The Purpose of a Practicum

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CHAPTER PREVIEW

This introductory chapter presents the concept of practicum as a unique learning experience which offers you the opportunity to review classroom knowledge, integrate this knowledge with the professional skills required in the social work profession, and support all interventions with the values of the social work profession. This chapter also provides a Student Self-Assessment of Practicum Strengths tool you can use now to identify the strengths you bring to the social work practicum so that you can build on them throughout your learning experience and then measure them again at the end of the practicum.

You are to be congratulated for embarking on your exciting social work practicum experience and applauded for reaching this stage in your professional education. You have been 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, expand your knowledge, develop your skills, and hone your use of professional values. It is time for you to move from the role of a student to that of a professional social worker.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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, theories, and models discussed in the classroom come to life. During the practicum, students work with real clients and have the opportunity and responsibility to use and enhance 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 individual 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.

Educational Policy 2.3 of the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE) Educational Policies and Academic Standards (2008) states thus:

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. (p. 8)

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

In order to ensure a positive learning experience and minimize the chances of having negative experiences, you should remember to:

- Clarify your professional goals while remembering that your school and agency will also have goals for the time you spend in practicum.
- Develop a positive professional relationship with your agency field instructor and your faculty supervisor while also seeking to learn from others working in your agency.
- Approach your responsibilities as professionally as possible while also remembering that you are a student who has much to learn.
- Strike a balance between structuring your practicum for maximum learning with maintaining an openness to learning experiences that are not planned.

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 in the book 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 new perspectives. The chapters may also be read in a different order to accommodate the structure and outline of your school’s program.

Each chapter begins with a section titled Chapter Preview, which presents a short capsule of the chapter content and reasons why the content and focus of the chapter is essential. It also describes the relationship between this chapter and previous ones, while also linking it to chapters that follow. The first major section of each chapter, Background and Context, presents selected concepts and principles related to the topic addressed by the chapter. The concepts and definitions presented in this section are not a substitute for a textbook or assigned readings, but rather should act as a

Critical Thinking

Practice Behavior Example: Social workers distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom.

Critical Thinking Question: How can you learn from a broad range of sources?
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review of key ideas that set the stage for what follows. The ideas in the Background and Context section of each chapter will stimulate creative thinking and raise important questions that need to be considered as you work your way through the practicum. These sections offer you general suggestions, guidance, advice, and sometimes even a few specific do's and don'ts intended to encourage and facilitate learning in relation to the chapter's objectives and 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 engage in critical thinking activities and answer questions that will help you integrate knowledge, skills, and values needed for the professional competencies for social work practice.

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 in the practicum experience.

Each chapter is followed by a Chapter Review. Chapters 5–19 contain Practice Test, which resembles a social work licensing examination in form and content.

The bibliography, provided at the end of the book, lists several books and articles related to the topics addressed in the book. These suggestions serve as resources for additional information and help in an in-depth examination of the topics presented. Using textbooks and readings from courses you have taken as reference guides will also help you understand how social workers continue to build on their previous knowledge and skills as more advanced practice is expected over time.

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Professional Identity

Practice Behavior Example: Social workers practice personal reflection and self-correction to assure continual professional development.

Critical Thinking Question: Although you are just beginning your practicum, you have some of the strengths a social worker will need. As you complete this self-assessment, identify the strengths you already have.

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Student Self-Assessment of Practicum Strengths: A Workbook Activity

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<tr>
<th>Areas of Competence</th>
<th>Practicum Strengths</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prepracticum Self-Assessment of Strengths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Empathetic, caring, and concerned for clients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal values, beliefs, and perspectives that are compatible with the agency’s mission</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Personal values, beliefs, and perspectives that are compatible with the NASW Code of Ethics</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Committed to achieving social justice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Respectful of diversity among clients and communities</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Nonjudgmental toward clients and colleagues</td>
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**Motivation to Learn**

7. Open to new learning experiences
8. Willingness to take on new responsibilities
9. Open to building self-awareness and professional competence
10. Adequate time and energy to devote to the practicum
11. A sense of “calling” to the profession
12. Commitment to using supervision

**General Work Skills**

13. Writing skills (reports, letters, professional records, using technological tools)
14. Ability to quickly process information, understand new concepts, and learn new skills
15. Ability to read rapidly, grasp ideas quickly, and pull meaning from the written word
16. Ability to organize, plan, and effectively manage time
17. Ability to meet deadlines and work under pressure
18. Ability to follow through and complete tasks

**Social Work Skills**

19. Ability to listen, understand, and consider varied views, perspectives, and opinions
20. Verbal communication skills
21. Ability to make thoughtful and ethical decisions under stressful conditions
22. Assertiveness and self-confidence in professional relationships with clients and colleagues
23. Ability to identify a need and formulate a plan to meet that need
24. Ability to solve problems creatively and effectively

(continued)
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Areas of Competence

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Knowledge

25. Self-awareness of how one's values, beliefs, experiences impact work and other persons
26. Knowledge of laws, rules, regulations, and policies of agency
27. Knowledge of the assessment tools, methods, and techniques used by agency
28. Knowledge of theories and interventions used by agency
29. Understanding of the process of planned change
30. Knowledge of the community context of agency

Prior Experience Related to Practicum

31. Experience in setting similar to agency
32. Experience with clients or client systems similar to those served by agency
33. Experience applying theory to practice
34. Experience working with professional teams
35. Experience playing social work roles
36. Training in professional skills related to those needed in practicum

Social workers are committed to taking a strengths perspective on their clients, helping them to address their problems and enhance their social functioning by building on their strengths. By applying that approach to your own learning and professional growth, you can use your professional strengths and assets as building blocks for the professional skills you will need. The following exercise will help you take a strengths perspective on yourself.

1. List the most significant strengths that you bring to the practicum based on the preceding checklist.

____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
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2. What 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?
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________

How Do We Learn? A Workbook Activity

The social work practicum is a unique opportunity in which you are offered the opportunity to prepare for professional social work practice by integrating your classroom knowledge and skills into professional competencies in 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, when we try out new behavior, or even when we confront our biases and unlearn some things we assumed were true. Openness to this type of learning can bring unexpected insights and unanticipated growth. Learning to face our hesitancies to venture into the professional world, 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 may create some discomfort, but that is the price of learning.

When the learning is about us—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, so 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?
____________________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________________
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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 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.
- Collect the textbooks you used in your social work courses and use them to help you integrate your classroom learning with your practicum experience.

References

1. After completing the “Student Self-Assessment of Practicum Strengths” in the activity section of this chapter, identify and prioritize the strengths you wish to acquire in terms of (1) attitudes, (2) motivation and desire to learn, (3) abilities and skills, and (4) knowledge and experience.