



Field Learning in Social Work Education: Implications for Educators and Instructors

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Abstract:

Field learning plays a leading role in social work education, and as such, social work educators and field instructors need to know how their students learn and develop during the field education experience; by being aware of the ways in which students learn and develop in social work agencies, educators and instructors can better understand students' educational needs and find ways to best support them through the learning process in practice. In this spirit, the article examines field learning in social work education in relation to the two dominant learning approaches for students as adult learners [individual approaches (adult learning theory) and sociocultural learning approaches] and looks at their application in field placement settings. The article highlights the multifaceted nature of field learning while suggesting that sociocultural approaches are closely associated with the nature of learning in field settings, and as such, they are particularly important for understanding the process of students' learning in social work field education.

Introduction

Social work as a practiced-based profession (IFSW/IASSW, 2014) requires a combination of theoretical and practical learning. Both types of learning are important for students to become professional social workers, and they take place inside and outside the university classroom through the field education experience.

In both classroom and field settings, the process of learning is critical for students to help them acquire, practice, and improve the values, skills, and knowledge needed for the profession. Learning enables students to become competent and ethical professional social workers, and as such, it can be seen as a developmental process that normally begins from the early stages of students' entrance into their educational programmes and continues throughout their field placement with social work agencies. From this perspective, learning impacts the whole educational process and is therefore considered as a long-term developmental and critical process, the purpose of which should be not only to inform, but also to change and transform (Dewey, 1997; Mezirow, 2000; Hager, 2005).

Despite the critical importance of learning for students' future outcomes, too often social work educators and field instructors do not take the much-needed time to step back and reflect on the ways in which students learn and develop in classroom and field settings. In the field work practicum particularly, educators and instructors tend to focus more on the operational and task-oriented nature of learning than on the process of learning itself, while they also underestimate the value of critical reflection in student learning during the field experience. But being aware of how social work students achieve their learning objectives in field education is of paramount importance to understanding the ways in which they learn about their professional role in the practice of social work and formulate their professional identities from field experiences. Given the importance of this issue, this article discusses field learning in social work education in relation to the two dominant learning approaches for students as adult learners [individual approaches (adult learning theory) and sociocultural learning approaches].

Before understanding the theories of learning presented in this article, however, it is useful to discuss briefly below the different types of learning in social work education in general and then look at the benefits, purposes, and importance of learning in/through fieldwork practice for social work students.

Overview of Learning in Social Work Education

A review of the relevant literature has shown that learning is a very broad term that usually encompasses many different forms and types. However, formal and informal learning appear to be the dominant learning types referred to in the social work education literature. The distinction between formal and informal learning is theoretically helpful, because it provides a framework for understanding the different types of students' learning as adult learners. But, it is important to note here that such a distinction is not always easy to draw. Indeed, the distinction between formal and informal learning is less clear-cut when applied to field education, one goal of which is the integration of classroom and field learning.

Formal learning processes are normally connected with institutionalised learning, such as academic, classroom-based, or laboratory learning (Eraut, 1994; Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 2001). Formal learning processes are highly structured and often take place off the job and outside the social work practice environment. Sometimes, formal learning can also be present in daily work: for example, on-the-job training courses. According to Eraut (1994), formal learning is linked to explicit knowledge (i.e., the knowledge derived from lectures, courses, books, etc.).

On the other hand, informal [11](#) or non-formal learning takes place primarily in workplace or field placement settings, is linked with daily activities, is self-directed, and is also highly unstructured and experiential (Eraut, 1994, 2000; Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 2001). Informal and unplanned learning may also take place within the formal institutional context—for example, between students or between

students and staff. Informal learning is a sort of experiential learning that enables students to acquire the necessary knowledge, values, and skills for the social work profession through their daily contact with the real world of practice. As students learn to recognize the informal processes of learning and especially those related to professional social work values and ethics, they are able to reflect critically and ethically upon their own or others' experiences, build upon them, and transfer them to other situations.

Like formal learning, informal learning is usually influenced by the cultural, social, political, and historical context in which it takes place, as well as by the person providing this type of learning. Garrick (1998) notes that informal learning is never neutral and that, in essence, it is linked with situated ethics [\[2\]](#), an area that has hardly been examined by the workplace researchers. As he nicely puts it: Informal learning is, however, never neutral. It is never independent of sociality, and as such, learning will be influenced by a person's social positioning at work or indeed anywhere. Social positioning will influence access to and experience of learning opportunities. It will shape one's identity, leading to different knowledges of 'reality'. One's conception of 'reality', one's experience, is not simply a 'given', and can never be read as unproblematic. (p.17)

Informal learning or non-formal learning is primarily linked to adult education because of its "learner-centred focus" and its "experiential" nature (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 2001), and it can be individual or social, tacit or explicit (Eraut, 2000). In relation to the latter, informal learning is mainly connected with implicit or tacit knowledge, which is associated with doing rather than saying in professional practice.

Polanyi (1976) was the first to distinguish between explicit and tacit (or implicit) knowledge and talk about the tacit dimension of human learning. He believed human knowledge cannot be fully explicit because it has personal and tacit elements. Tacit knowledge is associated with the hidden curriculum of professional practice, as opposed to the explicit knowledge of the overt curriculum concerning formal education or organisational statements (Coulehan & Williams, 2003; Hugman, 2005). The term "hidden curriculum" refers to values, attitudes, and unwritten rules that are implicitly conveyed in an organisation and the social environment and that have been "influential on the developing professional as they learn in the workplace" (Hafferty & Hafler, 2011, p. 17). The hidden curriculum (or implicit curriculum) is seen as another way to teach values to social work students (Inlay, 2003).

As mentioned earlier, the learning process can take different forms. In social work education in particular, learning is not only cognitive but also experiential. Aristotle, the father of experiential education, once said, "for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." Similarly, Kolb (1984), the modern father of experiential learning theory, said learning is more meaningful if it has been done through actual experience, because experience is the key to success in any endeavor. Kolb (1984) considered experiential learning as a process that links education, work and personal development.

Because learning always takes place in a social context, it is said to be a constructivist activity situated within the specific context of a learning environment and culture (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Bandura (1978), a renowned social learning theoretician, developed the concept of reciprocal determinism to explain that learning as development stems from the interaction between a person and the environment; this means that the person, behaviour (activity) and environment interact in complex ways so the environment influences the person, and the person influences the environment.

From the above, it is clear that learning is essential to students' professional development. In particular, as mentioned, learning for/and development through the field placement in a professional work environment is crucial for students to build a competent and ethical professional self under real-life conditions, as discussed in the section below.

Learning Social Work in Field Settings: Benefits for Students

Field learning ^[3] occupies a central role in the curricula of social work schools around the world. Indeed, a glance at the history of social work education reveals that, since the foundation of the first schools of social work until today, field placement learning has been at the heart of social work education, while approaches to field learning and the criteria used to evaluate students' learning and performance vary across schools and countries (Doel & Shardlow, 2005; Bogo, 2010; Doel, Shardlow, & Johnson, 2011; Reamer, 2012). But, why is field learning such a fundamental component of the social work educational process?

Field learning is a type of experiential learning that social work students engage in through their placements in social work agencies. Shardlow & Doel (1996) have described this type of learning as follows:

The learning that occurs whilst a student is on placement in a social work agency. It should not be taken to imply that students do not learn about practice in class settings.

It refers to the context of learning in the practice agency. (p. 5)

During the field practicum, social work students are moving from class-based learning to learning by doing, which marks their entrance into the world of the profession and the demands of learning through work. So field learning is regarded as the missing link between theory and professional practice (Parker, 2007). The whole process resembles a theatrical rehearsal, as students are gradually prepared to play the role of the future social worker. In particular, at the final stage of fieldwork practice, social work students seem to participate in a "prova generale" before entering into the professional arena.

Under normal circumstances, field learning is the richest experience for students, because it provides them a unique opportunity to deepen their knowledge about the social work profession through active participation in it. Throughout their practical experience, students are able to work with actual

clients, interact with experienced social work staff and other professionals and learn to develop interpersonal skills through contact with clients, peers, and role models. Noble (2001) points out that the process of “knowing and doing” through field learning helps students learn to make decisions in real situations. In other words, as students are increasingly involved in professional practice, they become initiated into the decision-making procedure in the workplace where – in most cases – the acquisition of this knowledge at a practical level is often more complicated than in theory.

Schneck (1995) describes fieldwork practice as “the nexus of influence having one foot in academia and the other in the reality of practice” (p. 6). This interim statement can be seen as a further advantage for students, because it makes them feel free from the duties of the professional role. In other words, the fact that students, by nature of their role, are still between two worlds – i.e., between school and the profession – enables them to have the time to reflect in and on practice as opposed to professionals who are, in most cases, pressed for time because of the volume of cases undertaken and bureaucratic procedures that exist in the working environment. So, given the benefits of their role, students can enjoy the merits of field learning without the pressures and risks of the workplace. Lager & Cooke Robbins (2004) concisely refer to the benefits that social work students can gain from fieldwork experience as follows:

In the field, students have the opportunity to test what they learn in the classroom; integrate theory with practice; evaluate the effectiveness of interventions; contend with the realities of social, political and economic injustice; strive for cultural sensitivity and competence; deliberate on the choices posed by ethical dilemmas; develop a sense of self in practice; and build a connection to and identity with the profession. (p. 3)

Based on the above, it can be said that social work students’ interactions with the real world of the profession and its demands lead them to a new pathway of knowledge and action concerning the social reality and how it is mirrored in the workplace. In this regard, fieldwork practice can be viewed as a challenge for students wherein they apply theoretical knowledge taught in academic settings, connect practice with theory, acquire new knowledge, and gain practical skills necessary for the profession (Noble, 2001; Lager & Cooke Robbins, 2004). Regehr, Regehr, Leeson, & Fusko (2002) summarise the merits of field learning saying that it is a “primary opportunity for students to integrate knowledge, values, and skills into their professional self concepts” (p. 56).

Field learning substantially contributes to acquisition of the practical or interpretive knowledge (the “know how”) required for any caring profession. In social work education, practical knowledge can be seen as a continuum of the codified knowledge (the “know what”) that occurs in the academic milieu, according to Eraut’s (1994, 2000) typology of knowledge. For Eraut, indeed, the combination of practical knowledge with codified academic knowledge is vital for the formation of the so-called professional knowledge for students.

The benefits of field learning for students not only relate to their professional development, but also to their personal development. Field learning in practice settings can contribute to students' personal development in a number of ways; during the fieldwork experience, students come into direct contact or interact with different categories of individuals, groups and professionals, as well as people with different personalities, cultures, and philosophies with whom they are likely to work later in their professional lives. Through this interplay, social work students have hands-on opportunities to discover new ideas or think about themselves and their own values, prejudices, and attitudes towards others, while learning to manage emotions and feelings within real-world agency settings.

In order to be successful, however, student learning under the direction of field instructors is of paramount importance; field instructors as practice teachers and supervisors are resource persons for their students; they use their theoretical and practical knowledge to assist students to internalise sets of principles, attitudes, and values that will partly govern their future professional behaviour. They also play a key role in helping students develop their ethics, skills, and knowledge and build ethical courage through guiding their practice in the workplace (Bogo, 2010; Doel, Shardlow, & Johnson, 2011; Reamer, 2012).

It is widely accepted in social work education that through the process of fieldwork placement, students can transform themselves from receivers into producers of professional knowledge, values, and skills. But this transformation is not instant, because field learning is a developmental process.

Approaches to Learning in Field Settings

The workplace has always been an important site for health and social care students' learning in real-world conditions. Hence, during the last 30 years, there have been heated debates among learning theorists about how students learn and develop through practice in the workplace. Central to these debates are issues concerning the processes of learning and knowledge transfer at the site. In his historical review of workplace learning theories, Hager (2005) identified two broad categories of learning theories, each with its own epistemological assumptions about knowledge and knowing. The first includes approaches that see workplace learning as a product, while the second looks at learning as a participatory process in a community of practice:

Early accounts of workplace learning were strongly influenced by the learning as product view. Here the focus of learning was on learners acquiring novel attributes.

More recent accounts are very much in line with the learning as process view. (p. 829)

Hager's description of the two paradigms of learning at work is very similar to Sfard's (1998) view of learning as a metaphorical concept – the learning as acquisition metaphor and the learning as participation metaphor – which has largely influenced the educational thought of western societies in recent years (cited in Hager, 2005).

According to Sfard's distinction, learning as acquisition is in line with individual approaches to workplace learning, while learning as participation is consistent with sociocultural or social/situational approaches. This implies that some views focus on workplace learning from an individual perspective, and others emphasize the social, organizational, and cultural dimensions of such learning. Paavola, Lipponen, & Hakkarainen (2004) summarise the differences between the acquisition metaphor approaches and those of the participation metaphor:

Approaches belonging to the acquisition metaphor typically emphasize individuals, processes happening in individuals' minds, conceptual knowledge, and clear-cut logical rules. To these features can be added innovativeness, such as in models of inquiry where creative efforts of searching through conceptual spaces are emphasized [...]

Approaches belonging to the participation metaphor typically emphasize communities, social practices, activities, and the situated nature of human cognition and knowledge.

This emphasis can also include progressive development of activities. (p. 569)

There follows a general description of the two most prevalent categories of adult learning theories in social work practice (individual and sociocultural) given that it is beyond the scope of this article to get too detailed about this vast field of learning approaches.

Individual Approaches – Adult Learning Theory

Individual approaches emphasize learning as acquisition, as described above, and focus on how students as individual adults learn. Basically, individual learning theories look at the individual students' ability to be successful learners, and as a rule, they vary from student to student depending on different characteristics. In her review of the empirical literature on social work field education, Bogo (2006) points out that the few studies attempting to identify students' characteristics that influence their learning path have shown that demographic factors, degree of anxiety about the practicum, learning style, and psychiatric disability influence individual learning in field placement settings.

Despite individual differences in learning, social work students, as adult learners, have some common characteristics. Knowles, the father of andragogy ^[4] theory, identified six assumptions about adult learning (Knowles, 1990; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) which, according to Bogo (2010) and Gitterman (2004), are particularly relevant to social work students as adult learners in practice settings, and are therefore important for understanding how they approach their field practice.

First, the learner's "need to know" requires them to be engaged in the learning process in order to satisfy it. In field education, social work literature has shown that, when students are actively engaged in the learning process, they are better able to deepen their knowledge of the discipline and make links between theory and practice; they can also better understand the structure of the organization (Bogo, 2010).

Second, the learner's self-concept relates to the autonomy and self-directedness of the student as an adult learner. Social work students, as self-directed learners, need to be proactive in their learning and capable of taking responsibility for themselves and their behaviours. In this context, when students are able to take responsibilities for their actions, they become capable of knowing the difference between right and wrong and make ethical choices and decisions that have a positive impact on clients, colleagues or other professionals, and organizations.

Third, the role of the learner's experiences – adult learners bring life experiences and knowledge to their learning process. According to this assumption, students who have had life and/or work experience like applying or transferring their prior knowledge and experience to a new situation. In social work, the literature has clearly shown that students with previous life or work experience may be less anxious, learn faster, and perform more competently in field education than those without (Bogo, 2010).

Fourth, readiness to learn. Adult learners are ready to learn when they want to know how to perform certain tasks and roles. Gitterman (2004) states that "social work students are ready to learn because of their aspirations for professional careers as well as the immediate demands of field work" (p. 101). Students' readiness for field learning is a key factor for their success in the placement, and therefore, it will be taken into consideration during the assessment to enter field practicum.

Fifth, orientation to learning. Adults learners are task-centred (or problem-centred) in their orientation to learning. Task-centered and problem-based learning is at the heart of field education. As the relevant literature indicates, social work students as adult learners tend to learn more when instruction is centered on relevant real-world tasks or problems (Shardlow & Doel, 1996; Bogo, 2010; Doel, Shardlow, & Johnson, 2011). In field education, thus, task-centered learning activities are vitally important for students to familiarize themselves with the profession in a real working environment, as well as to develop professional skills needed to work as a social worker.

Finally, motivation to learn. Adults learners want to learn and are internally motivated to do so. Students want to be listened to and talk about their preferences, interests, and opinions during field education. Student motivation to learn can, however, be blocked or limited by educational programmes that do not take into account adult learning assumptions or by previous educational experiences that have prepared them poorly (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005).

Sociocultural Approaches

As a counterpart to individual learning approaches, sociocultural (or social/situational) learning approaches go beyond the individual by emphasising the individual in the social context. Sociocultural approaches argue strongly for the importance of the social, relational, and situational aspects of

learning.

Historically, sociocultural approaches are strongly influenced by the American philosopher and educator Dewey and the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, who contributed to the dualist dichotomy of the individual and society (Hager, 2005). Both learning theorists broke new ground in the understanding of the social aspects of learning, as both argued that learning in an actual context is a form of social interaction and collaboration. Today, the ideas of Dewey and Vygotsky have been extended further by more recent ideas about learning in practice, such as the notions of situated learning and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999). These ideas are popular in the Anglo-phone social work literature and constitute an overarching framework to better understand how the learning and development process occurs in the practice context.

According to Lave & Wenger (1991), whose research was based on observing very diverse workplace communities, learning involves the whole person (not just the mind), where through participation, “agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other” (p. 31). In this view, social work students learn from, through, and with their interactions with others – their supervisors or field instructors, other students, work groups, other professionals, and more advanced or experienced others. Jarvis (1999) calls this type of learning “learning from secondary experience.” Further, students learn through their engagement in authentic activities within the workplace, which operates as a community of practice. For Wenger (1999), meaningful situated experiences enable students to fully identify with their profession.

Lave & Wenger (1991) see a “community of practice as a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Wenger (1999) points out that participation in a community of practice “shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (p. 4). This learning is described as learning from primary experience (Jarvis, 1999), and according to Eraut & Hirsh (2007), workplaces tend to emphasise this type of learning. In addition, Lave & Wenger suggest that stable and well-bounded communities of practice enable newcomers to move from the novice stage to the expert stage through full participation within the community of professionals.

The key aspect of situated learning is the concept of the apprentice observing the community of practice. This means that students learn by observing from the boundary or “legitimate peripheral participation,” which enables students to increasingly put together the culture of the community and what it means to be a member: “to be able to participate in a legitimately peripheral way entails that newcomers have broad access to arenas of mature practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 110). From this perspective, students learn in the workplace through observing the conduct of their field instructors, peers, or other people significant to them. Students also learn by observing organisational practices and the cultural norms within the organisation.

For Lave & Wenger (1991), the observation of others' behaviours, values, and attitudes within the workplace is very important, because it is likely to influence the learners' values and actions for life. Therefore, good or poor work practices impact students' ethical behaviour and practice accordingly. Within education, however, as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) has shown and a number of empirical studies have confirmed, students, as novice adult learners, learn not only by observation, but also by instruction. Vygotsky (1978) developed the concept of the "zone of proximal development" to explain how individuals learn through social interaction and through the assistance of more experienced others. In a similar way, Rogoff (1990) uses the term "guided participation" to show that individuals learn through more competent others and through guided participation with others in culturally valued activities.

Common Criticisms of Individual and Sociocultural Approaches

Despite their importance in understanding students' learning in field education, individual and sociocultural approaches to learning are not beyond criticism. Adult learning theory developed by Knowles, for example, has been criticised for focusing on the individual learning process without taking into account the social context and its role in learning. Learning is seen as an individual process that takes place independent of a person's social, cultural, or organisational environment (Merriam, 2004; Hager, 2005). Limited research has also been conducted to evaluate its basic theoretical assumptions, resulting in a debate over whether adult learning theory as developed by Knowles is a theory of adult learning or just a set of principles that guide practice (Merriam, 2004). Despite the criticisms, Knowles's theory and the six assumptions of adult learning described remain, after over three decades, a fundamental approach in the field of adult education (Merriam, 2004; Bogo, 2010). Sociocultural approaches to learning as developed by Lave & Wenger's overall view of learning has also been criticised by a number of scholars and researchers. For instance, some scholars cast doubt on whether learning itself is the result of a participatory process in a community of experts (Hay, 1993; Hager, 2005). More specifically, Hay (1993) points out that newcomers' entrance into a workplace community is not an automatic process, because there may be situations where the community of practice is feeble or exhibits power relationships that seriously obstruct access and participation. In a similar vein, Guile and Griffiths (2001) argue that full access and engagement in a community of practice requires a host organisation able to provide learning opportunities for students to observe, discuss, practice, and exchange different approaches with members of the workplace community.

Not all social organisations are stable and well-defined environments; Engeström (1999, 2001) has demonstrated that learning is also likely to occur through the contradictions and tensions present within the workplace as an active system. Hager (2005) argues that the participation process does not necessarily lead to learning as change. For Hager, learning is the driving force for change and, as such, cannot only be considered in relation to participation as a process. Hager adds a third

dimension to the classical dichotomy of learning as acquisition or participation— that of learning as construction and/or reconstruction, which includes the “construction of the learning, of the self, and of the environment (world) which includes the self” (p. 842).

Implications and Future Research

As has been discussed above, learning to become a skilful, ethical social worker is a dynamic and complex process by its nature and, as such, has been characterized as a multifaceted phenomenon. In addition, learning in social work education is a developmental process. In this light, it has been said that novice students and senior/experienced students have different learning abilities and needs and therefore require different support during their field experience. Despite these differences, social work students as adult learners learn individually or collectively or from a combination of both approaches in general. In this regard, individual adult learning theories and sociocultural theoretical approaches provide a useful starting point for understanding learning and development in field settings. Hence, it is very important for schools of social work that provide training programmes for field instructors to incorporate information on the two dominant learning theories in order to help instructors gain a deeper understanding on how students learn in field agencies.

But, given that learning in field settings has a social/situational orientation and is a strongly relational process, special attention should be given to sociocultural approaches and their related concepts to learning; sociocultural approaches emphasize learning through guided participation and support in communities of practice and highlight the critical role of the social context in which students interact with others and learn to develop their professional skills, values, and ethics. In the future, it will be interesting to see some sociocultural research into students’ learning in field agencies, as this type of research is still very limited in social work. Such research can be used, for example, to explore the extent to which field agencies currently provide “communities of practice” and to look at how field agencies select and organize learning activities and opportunities for students in order to help them to formulate their roles as social workers within these communities.

Conclusion

Field learning has always been an integral part of the social work curriculum, given the practice nature of the profession. Clearly, social work educators and field instructors who are well prepared and knowledgeable about approaches to learning in field education can better understand and explain the complexity of learning in field social work placements and design programmes for students that meet their educational needs both individually and collectively. Hence, all stakeholders involved in the process of field learning (e.g. field educators, faculty liaisons, and university faculty) should be well aware of two significant learning theories, with a special emphasis on sociocultural approaches to learning. As the literature has clearly shown, students are generally motivated and ready to learn when they are in a safe, respectful environment and are given meaningful opportunities to practice their skills, values, and ethics and participate and contribute in the process of learning

(e.g. Shardlow & Doel, 1996; Bogo, 2010; Doel, Shardlow, & Johnson, 2011).

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[1] Eraut (2000) prefers the term “non-formal” learning rather than informal learning, because it better reflects the content of learning according to him: “informal is associated with so many other features of a situation – dress, discourse, behaviour, diminution of social differences, etc. – that its colloquial application as a descriptor of learning contexts may have little to do with learning per se.”(p.114)

[2] According to Simons and Usher (2000), situated ethics is local and specific to particular practices and is immune to universalization.

[3] The international literature uses a variety of terms to describe the activity concerning the practical part of social work education. Therefore, terms like “practice learning,” “field learning,” “field education,” “fieldwork,” “practicum,” “work-based learning,” “fieldwork practice,” “placemen,” “practice learning opportunity,” and “practice placement learning” essentially refer to the same activity. However, the North American literature usually prefers the terms which have the prefix “field.” In contrast, the UK literature is more familiar with the term “practice.”

[4] “practicum,” “work-based learning,” “fieldwork practice,” “placemen,” “practice learning opportunity,” and “practice placement learning” essentially refer to the same activity. However, the North American literature usually prefers the terms which have the prefix “field.” In contrast, the UK literature is more familiar with the term “practice.”