The Purpose of a Practicum

**CHAPTER OUTLINE**

- Background and Context 2
- How to Use This Book 3
- How the Chapters Are Structured 3
- Practicum-Related Strengths: A Workbook Activity 5
- How Do We Learn? A Workbook Activity 7
- Suggested Learning Activities 8
- Practice Test 9

**LEARNING GOALS FOR THIS CHAPTER**

- To understand the purpose of a social work practicum
- To complete a self-assessment of your readiness for practicum
Congratulations for embarking on your exciting social work practicum experience. You are to be applauded for reaching this stage in your professional education and for being selected and approved for a practicum based on your academic achievements and your readiness for professional experience. The practicum offers a unique opportunity to apply what you have learned in the classroom, to expand your knowledge, and to develop your skills. It is time for you to move from the role of a student to the role of a professional social worker.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

A **practicum** is an experience that requires the practical application of theory or conceptual knowledge. Most types of professional education—whether in medicine, nursing, law, pharmacy, speech therapy, or social work—wisely employ some form of practicum, internship, or preceptorship to help the student learn how to apply knowledge and general principles to real situations, problems, and concerns. Many social workers, agency supervisors, and social work educators use the terms *practicum*, *field work*, *field education*, *field practicum*, and *internship* somewhat interchangeably. This book will use the term *practicum*.

The Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) Educational Policies, and Academic Standards (2008) states:

In social work, the signature pedagogy is field education. The intent of field education is to connect the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice setting. It is a basic precept of social work education that the two interrelated components of curriculum—classroom and field—are of equal importance within the curriculum, and each contributes to the development of the requisite competencies of professional practice. Field education is systematically designed, supervised, coordinated, and evaluated based on criteria by which students demonstrate the achievement of program competencies. (8)

Almost universally, students of social work at both the BSW and MSW levels describe their practicum as the single most useful, significant, and powerful learning experience of their formal social work education. It is during the practicum that the concepts, principles, and theories discussed in the classroom come to life. During the practicum, students work with real clients and have the opportunity to try out the skills and techniques they previously rehearsed in classroom role playing and simulations. It is also during the practicum that students make considerable progress in developing self-awareness and come to a better understanding of their particular strengths and limitations as well as the influence of their personal values, attitudes, and life experiences on their practice. The practicum can and should be a time when classroom theory is integrated with social work practice and when students merge with the values and fundamental principles of their chosen profession.

For many students, the practicum is a very positive and meaningful experience, but for some the practicum can fall short of expectations. The quality of every practicum experience can be enhanced if students are provided with guidance in identifying and making use of learning opportunities. A structure that helps students to examine and analyze their settings in ways that build on
prior classroom learning is of critical importance. Some of the most meaningful learning occurs as a result of having to deal with unexpected events and frustrations during the practicum.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to provide you with guidance and structure during the social work practicum. If used in a thoughtful manner throughout the practicum, it will help you make the best of whatever your practicum setting has to offer. Needless to say, this will not happen without effort. It requires a real commitment and a willingness to invest time in the learning process.

HOW THE CHAPTERS ARE STRUCTURED

Although the chapters are numbered in the conventional manner, this is not to suggest that you are to necessarily move through the book sequentially, one chapter after another. Rather, it is expected that you will be gathering information to complete the workbook activities in several of the chapters at the same time. It is expected that you will move back and forth between sections and will also revisit the same section several times as you gain experience in the practicum and begin to look at various questions and issues from a new perspective.

Each chapter begins with a section titled **Goals for Learning**. It lists possible goals or desired outcomes related to the knowledge, values, and skills that you can expect to learn and develop during the practicum.

The next major section, **Background and Context**, presents selected concepts and principles related to the topic addressed by the chapter. The box titled Food for Thought will contain several relevant quotations. The concepts and definitions presented in these two sections are not a substitute for a textbook or assigned readings, but rather should act as a review of key ideas that set the stage for what follows, stimulate creative thinking, and raise important questions.

In each of the sections labeled **Guidance and Direction**, you are offered general suggestions, guidance, and advice, and sometimes a few specific do's and don'ts intended to encourage and facilitate learning in relation to the chapter's objectives and its particular focus.

In most of the chapters, several pages have been cast into a workbook format and titled **A Workbook Activity**. You will be asked to use your critical thinking skills to seek answers to each of the questions and record the answers or related comments in the spaces provided.

A section titled **Suggested Learning Activities** lists several specific tasks and activities that provide additional opportunities and experiences for learning as well as a few additional ideas, words of encouragement, and specific cautions that may be important to you and the practicum experience.

Each chapter ends with a **Selected Bibliography** that lists several books or articles related to the topics addressed in the chapter. The sources listed should be fairly easy for you to locate in a college or agency library. Frequent reference will be made to the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* and to commonly used social work textbooks. Because the book *Techniques and Guidelines for Social Work Practice* by Sheafor and Horejsi (2008) is frequently used in social work practice courses and practicum seminars, the list will usually include a reference to specific sections in that book.
Food for Thought

Experience, both intellectual and emotional, is the raw material of the internship (Sweitzer and King, 2009, 8).

We are bound together by the task that lies before us.
—Martin Luther King

The transition between the skills class and your practice/internship is a critical time in which you prepare yourself for applying what you have learned to the real world. If you have been doing your work all along, we still cannot in good faith reassure you that you will be ready. In truth, you will never be ready (Brew and Kottler, 2008, 382).
The Purpose of a Practicum

Practicum-Related Strengths: A Workbook Activity

No doubt you have heard about the importance of taking a strengths perspective on your clients, helping them to address their problems by building on their strengths. This exercise will help you do the same thing for yourself. Because you may be wondering if you have the knowledge and ability to succeed in your practicum, following is a self-assessment tool designed to help you identify the resources you bring to this experience.

Below is a list of strengths that are important to a successful practicum experience. Depending on the nature of the setting, some will be of more importance and relevance than others will. This list can also be used to assess the appropriateness of a match between you and your practicum setting.

Place a check mark by all items that apply to you. Acknowledge your strengths, identify the areas in which you lack experience, and begin to set goals for professional development in both areas. Later in this book you will be asked to complete this self-assessment again, which will show you what you have learned over time.

Strengths for a Successful Practicum (Pre-and-Post Test)

Attitudes and Values

_____ 1. Empathetic, caring, and concerned for clients served by the practicum agency
_____ 2. Personal values, beliefs, and perspectives that are compatible with the agency’s mission, goals, and philosophy
_____ 3. Personal values, beliefs, and perspectives that are compatible with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics
_____ 4. Committed to achieving social justice
_____ 5. Respectful of a broad range of diversity among clients and communities

Motivation and Desire to Learn

_____ 6. Eager and open to new learning experiences
_____ 7. Self-discipline and motivation to do what needs to be done, even when you may not feel like doing it
_____ 8. Willingness to take on new responsibilities and perform tasks and activities within your range of abilities
_____ 9. Open to building self-awareness
_____ 10. Adequate time and energy to devote to the practicum
_____ 11. A sense of “calling” to the social work profession
_____ 12. Excitement about helping people improve the quality of their lives

Abilities and Skills

_____ 13. Writing skills (selecting and organizing content, drafting reports, preparing letters, keeping professional records, and utilizing technological communication tools)
_____ 14. Verbal communication skills (explaining, describing, and informing)
_____ 15. Ability to listen (understand what others are saying and respectfully consider their views, perspectives, and opinions)
_____ 16. Ability to quickly process information, understand new concepts, and learn new skills
_____ 17. Ability to read rapidly, grasp ideas quickly, and pull meaning and information from the written word
_____ 18. Ability to organize and plan work to be done and effectively manage and use available time
_____ 19. Ability to meet deadlines and work under pressure
Chapter 1

20. Ability to follow through on planned actions and complete tasks and assignments
21. Ability to make thoughtful and ethical decisions under stressful conditions
22. Assertiveness and self-confidence in professional relationships and group discussion
23. Committed to self-awareness and professional competence, including a desire to evaluate your own effectiveness
24. Ability to build relationships with the agency’s clients
25. Thoughtful, organized, confident, and comfortable when meeting with a wide variety of people
26. Thoughtful, organized, confident, and comfortable when working in groups
27. Ability to identify a need and formulate a course of action to address that need
28. Ability to solve problems creatively and effectively

Knowledge and Experience

29. High level of self-awareness (an understanding of how your own values, beliefs, attitudes, family background, lifestyle, appearance, and life experiences might be perceived by others)
30. Familiarity with communication methods and equipment used in the practicum agency (word processor, e-mail, computer software)
31. Prior successful experience in adapting to change, new situations, and new work environments
32. Prior successful employment or volunteer experience with services or programs similar to those provided by the practicum agency
33. Prior successful employment or volunteer experience in working with types of consumers or clients served by the practicum agency
34. Working knowledge of the state and federal laws, rules, regulations, and policies relevant to the practicum agency
35. Knowledge of the assessment and planning tools, methods, and techniques used by the practicum agency
36. Knowledge of the intervention methods and techniques used by the practicum agency
37. Knowledge of the research and evaluation tools, methods, and techniques used by the practicum agency
38. Understanding of the process of planned change
39. Understanding of the generalist perspective in social work practice and other practice perspectives, theories, and models relevant to the practicum setting

1. What are the most significant strengths that you bring to the practicum based on the preceding checklist?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

2. What other strengths not on this list do you bring to your practicum experience?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________
3. What can you do to secure learning experiences that will build on your strengths?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

4. What are the most significant limitations that you bring to the practicum experience?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

5. What practicum-related learning experiences will help you to address or overcome your limitations?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

How Do We Learn? A Workbook Activity

The social work practicum is a unique opportunity to learn. You are being offered the chance to prepare for professional social work practice by integrating your classroom knowledge and skills into a real social work setting with real clients. Your experience will be enhanced if you are aware of how you learn.

Learning is a type of change, which can be exciting and exhilarating or difficult and painful. Basically, we learn when we take risks—when we begin to think in a different way, when we view the familiar from a different angle, or when we try out new behavior. Openness to this type of learning can bring unexpected insights and unanticipated growth. Learning to face our fears, take risks, challenge ourselves beyond our current competencies, and then be open to supervision and feedback will always result in an enriching learning experience. This new learning will excite and inspire you. It will create some discomfort, but that is the price of learning. When the learning is about ourselves—our biases, prejudices, and emotional hang-ups—the experience can be especially challenging. However, this can free us from attitudes and behaviors that limit personal growth and effectiveness. Because clients deserve the highest quality of services possible, the profession of social work is committed to identifying competencies needed for practice, developing best practice standards, and adhering to evidence-based practice that measures the effectiveness of interventions. Answer the following questions about your learning style and learning goals, and think ahead about how you can maximize your learning experience. Your practicum will stretch your thinking. Open yourself up to this experience so that you do not miss a significant learning opportunity?

1. What learning experiences do you hope will help you acquire knowledge and develop social work practice skills?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
Chapter 1

2. What are you most excited and enthusiastic about?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

3. What are your greatest fears or worries?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

4. Given what you know about yourself and how you learn, what types of assistance, guidance, or structure would help you lower your defenses and be more open to learning in the areas that cause you some level of anxiety or worry (e.g., demonstrations, shadowing, reading client records, watching videos)?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

5. If you have a learning disability, what accommodations will you request in your practicum agency?

________________________________________________________________________

________________________________________________________________________

SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Conduct a cursory examination of each chapter in this book. Note the topics addressed and how the content is organized. Try to identify the links between chapters, since they are designed to build on each other.

- Keep this book with you while at your practicum agency and try to answer all of the workbook questions.

- If you write about a client, make sure to follow agency rules of confidentiality.
1. After taking the self-assessment in this chapter of your strengths going into practicum, identify and prioritize the strengths you wish you acquire in terms of (1) attitudes and values, (2) motivation and desire to learn, (3) abilities and skills, and (4) knowledge and experience.

2. Devise a plan for building on your strengths and acquiring the ones listed in question 1 above.

Log onto www.mysocialworklab.com and select the Career Exploration videos from the left-hand menu. Answer the questions below. (If you did not receive an access code to MySocialWorkLab with this text and wish to purchase access online, please visit www.mysocialworklab.com.)

1. Watch the interview with social worker Sue Dowling. Listen to her response to question 12 about why she chose social work. How does this compare with the reasons you chose social work?

2. Watch the interview with Beth Harmon, social work supervisor. Listen to her response to question 17 about her advice for students. How does this fit with the purpose of a practicum?