



# Experiential Learning in Preparation for Field Placement

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As Aristotle said, “The things we have to learn before we do them, we learn by doing them.” Prior to entering placement, social work students often experience anxiety about effectively dealing with problems and challenges in field (Warren, 2005). Further, students may not have the knowledge, skills, and abilities expected and needed in field, if these skills are not developed through other courses within the curriculum (Alex-Assensoh & Ryan, 2008). Engagement exercises are effective strategies to create experiential opportunities for students to learn necessary skills prior to the field experience.

To facilitate the student transition from student to beginning practitioner, the “Problem Solving Process Project” was developed as a major course assignment in an undergraduate Social Work Methods I course. This course teaches social work practice skills used by professional social workers in the delivery of services to a diverse group of clients. The course also gives the professor an opportunity to address areas of concern related to students’ practice prior to the field placement.

The Problem Solving Process learning activity is based on the principles of Situated Learning Theory, which posits that learning requires collaborative interaction with others and requires students to problem-solve in the midst of a learning activity (McClelland, 1995). This project places students in an experiential learning environment which requires the use and application of knowledge and skills learned in the classroom, such as contract planning, evaluation of practice, professional use of self, and case management skills. For this project, members of the college faculty and staff consent to serve as “clients”\* in need of services. [\* Editorial note: in order to avoid distracting the reader, we will omit the use of quotation marks around every use of the word “client/s” but readers should understand it as such.] The course professor then provides each client with assignment guidelines as to the problem/quality of life issue they are facing and for which they are in need of services, such as substance abuse or domestic violence. This activity differs from a traditional role-play in that students are not actually portraying clients, nor is the course professor there to observe the interaction. The use of college faculty and staff as clients helps to develop and reinforce skill sets students

will need in work with diverse clients in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and overall life experiences. The clients' interactions with the students are always in character and faculty/staff are instructed not to provide feedback to the students or correct observed errors.

Students are paired with clients based on previously expressed preferences (i.e., working with families and children). Students must contact their client to schedule an initial assessment appointment; they also write their client a letter, confirming the scheduling appointment and providing any relevant information, which affords the opportunity to develop professional written communication skills. Students demonstrate their ability to apply the problem-solving process, a generalist model, in working with their client. They are asked to engage and service their clients for at least six weeks, including a minimum of four face-to-face contacts. They are expected to make contacts with real social work and human services organizations to determine what services/programs are most appropriate to assist the clients' needs. For example, if the student's client was referred for suspected alcoholism, the student has to assess whether the client was in need of detoxification and/or outpatient services, then contact a local substance abuse treatment facility to determine the admission requirements, fees, types of insurance accepted, etc. If the client does not have insurance, then the student is required to identify and assist with obtaining a pay source, such as Medicaid. Throughout the duration of the assignment, each student receives one-on-one supervision from the professor to share concerns, ethical conflicts, self-evaluation of performance, and proposed additional strategies which may assist the client. In addition, students meet as a group with the instructor to share their experiences and offer feedback to one another.

For each interaction/contact with the client, the student must prepare a professional summary, which is made part of a client file submitted to the instructor for evaluation as a graded assignment. The file documents the initial assessment (history, frequency, duration, and extent of the problem, as well as identified needs), client support systems, coping strategies, and client strengths, progress notes based on the initial assessment, monitoring of the intervention plan, and follow-up after the termination of involvement with the client and services.

Use of the client file serves multiple purposes. One side of the file serves as documentation of the practice of social work skills in working with the client, including the initial assessment, development and monitoring of the intervention plan, evaluation of client progress, etc. For example, one client was seven months pregnant and HIV positive, with minimal family support; the student included this information on the practice side of the file in the initial assessment. The other side of the file serves as a means for students to self-reflect and evaluate their role, effectiveness, and involvement with the client. On the reflective side of the file, the students are required to evaluate their ability to assist the client and their effectiveness in bringing about change, to make notations as to how they worked with difficult clients (i.e., what the students' responses were to being yelled at by a client), and to observe conflicts between professional and personal ethics and values. The case file assists the

student not only in developing communication skills but also in broader professional development.

In conjunction with this problem-solving project, the course curriculum offers a number of sequential skill-building activities, ordering content to help the learner achieve the objectives of the course or assignment (Cagne, as cited in Kemp et al., 1998). At the beginning of the semester, students are asked to identify a preference in the fields of social work practice and the specific population. Then, based on their preferences, students are required to complete a ten-page paper researching the problem and identifying best practices in working with their preferred population. Because the problem-solving process involves engagement, assessment, planning, intervention, implementation, evaluation, termination, and follow-up, the course professor staggers the required components of the project to coincide with the instruction of these skills in the course.

The project provides both the students and the instructor with learning opportunities. Most important, the professor is able to use this project to evaluate students' abilities (or inabilities) to meet course objectives. One of the areas which prove most important for professional development is the use of supervision. The professor has to increase the number of office hours during this period, as much of her office time is spent advising and supervising students. There are some students that do not regularly attend supervision, which is problematic, since in the social work profession, working effectively under supervision is considered a competency. Telephone consultation is often necessary, as students want to contact the professor immediately following their interactions with clients. Some students experience high levels of anxiety during this project and need additional validation of their skills and assistance with formulating topics for discussion support so that they do not become overwhelmed by the project. Also, classroom peer supervision, in which students share their experiences with the class, helps students understand that others may be experiencing some of the same types of feelings and challenges related to the project.

At the end of the project, the professor seeks evaluation of the project from the students. Student feedback allows assessment of students' experiences in the project, and offers an indication of student self-reflection. The project encourages students to reflect on their own knowledge, skills, and abilities, and to identify those areas where they must continue to develop. One student noted:

This is an assignment to get you prepared for a real client that's going to depend on you to help them fix their problems...overall I think I had good intentions with my client but it was poorly executed.

Evaluation of the course also involves the course professor contacting the faculty/staff members who served as clients and asking them for their feedback of the student's performance in terms of professional work habits and the project as a teaching tool. One faculty member noted:

It was nice to see students who were well-prepared to deal with difficult clients. As someone who has received assistance from social services and having family members who have received assistance from social services...it was good to see social work practitioners being as prepared as they are. They role-played with someone who they did not know. As a member of the faculty it was nice to see other pedagogy and other teaching efforts of faculty. After my participation in the assignment I then decided to incorporate such assignments into my own courses.

In conclusion, experiential learning opportunities are a valuable pedagogical tool for faculty to transfer knowledge, skills, and abilities, and to provide numerous professional development benefits to students. However, an internship or practicum need not be the first opportunity to apply knowledge, values, and skills learned in the classroom to a "live person." Engagement exercises like the Problem Solving Process are effective strategies to create experiential learning opportunities for students to develop necessary skills prior to the field experience. This experiential exercise can facilitate students' transitions from student to beginning practitioner by addressing students' anxieties about entering field placement, encouraging students to venture beyond their comfort zone, developing practice skill sets not addressed in other courses within the curriculum, and actively engaging students in the learning process.

### References

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