field assignments on these working relationships can be easily overlooked.

Students make notable contributions to field settings as they bring hundreds of hours of work, new perspectives and energy, and the potential for pre-screened and trained candidates for employment following completion of the practicum or graduation (Globerman & Bogo, 2003; Hunter & Poe, 2014). Additionally, students contribute

to professional culture and professional development of the instructor (Globerman & Bogo, 2003). Individual professional growth and an obligation to contribute to the growth of the profession are factors that motivate field instructors to supervise students (Globerman & Bogo, 2003).

Conducting case studies is a common field education requirement for BSW students. In a 2008 survey of BSW programs, 77.3% of BSW field students performed a micro case study, 56.7% performed a macro level study, 50.9% performed a policy review, and 29.7% performed a group case analysis (Poe & Hunter, 2009). These case study assignments push supervisors to provide practice opportunities and keep students on track to follow social work protocol for conducting their practice. From an educational perspective, case studies and field-related assignments develop professional identity and competence. In the best cases, settings can reap lasting benefits from students' structured assignments.

This article highlights the power of student effort, capable field instruction, structured field assignments, and faculty liaison support in sustaining meaningful and productive field education partnerships that can benefit the field setting. This case study (about a case study assignment) is not intended to be exceptional; it is a solid illustration of how both the student and the field setting gain from an intentionally designed field education process. The insights of a field student, field liaison, and field instructor are brought together to illustrate the effective use of a field assignment (a mezzo-practice case study) that serves to enhance the field setting while building student competence, and thus supporting a positive relationship between setting and university.

Three Perspectives

Field Liaison

Social work students at our university are expected to complete an in-depth case study during their final practicum to apply and document their skills and knowledge at the micro, mezzo, or macro practice level (Department of Social Work at James Madison University, 2015). Done right, the case study focuses on work that is organic to the agency. The imposed structure of the assignment raises student work to a high level of analysis.

The full faculty review and revise the case study assignment in keeping with new educational standards. The field liaison, who is part of the faculty, negotiates the focus of the case study with the student and field instructor. The student remains in contact with their field instructor and students present and receive feedback on their work in the field seminar. Field seminar peers benefit from hearing about each other's processes and resources as the generalist perspective is reinforced on multiple levels of

practice. Private communication between the student and field liaison guide student perceptions of theory and practice.

In this case, one student's work rose to my attention when she demonstrated competence by using the group techniques she researched for a psychosocial group in a subsequent presentation with staff. Having been a field director for 15 years, I recognized that the quality attention and support that the university contributes over time to the field assignments is central to reinforcing the generalist perspective for field students, encouraging students' high-quality practice behaviors and maintaining positive relationships with field instructors. These are all imperatives of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (CSWE, 2015).

Student

In my BSW program at James Madison University, social work professors assign students their field placements. I was placed at a psychiatric hospital for adults, where professionals from many different disciplines work together to get patients stabilized and prepared to lead safe and successful lives in the community. The social worker's main responsibility in this setting is discharge planning, which includes linking patients to resources such as housing, health care, and financial assistance.

According to Moen, Liley, and Dennis (2014), "Students' reflection about their practice in systematic ways is an important learning process in field." Structure and supervision were built in to support me in this learning process. My cohort worked in the field Monday through Thursday and attended bi-weekly field seminar and capstone classes. In field seminar, my field liaison prompted us with questions about the purpose of our tasks, and how they affect the greater client population, to provoke a deeper level of reflection on our involvement. My field instructor and I discussed and reflected on events as they arose. We set aside roughly one hour each week for supervision. Her constant encouragement and support inspired me to raise the stakes, become more involved, and gain more independence over time.

Field Instructor

Having served as a field instructor for 25 years, my goals and expectations have become consistent. The students I supervise get an experience that is commensurate with the expectations of the social workers employed by the agency. All licensed staff, including social workers, are required to co-lead at least one group per week. Psychosocial rehabilitation (PSR) groups are a staple in patients' treatment at the hospital. One of my expectations has been for students to develop topics (at least three) for Community Education (CE) group.

Community Education is a 50-minute group that meets twice per week. Its purpose is to educate and prepare patients for community re-entry. This group is structured like a class, where patients learn and develop practical life skills. The group is very broad in terms of topics, which makes it a great group for student participation. Once the topic is developed, the student is responsible for leading the group discussion/activity. Determining how to effectively present the topic is critical, since mental health clients are often lacking in motivation and interest.

Student

I decided with my field instructor to conduct a mezzo-level case study that required me to develop and facilitate six Community Education (CE) groups. The product for this assignment is student's evaluation of the group (setting, membership, purpose), a literature review, an in-depth description of their planning process, and an evaluation of their interventions and impact. Once a week I joined my instructor and another social worker who co-facilitated CE. Before developing lessons and leading on my own, I observed two groups. I was drawn to the group members and how they functioned. I observed several patients sleep or doze off during group, while others dominated discussions and often got the group off-topic. In later groups, I noticed a lack of interaction and cohesion between individual members and the group as a whole.

I had learned about Tuckman's stages of group development model. Based on how long CE group had been together, I expected them to be past the *Norming* stage where roles and responsibilities are understood and agreed upon, and into the *Performing* stage with a cohesive vision on the group's goals and purpose (Zastrow, 2015). With disruptive members, sleeping members, and inconsistent participation norms, I felt this group was still stuck between the *Forming* and *Storming* stages (Zastrow, 2015).

My observations influenced how I sought articles for a literature review. Managing different levels of participation, social relationships between adults with mental illness, and low levels of energy in the classroom were themes that arose. My research findings ultimately shaped the structure of my lessons and the skills I used to manage them.

Rather than prioritizing the content of the lessons, I focused on the process of effectively engaging group members and increasing participation. To strengthen social cognitive functions and accommodate different types of learners, I incorporated visual, auditory, and kinesthetic components into the presentations, games, and activities I developed. Visual and interactive modalities were especially effective at increasing participation in this group.

Addressing dominant members with non-accusatory language helped minimize disruptions and conflict, while emphasizing positive norms. After learning the positive effects social networking can have on mental and physical health (ex. Cherry, 2019), I incorporated group and partner activities into each lesson. Through group work, patients received support from others who shared their experiences, goals, and concerns (Mental Health America, 2016). Supportive relationships are also important for co-facilitators (Mental Health America, 2016). My field instructor, co-facilitator, and I depended on each other's unique skills to make each group successful.

CE was the last PSR group of the day. By that time, patients' energy levels and attention were (understandably) low. Research on the relationship between the mind, body, and learning (ex. Lamprecht, 2016) led me to incorporate brief stretches and energizing movements into group as a way to increase awareness and attention of group members. After incorporating movement into each group, it became a norm that most members accepted and anticipated.

Field Instructor

This student displayed an interest in developing group topics and took the initiative to closely observe the group dynamics. One specific dynamic she observed was patients being unable to participate or give input due to other disruptive and dominating group members. She carefully integrated group norms that ensured each group member an opportunity to share.

This student was very cognizant of both the individual and collective functioning of the group members. Had she not been aware of these dynamics, she would have had much higher expectations of the group processes and outcomes, and subsequently would have been disappointed in the group work. She was able to see the purpose of the group and how the success of the group was really measured. Most importantly, she discovered that she really enjoyed the group work and that she had skills that made her an effective group facilitator.

Evaluation

Student

I evaluated the effectiveness of these interventions by comparing participation and engagement levels before and after implementation of the techniques mentioned. These observations were made by both myself and my co-facilitators. After each group I received feedback from my co-facilitators while we sat and discussed how group went.

When I was requested to give a presentation to the whole social work department at the hospital, I decided to model my presentation after the approach I took in facilitating CE groups to support my findings. I started with a neck and shoulder stretch to focus the group, then showed a Prezi presentation which included visual and audio components. I allowed space for discussion and story-telling. Halfway through, I implemented an energizing movement where we stood up and attempted to spell "banana" (a fruit chosen by a group member) using our bodies.

Participants appreciated the techniques I incorporated and were impressed with the interactive components. Multiple social workers requested more information about the activities I created and asked if they could reuse them in their PSR groups. One social worker familiar with CE group commented, "I am really impressed that you were able to get this particular group to pay attention to you, let alone participate in some of those activities. I teach the same group with the same group members on Thursdays, and have had a hard time getting them engaged this past month."

Hearing the other CE facilitator's comment was confirmation that my research, strategies, and facilitation techniques were effective and that I was able to teach experienced professionals new and useful information. Learning in this setting was not only in one direction, rather the agency professionals learned from me and vice versa. My field instructor cultivated a learning environment by providing opportunities for observation, practice, and research. She made herself available when I needed guidance, but did not spoon-feed me through the process.

For example, after I had led a couple of groups under the oversight of my instructor, she let me facilitate groups and carry out meetings in her absence. Field instructors should guide and support their students, but also trust them to take on tasks on their own. Independent, hands-on experience allows students to build competence and develop their own professional identity.

My professors and the field assignments pushed me to analyze my experiences, apply theoretical knowledge, and integrate other information to become an agent for change (Marc, Makai-Dimeny, & Oşvat, 2014). Students benefit from having structured class time and assignments that coincide with their internships. As students, we also have the advantage of full access to library resources and databases. Most social workers in the field do not have the luxury of time to stop and do a full research analysis on any given task. My structured assignments forced me to slow down and process every step in my work. I believe that the research and practice I contributed was beneficial to my agency and to future facilitators.

Field Instructor

It has always been my hope for field students to immerse themselves in their internship, develop practice wisdom, and gain independence in their tasks. During my years of serving as a field instructor at the hospital, I have supervised a handful of students who have fulfilled this hope and done exemplary work.

My immediate observation of this student was her level of comfort in leading the group topic. Her approach and interest in the group process surpassed my observations of former students. Her case study and findings were very well received by the Social Work Department who took interest in her process for group topics, activities, and facilitation. The hospital social workers have multiple work tasks in addition to facilitating psychosocial rehabilitation groups. They do not always have the time to research and develop new lessons or activities in a manner that is hands-on, incorporates more interesting modes of facilitating the learning process, or that utilizes humor or fun ways to learn. This student was able to take the time to do this, and as a result, patients really looked forward to our CE group each week.

Conclusions

The problem of identifying and maintaining field placements has been a recurrent theme among field directors, and was recently reiterated by Bogo and Sewell's (2019) "Introduction to the Special Issue on Field Education of Students" in the *Clinical Social Work Journal*. This reflection by a BSW student and her field instructor and field liaison speaks to an oft-overlooked factor in the relationship between university and setting: the field assignment. A well-crafted case study should be flexible enough to allow students to do the work of the agency in an organic manner but encourage them to use the social work change process while demonstrating competency along the way. In other words, it helps students do their best work for the setting.

One of the major complexities of field education rests in the fact that it cannot be crafted in an orderly, structured, and consistent fashion in the same way as a classroom can be (Bogo, 2015). "Field instructors, therefore, need to balance a focus on the practice delivered in their setting and draw links to the core competencies for clinical practice, for the profession, and as defined by the school" (Bogo, 2015). There is no proven substitute for a high-quality field instructor engaged in the best practices of creating a positive learning environment, forming collaborative relationships, and providing opportunities for students to observe and debrief practice, practice with clients under direct observation, and engage in mutually reflective dialogue (Bogo, 2015). Notably, these best practices to realize the signature pedagogy rest heavily on the field instructor (Hunter & Poe, 2014).

Building on the research for best practices for high-quality field education, scholars might analyze the role of the field case study, with field seminar's peer support and faculty liaison oversight, in contributing to positive relationships between programs and field settings. The field liaison and the assignment form the "inter-practicum-reliability" to assure some consistency of experience for field students and focused predictable communication between the student, instructor, and liaison in widely different settings. The result is an intentional partnership and structure where the direction of contribution is recursive: the student learns, the client achieves, and the agency workers gain new research-based tools or information.

The activities and outcomes presented in this article are admittedly common. Field educators can likely recount a number of notable student contributions to field settings. The process is familiar: a field student observes the agency functioning with fresh eyes, finds a "problem" and works the social work process. Ideally, the student consults the field instructor, seminar peers, the field liaison, and the literature to develop the project, structured by a field assignment. The ubiquitous case study can be seen as the mycelium of the field experience- binding together practice and knowledge and moving information between the student, instructor, possibly a task supervisor, and liaison. Positive outcomes from such assignments contribute to the satisfaction of the university-agency relationship.

Contrarily, poor quality assignments or inadequate field liaison support of those assignments may well contribute to negative impacts on university-agency relations. While little research attention has been turned in this direction, the humble field assignment and its role in facilitating communication, bolstering learning, and structuring positive student contributions deserves further research for its role in maintaining quality field setting relationships.

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