



# Online Supervision of Field Education

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Social work degree programs have many reasons for adopting internet technology to support classroom and field education. Many social work programs draw students from large geographical areas. Traveling to campus from remote locations places significant economic burden on many students, especially in an era of shrinking incomes and increased transportation costs. Offering online degree programs enables these geographically isolated students to remain in home communities for their social work education, and often results in a more comprehensive regional distribution of social work professionals (Ives & Aitken, 2008). Other programs have developed online MSW and BSW degrees as an alternative to the traditional academic schedule, particularly for students already working in the profession. In some communities, proprietary universities reach out to these students, offering online degree programs that compete with those located in state-supported universities. In many of these markets, state-supported and private university-based MSW and BSW programs are pressured to develop online degree programs in order to remain competitive, relevant, or simply to keep their doors open.

Given these current realities, field educators are called to develop methods for using the internet to support field education. A small but growing body of knowledge is emerging regarding the use of online technology for various aspects of the field practicum experience. Early adopters of online technology employed email to answer questions from and remain connected to field students (Evans, 2003). While this proved to be a useful method for communication, concerns included the lack of technology “literacy” and limited internet access. Other field educators pioneered the use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) such as Blackboard and WebCT (Roberts-DeGennaro, Brown, Min & Siegel, 2005). These VLEs were primarily used for interaction between learners via discussion boards, and as repositories for documents and other educational materials.

Most articles regarding these early efforts either describe the technological aspects of online course delivery or the learning outcomes of online versus face-to-face (F2F) students. Few articles present models specifically designed to support field education through online seminars or supervision. Only a handful of articles associate these efforts with a particular educational theory or discuss pedagogies for online delivery of these core field practicum activities. Wolfson, Magnuson and Marson (2005)

describe their use of WebCT to conduct an online field seminar for students in geographically remote locations. Through a combination of private emails to the instructor and public discussion boards on WebCT, students in the online seminars engaged in the same activities as their F2F peers. The online students rated the discussion boards as useful to their learning in greater numbers than their F2F peers rated their own in-person classroom discussions. Similarly, Bushfield (2005) used Blackboard to host field seminar discussions and case presentations. Students in Bushfield's field seminars noted that the online format enabled them to address discussion topics with greater depth and reflection. While both of these articles report some measure of success, both also relied on asynchronous methods (students are online and responding to course material at different times) versus synchronous methods (students are online and responding to each other in a "live" format).

Oterholm (2009) adds significant depth to the discussion of internet-supported field education by blending synchronous and asynchronous methods and connecting these technologies to existing pedagogies of learning. His fully online critical reflection seminar included a synchronous online chat room and an asynchronous virtual forum to assist learners in developing critical reflection skills. The seminar used Salmon's (2005) model for e-learning which includes five steps for moving the student from accessing technology to mastering course content. These steps include (1) developing the motivation to participate, (2) online socialization, (3) information exchange, (4) knowledge construction and (5) developing one's own ideas. Oterholm found that using a combination of synchronous and asynchronous formats overcame the deficits of using just one method or the other. For example, the online chat allowed for immediate exchange of ideas and a dynamic process, while the discussion board resulted in more time for reflective responses.

A comprehensive search of social work literature reveals that additional studies of this blend of technologies in field education have yet to be published. However, a review of the workshop schedule for the Council on Social Work Education's 57th Annual Program Meeting found five workshops addressing the use of synchronous and asynchronous methods in field education. Field educators are experimenting with these methods and are exploring theories and best practices. An intriguing option that has recently emerged is the use of a live online video connection to facilitate face-to-face field seminars from multiple remote locations. Face-to-face interaction and the use of teachable moments in field seminar has been a much-lamented loss in the use of online technologies. Live internet conferencing may provide a vehicle for overcoming this deficit.

Clearly, this emerging aspect of field education has far-reaching implications for the effective acquisition of professional social work practice skills. Online field education also brings up a plethora of issues related to pedagogy, learning styles and access to education. Conference proceedings suggest that many field educators are experimenting with these ideas and concepts; they are also contributing to the knowledge base of this significant shift in delivery of field education. What is called for is a set of best practices we can all attempt, measure, revise and support.

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