



Sustaining the Field Education Seminar: Promoting Reflective Journaling and In Class and Online Discussions

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Sustaining the Field Education Seminar: Promoting Reflective Journaling and In Class and Online Discussions

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Schools of social work are learning communities that have been positively associated with student success (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). As part of this learning community of social work, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008) describe field education as the “Signature Pedagogy.” This indicates that in social work education the field experience is at the core of our learning community. Educational Policy 2.3 (CSWE, 2008) further describes the “Signature Pedagogy” or “Field Education” as “. . . the central form of instruction and learning in which a profession socializes its students to perform the role of practitioner” (p. 8). Shulman (2005) describes signature pedagogies as “. . . the forms of instruction that leap to mind when you think about the preparation of the members of a particular profession. . .” (p. 52). Field instruction is a “major part of social work training” (Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2010, p. 3).

Field seminars are integral in assisting social work students in processing the experiences they have in practice. Royse, Dhooper, and Rompf (2010) state, “The basic assumption underpinning seminars is that each person in attendance has important information to share or contribute” (p. 8). A student in field education has feelings, professional dilemmas, personal biases, and challenged values, and the use of critical thinking through self-evaluation has traditionally been encouraged and expected in the field setting (Mailloux & Whitten, 2010).

Opportunities for a wider variety of teaching methods to address the critical components of social work field education have expanded with the onset of online technologies (Panos, 2005 ; Jiyoon, 2008 ; Wolfson, Magnuson, &

Marsom, 2005). Students in practice now have greater opportunities for learning and feedback in the technology-rich environments of today’s classroom. Wolfson, Marsom, and Magnuson (2005) concluded that students who used online field seminar discussions “felt freer to share their experiences, attitudes, and feelings on a deeper and more personal level” (p. 360). Other professional fields such as nursing and education have also explored the benefits of innovative techniques and online applications to field education and learning in the cyberworld (Wu & Lai, 2009; Frey , 2008; Jiyoon , 2008). Shulman (2005) summarizes, “New technologies of teaching via the Internet . . . computer-mediated dialogues . . . create an opportunity for reexamining the fundamental signatures we have so long taken for granted” (p. 59). Danis, Woody, and Black (2013) reported that face to face interactions were more personal with electronic field faculty contacts providing only limited information. The current study describes the use of online journaling, in class discussions, and traditional journaling for students in social work field education. This exploratory research focuses on student techniques of reflection on field education and communication with field instructors as it relates to their perceptions of personal competency in social work practice.

Reflective Journaling

Journaling as a reflective activity is a method employed in social work education for self-reflection, growth, and feedback (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2007). Danowski (2005) employs journaling techniques as a means for managing and reflecting on difficult situations with clients, supervisors, or other types of professional dilem-

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mas. Reflective journaling, as discussed in teacher education, encourages "...students to make connections between the course materials and their current or future teaching practices" and were seen as "low stakes writing experiences" (Boden, Cook, Lasker-Scott, Moore, & Shelton, 2006, p. 11). In the profession of nursing, reflective journaling is seen as a way for students to "... 'think aloud' objectively and transfer their thoughts and perceptions to paper documenting subjective and objective observations, scrutinizing alternatives, exploring, critiquing their ideas, analyzing and evaluating experiences" (Simpson & Courtney, 2007, p. 204). Further, Ruthman et al. (2004) found reflective journaling to be a way to infuse critical thinking across the curriculum in nursing. Social work education, as addressed through the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), calls for the field education experience to "connect the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting" (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008, p. 8). Further, CSWE's competencies and practice behaviors on professional use of self (2.1.1) and critical thinking (2.1.3) and direct practice (2.1.10) increase the need for social work students to engage in active reflection of experiences within the field setting (CSWE, 2008).

Peer Education

The use of students as peer educators or mentors in online discussions in the field experience provides a potential opportunity for an additional tool for reflection as well as increased and interactive collegial support for the social work field education experience. Further, the anytime, anywhere ease of online field seminars has growing relevance to 21st century students. Wolfson et al. (2005) found that 92% of students in their study rated the convenience of interactive online field seminars very high. Fetrow-Stewart (2008) has also shown good success in the use of peer mentors for the social work field education experience, and Harper, Maheady, and Malette (1994) discuss peer-mediated instruction as an alterna-

tive teaching approach with good results. Bowman and McCormick (2000) discuss peer coaching (education) as another way that instructors can connect with the student learning experience in addition to the traditional supervisor role common in social work field education. As Shulman (2005) indicates in the medical profession, "only one year of training or experience may differentiate the student from her instructor" (p. 54). Yet peer coaching may be helpful, as Gartner and Reissmann (1999) suggest that peers listen differently to their equals than to instructors or other authority figures. This is supported by Frey (2008), who found teacher's roles as peer coaches enhanced the growth and the facilitation of reflection by students.

The current study explores and describes students use of techniques to reflect on field education (journaling, in class, online) and communication in field education as associated with the student's perceptions of social work competencies. It further provides information to improve the current delivery of social work education and practice reflection on student experiences and meet the challenges of training competent social workers and sustaining excellence in field education in a technologically enhanced educational environment.

Methods

Subjects

One hundred seventy-seven social work graduate students (N = 177) from two different universities participated in this study. No demographic variables were gathered in the survey to protect student anonymity. Eighty-four subjects (n = 84) were from a Northwest rural university, while (n = 93) of the subjects were from a Midwest university in a urban metropolitan setting. Students in the sample were both full-time (n = 154, 88%) and part-time (n = 21, 12%) students, with the majority of the part-time students from the Midwest university (n = 18, 86%). The reports of field education experiences were similar between the two universities, with the only difference being in the number of students placed in school settings. This difference was due to a regional

difference. The school district in the metropolitan sample employs a large number of school social workers and subsequently requests many students each year.

Survey Instrument

The study made use of an original survey that was created to explore the topic. The survey contained both open- and closed-ended items. Twenty-two items were developed to evaluate the students' perceptions of the field education experience. Ten items on the survey asked respondents to identify their full- or part-time status, their program (advanced or a two-year program with foundation curriculum), the type of field education placement, their use of technology for personal communication with their field instructors, and the type of field education journaling that was required (traditional journaling, in class discussions, or online discussion groups or chats). This checklist was then coded as "yes" or "no." The categories of how the student reflected on their field education was converted into six nominal categories (no reported reflection, online only reflection, traditional journaling, both in class and online reflection, and all methods of reflection reported). Participants could check all that applied.

Thirteen items were developed using the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) ten educational competencies. Competency ten was subdivided into four competencies: (a) competency 10.1 (engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with individuals); (b) 10.2 (engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with families); (c) 10.3 (engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with groups); and (d) 10.4 (engage, assess, intervene, and evaluate with organizations or communities). A four point Likert scale was used to measure student agreement or disagreement with each competency based on their reflection on their field education experience (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=strongly agree) and on how reflection of field experiences impacted their perceived competency for each of the 13 EPAS competency statements. The total summed scores on the items ranged from a low score of 13 (indicating the lowest level of perceived prac-

tice competency) to 56 (indicating the highest level of perceived practice competency). The overall mean score of all 13 items was 47.1 with a standard deviation of 7.75 and a range of 42.

Procedures and Design

Students were selected using non-probability sampling methods. This purposive sample of students was chosen because they were currently fulfilling their field education requirements for their social work education. By using samples from two universities, a wider variety of methods to reflect on the field education experiences (traditional journaling, online and in class discussions) were included in the study. Students were asked by their field directors to participate in the study and were provided a consent letter for voluntarily participation before being given a survey to complete.

A survey methodology was used to collect data on practice reflection and the impact on students' perceptions of social work practice competencies. The study explored the students' communication with field faculty, their methods of reflection on the social work field education experience, and self-assessed social work competencies. The current study describes the use of online journaling, in class discussions, and traditional journaling for students in social work field education and associations with students self-reported social work competencies.

Data analysis. The data were entered into a statistical analysis program (SPSS 21). Frequencies, and mean scores were used to explore and describe differences between the types of field education experiences reported and the students' perceived field education experience competencies. Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Association was employed to describe differences in student reflections on their field education, communication with their instructors, and self-perceived reflections on their social work competencies.

Limitations. The data had several built-in limitations that may pose a threat to the validity of the findings. First, one school of social work is located in a rural environment while the other is positioned in an urban environment. This may have presented issues for the rural student sample

with limited access to technologies or with the inability to travel from remote locations. Additionally, one school represented an advanced generalist perspective while the other emphasized a clinical practice focus. The students at the two universities were more similar than different in their type of placements. Slight placement differences were noted as a possibility due to availability and demands for students in agencies or programs in the region. For example, in the urban area, school social work is a highly sought after placement; yet in the rural environment, the demand for school social work is not as robust. Another possible limitation was that students were in two different levels of field education (first year versus second year) and were in the two university systems (quarter versus semester). Further, there were some differences in field seminar requirements for students during the quarter/semester when the survey was given between the two schools. The school in the rural environment required ten colloquiums for MSW students during fall quarter only, and since the survey was done in the spring, contacts with field faculty were limited to the end of the quarter evaluations in agency. In contrast, the urban school required five field education seminars during each semester.

Findings

Field Education Reflection. Sixty-three percent ($n = 111$) of the students in both schools reported being required to participate in classroom discussion of field experiences, fifty-four percent ($n = 96$) were required to converse about their field practice online, and twenty-five percent ($n = 44$) were required to use traditional journals (written reflective submissions turned in weekly for feedback from field faculty) to reflect on their field education. These three types of reflection were grouped to form six categories. Nineteen percent of the students ($n = 33$) reported no type of reflection, seven percent of the students ($n = 13$) reported online only reflection, fourteen percent ($n = 25$) reported in class discussion only, fourteen percent ($n = 25$) reported traditional journaling, thirty-six percent ($n = 64$) reported using both in class and online reflection, and ten per-

cent ($n = 17$) of the students reported using all methods of reflection in their field experience. Further, Pearson correlations were not significant ($p \leq .05$) when exploring the relationship between the number of contacts with the field faculty and the self-reported competencies. Finally, there were variations in the type of field education reflections (traditional journaling (25%), in class discussions (63%), and online discussions (54%).

Communication with field faculty. Students from both schools of social work, here labeled Midwest Urban and Northwest Rural, communicated with their field faculty in similar ways. Forty percent ($n = 70$) reported they discussed practice experiences with the field faculty following field seminars. The majority of these students were from the Midwest Urban university which used mostly in class discussions of the field experience in an online format. Forty-two percent ($n = 75$) communicated with field faculty in their office, 60% ($n = 106$) used e-mail to communicate, 37% ($n = 65$) used the telephone to communicate, 19% ($n = 33$) used Blackboard© or D2L© (Desire to Learn), and 21% ($n = 37$) reported other ways of communicating with field faculty, i.e. catching them after a class or meeting with them at the field education site.

Students' style of communication with field faculty was similar between the rural and urban schools of social work though there were significant differences in the types of identified communication used. Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Association demonstrated significant statistical differences in communication after classes (Midwest Urban, $n = 52$, 74%; Northwest Rural, $n = 18$, 26% $\chi^2(1, N = 177) = 21.96, p = .000$), e-mail communication (Midwest Urban, $n = 68$, 64%; Northwest Rural, $n = 38$, 36%, $\chi^2(1, N = 177) = 14.28, p = .000$), and Blackboard© or D2L© (Midwest Urban, $n = 30$, 88%; Northwest Rural, $n = 4$, 12%, $\chi^2(1, N = 175) = 20.87, p = .000$). The Midwest Urban school consistently utilized all three types of communication, which may be attributed to the program's curriculum emphasis of regular and required field seminars through the program as opposed to the Northwest Rural program's required field seminars in the first quarter of field only. Additionally, students in the North-

west Rural program appear to have more often spoken directly to their field faculty due to limited access to the internet where students either could not afford or did not have ready access to the most current computer technologies.

Analysis Schools of Social Work and Field Education Experience

Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Association was used to compare students on the differences in the types of field education reflection experiences of online discussions, in class discussions, and traditional journaling. When comparing the schools, sixty-three percent ($n = 111$) of the students in the sample reported they were required to reflect on practice in classroom discussion groups. Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Association found a significant difference between the two universities in classroom discussions as a reflection experience for field education (Midwest Urban, $n = 79$, 71.2%; Northwest Rural, $n = 32$, 29%, $X^2(1, N = 177) = 41.43$, $p = .000$). Fifty-four percent ($n = 96$) of the students in the sample reported they were required to reflect on field education in online discussion groups. Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Association found a significant difference between the two universities in online discussion groups (Midwest Urban, $n = 81$, 84%; Northwest Rural, $n = 15$, 16%, $X^2(1, N = 177) = 85.25$, $p = .000$). In both tests, the Midwest Urban students reported more robust classroom and online discussions about their field experiences than did the Northwest Rural school.

Twenty-five percent ($n = 44$) of the students in the sample reported they were required to reflect on practice using traditional journaling. Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Association found a significant difference between the two universities (Midwest Urban, $n = 12$, 27%; Northwest Rural, $n = 32$, 73%, $X^2(1, N = 176) = 15.39$, $p = .000$). The urban social work students were more involved in classroom and online reflections of practice experiences and rural students were primarily involved with traditional journaling. However, students in both schools of social work reported using a combination of traditional journaling, online discussion, and in class discussions

which were largely dependent upon the preferences of the assigned field faculty.

Student Self-Reported Field Education Competencies

The primary research interest for the current study was whether student's self-reported competency scores were higher for those students who experienced online discussions of practice experiences versus those students who reflected in more traditional ways. T-tests and ANOVA could not be employed with these findings due to the nature of the dependent variables being an ordinal measure and the number of independent variables producing statistical noise. Instead, mean scores were presented for each of the competencies by the type of reflection the students used in their field education experiences.

Findings suggested that students who reported no in class discussions on field education ($n = 57$, $M = 44.5$ $SD = 7.8$) were different in their self-reported competency levels than those students who reported they had active in class discussions of practice ($n = 107$, $M = 48.5$, $SD = 7.4$). There was little difference noted between those students who were required to do traditional journals and those students who were not required use any type of reflections on the overall self-reported social work competencies. This finding does not indicate a strong support for the use of journals; however, when multiple techniques of reflection are combined (the use of online discussions, in class discussions, and traditional journaling) in the field education experience the findings do support a solid increase in the students' self reported social work competencies.

Findings also suggest that the use of in class or online group discussions may be preferable over traditional journaling in increasing social work competency, as both methods provide immediate feedback to students' field education questions or concerns and allow for direct reinforcement of appropriate professionalism and other practice skills.

While it was no surprise that findings indicated that students reporting no required reflections ($n = 32$) overall had the lowest self-reported com-

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Table 1.

Type of Reflection, Mean, Standard Deviations of Self Reported Competency

Competencies	Type of Reflection M (SD)				
	No Refelction <i>n</i> = 32	In Class Discussion <i>n</i> = 25	Online <i>n</i> = 13	Journal <i>n</i> = 25	All Methods <i>n</i> = 17
Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly	3.4 (.76)	3.5 (.71)	3.9 (.28)	3.4 (.91)	3.8 (.39)
Apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice	3.6 (.67)	3.5 (.71)	3.8 (.44)	3.6 (.87)	3.7 (.47)
Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgements	3.5 (.72)	3.5 (.71)	3.9 (.38)	3.6 (.88)	3.7 (.48)
Engage diversity and difference in practice	3.4 (.67)	3.4 (.76)	3.7 (.48)	3.3 (.89)	3.8 (.44)
Advance human rights social and economic justice	3.1 (.75)	3.2 (.72)	3.5 (.66)	3.1 (.88)	3.5 (.51)
Engage research informed practice / practice informed research	3.0 (.93)	3.2 (.76)	3.6 (.50)	3.2 (.83)	3.5 (.51)
Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment	3.5 (.68)	3.6 (.71)	3.6 (.65)	3.6 (.76)	3.7 (.47)
Engage policy practice to advance social and economic well-being to deliver effective social work services	3.0 (.74)	3.4 (.77)	3.5 (.52)	3.0 (.84)	3.4 (.51)
Respond to contexts that shape practice	3.1 (.86)	3.3 (.70)	3.5 (.52)	3.2 (.73)	3.5 (.51)
Practice Engagement	3.3 (.82)	3.4 (.77)	3.5 (.66)	3.1 (1.0)	3.5 (.63)
Practice Assessment	2.8 (.88)	3.2 (.99)	3.4 (.65)	3.2 (1.0)	3.5 (.52)
Practice Intervention	2.6 (.91)	3.0 (.98)	2.9 (.99)	2.8 (1.0)	3.3 (.60)
Practice Evaluation	2.4 (.80)	2.8 (1.1)	2.9 (.90)	2.7 (1.2)	3.3 (.48)
Total of all 13 competencies	43.0 (8.6)	46.4 (9.7)	48.9 (5.1)	45.4 (7.8)	49.7 (5.0)

petency on all 13 items, it was fascinating to discover that students who reported using online ($n = 13$) methods of reflection and multiple ($n = 17$) methods of self-reflection showed the highest scores on perception of social work competencies.

The total of all 13 competency items were summed. These were the original items created with the CSWE EPAS (2008) core competencies. Items 1-13 on the survey were summed to form an overall perceived score for each participant. There were marked differences in summed competency scores, with students that did not report any required field education reflection scoring the lowest on the total self-reported competencies ($n = 32$, $M = 43.0$, $SD = 8.6$). Students who utilized all methods of reflecting on their field practice experience were nearly seven points higher overall ($n = 17$, $M = 49.7$, $SD = 5$). This finding suggests that the use of multiple reflective techniques in field education will result in a higher self-perception of social work competency by the field student. A larger sample would possibly enhance these findings by allowing for testing of this through the use of inferential statistics. It is curious to note that a closer inspection of Table 1 indicates that students who reflected field experiences online also report higher levels of competency ($n = 13$, $M = 48.9$, $SD = 5.1$), while traditional journaling was almost similar to those students who reported no reflection ($n = 25$, $M = 45.4$, $SD = 7.8$). These findings suggest that using online reflection and/or multiple methods of practice reflection are the most beneficial in increasing student perceptions of their overall social work practice competencies.

Discussion

Overall, findings demonstrate that though there were a wide variety of student field education experiences and significant differences in the reflection methods required by both schools, the field education experience and student perception of competency in social work practice (as related to CSWE standards of practice competency) is most significantly enhanced by using both in class and online reflections of the practice experience. As was found by Zhao and Kuh (2004),

“participation in a learning community is positively linked to engagement as well as student self-reported outcomes . . .” (p.115).

In both the online and in class reflection methods, instructor oversight of the discussion appeared to increase student self-reported competencies (Bowman & McCormick 2000; Frey, 2008). Further, the overall self-reported practice competencies showed significant increases with each addition of a reflection method with the exception of traditional journaling. Thus, it would appear that both in class and online discussions benefit student field experiences and perceived competencies in social work practice much more than traditional journaling.

One area that should be explored in future research is peer influence on a positive field practicum experience. Peer response and encouragement through online reflection, in class discussion, and traditional journaling may have also enhanced greater confidence in students' self-perceived competencies. This is topic for exploratory research is supported in current literature (Harper, Maheady, & Malette, 1994; Fetrow-Stewart, 2008).

While online learning environments hold real possibilities for those in rural environments, it was found that all students want and need contact with peers as well as field faculty to amplify learning experiences (Harper, Maheady, & Mallette, 1994; Fetrow-Stewart, 2008). As further supported by Danis, Woody, and Black (2013), face to face contact with field faculty was still perceived by students as more personal and more favorable than electronic methods of communication. However, as students are increasingly involved in the use of online interactive communication, in both social and learning environments, field reflection methods utilizing more technology will need to be integrated into field education. This assertion is demonstrated by the participants in the current study who reported using social networking websites ($n = 94$, 53%), texting on a regular basis ($n = 141$, 80%), or using e-mail to communicate ($n = 167$, 94%).

Social work educators must begin to utilize technologies to assess student competencies with the 2015 CSWE EPAS. Engaging students

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through technologies will provide social work educators structured and immediate evaluation of student reflections of their field experience. Both in class and in online environments for discussing the field experience can benefit from the use of technologies. Thus, establishing that social work students are effective in meeting competencies requires multiple evaluation points that can be enhanced through the use of technology.

Recommendations

As social work educators we should make use of multiple methods to engage students in the learning process. The traditional pedagogical methods of journaling to reflect on field education have obvious benefits for students. However, this study demonstrates that when combined with either online or in classroom discussions with peers, the learning and self-reported competencies of the student are increased. Based on these findings, it is recommended that field education seminars make active use of online journals or discussions and/or class discussions to facilitate and enhance the learning process.

Because findings suggest student competencies increase with the combination of traditional journaling, online, and in class discussions, it would be important to replicate this study and include field faculty assessment along with student self-perceptions. This expanded assessment of field faculty reflections may better shape and determine best practice for the signature pedagogy of the field. Additionally, as peer response and encouragement through online reflections, in class discussions, and traditional journaling may be a factor in students' self-perceived competencies, this should be also be explored further in future research. Finally, it may be advantageous to validate an instrument to measure the efficacy of student reflection and critical thinking in the field education as it relates to CSWE measures of competencies.

Conclusions

Holding students of social work at both the BSW and MSW levels accountable for critical thinking and reflection while in field education will not only make their practice experience rich

and interactive, it will enhance their overall competencies in social work. A deeper understanding of the relationship between social work competencies and student experiences in field education will continue to yield additional insights into best practice. Finally, improving the field education experience through multiple methods of student contacts with field faculty will only enhance student support and provide social work educators with a deeper understanding of a student's social work knowledge and skills.

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