Contemporary Practicum Issues: An Online Update

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In 2015, Marion Bogo published a seminal article highlighting contemporary issues in practicum education, which is recognized as the signature pedagogy in social work education (Bogo, 2015). As Professor Bogo's former doctoral student and collaborator (Bogo & Dill, 2008; Dill & Bogo, 2009), I am deeply influenced by her scholarship and committed to advancing its contemporary application. However, the educational landscape has transformed significantly since Bogo's publication, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The rapid transition to online education across higher education has diversified instructional modalities, which now include synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid formats. Previously reluctant to embrace online methods, social work educators now recognize their potential to engage underserved populations, including students from remote areas, working adults, and individuals preferring self-paced learning.

As the author of this article and director of an emerging online MSW program at Marist University in Poughkeepsie, New York, I am actively exploring innovative methods to sustain and promote the best practices in practicum education that were identified by Bogo, specifically within digital contexts. This edition of Research Finds presents a comparative analysis, examining how practicum education practices have evolved over the past decade, and the degree to which Bogo's best practices have been maintained, adapted, or challenged in online environments.

Bogo (2015) outlined six essential factors of effective practicum education:

1. Positive learning environments that welcome and value students
2. Collaborative, engaged relationships between practicum instructors and students
3. Structured opportunities for observation and debriefing
4. Authentic student engagement with clients extending beyond shadowing

5. Supervision discussions grounded in real student experiences, supported by video/audio recordings
6. Prioritized feedback and coaching through role play and active supervision

Professor Bogo, however, also noted significant challenges, including dependency on voluntary agency participation and the reduced authority of practicum directors, who frequently function as administrators rather than faculty. She advocated structural changes, emphasizing collective responsibility for excellence across all social work educators and the importance of strong peer networks among practicum directors.

A review of the current data from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2025) indicates that there are 953 accredited, candidacy-status, and pre-candidacy-status BSW and MSW programs operating in various formats. Entirely online and hybrid programs represent approximately 39.66%, marking a significant shift toward greater accessibility and technological integration (CSWE, 2025; Kurzman, 2019).

While empirical evidence remains limited, current practices in online social work education predominantly combine asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid course models alongside traditional, in-person internships. Practicum liaisons generally conduct their site visits and student supervision virtually, often utilizing platforms such as Zoom. Discussions from the CSWE listserv indicate that most practicum directors typically permit only one of the two required internships to be fully virtual (CSWE listserv, personal communication, March 20, 2025). Schwartz et al. (2024) provided a robust and practical framework guiding the atypical use and careful selection of exclusively virtual internships.

This article explores the critical question: How has online social work practicum education adapted or struggled to maintain the best practices identified by Professor Bogo nearly a decade ago? Drawing on emerging research, grey literature, and consultations with educators, this comparative analysis revisits Bogo's essential components for sustaining high-quality practicum education in the digital age.

Factor 1: Fostering Positive Learning Environments

Professor Bogo emphasized fostering positive learning environments where organizations actively embrace student learning through meaningful clinical discourse. Effective partnerships between universities and organizations, facilitated by practicum liaisons, offer reciprocal benefits, supporting both student growth and organizational development. Practicum supervisors, in turn, enhance their leadership skills and contribute to shaping a competent, prepared workforce.

In contrast, online practicum education presents unique challenges and opportunities. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled social work educators to innovate, seeking creative ways to build virtual learning communities. Kourigiantis and Lee (2020) illustrated an exemplary approach through "Practice Fridays," where students voluntarily participated in virtual practice simulations using actors. Expanding this model by including practicum supervisors in simulation exercises and feedback sessions could further enhance learning outcomes and reinforce partnerships between organizations and universities.

Suggested strategies for fostering positive online learning environments include:

- Virtual synchronous orientations: Hosting joint orientation sessions online for students and practicum supervisors can create cohesive learning communities, overcoming barriers such as distance and scheduling.
- Interactive virtual sessions: Small-scale, online synchronous "lunch and learn" sessions (jointly held for both student and practicum supervisor) focusing on supervisor–student relationships can strengthen interpersonal connections and enhance supervision quality. Topics can include how to make the best use of supervision.
- Enhanced site visits using Zoom technology: Leveraging digital tools such as virtual whiteboards, recorded discussions, and transcripts increases engagement and supports timely, meaningful communication between practicum liaisons, students, and supervisors.

Factor 2: Collaborative Relationships Between Instructors and Students

The second factor focuses on the importance of strong, supportive relationships between students and practicum supervisors. Professor Bogo emphasized the necessity of fostering students' self-directed learning; however, anxiety frequently characterizes early professional experiences, as students begin direct client interactions. Research underscores that secure and supportive attachments between students and supervisors significantly impact students' ability to manage anxiety, engage in critical reflection, and develop professional knowledge, values, and skills (Bennett et al., 2008, 2012).

Anxiety has long been recognized as an inherent part of social work students' learning processes, particularly during initial practicum experiences (Gelman, 2004; Gelman & Lloyd, 2008). Supervisors are essential in mitigating this anxiety through consistent emotional support and structured guidance. However, the hybrid model of online educational delivery, combined with primarily in-person internships, introduces additional complexity to this dynamic. Recent trends, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, have intensified student anxiety, exacerbating existing mental health challenges due to isolation and reduced direct interpersonal support (Dill & Murphy,

2022). Professor Bogo's focus on collaborative relationships between practicum supervisors and students has the potential to ameliorate overarching anxiety for students by creating a safe space for learning and development.

While literature specifically addressing changes in supervisor–student dynamics within online social work practicum contexts remains limited, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the importance of these relationships becomes magnified in online learning environments. To address the heightened significance of supervisory relationships in online practicum education, the following strategies are recommended:

- Regular and consistent liaison meetings: Utilize Zoom or, if feasible, in-person meetings to foster open dialogue. Regularly scheduled check-ins can explicitly address questions such as: How is your supervisory relationship progressing? Do you feel sufficient time is dedicated to addressing client issues and your self-care? How can the practicum liaison further support this relationship?
- Preparatory courses and simulations: Courses designed to prepare students for practicum should incorporate virtual simulations and role plays, ensuring students enter placements with foundational client-engagement skills and greater confidence.
- Synchronous seminar classes: Maintaining synchronous, interactive seminar classes within predominantly asynchronous programs provides critical spaces for students to collectively address anxieties and challenges, thus alleviating some pressures from individual supervisors.
- Enhanced supervisor support: Monthly virtual check-ins specifically for practicum supervisors can offer much-needed support, enabling supervisors to discuss challenges, share strategies, and enhance their mentoring capacities.
- Focused attention on student mental health: Practicum liaisons and supervisors must collaboratively prioritize student mental health, proactively discussing strategies and resources to support students experiencing mental health challenges during their practicum placements.

Factor 3: Opportunities for Observation and Structured Debriefing

Professor Bogo significantly advanced the integration of simulation in social work practicum education. Although not explicitly detailed in her original 2015 article, her subsequent contributions have deeply influenced the widespread adoption of simulations in social work, particularly in virtual learning environments (Rogerson et al., 2021; Occhiuto et al ,2023). Simulations allow students to engage with trained actors, offering safe and structured contexts to practice essential client engagement skills aligned with the CSWE 2022 EPAS competencies (CSWE, 2022).

Internationally, and particularly in the UK, there is a parallel emphasis on observational practices. Practicum supervisors regularly observe student–client interactions, providing structured feedback, debriefing sessions, and reflective discussions (Dill & Hanssen, 2019). An emerging trend in observational practices directly involves individuals with lived experiences (service users) in the observation and feedback process. For example, Dill et al. (2016) explored this innovative approach in their article, "The Path Less Traveled." Additionally, the CSWE will release a curriculum guide in 2026, further emphasizing service user involvement in practicum education, mainly through direct observational feedback to students, enriching the learning experience by offering students real-time insights into developing knowledge, values, and skills.

Recommended strategies for effectively utilizing observations and structured debriefing include:

- Incorporation of simulations and observations: Practicum supervisors should actively integrate simulations, role plays, and direct observations into practicum education, utilizing these as essential assessment and learning tools.
- Structured feedback training: Supervisors should require explicit training on delivering constructive feedback after observations, highlighting strengths and specific areas for improvement, and addressing the student's explicit requests for balanced and growth-oriented critiques.

Factor 4: Genuine Opportunities for Direct Client Engagement

Professor Bogo underscored the critical importance of providing social work students with authentic opportunities for direct client engagement. Central to her scholarship is the Integration of Theory and Practice Loop (Bogo & Vayda, 1998), which encourages students to use direct client experiences to inform and reinforce classroom learning, creating a reciprocal cycle of theory and practice.

Echoing Malcolm Gladwell's concept of the 10,000-hour rule from his book Outliers, achieving excellence in any field, including social work, requires dedicated, consistent practice over time (Gladwell, 2008). Professor Bogo emphasized that genuine engagement in practicum education should extend beyond passive shadowing to actively involving students in meaningful client interactions. While traditional in-person placements typically facilitate these direct interactions, virtual placements necessitate careful planning to ensure robust, authentic client engagement.

Schwartz et al. (2024) stressed the importance of rigorously evaluating virtual internships to confirm they provide adequate direct practice opportunities. Key questions for screening such internships include clarifying the specific tasks students

will perform, the types of clinical interactions involved (e.g., counseling, case management), and the technological tools students will use. Additional considerations include verifying security protocols for protecting client data and ensuring clear expectations around the practical components of virtual placements.

Recommended strategies for ensuring genuine client engagement opportunities include:

- Rigorous internship vetting: Practicum directors and liaisons must thoroughly evaluate internships—whether virtual or on-site—to ensure they provide substantial opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with clients.
- Supervisor training: Training programs for practicum supervisors should emphasize strategies for facilitating real-world client interactions. Placements unable to offer such experiences should be reconsidered or removed from practicum rosters.
- Consistent student feedback: Regular feedback from students through seminar classes and individual check-ins should specifically address the quantity and quality of client-engagement opportunities.
- Educational preparation: Schools of social work should cultivate a culture of direct engagement and comfort with being observed in practice, preparing students from the outset for active, observable interactions with clients.

Factor 5: Practicum Supervision Related to Student Experiences

In this fifth factor, Professor Bogo emphasized the necessity for practicum supervision to consistently and deeply explore students' direct experiences with clients. Regular, structured supervision sessions should facilitate detailed exploration of these interactions, going beyond simple descriptions to include reflective analysis. Utilizing recordings of client interactions, secured with proper consent, significantly enhances the quality and depth of supervision discussions.

The rapid increase in employment-based internships, however, raises concerns about maintaining robust student learning experiences. Regularly scheduled supervision sessions that require students to present video-recorded client interviews—not just written or transcribed process recordings—can help ensure that critical aspects of practice, such as nonverbal communication, tone of voice, and eye contact, are thoroughly examined (Lynch et al., 2023).

Recommended strategies for optimizing practicum supervision include:

- Supervisor training: Practicum supervisors should receive training focused on effective use of recorded client interactions. Such training should equip

supervisors with skills for providing balanced, meaningful feedback, fostering both psychological safety and deep reflective learning for students.
- Quality-focused supervision: Practicum sites, whether virtual or in-person, must prioritize the quality and content of supervision sessions, not merely adherence to time requirements. Training programs for supervisors could incorporate recorded role-play exercises demonstrating effective supervision methods, particularly the structured review of student–client interactions, to facilitate rich, reflective discussions.

Factor 6: Practicum Supervisors as Coaches

In this final factor, Professor Bogo advocated for practicum supervisors to adopt coaching roles, actively guiding students in developing their professional practice. Effective training programs for supervisors should include methods that enable supervisors to articulate the theoretical and practical foundations of their interventions. This approach allows supervisors not only to assist students in understanding their practice, but also to communicate clearly how intervention models and principles guide client interactions and the feedback provided to students.

Although Bogo did not specify exact methodologies, she encouraged social work educators to train practicum supervisors in reflecting upon and articulating their practice processes. Coaching practices for supervisors should explicitly include strategies to help students understand and integrate the CSWE 2022 EPAS and its nine core competencies into their professional development (CSWE, 2022).

Online social work education can utilize asynchronous role-play recordings effectively to train supervisors on coaching techniques. These role plays can help supervisors support students in navigating complex practice issues, including fostering cultural humility and addressing oppression and racial biases.

Suggested strategies for effectively implementing this coaching approach include:

- Recorded role-play trainings: Develop asynchronous recordings of role plays that demonstrate how practicum supervisors can effectively coach students on improving their practice and explicitly connect this practice to the CSWE competencies.
- Mentorship by experienced supervisors: Leverage experienced supervisors to create training materials, including recorded coaching sessions, to mentor and develop newer practicum supervisors in effective coaching techniques.
- Training for practicum liaisons: Practicum liaisons themselves require focused coaching on mentoring supervisors. Comprehensive training programs should equip practicum liaisons with the skills necessary to effectively support,

educate, and mentor supervisors engaged in the intricate and demanding task of practicum education.

Conclusion

In her seminal article, Marion Bogo highlighted many challenges in practicum education, including the reliance on supervisors to volunteer their time for student learning. While not clear in recent literature, practicum directors may still feel placed more in an administrative— versus faculty-based—role, whereby "faculty" are seen in a more elevated status in social work education. That said, this is a time for real change, and with change there is challenge but also opportunity. In our newly formed online asynchronous program, I see students applying from all walks and stages of life and from varying backgrounds, which only enriches student, faculty, and practicum education learning. Online social work education is not going away, and further research into the implications of practicum learning are required going forward.

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