



Building a Better Field Seminar

Author(s)

Katharine Dill, PhD
Marist College

Pamela H. Bowers, PhD
Humboldt State University

Abstract

In this small-scale study of 130 respondents from the CSWE Field Directors listserv, the research explores the pedagogical challenges and opportunities of teaching social work field seminars. Adult learning theory and the integration and implementation of self-directed learning become the genesis for a better understanding of how to teach a seminar in a way that engages students in active and reflective learning. This analysis provides a platform for understanding the fundamental pedagogical requirements of teaching field seminars in social work education.

Keywords: field education; field seminar; adult learning theory; student-led

Introduction

The social work field seminar is a longstanding requirement of many social work education programs. This small-scale study explores how field liaisons (also known as social work educators) implement and teach this required course to BSW and MSW students, both in-person and online. While many social work academics, field directors, and field liaisons are required to teach field seminars, these same individuals are rarely provided with a framework for making this foundational course both relevant and engaging for students. In this article we look at the themes elicited from an online survey of individuals who teach field seminars. We explore how field liaisons teach and implement field seminars, and create a framework for understanding how our teaching can enhance the confidence and competence of our students.

Key Concepts

The Social Work Education Field Seminar

The social work field seminar is the learning environment in which social work theory and practice intersect (Poe & Hunter, 2009). Field seminars and their accompanying placements are key spaces in which students can critically reflect upon their developing professional identity (Bowers, 2017). Brookfield and Preskill (2005) highlighted the educational philosophy of the field seminar, which is to learn through discourse. Unlike other traditional social work classes, the field seminar employs discussion as a method of exploring the overt and subtle nuances of social work practice. The format of the field seminar encourages a rich dialogue about personal, professional, and practical challenges. It is an environment within which difficult conversations can be conducted regarding, for example, broad societal issues such as race, cultural competency, social inequality, and isolation. Underlying these broader topics, students commonly raise emerging practice issues such as developing confidence, dealing with emotional triggers, and navigating the complexities of supervision and organizational culture.

Sherer and Peleg-Oren (2005) described a “learning triangle” of individuals involved in field education learning. On the first side of the triangle is the field liaison, who is the conduit between the university and the field placement; on the second side is the field instructor; and on the third side is the student. All are involved and invested in the student’s learning. The confluence of the three members’ contributions is essential to the overall development of the student in field learning.

The field liaison plays a specific and important role in social work field education by teaching and implementing the field seminar. Also, as Larkin (2019) has described, the field liaison is the conduit between the university, the field placement, and the student. Hunter et al. (2015) highlighted the critical role that the field liaison plays in providing an intersection between practice and theory for students. Bogo (2010) further enunciated the role of the field liaison as having three elements: facilitator, monitor, and evaluator. Fortune et al. (1995) defined the role of the liaison as being that of a “trouble-shooter” who is called in to support field instructors in navigating complexities with students. Bogo (2010) made the important point that the field liaison often takes on a dual role by teaching the field seminar while also navigating the role of a liaison and completing site visits. She argued that the field liaison, therefore, needs to play a pivotal role in curriculum design and implementation. Fortune et al. (2018) found that field liaisons are typically social work professionals who have extensive practice experience, but minimal teaching and educational experience. As we can see, the field liaison is tasked with multiple roles, including that of teacher, supporter, and advocate for both the student and the field instructor.

Overview of the Literature

The literature exploring the pedagogic challenges, nuances, and teaching of the field seminar frequently returns to the roots of adult learning theory and, more specifically, self-directed learning. The unique elements and issues raised in the field seminar often explore the complexities of social work practice in a field placement. The field seminar benefits students only if they bring their issues and challenges to the learning environment (Bogo, 2010). Furthermore, students who are engaged, self-directed learners often use the seminar as a place to make sense of the “messiness” of practice.

Despite the rich literature on integrative field seminars, few studies have looked at whether they make a difference in students’ practice or learning (Fortune et al., 2018). Most attempts to evaluate field seminars have relied on subjective assessments by students after completion of the seminar (Schneller & Brocato, 2011), and almost no research has compared students who have participated in a field seminar to those who have not.

Dalton (2012) highlighted the uneven implementation of field seminars across BSW and MSW programs, and across foundation and concentration years. He argued that the field seminar is viewed as a “lesser than” course, and as a result is not well valued, researched, or implemented. He also noted that there is minimal research on the assignments used in teaching field seminars.

Adult Learning as a Framework for Teaching the Field Seminar

Bogo (2010, p. 79) highlighted the implicit role of adult learning theory in our understanding of how social work students learn and develop in the context of a social work organization. Adult learning theory (i.e., andragogy) suggests that rather than students being simply the recipients of knowledge, they actively must generate the interconnectedness of learning in the classroom and in field placements (Knowles, 1984). The most prominent authors in this area suggest that adult students are ultimately responsible for their own learning and development. Merriam and Bierema (2013) supported the concept that adult learning is developmental in nature. Adult learners become more self-directed based on their emerging repertoire of practice experience, and leverage greater learning as they increase their ability to apply knowledge in the here and now. The field placement provides an opportunity to make sense of learning at the moment. Merriam and Bierema (2013) proposed that adult learners do best with problem-based learning, such as examining complex cases in class, discussing challenging practical or ethical challenges, and reviewing client best practices.

MacKeracher (2004) spoke to the kaleidoscope of learning. She described how learning

involves different senses, with emotional, physical, cognitive, social, and spiritual aspects. She contends that strong emotions come into play when learning. With this in mind, structured learning activities can help students to make sense of the chaos of their learning in the context of the emotionally charged work they experience in their placements in human services organizations. Such activities can include weekly check-ins that explore the emotional territory of the work, student's reflective logs, and even video blogs that explore the emotional complexity of the work.

Learning in Field Education: Seminal Texts

The current literature on teaching field seminars focuses on preparing the student for both the field education experience and the parallel seminar. While their article is dated, Cochrane and Hanley (1999) approached preparing students as an evolving journey. They asserted that students need time to transform their learning through a series of developmental milestones. Larkin's *A Field Guide for Social Workers* is a compendium of resources that links the Council on Social Work Education's nine competencies to learning in field placements, and is intended to help students reap the rewards of their field placement (CSWE, 2015; Larkin, 2019). Glassman (2016) highlighted the role that self-directed learning takes in field education. Ward and Mama (2010) further explicated the reflective aspects of learning in the field. The authors help students to shape their learning through thought-provoking questions. Danowski (2005) provided a "survival guide" for the social work placement, in which self-directed learning theory is applied to explore themes such as beginning placement and termination with clients.

In summary, the intersection of adult learning theory with seminal texts on learning in the context of field placements suggests that self-directed students reap the greatest rewards from their social work placement. Despite the myriad of literature on navigating field placements, however, there remains a paucity of pedagogic perspectives on teaching the field seminar.

Methodology

Measure

For the current study, we prepared a survey targeting social work faculty who teach the field seminar course in Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)-accredited social work programs at the BSW and MSW levels. The survey of 18 questions asked mostly open-ended questions for participants to reflect on exploring the pedagogic and innovative strategies they use when teaching the course. The survey inquired about the number of years the person has taught the course, the type of program (BSW or MSW) they currently teach in, their role as a field liaison (e.g., if they conduct site visits, teach the seminar course, identify field placements), and the number of students taking the

course at each level of the program. Other questions asked about the respondent's teaching strategies, suggestions for enhancing teaching, educational philosophy, and sources of inspiration, all concerning teaching the field seminar.

Sample

The CSWE Directory of Accredited Programs (<https://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/Directory-of-Accredited-Programs.aspx>) was used to identify social work programs in each US state. The names and email addresses of field directors in each program were extracted and put into alphabetical order. A stratified random sampling approach was used to generate a list of field directors to whom the survey was sent (n=155).

Data Collection

Before recruiting any participants, this study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at a small liberal arts college in the eastern US. In addition to the personalized invitations to participate that were sent to field directors, a general email to the CSWE-affiliated programs field directors listserv was sent in June 2019. The listserv offers an open forum for both directors and field seminar instructors to connect on all field-related topics. Two reminder emails were sent and data collection ended in August 2019.

Data Analysis

Responses to the online survey from participants were typically brief and to the point. Despite this, our two-person research team employed a strategy of constant comparative analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby we each took the survey responses, reviewed them, and developed thematic codes that emerged from the analysis. Following this independent analysis, we identified higher-level categories that resonated for both researchers. The findings reflect our synergistic perspective on dominant themes emerging from the responses.

Findings

A total of 130 completed surveys were returned. Four recurring qualitative themes emerged: 1) integrating theory with practice; 2) creating a safe space; 3) peer learning; and 4) student-led learning. Each of these themes is elaborated below, and they form the genesis of our discussion.

Integrating Theory with Practice

Much of the feedback provided by respondents highlighted the need to “connect the

dots” of theory to practice. Respondents described the field seminar as a place where students can make links between the theoretic assumptions of the work and the application and integration of the field material. The responses below highlight this intersection between the classroom and real-world experiences:

- “The integration of curriculum with the practice experiences.”
- “Assignments that help students link classroom knowledge with field placement.”
- “Reinforce connections of practice with social work ethics and values.”
- Respondents felt that the field seminar was the sole academic space in which students could make sense of academic material within the context of their applied learning from field placements.

Creating a Safe Space

An overarching theme that arose repeatedly was the concept of creating a safe learning environment. Survey respondents expressed the need to create a space that allows students to explore the complexities and sometimes “messy” aspects of practice learning. Creating a unique learning environment allows students to explore their personal and professional identities. A safe learning environment also cultivates rich reflections on personal and professional growth. The following statements showcase the underlying principle of creating a learning environment that empowers students to take risks:

To provide a safe place where students can discuss how they are “experiencing” all that they have learned and its application in the field. I also believe [the] field seminar is a great place for students to begin developing collegial relationships [and] supporting and challenging each other.

My teaching philosophy is to provide a safe space for discussion and processing [;] challenge students to use critical thinking, the Code of Ethics, and other skills/resources to enhance their professional growth; and to help them develop skills and a process to continued professional growth after they graduate.

While respondents shared the desire to create a safe learning environment, information on how this is made a reality was not elicited by the survey. How to create a safe space for students remains an elusive feature of teaching the field seminar.

Peer Learning

Another repeated theme was using the field seminar as a space for peer learning and development. Peer learning provides mutual support and becomes a form of self-care through the sharing of challenges and opportunities that arise in the field placement setting. The field seminar is a microcosm of the workplace environment, and becomes the genesis for fostering positive, healthy working relationships with peers in the

seminar.

- “It is a time and space for mutual support from peers regarding the challenges of practicing in the field.”
- “To give students a ‘support group’ to help them manage stress and challenges.”

The nature of the field seminar is seen as an opportunity for sharing authentically: “Create spaces that energize students to interact deeply, honestly, and [respectfully] with one another, so they become skilled at group work and understanding of the profession.”

This peer model of learning encourages brainstorming, whereby students can learn to offer feedback and guidance to each other on complex practice issues. The environment becomes one of problem solving, with practice challenges “unpacked” in the context of peer feedback.

Student-Led Learning

Much of the response to the survey centered around creating a field seminar both for and with the students. This dominant theme showcases the need to shape a seminar that is creative and engaging and also allows for students’ voices, participation, and engagement. Many respondents reported that students set the tone for their learning, which supports the concept of self-directed learning.

- “Student-chosen tutorials on topics they want to know more about (e.g., financial literacy, street drugs of abuse).”
- “I involve students in planning the content and try to tailor what I offer to their expressed needs/interests.”
- “It’s the students’ responsibility to make [the] seminar meaningful; they bring their practice challenges and successes and work with each other to elevate everyone’s practice.”
- “Students set the tone for the learning experience. The seminar is more about reflection than it is about assessments and graded assignments.”
- “I take a student-forward approach. I have a set of questions based around a competency but let the students lead with content. I try to let them respond to each other and generate discussion as much as possible and still usually give an additional point of view or more questions to consider.”

Students taking charge of their learning environment was a dominant theme.

Respondents shared their desire to act as a coach or mentor in the classroom, while at the same time ensuring that students become their own support system and arbiters of professional wisdom, with the ability to navigate the ethics and challenges of everyday social work practice.

Discussion: How to Build a Better Field Seminar

This section outlines ways to “build a better seminar” — creating a blueprint for social work educators teaching field seminars based on the four substantive findings. It provides a practical compendium of teaching resources that can be implemented in an “on the ground” classroom or in a virtual learning environment. Each section below gives three suggestions that can be readily integrated into the field seminar learning environment.

Integrating Theory with Practice

Field education allows students to link theory to practice (Bogo, 2015; Dettlaff & Dietz, 2004; Wilson & Campbell, 2013; Wilson & Kelly, 2010). The question is: How do educators make this linkage a reality in the field seminar? The following suggestions may support building the bridge between theoretical frameworks and the “messiness” of everyday practice: 1) Ask students to integrate the literature into student-led seminar presentations on topics such as emotional triggers, effective use of supervision, and trauma-informed practice; 2) Require students to reflect on the theoretical underpinnings of their field placement in written and oral assignments, and 3) Use reflective assignments, such as video blogs or journals, to explore links between the theory and practice reality. This last suggestion integrates well into a digital environment, where students can record their reflections in real time.

Creating a Safe Space

Students need a safe space in which to reflect upon the nuances of practice. Responding to our survey, field directors indicated that safety is crucial to building a learning environment that empowers students to explore the emotional terrain of social work practice. Therefore, we suggest that the tenets of trauma-informed practice can inform learning and development in field seminars. Berger et al. (2016) defined trauma-informed practice as a “system of care that demonstrates an understanding and recognition of trauma as both interpersonal and sociopolitical and is, therefore, aligned with principles of social justice” (p. 145). They suggested that the trauma-informed perspective has five tenets: 1) safety, 2) trustworthiness, 3) choice, 4) collaboration, and 5) empowerment.

Field seminars that are based on these tenets can enable students to reflect on their journey of personal and professional growth. Strategies for creating a safe, trauma-informed field seminar learning environment can include: 1) shaping class ground rules around the five tenets (e.g., under “safety,” students can share their ideas in a manner that supports and respects individual beliefs and confidentiality); 2) applying the five tenets during check-in to help the student make a connection between the

concept of trauma-informed practice and field placement settings; and 3) exploring emotional triggers and how a person's trauma and background can play a role in their personal and professional development in the social work profession.

In a society where race and bias remain at the forefront of students' and educators' minds, the field seminar, through its use of discussion-based learning, can and should be the genesis for "crucial conversations." Issues such as racial bias, white privilege, and oppression should be explored and integrated throughout each seminar. Cultivating a trauma-informed safe space in the field seminar can allow for these challenging conversations to transpire and inspire students.

Peer Learning

Peer learning places students in charge of facilitating their own learning. However, it remains a nebulous concept, particularly as it relates to social work education. Boud (n.d.) suggests that peer learning should benefit everyone in the group and allow for the sharing of knowledge and ideas among participants. Suggested strategies for enhancing peer learning include: 1) regularly using role plays and structured peer feedback to allow students to learn from each other and refine their skills; 2) requiring each student to facilitate peer discussion in a seminar once per semester, thus further enabling peer learning and encouraging emerging leaders in the classroom; and 3) discussing case presentations in a way that allows peer feedback, thus providing "cross-fertilization" of ideas that students can then begin to integrate into their practice. Subject matters for peer learning might include talking to a client on the phone, managing a resistant client, and having a challenging conversation with a field supervisor or field liaison.

Student-Led Learning

The underlying principles of adult learning theory and self-directed learning create a framework for the field seminar. As stated in the literature, students need to cultivate their learning and link classroom material to their experiences in field placement settings (Bogo, 2010; Knowles, 1984). Mackeracher (2004) reminds us, as educators, to be aware that learning cannot be exclusively lecture based, but should involve students' emotions and senses. Strategies for cultivating a sensory-based field seminar learning environment include: 1) employing techniques such as photo-voice, in which students upload photos that represent their emerging personal and professional development over the course of the semester and share their insights with others in the seminar; 2) using e-portfolios to showcase student learning over time (this can include students uploading materials such as observation reports (Dill & Hanssen, 2019), process recordings, video journals, and any reports written over the year) (Clemson University, n.d.); and 3) conducting mindfulness exercises and even yoga to help students focus on self-care and cultivate an awareness of the mind/body connection

(Lee & Himmelheber, 2016).

Conclusion

Building on the four substantive findings from the field directors survey, this paper provides practical strategies for moving ideas into action. This exploratory study highlights the pedagogic complexity of field seminars and provides real-world strategies for “building a better seminar.” As Covid-19 continues to force us to consider new and innovative strategies for teaching and learning, the field seminar, at its core, continues to require educators to address the complexities of practice and their impact on the personal and professional development of social work students. The teaching philosophy for field seminars remains the same despite the shifting landscape of higher education. The seminar class will become even more important as a space in which students can unravel the complexities of social work and the world around them.

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