



Initial Assessment of Integrating Service-Learning in Field Education

Journal:	Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education
Article Title:	<i>Initial Assessment of Integrating Service-Learning in Field Education</i>
Author(s):	<i>Roberson, Bissell and Baker</i>
Volume and Issue Number:	<i>Vol.26 No.2</i>
Manuscript ID:	262037
Page Number:	37
Year:	2023

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is a refereed journal concerned with publishing scholarly and relevant articles on continuing education, professional development, and training in the field of social welfare. The aims of the journal are to advance the science of professional development and continuing social work education, to foster understanding among educators, practitioners, and researchers, and to promote discussion that represents a broad spectrum of interests in the field. The opinions expressed in this journal are solely those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the policy positions of The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work or its Center for Social and Behavioral Research.

Professional Development: The International Journal of Continuing Social Work Education is published two times a year (Spring and Winter) by the Center for Social and Behavioral Research at 1923 San Jacinto, D3500 Austin, TX 78712. Our website at www.profdevjournal.org contains additional information regarding submission of publications and subscriptions.

Copyright © by The University of Texas at Austin’s School of Social Work’s Center for Social and Behavioral Research. All rights reserved. Printed in the U.S.A.
ISSN: 1097-4911

URL: www.profdevjournal.org

Email: www.profdevjournal.org/contact

Initial Assessment of Integrating Service-Learning in Field Education

Roberson, Bissell and Baker

Abstract

Service-learning pedagogy and social work field education share a belief in the efficacy of learning when engaged with community partners. However, they have traditionally been recognized as separate pedagogical practices, arguing the two are incompatible. Such conclusions may be premature. The authors integrated elements of service-learning into the first year of a concurrent MSW field education program, followed by focus groups to evaluate student and field instructor experiences. Findings indicate that integrating service-learning into the field education model can leverage the best of both pedagogies, leading to enhanced outcomes. Recommendations for field education programs are included.

Initial Assessment of Integrating Service-Learning in Field Education

Social work educators value field education as key to integration of knowledge and skill. In fact, early agencies offered social work apprenticeships, emphasizing the value of learning by doing (Wayne et al., 2010). As schools and curriculums developed, hands-on practice remained. As such, in 2008, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) named field education the “signature pedagogy” (CSWE, 2008, p. 8).

Service-learning, like field education, is a form of experiential learning where community agencies and learning institutions partner to provide mutually beneficial service experiences, enabling students to learn and address systemic factors (Jacoby, 2015). Key elements of the pedagogy include the intentional use of reflection, reciprocity in relationships between the educational institution and service agency, and opportunities for students to directly engage community members and issues. Service-learning pedagogy and field education share common values and structure, such as using community partners as coeducators, both aligning with social work values and ethics.

Service-learning is also uniquely attuned to the mission of social work by supporting the core values of service, social justice, and competence (NASW, 2021).

With common aims and processes, it is interesting that the two have traditionally been recognized as separate pedagogical practices, often arguing the two cannot be intermingled (Phillips, 2011). Furthermore, several field education programs utilize elements of service-learning without fully understanding or leveraging the strengths of the pedagogy. We argue that intentionally integrating service-learning elements into the field education model can lead to enhanced outcomes for both students and partnering agencies. As such we introduced key elements from service-learning pedagogy into a foundation field education program for one year. Elements included an increased use of student reflection, intentional efforts at creating reciprocity with hosting agencies, and assignments that allowed both students and agencies to identify benefits of the partnership.

Pedagogy

Field Education

Initially, graduate field education was conceived of as “learning experiences” with little programmatic structure (CSWE, 1971, p. 60). The 1994 Master’s Program Evaluative Standards, Interpretive Guidelines, Curriculum Policy Statement, and Self-Study Guide (CSWE, 1994) required 900 field hours, differentiating between foundation and concentration level practicum. Social work field education is based, in part, in experiential learning theory (Finch et al., 2019). Experiential learning theory is built on the premise that learning is both holistic and process-oriented; the collection of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) seeking to explain the process by which individuals transform experiences into learning (Kolb, 2015). Field education draws from this theory by providing opportunities for students to

C. Jean Roberson, MSSW, DSW, is an Assistant Professor and Director of Field Education for the Master of Social Work Program at Samford University

Brooke Bissell, MSW, is a Outpatient Child and Adolescent Therapist at JBS Mental Health Authority

Lisa Baker, MSW, Ph.D., is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Social Work at Samford University

experience social work practice, while supervision and field assignments apply class content and reflect on practice experiences.

Service-learning

Service-learning is a pedagogical practice developed by John Dewey that integrates principles of community engagement and hands-on learning (Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2014; Rose et al., 2019). Students who take part in service-learning experiences are expected to participate in the operations of a local organization engaged in improving some aspect of their community. Service-learning theory is characterized by three primary themes: (a) a high level of student reflection, (b) a mutually beneficial relationship between the host agency and the student learner and (c) community engagement (McGuire & Majewski, 2011; Rose et al., 2019). Reflection serves as a vital aspect of the curriculum for students, specifically enabling students to process both their own experiences as well as areas of social life impact and community influence. The reciprocal nature of the partnership between student and agency is vital to effective service-learning, ensuring that students are effective in their work while receiving educational benefit. Community engagement enhances the student's learning outcomes, providing the ability to see real-life application of abstract concepts in community practice while promoting several practical skills, including an increased level of self-efficacy (Rose et al., 2019).

An Integrated Model

The objectives of this project were to determine initial feasibility of incorporating service-learning pedagogy in field education, specifically the elements of reflection, reciprocity, and community engagement. Elements were captured in field seminar assignments including discussion posts, process recordings, article reviews, and the learning contract. While such activities are common to field education, utilizing them as outlined in service-learning pedagogy can bring a unique focus and learning goals to each one. At the conclusion students and field instructors participated in focus groups to provide implementation feedback.

This project was integrated into the foundation field seminar sequence in a social work master's

program. The program utilizes a concurrent field model in which students complete field requirements over 2 semesters, concurrent with coursework. The current project was a part of a faculty fellowship program on integrating service-learning and received approval from the University Institutional Review Board.

Integration of service-learning elements *Reflection*

Service-learning offers opportunity for students to develop both professionally and personally (Ash & Clayton, 2004), with the linkage essential for transformative learning (Fink, 2013). Reflection can function as that link (Barnes & Caprino, 2016). In the service-learning model, reflection becomes the tool through which students develop metacognition, an essential element of effective social work practice.

Throughout the field seminar course students were required to complete three reflection assignments consisting of discussion posts, process recordings, and a closing reflection. First, students were assigned weekly directed reflections designed as discussion posts. In initial posts, students were asked to complete a prereflection addressing expectations, hopes, assumptions, and fears of their field settings. The remaining discussions either required the application of social work course content or related to personal performance and growth, such as conflict resolution and dealing with disappointment. This enabled students to connect course content with practice while applying experiences to personal growth (Fink, 2013). Each went beyond a traditional emphasis on reporting and, instead, emphasized reflection as the key learning element.

Additionally, students completed a series of process recordings. Students selected a portion of a client interaction and wrote that out verbatim, responding with written identification of application of social work course content, use of a theory or particular skill, and insight into the cognitive and affective processes that influenced decision making. The agency supervisor reviewed these, highlighting key points and offering suggestions based on their expertise. The key element of the process recording was the emphasis on identifying the cognitive process of decision making during the encounter and the affect processes, highlighting their influence on

professional judgement. This required a higher level of reflection from the student.

A significant type of reflection in service-learning is the closing and celebratory reflection occurring at the end of the partnership, identifying successes and lessons learned and allowing for closure (Jacoby, 2015). To this end students completed an academic poster addressing the following elements: social issue addressed by the agency, agency summary, student experiences, key points of learning, case example, and plans for continued growth. This allowed the student the opportunity to identify professional growth and change in the context of the agency work. The printed poster was presented to the field agency and supervisor.

Reciprocity

Another key element of service-learning is the reciprocity of the relationship between the educational institution and partnering agency (Jacoby, 2015). A common distinction made between internship programs and service-learning is that the needs of the learning institution remain primary. However, efforts can be made by field programs to bring greater equality with the agency. Due to difference in access to resources, there is an inherent power imbalance between large educational institutions and nonprofit agencies. Reciprocity addresses this imbalance, allowing key community players to act as instructors, heightening the possibility for coeducation. One tool that can facilitate this process is the learning contract, a common tool for field education.

Initiated by the social work program and student, the learning contract includes required competencies for students to acquire and demonstrate. In the development and discussion of the learning contract, the agency identifies tasks that both address the competencies and meet the needs of the agency and constituents, allowing both parties to engage in dialogue. Given the learning contract is a planning tool shaped by dialogue, it is treated as a fluid communication document that can be revised during the partnership. This allows for the changing needs of both parties that occur in the course of the work, structurally elevating the voice of the agency and prioritizing the changing needs of the agency.

Additionally, in the field seminar, students are asked to review a series of scholarly journal

articles that address the population served in the partnership. Agencies are asked to give direction to the topics so that students gain understanding of the population and issues relevant to the field service. By having a voice in the topics, agencies serve as coeducators with faculty, directing the learning experience.

Focus Group Assessment

To assess the effectiveness of the integration of service-learning pedagogy in field education, we held separate focus groups for students and field instructors. Sixteen field instructors attended. Of the 21 students enrolled in field work, 19 students participated in the focus group. The two students who were unable to attend the meeting provided written responses. All focus groups were conducted via Zoom and alternately facilitated by the researchers using a guided interview format. Content was reviewed independently by each researcher and then together to compare themes and content. Feedback centered around the three different themes of service learning: (a) reflection, (b) reciprocity, and (c) community engagement.

Reflection

Reflection is important to successful integration. In conversation with the students, a common theme was the substantial benefits of the reflective assignments. Students expressed that during the busyness of the school year, it would be natural to complete their assignments and tasks without devoting meaningful time and thought to the experiences, especially if the content focused on reporting activities. The popular sentiment was that reflection activities forced students to slow down during the semester and process learning both academically and emotionally.

Reflection also produced meaningful benefits to the hosting agency and emerged as a process in which instructors also participated. Field instructors reported that the process of orienting and training interns caused them to reflect on the practices of their agency and their own personal work style. Onboarding interns requires a great deal of education on the agency's policies and procedures, which necessitates each field instructor to consistently reexamine these policies. Participants shared that having to intentionally look at their own policies helped them to think critically and helped them identify

areas for improvement. This benefit occurred at the agency's policy and individual practice level.

Reciprocity

A key concern in developing a reciprocal relationship is that both the agency and field instructors receive benefit from the partnership. Field instructors expressed that the teaching aspect of being a field instructor was beneficial to their own personal and professional development. Developing a longer supervisory relationship (2 semesters) with their intern caused field instructors to consider different questions, motivations, and concepts that they may not have explored in depth otherwise. Additionally, engaging with student assignments, such as the process recordings, stimulated field instructors to learn more and refresh their knowledge base. Many attendees expressed that they took the responsibility of this teaching role very seriously and considered it a key part of their role as a social worker. Interestingly, agency directors also spoke of supervising an intern as a part of professional development for their staff, recognizing the growth that took place within their own employees. This professional development experience led many of the field instructors to express a desire for more involvement with the social work department and the university.

Community Engagement

Field instructors reported that their MSW interns were treated and developed as staff members, albeit with more supervision from established professionals. While the field instructors did acknowledge some points of needed academic growth, they expressed that their interns were quick learners and able to make up for these gaps using soft job skills such as critical thinking, self-awareness, and the ability to ask for additional support. The use of reflection was a helpful structural component that supported the interns' ability to become independent assets to the agencies.

Agencies also identified the longevity of the internship (2 semesters) as a structural support. Service-learning designates that an experience should be a long-term investment from both parties. Field instructors expressed that this longer-term investment gave them time to fully trust their intern and for the interns to form more

meaningful connections with staff and clients.

These structural benefits resulted in two primary themes. First, the interns were able to benefit the agency through their work. A common statement expressed was that the student was able to act as an extension of their supervisor, accomplishing tasks that the supervisor generally would not have time to do. Second, the interns also expanded the agency's reach in general, another key attribute of service-learning. Agency partners viewed the partnership with the social work department as a way to develop and offer additional programming for clients, a path towards deepening the agency mission.

Discussion

Successes

The integration of service-learning pedagogy into the field education program served as a benefit for both student and agency. Students referenced a growing sense of reflective practice that is illustrative of developing metacognition and self-efficacy. This is in keeping with past literature on service-learning pedagogy and increased self-efficacy (Rose et al., 2019). In fact, students reported the value of completing the reflections outweighed the demand on their time and energies. As agency personnel saw this growth, they responded by allowing students to contribute more independently.

Similarly, the recognition of agencies as equal coeducators in the relationship solidified the partnership between the social work program and agencies, consistent with gains of service-learning (Gerstenblatt & Gilbert, 2014). While still recognizing that working with field education students is a service they can provide, agency personnel spoke more about the growing benefit to their staff, continued development of services, and integration of interns into their pattern of work, making it more essential and less optional. This is critical for any field education program, as the relationship between the two entities often determines access to opportunities.

Challenges

Significant planning is required to integrate service-learning pedagogy into the framework of social work field education. When the emphasis is on the reciprocal partnership, efforts must be made for greater conversation about agency needs and student learning activities, along with

recognition that the building of the partnership often outweighs the speed of efficiency. This requires more time and effort in maintaining the relationships during the field education experience. At the same time, ensuring a mutually beneficial relationship increases efficacy over time, resulting in stronger communication and leading to less maintenance.

Conclusion

While service-learning and field education may continue to be considered separate pedagogies, we found an intentional integration of the two to be effective in the field education program. A more strategic integration of service-learning pedagogy can leverage the benefits of the pedagogy to the betterment of the social work program. Our recommendations would be for field education programs to integrate reflection into the activities of the field seminar. Creating opportunities for field supervisors to participate in these reflective exercises is also beneficial and harnesses the benefits of reflection for both student and site. Secondly, finding ways to allow for mutuality in the relationship is key. Seeking agency input on certain assignments opens opportunities for the students to engage with the agency more fully and deepens the students' level of community engagement. Orienting the partnership with agencies around relationship, as opposed to transaction, is important. One way to accomplish this is by holding regular focus groups for agencies where they are free to express the benefits and needs of the partnership. Providing field supervisors with copies of syllabi so they can track student learning can also empower supervisors to step more fully into the role of coeducator.

Our experience in integrating the two pedagogies demonstrates gains for the institution, the learner, and the agency. While more time consuming, we found that seeking to join the two moved our field education program forward both in learning outcomes and strengthened field relationships, allowing us to capture the strengths of both service-learning pedagogy and field education. Further research on integration is needed, providing greater evidence of the efficacy of an integrated model for both agency goals and student learning outcomes.

References

- Ash, S. & Clayton, P. (2004). The articulated learning: An approach to guided reflection and assessment. *Innovative Higher Education*, 29(2), 137–154. <https://doi:10.1023/B:IHIE.0000048795.84634.4a>
- Barnes, M. & Caprino, K. (2016). Analyzing service-learning reflections through Fink's taxonomy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(5), 557–575. <https://doi:10.1080/13562517.2016.1160221>
- Council on Social Work Education. (2008). Educational policy and accreditation standards. CSWE. [https://cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Standards-and-Policies/2008-EPAS/2008EDUCATIONALPOLICYANDACCREDITATIONSTANDARDS\(EPAS\)-08-24-2012.pdf.aspx](https://cswe.org/getattachment/Accreditation/Standards-and-Policies/2008-EPAS/2008EDUCATIONALPOLICYANDACCREDITATIONSTANDARDS(EPAS)-08-24-2012.pdf.aspx)
- Council on Social Work Education. (1994). Master's programs evaluative standards, interpretive guidelines, curriculum policy statement, and self-study guide. CSWE.
- Council on Social Work Education. (1971). Manual of accrediting standards for graduate professional schools of social work. CSWE.
- Finch, J., Williams, O., Mondros, J. & Franks, C. (2019). *Learning to teach, teaching to learn: A guide for social work field* (3rd ed.). CSWE Press.
- Fink, L. (2013). *Creating significant learning outcomes: An integrated approach to designing college courses*. Jossey-Bass.
- Gerstenblatt, P., & Gilbert, D. J. (2014). Framing service learning in social work: An interdisciplinary elective course embedded within a university-community partnership. *Social Work Education*, 33(8), 1037–1053. <https://doi:10.1080/02615479.2014.935731>
- Jacoby, B. (2015). *Service-learning essentials: Questions, answers, and lessons learned*. Jossey-Bass.
- Kolb, D. A. (2015). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development* (2nd ed.). Pearson Education.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 4(2), 193–212. <https://doi:10.5465/AMLE.2005.17268566>
- McGuire, L. E., & Majewski, V. (2011). Social work and service-learning in the age of com-

- petency-based education. *Advances in Social Work*, 12(1), i-vii. <https://doi:10.1806We0.1898>
- National Association of Social Workers (NASW). (2021). Read the Code of Ethics. NASW. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Phillips, A. (2011). Service-learning and social work competency-based education: A 'goodness of fit'? *Advances in Social Work*, 12(2), 1–20. <https://doi:10.18060/1318>
- Rose, S., Thomas, J., Christian, S., Morris, D., & Segó, A. (2019). An examination of service learning and self-efficacy for master's students engaging in substance use education. *International Journal of Psychological Studies*, 11(4), 82. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijps.v11n4p82>
- Wayne, J., Bogo, M., & Raskin, M. (2010). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 46(3), 327-339. <https://doi:10.5175/JSWE.2010.200900043>