# Achieving Field Education Competence through an Integrative Syllabus: Bringing the Field to Class

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## Introduction

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), in its *Educational Policies and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs,* has designated field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. As the signature pedagogy, field education provides the environment and platform in which students integrate the concepts and frameworks learned in the classroom in a practice setting (CSWE, 2015). This paper will outline the current models for integrating the field education practicum experience with course work. The authors will then propose and outline an aspirational model with an integrative common syllabus as the core connection between the core curriculum areas of policy, research, practice, social justice, and theory.

## Theoretical Frameworks and Current Field Education Models

Today, the signature pedagogy of social work education requires that we move beyond the traditional approaches of class and field course design toward a model that can address newer, emerging teaching and learning environments that are inspired by constructivist frameworks (Mattar, 2018). Constructivist frameworks focus on the individual in the process of constructing knowledge and resonate most with field education experiences that are intended to be immersive in nature and provide hands-on, real-world practical application and experience. This individual knowledge construction is reflected in the authors' proposed syllabus, which allows the field to come alive in the classroom by integrating the experiential learning with application of classroom knowledge. Furthermore, an integrated syllabus can support the signature

pedagogy of the profession as educators respond to the rapid emergence of online social work education programs with geographical dispersion of students (Blagg, 2018) and the increase in the utilization of adjunct faculty members, both of which present special challenges to the integration of course content with field education and the education of competent social work practitioners.

There are several models in the literature that aim to guide the integration of the field education practicum experience with the classroom instruction of the course content. These include:  the field learning contract, in which each course is connected to the field practicum with reciprocal transfer of learning between class and field (Boitel & Fromm, 2014); the field seminar model, that uses an integrated case analysis to encourage students' critical reflection on their practice (Boisen & Syers, 2004); and the field immersion model, that sends a classroom educator into the field as an "academic advisor" (Clapton et al., 2008). Each of these models strive to align the classroom and field experiences, but are more field-based than integrative. In contrast, the authors' model illustrates how the class and field experiences integrate through a common syllabus. In other words, this integrated field classroom syllabus model proposes that classroom educators and field instructors jointly develop a syllabus for the classroom and for the field that incorporates the key learning activities of each setting into the other through common learning activities or assignments and shared cases. However, there are few approaches in the literature integrating the field education practicum experience with classroom course content.

The authors' model is informed by the Black and Feld (2006) and the Fornaciari and Dean (2014) models. Black and Feld's (2006) model restructures the process recording, a document that provides verbatim reflection about an experience with a client system, to provide an avenue that accounts for the learning styles of students and the need for processing field experiences and integrating classroom instruction. Fornaciari and Dean (2014) provide a basis for teaching students by redeveloping syllabi to focus on how adults learn. Fornaciari and Dean (2014) note that the current curriculum structure for classroom courses, field education practicums, and field education practicum seminars are content driven and can become isolated from each other. The merger of the Black and Feld (2006) model with the adult learning approaches of Fornaciari and Dean (2014) provides an understanding on how to build a collaborative and integrative syllabus that is inclusive of the field education practicum and classroom instruction.

### Moving Towards a Field-Centric Syllabi Model

Clapton et al. (2008) piloted a project that meets some of the challenges of theory, practice, and classroom curriculum within the context of a student's individualized field education practicum experiences. There are several deficits the authors intend to address with their integrated syllabus model. These may include:  uneven learning

opportunities across field agencies, the need to ensure course instructor knowledge of current practice challenges in the field, and the need for new field instructors to understand CSWE competencies and behaviors within the context of their mapping across the curriculum. This is especially relevant in the rapidly expanding reach of programs that offer distance education options in new geographical areas utilizing field instructors new to their programs. The centerpiece of the authors' model is what they have termed the "integrated syllabus," a curriculum tool that they have constructed to envision and operationalize an ideal field-classroom integration.

First, the integrated syllabus will respond to challenges in distance education programs due to the geographical dispersion of classroom-based instructors and field education practicum instructors. Second, the model will address the challenges of the prominence of adjunct faculty teaching in some distance education programs. Third, an integrated syllabus will guide and support community field instructors who are responsible for the development, implementation, and assessment of a student's learning experiences at the field placement but are often not well connected to the classroom curriculum or the full-time faculty members. For distance education programs that do not have field seminar courses simultaneously with their field education practicum, the syllabi for both the practice classroom course and the integration of the field education practicum to address content and gaps usually covered in field seminar courses.

The authors' integrated syllabus model shares certain features with the existing models described above. For example, the model calls for active involvement of some or all key stakeholders, as does those proposed by Boitel and Fromm (2014), Boisen and Syers (2004), and Clapton et al. (2008). Assignments and learning activities are specific to field-based cases (Boisen & Syers, 2004) and there is joint (field and course instructor) assessment of student work (Clapton et al., 2008). In short, the authors use the syllabus to operationalize the integration of classroom and field and thus place it in the forefront, or as the centerpiece, of the integrative model.

## Achieving Competence via Integrative Syllabi

Originating in the 1880's to describe an outline of lectures, the term "syllabus" has evolved to serve one or all of three major roles:  as a contract, as a permanent record, and as a learning tool (Parkes & Harris, 2002). As a contract, the syllabus articulates the policies that govern the student/instructor relationship and delineates the role of the student and of the instructor regarding attendance, assignments, and other course requirements. Items that are characteristic of the contract syllabus include assignment due dates, calendar of readings, issues related to academic dishonesty, and a grading scale (Ludy et al., 2016; Parkes & Harris, 2002). As a permanent record, the syllabus provides documentation for accreditation review, certification or licensure, and student transfer of credit. Central to the syllabus as permanent record would be the number

of course credit hours, course prerequisites, title and rank of instructor, required texts, and course objectives. Most recently, the syllabus has been identified as a learning tool, sometimes referred to as the "learner-centered" syllabus, which provides information that enhances or extends classroom learning (Ludy et al., 2016). Teaching philosophies, time management and organizational strategies, study and writing aids, and additional course references are often found in syllabi that function as learning tools.

The syllabus has taken on increased importance in online classes. In contrast to the traditional classroom where the in-person instructor can elaborate on and clarify the syllabus, students in the online classroom are often more dependent on the written document to communicate all course information. In addition to increased specificity of all the items included in the syllabi describe above, the online syllabus must provide, among other items, detailed information about technology requirements, online etiquette, instructor access, navigation of the Learning Management System, and links to internet resources (West & Shoemaker, 2012).

These important functions of the syllabus are evidenced in the authors' integrative syllabus. The integrative syllabus serves as a contract not just between students and instructors but also between the classroom instructor and the field instructor. As a permanent record, the integrated syllabus documents the actual mechanics of the field-class integration. In addition, the integrated syllabus serves as a learning tool because it helps students to identify the ways that information from current field settings is brought into the classroom for discussion and application of course concepts. The integrated syllabus supports the primacy of both knowledge and skill development.

As noted above, the major difference between existing models, which integrate the classroom and the field, is that the integrated syllabus model brings the field and the practice setting into the classroom by identifying essential field processes and products that must be included in the course syllabi for both the field and the classroom. These characteristics of the integrated syllabus are:

- Classroom instructors, field liaisons, and contact information listed on both classroom syllabus and field syllabus
- Course description for both field and classroom courses listed on both syllabi
- Field competencies and behaviors listed on classroom course syllabus
- Competencies and behaviors specific to the classroom course are highlighted in field syllabus
- The Learning Management System includes appropriate components to address the integration
- Classroom instructors, field liaisons, and field instructors have guest access for respective Learning Management Systems
- Identified section of the classroom and the field syllabus specifically addresses

       the classroom-field integration
- Integrated assignment requirements identified in Course Outline for the classroom course and the field course

## Assessment and Integrative Syllabi

Curriculum mapping and master syllabi ensure that competencies and behaviors are addressed and reinforced at increasing levels of difficulty across courses and field experiences. Master syllabi thus provide guidance to instructors regarding the desired purpose and outcomes for each course and prevent unnecessary redundancy in assignments. Richmond (2016) discusses how creating a learner-centered syllabus promotes community and provides clarity to the student about the instructor's role.

CSWE (2015) states, "social work competence is the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being" (p. 6). Because field education is the "signature pedagogy" of social work education, then a competency-based education delivered in a social work distance education program must maintain fidelity by demonstrating how the knowledge, values, and skills of the curriculum are integrated and applied in practice situations. An integrated syllabus for the profession is one characteristic of "signature pedagogy."

## Characteristics of "Community of Learning" Field Agencies

The first step in the development of integrated syllabi is the identification of those field agencies willing to partner with the school to create learning experiences and case materials for the classroom. Classroom learning then is actively applied to the current, lived experiences of clients and dilemmas facing the state and local community agencies that serve them. For purposes of this paper, the authors' call these agencies "Community of Learning" (CoL) Field Agencies that possess several of the following characteristics:

1. Agencies are committed to afford qualified MSW and/or licensed clinical social work field instructors with time not only to provide field instruction and meet with the field liaison, but also to participate in field seminars in the generalist and/or specialization years. In addition, agencies allow enough time for field instructors to engage in CoL meetings to ensure opportunities for students to transfer learning from the classroom enough times to intentionally practice application of theory and skills. Collaboration here is paramount so that classroom faculty share assignments with embedded competencies and behaviors with field instructors/liaisons who also share information about specific opportunities in their agencies to ensure application and integration of learning.

2. Agencies have the ability and commitment to provide both micro and macro learning opportunities for students in their generalist year.

3. Agencies are able to assign about 7-10 cases for students to review during the first month of the semester.

4. Agencies are able to provide opportunities to observe and co-facilitate individual, family, group, and community interventions.

5. Agencies are able to provide cases of sufficient complexity to allow students to engage in differential assessment, diagnosis (clinical), and intervention using a variety of practice models.

6. Agencies represent the five major federal, state, and local agencies that provide services to children, youth, and families, i.e. community services boards, court service units, departments of social services, public schools, and health departments. Alternatively, agencies represent private and nonprofit human services agencies, facilities, and organizations (these placements provide especially valuable learning opportunities for interprofessional and interagency collaboration and for learning about the impact of law and government on policy).

7. Agencies, such as Infant Stimulation Programs and Area Agencies on Aging, whose clients represent populations at risk across the lifespan.

Many departments of field education already have such agencies within their lists of approved placements, but they may not have considered seeking these agencies' expertise to augment classroom-learning opportunities.

**Steps in the Development of Integrative Assignments/Learning Activities**

After identification of the Field Community of Learning (CoL) teams, the challenge of meaningful integration of the field into the classroom begins. The authors suggest technologies that may be helpful for work in distance education settings at various stages of the process. Your institution for your geographical region may adapt the following steps:

1. Establish integrative teams of distance education (DE) full-time course faculty, field faculty, and field instructors, inviting them to become part of a learning community (Field CoL).

2. Determine times and ways to meet and calendar these throughout the duration of the course. It may be beneficial for agency faculty to meet in-person for an intensive

half-day or full day prior to, or early in, the course to generate input. However, in a distance education setting, meetings with geographically distant agencies may be accomplished via Zoom, or a similar web-conferencing tool that allows for shared screen capabilities and virtual face-to-face contact.

3. Send a copy of selected syllabi to field instructors/liaisons ahead of time and schedule a meeting to review course-mapped competencies and behaviors from the CSWE *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards*, working with field faculty to translate these to learning outcomes for students, i.e. specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) relevant to their agency to be developed during placement. Then, as suggested by Fornaciari and Dean (2014), ensure that the descriptions of assignments and learning activities in the syllabus are written in such a way that students, and the agency, can clearly see how they are tied to the KSAs they will need in their work at the agency. The use of Google documents or other document sharing programs can be helpful for collaboration and refinement.

4. Gather field agency input into those competencies/behaviors most likely to be reinforced in their setting and additional behaviors that they feel need attention in this course or other courses. This process ensures that content and skills remain relevant to the community. This may be done via the use of a Google form or survey to capture the input of several agencies at once regarding specific learning opportunities, for example, in the areas of value conflicts, ethical dilemmas, engagement, assessment, goal-setting, and intervention. However, it may be most effective to do this in individual agency meetings in order to create a social presence and community of learners.

5. Analyze agency input to determine additional learning opportunities that may need to be developed in class or in field. Bring this information back to course leads/ instructors for discussion.

6. Begin work with each agency on integrative assignment(s)/learning activities, using and/or refining templates and jointly developing rubrics within the Field CoL.

7. Pilot the integrative assignment(s).

8. Provide an opportunity for field instructors to give feedback to inform the course assignment grade.

9. Determine the impact/benefits of the integrated assignment(s) on student learning outcomes via students' grades/achievement of learning outcomes.

10. Determine impact/benefit of integrated assignment(s) on the agency through a Google form survey, or if preferred, convene focus groups using Zoom or another

synchronous web-conferencing tool or an asynchronous discussion tool such as VoiceThread. Items to be measured might include the impact of the integrated assignments on: the development of learning contracts, student performance in field, the field instructor's time, and benefits to the field instructor/agency such as access to videos, articles, or other educational resources.

**Template for Identifying Cases**

A template for identifying cases is offered to help the CoL Field Team identify agencies that will contribute cases that can be used across several courses (see Appendix A). For example, a case containing a process description of an intake interview with a couple could be augmented with content describing symptoms so that the case could be used in a course focused on diagnosis. The same case might be augmented with content illustrating the need for a review of agency policies and procedures in light of trauma-informed care. Decision case writers Wolfer and Scales (2006) recommend cases that include micro practice cases involving individuals, families, and groups and macro practice cases for policy, planning, and administration challenges from various practice settings and agency functions (pp.vii, 12–14). Different learning activities may be developed from each case based on the competencies and behaviors mapped to specific courses. The process provides an opportunity to identify new cases for student use that reflects current experiences in field. The process also provides an opportunity to review existing cases during the course revision process to determine needed updates to reflect emerging micro or macro issues and evidence-informed practices in treatment.

Though the initial template may contain suggested categories, the CoL Field team further develops or refines the template to identify characteristics of cases and opportunities within each for learning. This is a collaborative process that might begin with in-person meetings but continue through the use of Google docs or other free collaborative writing applications such as Microsoft Word Online or Dropbox Paper. For example, additional categories might be added to the template for a case determined to be appropriate for a generalist practice class. These might include personal and professional value conflicts, ethical dilemmas, professional roles and boundaries, social and economic justice issues, and strategies for engagement, assessment, goal-setting, and intervention (Gupta, 2015). Cases used for clinical specialization courses may require students to make complex decisions about differential diagnoses and choices regarding the most efficacious theoretical orientation, interventions, and modalities. Other information suggested by Wolfer and Scales (2006) includes family dynamics; laws, policies, procedures or other contexts that affect service delivery; social work values and ethics; perspectives of agency management; and interpersonal dynamics at the agency (p. vi, p. 14).

Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine, and Leenders (1997) describe a decision case as "a

description of an actual situation, commonly involving a decision, a challenge, an opportunity, a problem or issue faced by a person (or persons) in an organization. The case allows [the reader] to step figuratively into the position of the particular decision maker" (p. 2). Cases may include information about the responses of the reporter as this is part of the learning (Wolfer and Scales, 2006, p. 7). Of course, if cases are current, the responses of the reporter are the student's responses.

Decision case writers look for cases that have real-world challenges, such as being forced to make decisions without full and sometimes inaccurate information, facing barriers and limits on intervention, and facing unanticipated consequences of decisions (Wolfer and Scales, 2006, p. 14). These components can be addressed in the initial case description or through the use of "wildcards" in a subsequent learning activity. The team redacts identifying information to protect confidentiality but following the protocols of decision case writers, details that would affect assessment and the dynamics of the case are kept or similar details are substituted. These may include age, gender, race, ethnicity, and geographical locations such as urban and rural or regions of the country (Wolfer & Scales, 2006, p. vi).

Decision cases omit theoretical frameworks in order to allow the application of various theories to the case (Gray, Wolfer, & Maas, 2006). Theoretical frameworks are addressed by course instructors as they design learning activities using the cases. Finally, cases challenge the worker to make a decision but do not contain final resolutions or answers (Wolfer & Scales, 2006, p. 6). The CoL Team may wish to contribute to discussion keys for instructors to use with students.

## Conclusion

The model that the authors are proposing is aspirational, and one that they are currently discussing with colleagues as their school engages in curriculum transformation. This model is dependent on the validation that field education is the signature pedagogy of social work education. The authors' model is a proactive approach to bringing the unique opportunities and challenges of communities into the classroom. Through this integrative syllabus, the authors have provided an example of how to create communities of learning (CoLs) that are reflective and inclusive of organizational experiences. The cases developed from the CoLs should be used across the core social work curriculum and be addressed in multiple courses. As the signature pedagogy of social work education, field education experiences provide opportunities for schools to integrate their communities into the curriculum. An integrative syllabus provides an opportunity for community social work practice to be at the core of the social work program. The authors aim to fulfill a believed universal desire in social work education:  to teach students how to effectively practice in the communities in which they desire to be a change agent.

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## Appendix A:  Template for Identifying a Case

*Note: This case may be used in learning activities across several courses to address more than one competency and area of practice. See attached competencies and practice behaviors.*

**Instructions to Case Writers:** Please ensure that details such as name, age, date of birth, location, agency name, and any other identifying information are changed to protect client/family/agency confidentiality. However, substitute information necessary to maintain the dynamics of the case and provide a comparable learning experience. Be sure to include changes in circumstances or events as they occur, in order to replicate the challenges clients, families, agencies, and social workers face in their work together.

Current Practice Setting: [insert pseudonym and type/function of agency] - Describe agency mission, setting/geographical area, population served, type of agency (public or private, for profit or nonprofit), services offered

Identified Challenge - description of presenting problem in work with an individual, family, or group or description of a challenge in macro practice

Micro Case Name: [insert here, ex. John Doe]

Identifying Information (Disguise details of name, age, date of birth, and race/ethnic changes necessary to protect confidentiality but maintain the dynamics of the case.)

Referral Statement (Include source, reason, and date of referral.)

Presenting Problem(s) (Required components of this section will vary by instructor or program but include items such as precipitating events, history of the problem, and previous attempts to seek help or involvement with other agencies.)

Current Family Relationships/Dynamics/History (State whether source of support or conflict.)

Social and Economic Justice Issues

Current Involvement with Significant Systems (State whether source of support or conflict.)

Relevant Cultural Factors (Includes impact of demographic and cultural factors. Impact on client/family/agency – contribute to current difficulties or serve to mitigate them)

Relevant Spirituality Factors (Includes influence of spirituality and whether a source of support or conflict.)

Strengths (Include client strengths and availability of support systems and resources.)
   • agency strengths – including relevant formal and informal support systems

Reaction of the Social Worker and Impact on Worker's Use of Self- (May include conflict between client and worker values, conflict between the personal and professional values of the worker, conflict between personal or professional values with those of the agency feelings about the client system, ethical dilemmas, professional roles and boundaries.)

Challenges or limits in performing the social work role such as lack of information, inaccurate information, unanticipated events or consequences

Challenges to Engagement

Challenges to Assessment

Challenges to Diagnosis (These may include cases with complex differential diagnoses for specialization classes.)

Challenges to Treatment Compliance and/or Treatment Availability

Agency Challenges Impacting Service Delivery (These may include the availability of trained staff, recommended modalities, funding to deliver services, sometimes in the face of legal mandates. Also, includes climate in the relationship in terms of leadership and presence/absence internal conflict.)

Agency Context (Includes relevant laws, policies, procedures, and other mandates.)

Other Situational Challenges (Includes lack of information, inaccurate information, barriers or limits on intervention, and unanticipated consequences.)

*Note: This template integrates areas recommended by Gupta (2015) and Wolfer and Scales (2006).*