



In Defense of Process

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The social work field is currently focused on goal achievement, competence and evidence-based practice. We must not underestimate the importance of process. Becoming a social worker, being a field instructor and developing a collaborative relationship in supervision, even evaluation and gate-keeping – all of these are a process.

Becoming a social worker is a major life transition; students are often not prepared for the stresses of clients' emotional turmoil and of developing a professional self. Anxious about interviewing clients, they may feel that they have little to offer. As one student said, "Why don't they give this client a real therapist?" Learning about ethical practice, especially maintaining appropriate boundaries, requires interns to be aware of their own feelings and reactions. In addition to learning skills, interns need to use a meaningful form of process recording to reflect on their practice, interactions, and selves in supervision.

The supervisory relationship is the scaffolding for the teaching of social work skills and competencies. Becoming a field instructor is also a major life transition, a further development of the professional self (Urdang, 1999). Supervising a social work intern is not merely a matter of transferring knowledge and techniques to a novice; it is a special art that has to be cultivated. Field instructors, like students, may bring their own insecurities and performance anxieties into the relationship. An ongoing dialogue focused on the question, "How are we working together?" is essential. The field liaison has an important role in supporting both the field instructor and the intern in this process, and in helping to resolve disruptions in the supervisory relationship (Urdang, 1991).

Evaluation of interns in the field is a critical responsibility. Clarity is needed regarding expectations for student achievement and methods for assessing progress. We should ask what we are evaluating and what is considered evidence, not excluding the subjective/intersubjective and the affective. Meta-competencies like self-awareness are as important as competencies (Urdang, 2010). Evaluation should not be an abrupt procedure at the end of the semester; supervisors should regularly review the positive aspect of interns' work without avoiding discussion of their difficulties. One of the essential elements in dealing with problematic learning situations is the establishment of due process.

In all these areas – socializing students into the profession, developing a collaborative supervisory relationship, and evaluating intern performance – we must put process issues front and center as we prepare students to be social workers.

References

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