



Deliberate Practice: A Framework for Enhancing Competence in Field Education

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Introduction

This literature review explores the concept of deliberate practice and its intersection with social work field education. The concept of deliberate practice is an emerging framework that shows promise in understanding the complexity of learning within field placement settings. Leveraging the tenets of deliberate practice, the field supervisor encourages and amplifies student learning through intentional, goal-oriented supervision and learning. This focused learning is achieved through the provision of balanced feedback that seeks to shape and improve an individual's mastery of complex skills over time (Ericsson, 2004, 2006; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Ericsson, Roring, & Nandagopal, 2007). While not exhaustive in nature, this brief review underscores the emerging tenets of deliberate practice and links these ideas to the complexity of social work field education.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you see a place for deliberate practice in the context of everyday field education?
2. What strategies would you use to encourage the support and training of deliberate practice with field supervisors?
3. How do you think students will respond to the concept of deliberate practice in field education?

Goal-Directed Learning

The literature on deliberate practice advocates for learning that is both focused and goal-directed in nature (Allen, Shankman, & Haber-Curran, 2016; Ericsson, 2004, 2006, 2008; Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson et al., 2007; Krackov & Pohl, 2011; McGaghie, Issenberg, Cohen, Barsuk, & Wayne, 2011; Rousmaniere, Goodyear, Miller, & Wampold, 2017; van de Wiel, Van den Bossche, Janssen, & Jossberger, 2011). Increasingly, challenging learning is the hallmark of deliberate and refined practice. One never reaches a plateau of learning but rather, more sophisticated performance is expected over time. Goal-directed learning requires the learner to constantly refine and improve their skills. One can never rest on their “laurels,” but instead remain steadfast in their desire to continuously improve their skills.

One traditional field education assignment is the learning contract. The innate premise of the learning contract is to be goal-directed and task-focused in developing learning opportunities in the field placement setting. Shifting the learning contract away from merely an administrative task, to a form of deliberate practice, can have many benefits. An underlying goal may include demonstrating greater empathetic engagement with clients. This goal can be documented in the learning contract at the beginning of the academic year. The student can enhance their skill development in this area through repeated observation of their practice by their supervisor. Viewing the learning contract as an active method of goal-orientated practice creates a solid framework for promoting deliberate practice with social work interns.

Continuous, Refined, and Increasingly Challenging Practice

A fundamental aspect of deliberate practice is the provision of multiple opportunities to refine one’s skills. There is a direct intersection between the concept and the prerequisite need for social work interns to have “multiple opportunities to practice” (Bogo, 2015). Students should be provided with varied opportunities to rehearse their skills. Pianists are provided with more complex musical scores, chess players more challenging opponents, and social work interns more complex case assignments. Practice for practice’s sake is not enough – rather, the situations must become incrementally more complex over time. An underlying feature of deliberate practice is the exposure of students to learning opportunities that can be both challenging and innately uncomfortable.

Applying this tenet to field placement learning requires field supervisors to clearly define more challenging tasks in students' field placement settings. For example, encouraging students to use more open-ended questions and motivational interviewing skills, or taking on a task that the student has expressed reservations about, such as conducting a telephone interview. The underlying principle of continuous and refined practice includes encouraging students to leverage field placement learning to cultivate skills that they might otherwise shy away from. Moving beyond one's comfort zone is an essential ingredient to this aspect of deliberate practice within the context of field education.

Balanced Feedback as a Prerequisite

A key element of deliberate practice is a learning environment that incorporates external coaching and specific feedback (Ericsson, 2008; Rousmaniere et al., 2017; van de Wiel et al., 2011). Feedback that is balanced and not overly harsh or unrealistically positive is a symbol of deliberate practice. Each time the external coach meets with a participant following a concerted effort of rigorous practice (i.e., swimming championship, piano recital), the external coach provides the individual with specific, concrete strategies for enhancing their performance. Deliberate practice requires concerted attention to skill development through the delivery of constructive and meaningful feedback.

The field supervisor must be ready and willing to provide structured, balanced feedback within the context of a safe learning environment. Both the field supervisor and the student intern must cultivate skills in giving and receiving feedback. Training for field supervisors should provide opportunities to enhance their feedback skills—for example, role-play scenarios with peers can give field supervisors the chance to shape these skills. Interns can also request additional feedback on skills they are not confident about. For example, a student who has received repeated advice that they present as “not engaging” with clients can specifically request more guided comments that focus on this skill area.

Inspired by Motivation

A key feature of deliberate practice is the desire to learn, grow, and develop. Deliberate practice is predicated on an inner ability to shift from ordinary to extraordinary (Dunn & Shriner, 1999). Ericsson et al. (1993) have suggested that internal motivation is heavily influenced by the outcomes of deliberate practice—when we see our goals become reality, we are more able to sustain motivation. Ericsson and colleagues have also submitted that continuous practice, cultivated by external feedback and internal

reflection, is the key to overall motivation to achieve eventual success (Ericsson, 2008; Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson et al., 2007).

The challenge for field supervisors is their capacity to help a social work intern shift from mediocre to advanced practice. A high-performing social work intern openly asks for more challenging assignments and more intense and refined feedback on skill development. The role of the field supervisor to help social work interns make this shift can be profound. The field supervisor's capacity to provide regular, consistent, balanced, and motivational feedback is an important ingredient when cultivating learning that assists social work interns to move towards enhanced levels of confidence.

Summary

The intersection of deliberate practice and field education creates a synergistic learning environment. Field education, as the signature pedagogy, is focused on creating multiple opportunities for learning. The field supervisor, or external coach, sets the stage for goal-directed learning whereby an intern is expected to challenge themselves daily. Interns learn to embrace constructive, balanced feedback to become increasingly more competent over time. Deliberate practice by itself can set the stage for lifelong learning whereby one continues to seek constructive, balanced, and rich feedback to continuously enhance their practice over the life course of their professional career.

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