



# Observations of Practice in Field Education: A Literature Review

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## Introduction

The Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* state that assessment of students' competence must involve observation in real or simulated practice situations (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). Observation in "real time" or, as termed in this paper, "observations of practice" can present challenges for both field education coordinators and field supervisors alike. While observing students in field placements seems to be essential, strategies for making this an everyday reality in social work field education can appear elusive. This literature review explores the various dimensions of observation. The review culminates with an analysis of the role of the field supervisor in creating, supporting, and planning for observations.

## Discussion Questions

1. How do you promote field supervisory buy-in for observations?
2. What type of training do you offer field supervisors in implementing observations?
3. What are your greatest challenges in making observations a reality in your social work department?
4. What are your greatest successes in using observations as a learning activity for students?

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## **Review of the Literature**

Observations in field education have various titles and minimal working definitions. The Council on Social Work Education (2015) refers to observations as “observations in real time,” while New Zealand researchers use the term “live supervision” (Davys & Beddoe, 2015) and UK researchers apply the term “observation.” Le Riche and Tanner (1998) have pointed out that there appears to be no clear operational definition of what is meant by observation in social work practice and asserted that observations involve a complex interplay of various elements, including watching, feeling, thinking, reflecting, and understanding. As Beddoe, Ackroyd, Chinnery, and Appleton (2011) have suggested, observations are more than just “watching” and require observing others and being observed, in order to create new refined skills that lead to emerging competence in social work practice.

### **Preparing Students for Being Observed**

Preparing students for field placements often begins with students shadowing more experienced colleagues, including their own field supervisor (Carey & McCardle, 2011; Kemp, 2001; Le Riche, 2006). Shadowing provides students with the opportunity to observe others in practice (Carey & McCardle, 2011; O’Connor, Cecil, & Boudioni, 2009). Like an observational “dress rehearsal,” it helps students to learn the tenets of social work practice. Le Riche (2006) has outlined a course that focuses on shadowing social work practitioners. The course situates “shadowing” as a beginning foray into observational learning; students are encouraged to keep a learning journal of what they feel, think, and reflect upon during their shadowing experiences. According to O’Connor et al. (2009), students in their first-year of social work education reported that shadowing professionals on home visits was their greatest learning experience prior to starting a field placement. This suggests that shadowing, a beginning form of observation, can have a significant influence on students and their learning.

### **The Role of the Field Supervisor in Observations**

Field supervisors can use observations of practice to teach students the essential components of the social work process, while simultaneously recording a student’s evolving competence (Bogo, 2010; Carey & McCardle, 2011; Cleak, Hawkins, Laughton, & Williams, 2015). In their article “Failure to Fail,” Finch and Taylor (2013) discuss the struggles field supervisors’ experience in documenting, evaluating, and, when necessary, failing a student. Observations of practice serve a dual purpose. Supervisors can (1) assess a student’s skill level and areas that require refinement, while (2)

building a portfolio of documented observations of the student that can provide evidence to support the mid-year and final field evaluations. As Maidment (2000) has suggested, “without direct observation, field educators cannot vouch for the competence of the students’ practice, with confidence” (p. 151).

Another important component of observations of practice is the capacity to encourage students to form links between theory and practice. Saltzburg, Greene, and Drew (2010), in their analysis of observations of practice, found that a key learning feature of observation was students’ ability to move classroom knowledge into the realities of practice. Students can explore the links between theory and practice in the post-observation analysis with their field supervisor. For example, when a field supervisor provides a student with feedback on their use of a strengths-based approach, it reinforces the student’s understanding of how theory comes to life in practice.

The value of observations of practice is predicated not merely on the observation itself, but also on the quality of feedback provided following the observational event. “Deliberate practice,” or the art and science of focusing skill development over time, is becoming an important concept that is relevant to social work education. Deliberate practice takes place over time, is focused, and is systematic in refining skill development. Feedback by an external party provides the individual with specific strategies for enhancing their practice (Rousmaniere, Goodyear, Miller, & Wampold, 2017). An underlying principle of deliberate practice is the challenge that individuals face in being forced to move beyond their comfort zone to develop new skills. An essential component of deliberate practice is the ability of the field supervisor to offer refined and constructive feedback immediately following the observation of the student.

Feedback should occur within a safe learning environment (Bogo, Lee, McKee, Baird, & Ramjattan, 2016; Saltzburg et al., 2010). Bennett and Saks (2006) have suggested that the field supervisory relationship should contain a “secure base,” whereby students can explore challenges and complex problems within the context of a safe learning environment. Deliberate practice is predicated upon a strong and supportive supervisory relationship that transitions beyond the superficial aspects of the observation to include specific strategies the student can incorporate to improve their practice. Deliberate practice highlights the importance of a safe learning environment, as it can serve as a buffer when students feel uncomfortable or challenged.

Emotions, and in particular the role of anxiety in learning in field education, are important to consider when constructing observations of practice (Baird, 2016; Gelman

& Baum, 2010). Exploring and understanding a student's emotional terrain are key in field education (Litvack, Mishna, & Bogo, 2010; Maidment & Crisp, 2011). Being observed is one aspect of performance anxiety. Baird (2016) has explored the role that emotional self-regulation (i.e. monitoring one's emotions) can play in helping students to harness their fears. Approaches to self-regulation can include stress-reduction strategies, such as promoting the tenets of mindfulness (Lynn, 2010). Irwin (2014), in a Northern Irish study, explored the impact of observations on student learning, and found that students were more able to relax when they knew what to expect, including when an observation was occurring, who would be involved, and what was expected in terms of their performance during the observation.

Experiential learning is a key component in promoting student education and development outside of the traditional classroom environment (Bogo, 2010). Kolb's learning cycle describes learning as a never-ending cycle of growth and development in which students can apply theoretical learning to real-world practice (Kolb, 1984). Observational learning promotes the link between what is learned in the classroom and what is learned in the context of social work practice. Classroom role-plays about a client who is non-verbal, for example, do not resonate as much with students as being observed in their attempts to engage a young adolescent who refuses to say a word.

### **Planning for Observations**

Observations require careful planning (Beddoe et al., 2011; Carey & McCardle, 2011; Davys & Beddoe, 2015; Humphrey, 2007; Le Riche & Tanner, 1998; Tan, Tiah, & Chong, 2012). Discussing the role that observations will play in a student's learning over the course of a semester can set the stage for developing an observational learning culture in a field placement setting. Field supervisors can start the conversation about observations with students at the beginning of the year by discussing what practice situations will be observed, who will be observed, when the observations will take place, where the observation will take place (e.g. home visit or office), and why the observations are important (e.g. how the information from the observation will be used in the student's final evaluation). In addition, the field supervisor and student should discuss the role of the client, the willingness of the client to participate in the observation, and how to prepare and protect clients before and during the observation.

On the day of the observation, planning might include addressing the following questions: Where will the supervisor sit in the room? Will the supervisor take notes? What should the student do if they require help or support? Supervisors and students should also plan what should be done if the interview goes in an unsafe direction.

Before the start of the observation, it is important to explain to the client what the observation is about and how the client's confidentiality and safety are paramount (Irwin, 2014).

The discussion following the observation is where issues related to feedback and promoting deliberate practice can occur. Feedback should be delivered in a structured, balanced, and challenging manner in the context of a safe learning environment (Rousmaniere et al., 2017). Questions to consider in this post-observational analysis can include the following: Were the learning objectives achieved? What strengths were demonstrated during the observation? What areas need improvement?

### Summary

Observations of practice, in the context of this literature review, focus on a field supervisor observing a student engaging with a client. Field supervisors can also observe students in other contexts, such as team meetings, case consultations, and case presentations. Feedback should be balanced and include discrete areas in which a student can improve their practice over time. This type of balanced feedback, by its very nature, aims to move students outside of their comfort zone, and can therefore cause students to feel anxious. Creating a safe space for learning and growing is essential. Students should be encouraged to use the journey of being observed as a mechanism for self-reflection that leads to an enhanced understanding of their own personal and professional self.

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