



FIELD EDUCATOR
SIMMONS SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

Volume 8.2 | Fall 2018 | Conversation | © October 2018 | fieldeducator.simmons.edu

A Conversation with Tory Cox

Author(s)

Tory Cox, EdD

University of Southern California

Elizabeth Whitney, MSW

Simmons University

[Editor's Note: This issue's conversation features an interview about virtual field practicums with Elizabeth Whitney, MSW, Assistant Director of Field Education-Curriculum and Training for Simmons University's online program SocialWork@Simmons and Editorial Staff Member of the Field Educator, and Tory Cox, EdD, Assistant Dean of Field Education and Director of the Virtual Academic Center's Field Education program for the University of Southern California's Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.]



Tory Cox, EdD

Clinical Associate Professor

University of Southern California

Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work



Elizabeth Whitney, MSW

Associate Professor of Practice

Simmons University

SocialWork@Simmons

Elizabeth Whitney: Thank you for taking your time to participate in this interview. The *Field Educator* is so interested in learning more about your program and how you have innovated a new way to bridge academics and practice. Perhaps you could start off by describing the virtual field practicum. What does it look like? What are the essential elements of it?

Tory Cox: In our program here at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, we look at four consecutive semesters of field. No matter which program students are in (whether it's the four-semester, six-semester, or eight-semester program) they're going to do four consecutive semesters of field. The way we've divided that up in our Virtual Academic Center (VAC) online program is that our first semester of field is the Virtual Field Practicum (VFP). One of our faculty members,

Betsy Phillips, partnered with one of our former faculty members, Gary Wood, who was serving as a liaison with our for-profit company who handles our online technology, to develop the VFP starting in 2013. Our Senior Vice Dean and Director of Field Education Marleen Wong commissioned them to find a way to better prepare students for community-based placement while also giving our field placement team time to develop placements across the country.

Since 2014, it has been a required course for all MSW students in the Virtual Academic Center (VAC). This course meets online, face-to-face for four hours per week. That's two hours in one time period and two hours in another. It is the most intense time period in terms of amount of time spent face to face with instructors and students of any course in our school. There is an additional 12 hours of asynchronous work. Together, that equals 16 hours which is the equivalent of what our campus-based students do when they go to in-person internship experiences. We've mirrored that so our online students are getting a similar experience, but getting those 16 hours in a different way.

During one of the two two-hour time periods each week that the online students meet, they will be engaging with an actor who plays a scripted character that our faculty have created. The character's name is Mario, and he is a military veteran. The actors that portray him do so across multiple classrooms and across multiple semesters. They've become very good at the depiction of this character to the point that our faculty often spend time after class debriefing with our military students who are in the class because of the realness of the experience for them.

The asynchronous work and some of the in-person work is used to train students in evidence-based practices. They're being taught motivational interviewing, problem solving therapy, and cognitive behavioral therapy. During the second time they meet during that week, the actor comes in and portrays the character. Our students are assigned to spend 15 to 20 minutes with the character at a time. About four to five students in the class practice during each session with Mario. The other students are observing and coaching. The faculty member provides guidance, mentorship, coaching, teaching, and expertise on how to apply the interventions.

In addition to the training that takes place on evidence-based interventions, students also review and respond to detailed vignettes that show how the nine competencies developed by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) are enacted and implemented. The asynchronous work is extremely robust and fills in and trains them in the areas that other students, for example in our campus-based program, have after they start in an agency. In some ways, it could be argued that they get superior training because field experiences often vary in significant ways during a student's first semester at a field agency.

By the time our students who are in the VFP transition to community-based placements in their second semester of field, they are prepared. They have learned evidence-based interventions, have worked through the competencies, and have done process recordings (we call them Reflective Learning Tools, or RLTs) in the VFP. They've interacted in a simulated client experience, which is going to get them prepared for what it's like with an actual client. They're much more versed at coming in and moving into client-based interactions in a more seamless way than they would have otherwise.

EW: That's fascinating. I'm finding myself thinking about this notion of equivalency. You had said, in terms of hours, that the VFP has the equivalent to what campus-based students have in their field placement. In another sense, I don't know if this is the right way to put it, but the VFP is not necessarily equivalent in that the folks who are in the VFP sound like they're getting a very robust and a very clear progression of learning in the VFP.

TC: That is exactly the way that it has developed and was designed by Betsy and Gary. It actually helped us on a couple of fronts. One of them was to address severe challenges at getting students into placements on time. For example, we may find out about a student who is starting and where they are located only a month or so before they are to enroll. And, students can be from anywhere in the country. The question would be, how do you develop a placement in some distant location when you have no history, little name recognition, and no established community goodwill? You also have to engage in developing a memorandum of understanding with an agency, and you're doing this from a distance.

The VFP came in as a nice way to address that issue, but also to address the issue of preparation for students. In Southern California, we feel like we have a sense of common culture or common knowledge with agencies in the surrounding area to some degree. With the online program, students are coming from all over the country with a variety of backgrounds, training, and circumstances. We are now training them in our standards and expectations in that first semester and giving them skill sets that they can take into their communities. We can vouch for their level of training.

EW: I'm curious what impact this course has had on student preparation. Have you collected data? If so, what does it show you?

TC: We have an outside research group that has come in named Clarus Research. Senior Vice Dean Wong engaged them to take an independent look at the efficacy of the VFP compared with our ground students. They have looked over time at the field evaluations from agencies for our campus-based students and evaluations for our

virtual students across their four semesters. Students in our campus-based program go to two semesters of an in-person placement in their first year and two semesters of in-person placement for their second year. Our VAC students go to VFP for one semester, then they go to three semesters of in-person, or community-based, placement.

In our research, we basically wanted to know what the experience was like for the students in the VFP versus going in person. We looked at what we view as the independent indicator, which is the feedback from field instructors in the agency. They work with multiple students from multiple schools. They're all over the country. Even if they've only worked with USC, they're still giving their rating of a student as opposed to us influencing that.

The research team has some fascinating findings. Essentially, what they found is, rated over the course of their four semesters, the Virtual Field Practicum students are rated higher on three out of four field semesters. The VAC students are rated slightly higher or higher than the ground program for the first semester, the third semester, and the fourth semester. Only in the second semester were our ground students rated higher by field instructors.

I think there's a social aspect to this outcome because the on-ground students have been in the agency for two semesters at the end of the second term and have developed a sense of compatibility while our VAC students are just starting off on their in-person placement during the second semester of field. Similarly, the VAC students in their second semester of community-based placement are rated higher than ground students in their first semester of placement in their second year. Does that make sense?

EW: That makes a lot of sense. For the VAC students, they are less well-known to the agency than the campus-based students are at that point. That may be impacting the ratings.

TC: Correct. If you look at a graph for the VAC students, the four evaluations at the end of each semester shows this beautiful steady upward line. It shows this nice improvement from the VFP, in which our faculty are the raters, to the community-based placement where field instructors are the raters. The ground program has more of a lightning bolt. What happens is they go up from the first rating to the second and then it skews downward as they start a new placement in their third semester. I would venture to say that's probably a fairly accurate lightning bolt line for most programs that do two placements because of the social aspect of getting to know the new agency. At the end, what happens is they end up almost identical.

EW: That implies that you're using the same evaluation in the first term with the VFP as is used for all students when they're in in-person field practicums. Is that correct?

TC: Kind of. Here's why. It is the same in both programs, but different from generalist to specialized semesters. We follow CSWE requirements and had CSWE accreditation last year. We use the same document for both ground and virtual. The way that CSWE has stipulated it is that generalist competencies are judged in the semester in which the generalist's course work is done. For our school, we do a 1/3 structure. That is, we do one semester of generalist course work then three semesters of department specific or specialized study.

We use the generalist competencies for the first semester, as the ground does as well. Then we have the students assessed on department-specific competencies for the final three semesters for both ground and VAC. We also bring forward competency one from the generalist because that's about professionalism and ethics and is the competency area that leads to the most challenges for our students. Our ground program was instrumental in structuring it this way. So, we carry that one all the way through, and then we add the nine that are specialized for the departments for the final three semesters.

EW: That answers one of the questions I had - how you structured the progression of field education. You also brought up accreditation. I can imagine that many people will have questions of how you handled accreditation with the difference between a virtual first term as opposed to a traditional in-person first term.

TC: Yes. We were wondering as well how that was going to go. Our general frame is that we're delivering the same content with different methods. There may be some differences with the way a virtual program is run versus the ground program, but we use the same syllabi in all four semesters of field. We have an expectation that the students get the same training, whether it's delivered in a virtual field practicum followed by a three-semester placement or in two in-person placements. We feel confident that we are able to deliver the same material.

That was our frame, and it was validated in our re-accreditation process. We have the statistics to support the efficacy of both methods of delivery. I think that's also a strong component that occurred during re-accreditation. When we were engaging in field dialogue with our reviewers, we brought in a field instructor virtually that works with students in our virtual platform. She was from New Jersey, and we also brought in a field instructor from our ground program in Los Angeles who came in person. We were mimicking what our program is, which is both virtual and ground. Our virtual field instructor talked about how she engaged with students and what that meant for her over the years. It was very compelling.

We feel confident in our ability to meet all the competencies of CSWE in the way that

we're training students. We can advocate pretty strongly for our training of students in what could be considered a better way because they're learning how to engage in a virtual setting with clients. That is the idea of telehealth or telemedicine, which is growing.

Social workers tend to ground ourselves on whether something is going to work in person. People may ask, if you're being trained virtually, whether it will really work in person. Our response is, "Wait a minute, the environment's changing." The world is changing. More people are getting their services delivered through online or a virtual program than ever before. At some point, it'll likely tip the 50 percent scale. So, the question at that point is, "Are your on-ground social workers being trained successfully to navigate in a virtual world?" I think that something we should always keep in mind is whether we're preparing our students for what is to come in the field.

EW: That's very interesting. What you are doing is, in fact, following emerging practice in the field and being innovative in that way as well. You're anticipating my other questions. Any significant innovation to established practice (whether it is in business, healthcare or other clinical practice, or academia) is often received with uncertainty. Certainly, what you're doing would fall in this category of going against the established tradition of field education. I'm curious what you've encountered in response from faculty, from students, and from community partners. Did you encounter skepticism, concern, or questions about the prudence of going down this road?

TC: Yes. I definitely appreciate that question. First, here is how we oversee the course currently for quality control. We have a lead instructor from our field faculty, Laura Cardinal, who oversees all the intricacies and details about taking this course to fruition with 25 plus sections every semester and actors attending multiple times per week. It's really an intense environment. This is where we are now. We're in a very skilled level of oversight. It's quite amazing, especially when looking at our journey.

The idea that people were uncertain about what a virtual field semester would mean has permeated before and since I began my role in VAC Field in 2015. I hear about it. We have had some students share that their experience was very simplistic: that they watch an actor portray somebody, and now they think they're prepared for client work. But this characterization is not supported by data and the breadth of student experiences in VFP.

Let me actually break it down. There are some agencies and some folks who were trained traditionally, that were slow to embrace this way of training. People were slow to embrace social work online, in general. Now, four and a half years into the VFP, we're saying we have a different way of training for field education. I'm fairly

confident that there are plenty of agency folks that were skeptical about that, too. Once they began receiving our students, however, and seeing that they were coming in with increased skill and not just fresh undergrad experience, or some other experience, they began to see the quality and the benefits of having it. When we went to this three semester model for community-based placement, they also appreciated that because it offered them a year of service from the student. You have a couple of benefits to us going to this model. One was on the back end: the agencies had a year of service. Second, on the front end, they were getting better-trained students.

Our students, themselves, sometimes ask the question about what they are getting. They know that in the campus program, students are going to an agency and here they are doing simulated work. That's when I share our research with them. I show that, when it's all said and done, they're equally prepared, if not better, than our campus students. I share the research so they can get a sense of confidence. There's always a sense that the grass is greener on the other side. It permeates our society. Once on-ground students understand there's a difference, they question why they can't get the VFP experience. Early on, there was skepticism, but it was overcome because of the two benefits I mentioned.

EW: As you start collecting data, that really can underscore the points that you're making. How about with field faculty and those teaching other courses? Was it similar for them or were they more accepting?

TC: There was a similar sense with what happened in probably every school of social work going to an online program: there was resistance to going online, period. That idea took a lot of digestion and a lot of getting used to. There were probably a certain percent of the faculty that were still uncertain about that once we launched into the program. Maybe some of them still are. For the most part, the tipping point did occur with online programming at a certain point. Now, you can see the proliferation across the country. We were the first research school of social work to go online in 2010. We've seen this develop over the years in an interesting way.

In these programs, three to four cohorts start each year. There's just no time with these models to sit back in a summer and reflect. Classes are going all the time, non-stop. I like to say to people that we're in the 33rd cohort in the online program [since 2010]. That would be the equivalent of what's happened on ground since 1985, welcoming 33 cohorts of students.

The speed and acceleration at which we move forward is such that when we launched the VFP, it came about with little resistance from faculty because we were always in innovation mode, developing the ways, trying to figure out how to make this thing work as best as possible. I'm sure there were those who were questioning it, especially

because of some of the early stats that were coming from the field evaluations at the end of the first semester. Those were being done by faculty. But, once we saw the longitudinal data, we knew that we are onto something. Let me continue with that line just for a minute to say that this course, traditionally, is the highest-rated class by students in the school.

EW: You've anticipated another one of my questions!

TC: It is the most intense in terms of face time and asynchronous time of any class that we have: four hours of actual face-to-face engagement per week and 12 hours of asynchronous. It's the most intense in that sense. In this course - I want to say this, but just be prepared - there are 81 assignments per student.

EW: Wow. [laughs]

TC: I should say there are 81 micro assignments. For example, they do 8 process recordings, or what we call reflective learning tools, which simulates the in-person field experience. They do 10 risk factor vignettes, ethical dilemmas, and more. The faculty member has to look at 81 assignments and give feedback on those. That's per student. With 10 students per class, you're talking 810 assignments to be looked at by the instructors. It's very intense.

Even with that intensity, instructors themselves say it is the most gratifying course they've ever taught because they see the change occur in the student in ways they've never seen in a class before.

EW: Both instructors and the students are rating it extremely highly?

TC: Right. There's not necessarily a forum for faculty to rate it, but in terms of their desire to teach it again and their feelings about the course, we can see that they feel that strongly. We have people requesting it and talking about how much change they see in students in this course.

EW: That says a lot.

TC: It says a lot about Senior Vice Dean Wong's vision for field education and how Betsy and Gary designed the course.

EW: Sounds like it.

TC: It also says a lot about our lead instructor, Laura Cardinal, and how she supports the faculty. We have consultation groups every month. She does training every week

for anybody who's teaching it new. We really layer in a lot of support for our faculty to make sure they feel as prepared as possible.

EW: As you're talking about the high number of cohorts you have and the rapid pace of work, I can see how you're pretty quickly able to see what's working, what's not working, and make some shifts. There's a lot of opportunity to do that. It sounds like there's so much you've gained. What do you think has been given up by instituting this first term as a virtual field practicum, if anything?

TC: Given up? It's like the question, "Name your failures." I want to say most failures, most of the time, lead to a great outcome.

I like your question. It's a really good question. Some students feel like they're not getting the exact same experience as they might in the on-ground program with a two plus two placement. When they finish the program I don't think they feel that way. We would have to look at the metrics to see where that is.

We certainly don't feel that way. In fact, we feel that we've got an incredible model. We don't feel like we've actually given anything up. What we have had to do is continually work with our ground program to make sure that we're aligned in the content that is being delivered, even though the delivery method is different.

I would say that has led to an increased collaboration and alignment effort as opposed to feeling like we can just go off and do our thing because we're all doing the exact same thing. No, we are doing things a little differently, but let's make sure we continue to stay connected. It's less about what we've given up; we just had to make sure that any of the differences are addressed successfully between those programs.

For VAC students, then, we have given up the structure of having them at two different placements. I don't mean just because that's the way the ground program operates. It's because now there's not an opportunity for two different levels of engagement in a community setting with a different set of folks. I won't deny that has a social and cultural value for students in their development. It's mitigated somewhat because in the Virtual Academic Center, our students are about five years older than our ground students, on average. They tend to be in their mid 30s as opposed to late 20s for the ground. Most of them are already experienced in working. They have already worked in multiple agencies or multiple organizations. They're usually mid-career professionals with families or responsibilities.

We're not working with as many 22 year olds coming in to our program who are trying to learn how to engage in a work environment. That doesn't feel as pressing of an issue necessarily, although some of our folks have not been in social work agencies. The

collection of what their experiences have been and the training that we deliver offset that loss of two placement opportunity, in my opinion.

EW: That makes sense. For some students not having two agency experiences can have more of an impact than for others. Tory, you've really given so much rich information, and have described this in a way that it's incredibly compelling and informative. Is there anything that we haven't talked about, or I haven't asked you, that you think could be important for our readers to know?

TC: I feel very strongly about this. That is, anything that can be done well in person or in an on-campus space can be done equally well in a virtual environment. That is a core belief that we have. We are getting research now that supports our beliefs. I attend sessions sometimes where other people talk about how they have a hybrid program, which for them means that students do something physically in-person and something online. I was in a presentation just last year. I had a chance to stand up with another one of my colleagues, June Wiley, who oversees all of our virtual programs across multiple degrees here at our school. We just said, "We respect what has just been said, but we really want to be clear that we believe that everything that can be done in person can be done online."

There's a lot of research about how relationships can sometimes be viewed as being stronger in an online or in a remote-worker setting than in-person. We would argue against old ways of thinking that if it is not done on ground or in person, it is somehow "less than." We would really recommend that this way of thinking be discarded. That's our message going forward. The way that engagement is occurring virtually, in the way that the younger generation is embracing it, also speaks to the value of exploring it from that perspective.

EW: Thank you for that. I think that's a really nice way to finish because it's tying the point of virtual engagement together with what you're saying about your incredible team. It's a matter of committing to do it well, and finding the methods and technology to do that in a very high quality manner with both integrity and fidelity.

TC: I agree. You mentioned something that made me want to say something about how we operate. I have an office staff I work with made up of four individuals. Then we have 13 full-time field faculty and more than 40 consistent adjunct field faculty. Our student enrollment is around 1,800. Our incredible group of full-time field faculty work with this amazing group of adjuncts to deliver this course and the rest of our field courses to our students across the country.

Our for-profit partner, *2U*, provides incredible student success advising and has a terrific placement team that our faculty works with that develops placements around

the country. Our faculty do all the approving of those placements. When there are challenges having to do with student progression and then once students start their placement, our faculty are the ones that guide that progression. But, we could not do this without our placement team that develops placements all around the country.

We also receive terrific support from the 2U management team in working with the actors for VFP. They contract with the firm that represents the actors and vets them for the role. Our lead instructor, Laura Cardinal, then completes the feedback loop with them in response to the actors' embodiment of the Mario role. If there are issues with the portrayal, she works directly with the 2U management team to address those concerns. This collaboration has led to high levels of quality control in this aspect of the VFP.

EW: That's important. That provides a larger context of the structure of what supports the work that you're doing. I really appreciate your sharing this information. Thank you.

TC: Yes, my pleasure.

For more information on the Virtual Field Practicum please visit:

<https://msw.usc.edu/academic/field-experience/virtual-field-practicum/>