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# Utilizing Student/Peer-Facilitators to Create a Dynamic Field Seminar Learning Environment

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## **Introduction**

Schools of social work are training grounds for professionals who, on the whole, will continue on to practice in the community, as opposed to residing within “the ivory towers” of academia. In order to support students in bridging the gap between the academy and the practice world, integrative seminars are structured to connect course content to the students’ goals and experiences. The nature of the integrative classroom format enables students to make the connection between the theory of the profession and their practice in the field. As a result, the integrative seminar is the ideal classroom companion to field education.

There are over 700 students in the University of Michigan School of Social Work (U-M SSW) Master of Social Work program. Each year approximately 300 students are required to enroll in the foundation field seminar, taken concurrently with the student’s first term of field placement. Students start field placement in either fall or winter. In past years, the foundation field seminar was taught by adjunct faculty. In 2005, the field office faculty assumed teaching responsibility, instituting a small group discussion format based on the topic-focused group lecture. It was soon determined that the format was plagued by a number of issues, and the classes received poor-feedback ratings from student participants.

An MSW student saw an opportunity to reconfigure the course. Enrolling for independent study credit, Shoshana Hurand worked with field director Betsy Voshel to research and evaluate other schools’ field seminar models. They jointly designed a new foundation field seminar experience. The

resulting model (a seminar focused on reflective practice and integrative learning, and co-facilitated by a student/peer and a field faculty member) originated at U-M SSW ten years ago and has a tenured history of success according to both students and faculty.

### **Literature Review**

According to the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), field education is the “signature pedagogy” for social work education (CSWE, 2008). However, the literature contains very few recommendations regarding an educational approach whereby students, through a reflective process, learn how to integrate their knowledge and practice experiences.

Smith (2013) points out that there are a “limited number of studies that have evaluated social work students’ capacity to integrate field education and classroom learning” (p. 251). Bogo (2010), referencing earlier work by Wayne, Raskin, and Bogo (2006), states “integrative seminars may be offered as a vehicle to assist with theory-practice linkages, although accreditation standards have not required this particular pedagogical approach” (p. 13-14). Poe and Hunter (2009) “found that 96% of social work programs reported the presence of a seminar but that they discovered a wide variation in the concept, purpose and structure of the seminar” (as cited in Bogo, 2010, p. 14). Bogo (2010) concludes “there are no studies of integrative seminars in graduate social work programs, while anecdotally it seems as if the use of this educational approach is less pervasive” (p. 14).

Cheetham and Chivers (2005) developed and empirically tested a model of professional competence by looking at twenty professions, leading them to propose a new model of professional practice. Cheetham and Chivers (2005) found that colleagues valued consultation focused on problem solving. To address this gap, one could argue that a student/peer-facilitated seminar model focused on processing the field experience may be beneficial to students, simultaneously developing proficiency with the required competencies and practice behaviors (CSWE EPAS, 2008).

Ashwin (2003) and Topping (2005) articulate the valuable learning that takes place using the peer facilitator role. Topping (2015) states that “peer learning can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions” (p. 631). In summary, research supports the idea that bolstering the traditional seminar model by using student/peer-facilitators is an educational approach worthy of further discussion and exploration.

### **Determining the Model**

#### **History**

The idea of the foundation year field seminar being co-facilitated by student/peer and field faculty was developed after communication with field directors at peer institutions, study of different service-learning models, and a survey of U-M SSW students. Seminar formats and curricula were

surveyed from approximately fourteen other MSW programs and service-learning programs throughout the United States. At the time, few schools of social work had a concurrent field/seminar requirement and none were using student/peer-facilitators. In addition, a series of student-led focus groups was held to understand current students' perceptions of what would constitute an "ideal" field seminar experience.

Informed by the collected data, a series of changes (including modification to the goals, curriculum, and assignment) were made to the foundation field seminar format, leading to the current peer-facilitation model. After undergoing several trials, the peer-facilitator model was established with a principal emphasis on:

- supporting the ongoing development and discussion of field-based learning experiences
- providing an avenue to model, develop, and build collegial consultative relationships with classmates and faculty
- establishing a peer support system

With main principles established, a field seminar model was designed whereby students have the opportunity to:

- increase overall problem-solving skills related to field issues
- integrate the required competencies and practice behaviors linking field experiences with the classroom
- increase capacity to become a reflective practitioner
- learn how to give and receive constructive feedback
- receive support and mentorship from student/peer facilitators
- recognize and develop ethical behavior as a professional

Each seminar is co-facilitated by one student/peer and one field faculty member. All student/peer-facilitators have completed at least one term of field placement and are matriculating MSW candidates. The model allows students to develop an experiential and empathic relationship with the peer-facilitator, as well as benefiting from the field faculty's institutional and professional knowledge. The strength of the model rests on the premise that within the interdisciplinary approach, students learn in a team to collaborate, network, consult colleagues, problem-solve, and generate ideas.

### Student Readiness

The ultimate goal is to create a climate conducive to supportive peer consultation. In order to achieve this, the field department must be mindful of the varying degrees of readiness exhibited by first-time field students. This point was made by Gelman and Lloyd (2008), who referenced a study of clinical-peer mentoring with new nursing students that reduced the anxiety of the student nurses. Given that MSW candidates enter schools with varying levels of experience and social work exposure, it is apparent that some students will come more prepared to participate in field than others. A peer-learn-

ing model allows less experienced students to benefit from their more seasoned counterparts.

### **The New Field Seminar Model**

The newly constructed field seminar model assigns 16 students to a student/peer-facilitator and field faculty team to meet bi-weekly for two hours in two alternating sections. This results in a total of number of seven sessions during the students' first term in field placement. The model requires a workload of approximately three hours per class session between classroom time (two hours) and preparation and assignment feedback (one hour).

In addition, the entire facilitation team (all student/peer-facilitators and field faculty members) meet four times during the term for two-hour collaborative sessions. The goal of the monthly collaborative meeting is to reflect on the seminar model's effectiveness, evaluate the seminar curriculum, and develop and build professional collegial consultation skills. Part of the independent study course credit requires that the student facilitators co-lead and develop the training agenda for the facilitation team meetings whereby they clarify best practices, share classroom activities, and identify areas for improvement and future support. They also assist in recruitment and interviewing of potential new student facilitators.

A rigorous application and interview process recruits second-year or advanced standing students as student/peer-facilitators for each section. Selected students receive independent study credit for participation. Peer facilitators are required to attend an orientation session that focuses on the development of facilitation skills, team building, and the seminar curriculum. A transition team meeting is also required at the end of the term for the departing and incoming student facilitators.

A common syllabus is used for every section of the course. On the Foundation Educational Agreement, the NASW's required social work competencies and practice behaviors are paired with critical seminar curriculum points. Integration of the core competencies allows seminar students to fully connect coursework and seminar discussions with field-based learning experiences and assignments. Each competency is identified as a session theme for targeted discussions. Students frame their discussions based on the competencies, identify solutions to problems they are experiencing in field, and develop and practice collegial consultation and support with their fellow participants, student-peer facilitators, and the field faculty.

### **Taking Advantage of Technology**

The University of Michigan School of Social Work uses Canvas, a web-based and University-supported platform, for facilitation teams to post lesson plans to be used across multiple sections of the course. This ensures that the seminar content is consistent across all sections and that the course materials are accessible to students at any time. A uniform syllabus enables peer-facilitators and

faculty to explore beyond their usual educational constructs while providing a similar experience for students across sections. The course syllabus is created by the field faculty/student peer-facilitation team and is focused on integrating the CSWE EPAS 2008 competencies. The Canvas site provides a platform to house a variety of resources aimed at supporting facilitation and curriculum development.

Students enrolled in the seminar participate in a “flipped classroom” experience in which, prior to class, they are assigned articles to read and/or view electronic media and complete a reflection assignment in preparation for the classroom discussion. The students write a structured reflection related to the assigned material that focuses on What? (What did I learn?), So What? (Why was what I learned important?), and Now What? (What will I do with what I have learned – how will I apply it?). These individual reflections are submitted in an electronic drop box on Canvas and reviewed by the student/peer-facilitators who can provide electronic feedback. The field faculty also reviews these reflections and provides additional input/support when appropriate.

### **Program Evaluation**

#### **The Facilitator’s Experience**

As confirmed by an overview of the literature, the student/field-faculty facilitation teams are able to consistently identify rewards related to their team teaching approach. The student/peer facilitator provides the element of the lived experience and overarching guidance and mentorship is provided by the field faculty. In monthly team meetings, both the student/peer and field faculty facilitators articulate what they have learned about themselves as teachers and facilitators. Peer facilitators stated that the seminar experience helped them to better understand the challenges faced by students in field, which can at times mirror problems encountered in clinical experience by more tenured social workers.

#### **The Foundation Student’s Experience**

Seminar participants are required to complete a midterm evaluation. This practice was implemented in the original term of the pilot (Fall 2006) and performed in each subsequent term. The mid-term check-in enables the facilitation teams to assess their effectiveness and make adjustments based on each course section’s unique needs and learning styles. Overall, students’ satisfaction scores with their seminar experiences have improved as the seminar model has evolved. Responses related to the: student facilitator/field faculty team model, syllabus, assignments, utilization of class time, class section size, development of trust and comfort, and the overall experience were evaluated for the last nine years. Over this time, using a five-point scale (poor, neutral, average, good, excellent), the majority of students rated their satisfaction with the overall seminar experience in the “good” to “excellent” range. Additionally, students’ written comments have helped improve the weekly sessions and quickly address gaps in the curriculum. Historically, U-M SSW course satisfaction scores tended to be lower in required foundation courses due to student eagerness to dive into their chosen

method of concentration. The student/field-faculty facilitation teams have been immensely pleased with the overall results.

### **Outcomes**

One of the major accomplishments of the student/field faculty facilitation teams is that they have helped the office of field instruction connect to a wide range of student perspectives on an ongoing basis. The U-M SSW office of field instruction has been able to create a valuable communication channel to students and be flexible by adjusting to changing student needs. The student/peer facilitators provide a dynamic access point for other students to take risks and inquire about field-related topics. Student/peer-facilitators have advised fellow students regarding course requirements, coached students on developing fieldwork site relationships and assignments, and helped students navigate challenging field scenarios. In short, student/peers are eager to provide feedback based on their experiences and participants are more receptive to this feedback. Throughout this process, the student peer facilitators keep the field faculty abreast of students' needs and challenges and possible solutions by drawing on their knowledge and expertise. In the end, the student/peer facilitators have supported the overall field instruction process; not just the seminar class.

### **Lessons Learned**

Over the past several years the U-M SSW office of field instruction has learned lessons and seized the opportunity to improve the field seminar model. It has been determined that students selected as facilitators must be responsible, dependable, and highly motivated in order to satisfactorily complete the requirements to earn independent study credit. It was also found that student facilitators should be self-starters and/or come highly recommended by faculty. Over the years, student facilitators have met or exceeded the field office's expectations. In U-M's SSW experience, very few peer-facilitators ever fumbled their responsibilities, but when it has occurred, the field faculty was able to step in to provide additional support.

Utilizers acknowledge that co-facilitators have been a wonderful support and addition to the seminar model. Under this model, there has never been a cancelled seminar class due to unexpected scheduling conflicts (illness, emergencies, etc.). Because the syllabus is standardized across all seminar sections, the student peer facilitators have been able to step up and go "solo," to facilitate an individual class when field faculty have been unexpectedly absent. Faculty have also at times covered for a student/peer-facilitator's unexpected absence.

The peer-facilitator model requires a fair amount of logistical coordination related to scheduling meetings, recruitment, training, etc. One person within the field department must be responsible and accountable for the overall program throughout the academic year. In U-M SSW's model, the field director has assumed primary responsibility, with the assistance of a field office support staff member to manage the logistics. A graduate assistant may also be used as the coordinator; U-M SSW has expe-

rienced some success with this idea.

### **Conclusion**

The student/peer-facilitated seminar model at the U-M SSW has been a positive addition to the school's curriculum. The model accomplished goals, regardless of growing enrollment numbers, and has not depended on additional financial resources in order to be successful. Of course, implementation of this model is easier if the authority rests comfortably within the field office. However, schools that have a field seminar taught by tenure track or adjunct faculty could easily adopt this model without tremendous burden. The goal is to provide student/ peer support and mentorship in conjunction with faculty expertise. Students in the seminar have shared countless examples where field-related conflict was successfully negotiated and tacit knowledge developed. The acquisition of skills and linking knowledge with practice has had positive impact on students' confidence in becoming self-assured social work practitioners. Regardless of the school's size or financial resources, the benefits of utilizing student/peer facilitators far outweighs any organizational costs.

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