



# Promise and Price of Innovation: An MSW Student as a Field Supervisor/Seminar Facilitator for a BSW Program

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The primacy of field education in social work education is well established (Kissman & Van Tran, 1990; Knight, 1996; Savaya, Neta, Dorit, & Geron, 2003; Strom, K., 1991). This is clearly evidenced by the recent naming of field education as the “signature pedagogy” by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). Since CSWE began accrediting social work programs, evidence indicates that students report field practicum as the most important course in the curriculum (Briggs, 1977; Roberts, 1973; Savaya, Neta, Dorit, & Geron, 2003; Skolnik, 1988).

Securing and maintaining field supervisors and placement agencies is increasingly challenging for programs (Bogo, Raskin, & Wayne, 2002). Several authors have noted that many geographic areas have limited numbers of social workers available, with some locations having too few masters level social workers, which has led to a dearth of field supervisors and settings (Bogo et al; Ligon & Ward, 1999; Raskin, 1983; Strom, 1991; as cited in Kittle & Gross, 2005). According to Blake and Peterman, having a social worker as a field instructor is important, as a social worker is able to act as a role model and provide unique perspective (as cited in Kittle & Gross, 2005). Evidence from Strom (1991) indicates that social workers differ greatly in their expectations of students’ ability to embrace social work values from professionals from other disciplines; Strom also indicates that degreed social workers, both BSW and MSW, compared to field instructors from other disciplines, are better prepared for the educational function of field supervisor.

A recent undertaking between a BSW program and a MSW program sought to address the needs and obstacles of both programs. This endeavor would provide a novel placement for a third year MSW intern who was pursuing a macro level educational placement. It would enhance the staffing of the BSW program and offer an additional field placement for a BSW student. This is a report from the Coordinator of the BSW program at Franciscan University Steubenville (FUS) about the promise and price of this innovative effort.

## Planning the Project

Because of the acknowledged importance of field instruction to social work education, the FUS Field Coordinator had many factors to consider before agreeing to the arrangement that is the focus of this report. Certainly the benefits and/or consequences for the BSW students were an important consideration, but the Coordinator had to be certain that the MSW student met the established program criteria for field supervisors, and that the proposed internship met the criteria for an acceptable and appropriate field setting. In addition, the learning needs of the MSW student would have to be addressed.

Three distinct activities for interaction between the MSW student and the BSW students were identified. First, the MSW student would take on supervisory responsibility for one BSW student placed in the MSW's place of employment, a child welfare agency. Second, the MSW student would serve as a co-facilitator, along with the program's field liaison, for the concurrent weekly field seminar attended by all 13 senior field students. The MSW student and the field liaison split responsibility for the didactic information on the course outline for the seminar, and each led the instruction and discussion of that material. According to Coulton and Krimmer (2005), co-supervision provides a broader base of support for students. Results from these authors' exploratory study indicated that students valued the exposure to diverse areas of expertise. Finally, the MSW student would provide one-on-one modeling regarding a social work perspective to six field students who did not have a degreed social worker for a field supervisor, as required by the program and CSWE. To fulfill this task, the MSW student met individually with each student who did not have a degreed social worker for a supervisor on a weekly basis. The MSW student would review the BSW's field activities and situations, and help the student to examine them from a social work perspective.

The Coordinator had to be certain that the MSW student could fulfill the planned obligations of serving as a field supervisor. Program criteria for field supervisors include having adequate practice knowledge and experience, being invested in social work practice, and the ability to help students meet all of the practicum requirements. The Coordinator was convinced that the MSW student possessed the necessary qualities and met the needed requirements. The MSW student had worked in social services for many years and the agency was directed by two MSWs during those years. The graduate student was in her third and final year of the MSW program and had completed the majority of her social work courses. The Coordinator, having worked with the graduate student in her first placement, felt comfortable that she shared the knowledge base, skills, and values of professional social workers. The student strongly supported the person-in-environment perspective and practiced empowerment with her clients. Furthermore, the MSW student had a strong desire to work with the BSW students and she had a wealth of experience that she could share. The MSW student could provide a clear understanding of the child welfare system, while giving the BSW student various learning activities and experiences. She could serve as a role model and potentially inspire students to consider child welfare as a career choice, where trained social workers are sorely needed.

A final advantage identified was that the student was strongly motivated to perform effectively in her placement. Fortune, Lee and Cavazos (2005) suggest that highly motivated individuals are more likely to succeed. The Coordinator of the BSW program arranged to supervise the MSW student weekly, in agreement with the MSW's school.

With regard to meeting the criteria for an acceptable placement setting, the MSW student's place of employment, a public child welfare agency, certainly qualified. In fact, the agency was already an approved agency and had been accepting Franciscan University interns for many years. The agency was committed to social work education, and had recently hired one student from the FUS program who had completed her practicum there. The agency offered a range of activities and tasks for the BSW student, and the agency administrator was in agreement to having the MSW student serve as a field supervisor. The CSWE accreditation standards require that the master's level student have the chance for advanced practice opportunities. It was clear that the MSW student would, through her placement with the BSW program, have new and different experiences than those she had in her foundational placement, which she had completed in a correctional setting under the supervision of the Coordinator. While her university had approved the idea of the placement with the BSW program, they provided few guidelines or expectations regarding tasks that should be provided for her. Mor Barak, Travis, and Bess (2004) list various skills that are recognized as important to social work managers, which are useful for planning activities for macro level placements. These include leadership, personnel management, fundraising, supervision, marketing, and program evaluation. Regehr, Anstice, Bogo, Lim, and Donovan (2012) identified six categories of skills and attributes that field supervisors value regarding macro level students, including learning and growth, behavior and relationships, leadership, critical thinking, communication, and values and ethics. The planned tasks and activities for the MSW student were centered on the aforementioned skills, and the categories were used to evaluate the MSW student's performance.

### **Results of the Venture**

The Coordinator at FUS was able to oversee the results of the venture, using research gathered by the MSW student. The experience, as might have been expected, had both positive and negative consequences for the BSW students, the program, and the MSW student. In general, the venture was a success for the BSW program and its interns. Both facilitators had extensive practice experience and they were able to share their experiences with seminar students, which proved very helpful and meaningful, according to the BSW students. The students reportedly found the MSW student to be particularly supportive and understanding. They shared that she was more likely to encourage them to share in the seminar, and was less likely to criticize them. This cannot be understated in light of evidence from Bogo, Globerman, and Sussman (2004), who suggest that sharing with others and feeling a level of comfort in the group can be difficult for students. The BSW students felt the MSW student could relate to them and their concerns, including constraints on their time, the pressure to meet numerous deadlines, and the skills needed to balance all of their responsibilities in the field and

classroom. These issues were the focus of many individual sessions with the students, along with other topics, including professional identity and successfully working with professionals from other disciplines. Bogo, Globerman, and Sussman (2004) point out that coupling group and individual supervision clouds the unique contribution of each, but it seems reasonable to infer that the MSW had a positive effect on the students as a result of both her individual and group interactions.

The MSW student conducted a survey of the students to determine whether the seminar, which she co-facilitated, met its goal of bridging classroom learning and field practice. This survey, which was based on the course objectives for the seminar, revealed that the seminar was moderately effective in accomplishing its goal. In fact, the seminar was seen as effective regardless of students' age, gender, educational background of the field supervisor, or population served by the field agency. The items rated highest were the effectiveness of the seminar in (1) increasing the student's ability to engage in practice consistent with the ethics and values of the social work profession, (2) allowing the student to demonstrate ongoing professional growth, development, and identity as a social worker, (3) allowing the student to demonstrate the ability to provide support and encouragement to other students, and (4) helping the student to evaluate the suitability of the field placement for enhancing their preparation for professional social work practice. These results point to specific benefits of the seminar regarding the integration of field and coursework, which can be partially attributed to the contribution of the MSW student.

Benefits for the MSW student were also evident. The MSW student had opportunities to demonstrate her skills and abilities related to each of the categories outlined by Regehr et al. (2012). First, with regard to learning and growth, she demonstrated positive behaviors related to her eagerness to learn, and her enthusiasm and self-awareness. She showed that same level of enthusiasm in her interactions with the students. As for relationships, the second category, she worked effectively with the Coordinator of the field program and the students. In terms of leadership, the third category, she had taken on a placement that was totally unique and for which she had to take risks and design a meaningful experience with little precedent. The students found her to be a positive role model and very encouraging. With regard to critical thinking, category four, the MSW student had to use these skills in her interactions with her practicum student at her agency, but also in her interactions as co-facilitator of the seminar group. She had to practice within the structure of the university and the social work program, applying policy to practice and practice to policy. Communication is the fifth category, and the MSW student was inspiring and dynamic in her presentation of information, according to the BSW students. Her evaluation of the project was thoroughly researched and thoughtfully written. Finally, she demonstrated that her performance with the students throughout the year was ethical and competent. She was sensitive to the unique needs of each of them and several viewed her as a mentor. Ultimately, the student gained much needed supervisory experience while identifying as a professional social worker. She was pleased with her overall experience and shortly after her graduation she obtained a supervisory position in a mental health setting.

It took considerable effort to arrange appropriate supervision for the MSW student. The FUS Coordinator's experience in supervision and in field education administration was a good match for the MSW student's needs; in addition, the student participated in a monthly seminar with her cohort at her school. However, there were some obvious difficulties with the arrangement of the FUS field liaison and the MSW student working together to lead the BSW seminar. Both the liaison and the MSW student struggled with one another regarding their position in the group, as is often typical with co-facilitators. The importance for the BSW students to perceive the facilitators as equals was stressed by the Coordinator on several occasions, yet this struggle continued the entire academic year. Toseland and Rivas (2009) assert that co-leaders should openly discuss their relationship with one another which, unfortunately in this case, was not practiced, at least not often enough. Efforts by the Coordinator to meet with the co-leaders together were not successful due to scheduling conflicts, which may have been indicative of their general unwillingness to work more cooperatively. An alternative, suggested by Toseland and Rivas (2009), would have been to have the leaders meet directly following the group in order to address issues and concerns between them. However, the leaders' struggles did not appear to have a major impact on the BSW students. The Coordinator had all thirteen field students in class in each of the semesters during this pilot project, and the seminar was periodically discussed with them. Not once did the students mention a perceived conflict between the facilitators. The Coordinator also had numerous one-on-one meetings with the students, and again the aforementioned conflict acknowledged by the coordinator was never mentioned by students. Finally, no mention of any perceived difficulty between the leaders was ever mentioned in student field journals. In the end, the Coordinator deemed that the difficulties of the facilitators were functions of their inexperience in supervision, and that each had learned a great deal in this process.

### **Implications**

Developing a meaningful and challenging placement often requires creativity and flexibility. This particular endeavor hinged on risk-taking by faculty members from both universities. Both social work programs seemed to benefit from the experience on numerous levels. The BSW students benefited from having two experienced social work professionals leading the weekly seminar. The students appreciated the MSW student, who was clearly a role model for them. The MSW student was allowed to try new roles and develop new skills in a setting that is not a typical field placement. The BSW program was able to utilize the skills and experience of the masters level student to augment program staffing.

This innovative approach also revealed additional benefits along with some challenges. Both group leaders gained supervisory experience and had the chance for self-reflection. Bogo, Globerman, and Sussman (2004) found that the key benefit of group supervision and supervisors was the opportunity to learn from one another. Many authors have indicated that preparation for the leadership role is necessary; this is one area where greater attention is indicated. Leading learning groups is different

than clinical groups, and different knowledge and skills are necessary (Bogo, Globerman, & Sussman, 2004). The lack of clinical experience on the part of the co-leaders in facilitating groups may have not been fully appreciated and managed when this endeavor was initiated. According to Toseland and Rivas (2009), "persons who are training to become groups workers should begin by becoming thoroughly familiar with the theoretical knowledge about groups as a whole and the way members and leaders function in groups" (p. 123). Time constraints on the part of the Coordinator of Field Education and the co-leaders interfered with much needed discussion and instruction related to roles and leadership style. Toseland and Rivas advise that having co-leaders who do not agree with one another is worse than leading a group alone. In addition, ongoing joint meetings would have been helpful in assessing the dynamics between the leaders and their work with the group. Coulton and Krimmmer (2005) suggest that supervision of the co-supervision process is needed to monitor the effectiveness of the process.

### **Conclusion**

Social work programs are always seeking challenging and meaningful placements for students. Securing quality placements and field supervisors often requires a willingness to consider unique or non-traditional settings and supervision arrangements. Openness to novel placements can lead to unlimited possibilities for students and programs. Social work programs must be flexible regarding their policies, and field coordinators must be proactive. Enhanced collaboration between bachelors and masters level programs and between social work programs at different universities can lead to unique and rewarding opportunities for students and programs. As Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin (2006) conclude, previously untried approaches are necessary if social work educators are to remain committed to preparing highly qualified practitioners.

However, enthusiasm about new models must be tempered by the awareness of the price of innovation. In this case, schools of social work depended on an MSW intern's skill and experience to solve the problem of finding a convenient placement as well as supervision for BSW students. With a less gifted and independent MSW student, or with less oversight from the Coordinator, the MSW student and/or the BSW students could have experienced difficulties. Developing and implementing a placement arrangement to suit the needs of a student who was employed full-time required intensive planning and flexibility of supervision. It is crucial that schools of social work understand that innovative programs demand more, not less, investment from field education departments. The cost to the field education departments cannot be underestimated; at each stage, intensive collaboration is necessary to avoid disappointments, compromise of student learning goals, conflicts of interest, and/or problems with role boundaries. The experience of these participants also underscores the importance of careful evaluation of all new programs from the perspective of the various stakeholders. The MSW student offered important insights in her evaluation of the BSW seminar; formal evaluation of larger innovative ventures will be necessary to determine which efforts will bear fruit.

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