



# Innovations to the Design and Delivery of Foundation Field Education Seminars

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## **Introduction**

Field education is considered the signature pedagogy of the social work profession (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008). “Signature pedagogy is a central form of instruction and learning to socialize students to perform the role of a practitioner” (CSWE, 2008, p. 8). Although the primary delivery mechanism for field education is the internship and its accompanying professional social work supervision, field seminars are an important component. The practicum seminar has been noted to serve a wide range of educational purposes for the development of social work professionals by integrating classroom and field learning and socializing students to the process of peer consultation (Fortune et al., 2018). It can be used to prepare students for employment (Deck et al., 2017) and help students critically reflect on their development (Bowers, 2017; Bowlin & Cress, 2015). The field seminar also provides an opportunity to share experiences, reinforce values and ethics, examine agency policies and procedures, explore personal reactions and feelings to situations, discuss personal and professional challenges, and network with other students in a safe environment. (Dill & Bowers, 2020; Harris & Myers, 2013).

Despite the educational value of field seminars, Fresno State was among the minority of graduate programs that did not include field seminars as part of its curriculum. The program faced several barriers, including faculty resistance, workload, classroom availability, and integration of the seminar into the program matrix of courses. The resistance from faculty was centered primarily on workload. Facilitating a field seminar was viewed as additional work rather than part of the field liaison role, and faculty were not receiving additional workload credit for this task. Classroom

availability was also at a premium at Fresno State; the seminars had to fit into the course schedule, resulting in some sections being offered at unpopular times.

Field seminars were initiated for second-year MSW students in 2008 as a way to strengthen integration of the advanced, multisystem concentration. Faculty volunteered to facilitate the seminars as a pilot. Student feedback was positive and consistently indicated the need for a first-year seminar, primarily for support and socialization. Yet there was little overt faculty support for developing the foundation-year field seminars, primarily due to the workload issues described. In order to operationalize the foundation field seminars effectively, three key strategies were implemented.

The first strategy was to persevere and find creative solutions to the barriers faced. Two tenured practice faculty members and the field coordinator met informally to carve out the details of the structure and delivery of the seminars to fit the MSW program configuration. Planning included development of the syllabus and supporting documents, and seminar enrollment.

The second strategy was to convert the problem of faculty resistance to facilitating field seminars into a learning opportunity for second-year MSW students. The key innovation to the seminar design was the designation of facilitators. Instead of faculty, second-year MSW students who are enrolled in both advanced field and the advanced practice group class, and who need group experience for field internship, facilitate the biweekly field seminars as a component of their second-year internship. The biweekly, one-hour field seminars are not delivered as a separate course but rather are incorporated as part of the internship and count for internship hours. Facilitating a group is required for all second-year MSW students in field, and the first-semester MSW field seminars are designed as a socialization group (Toseland & Rivas, 2017), so this arrangement met the learning needs of both student cohorts.

The third strategy was to further limit the impact on faculty workload by separating the supervision of the MSW student facilitators from the faculty liaison role. Similar to the traditional supervision of MSW field practice in agencies (Poulin et al., 2019), the faculty teaching the advanced practice group course and the field coordinator met with the MSW student facilitators initially to prepare them for their group seminar experience and then throughout the semester for group supervision and individual consultation. These meetings involved reviewing the syllabus, discussing the role of the facilitator, helping facilitators manage student absences, providing support, discussing the responsibility of group members, and applying group process principles to practice. Meetings were scheduled monthly to monitor progress and provide support. Faculty were also available outside of the scheduled meetings for consultation as needed. These foundation field seminars began in October 2013.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Since its inception, the students enrolled in the field seminars were asked to provide written feedback to facilitators in the form of course evaluations. The evaluations are similar to those for any other course except that they solicit only comments, rather than also including ratings of items associated with a traditional class such as content of lectures and structure of the syllabus. These evaluations were collected at the end of the semester by the field coordinator and copied before being provided to each facilitator. Over the past six years, 270 out of 333 (81%) first-year MSW student participants completed end-of-course evaluation comments between 2014 and 2019. Additionally, the MSW student facilitators completed a short survey at the end of each semester. This survey assessed student learning, support, and satisfaction with the experience. For the past six years of implementation, 67 out of 70 (96%) MSW student facilitators completed the survey.

This research is considered an exploratory case study. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) define a case study as “a detailed explanation of one setting, or a single event, a single depository of documents, or one particular event” (p. 54). An intrinsic case study design is used in situations in which the researcher’s intention is to better understand a particular event or phenomenon (Lune & Berg, 2017). It is not designed to understand or test abstract theory, or to create new theoretical explanations, as instrumental or collective case studies might do; rather, it chooses cases to better understand a specific problem or concern (Munhall, 2007). Using direct interpretation, researchers create naturalistic generalizations from multiple sources such as interviews, observations, and documents. Data is organized, described, and classified into codes and themes, and interpreted to better understand a specific issue or concern (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Content analysis systematically identifies and categorizes data into codes, or meaningful pieces of content, in order to develop significant themes in qualitative analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Patton, 2002). The authors used content analysis on both the data from the course evaluations and from the facilitator surveys. For the study, written evaluative comments from the data pool were coded independently by two coders. The authors each coded the written comments to identify preliminary words or phrases that described a participant’s experience. The authors then discussed, and agreed on, the main themes, which are described in the following section.

## Findings

A number of themes were identified from the course evaluations provided by the first-year MSW student participants who completed them. The most common theme was

that student participants found the foundation field seminars to be effective. They felt that the MSW student facilitators were relatable, caring, knowledgeable, created a safe learning environment, and facilitated the group process well. Additionally, the preponderance of positive student comments related to the facilitators indicated a clear development of rapport, trust, and effectiveness in relation to the first-year MSW students.

A second, but related, theme was that students found the foundation field seminars to be useful and supportive. These comments centered on the seminars being a venue for problem solving, venting, learning from others, and receiving validation. Self-care was also perceived as a benefit of the seminars; this was explicitly mentioned by a few students but implied in many comments.

In addition to the themes presented above that support the educational effectiveness of the field seminars, two minor themes emerged that were less supportive. One minor theme was related to scheduling and logistical concerns. The seminars met every two weeks and several students suggested that this change to a monthly schedule. This was largely due to the inconvenience and associated stress of the commute to campus for a 50-minute class in the evening.

The second minor theme was that a small percentage (8.5%) of students felt that the field seminars themselves were pointless. These comments focused on the seminars being a waste of time and providing no educational benefit for students. It is important to note that these comments were often clustered in specific seminars and may be correlated to the skill and/or confidence of the student facilitators. They may also be attributed to the group culture of specific groups. Questions about how the seminars fit into an MSW curriculum are not uncommon, as the seminar is unlike any other classroom experience a social work student will encounter. Some students are under the impression that support is the only function of the seminars, and if they are receiving adequate support from other sources, such as their field placement supervisors or faculty liaison, this experience is perceived to be redundant. In these situations, the MSW student facilitators may also have needed more orientation and support in clarifying the purpose of the seminars and differentiating it from agency-based supervision with the field instructor.

The results from the MSW student facilitator surveys from 2014–2019 suggest that the facilitators gained a great deal from this experience. Sixty-seven of 70 MSW facilitators (96%) completed the facilitator surveys at the end of the facilitation experience. The survey consisted of three questions related to their learning experience, rated on a 1–5 Likert scale, with 5 equaling “very much.” On the first question, “How much did this group enhance your learning group skills related to your Advanced Practice with Groups course?” facilitators scored a mean of 4.52 (.56) on. The second question, “To

what degree can you apply this learning to future group practice?" resulted in a mean of 4.49 (.61). The third question, "How well did the member preparation support your role as a facilitator?" earned a mean score of 4.18 (.78).

Finally, the predominant themes from facilitator comments on the surveys can be organized into three general areas. The first is that the MSW student facilitators found the experience to be very applicable for future practice. Multiple students commented on the value of the experience throughout the last six years of implementation. The second theme is the importance of having a fellow MSW student as a cofacilitator in order to provide support. With rare exception, all of the facilitators were assigned a cofacilitator for this experience and were not asked to facilitate the process alone. Lastly, facilitators indicated that the orientation materials and monthly supervision sessions were helpful and supportive. The facilitator surveys were provided in writing and were anonymous, but they were completed in the presence of the faculty; it is possible that some student facilitators may not have felt safe enough to express negative comments, so this last theme could be biased.

## Discussion

The foundation field seminar delivery is innovative in its use of second-year graduate students as facilitators. This nontraditional design appears to be highly effective as both a socialization mechanism for the first-year students and as a meaningful practice experience for the second-year MSW student facilitators. For MSW programs that do not require two years, this kind of design easily could be adapted to allow MSW students to facilitate bachelor's level seminars as well. It would allow for a similar learning experience for the facilitators, and they may feel more comfortable facilitating a group of students who are not so close to their peer group.

Additionally, this design offers benefits both to the participants and to the facilitators. In fact, participants have commented on the value of being able to ask students senior to them regarding program issues about which they do not feel comfortable asking faculty. For instance, there is a general feeling that they can receive a more candid answer about some matters, such as faculty teaching styles, that can only be addressed by someone who has been a student. Under certain circumstances, tips for success can be seen as more relevant and valuable from a peer than from an instructor.

Of course, there are also limitations with having students facilitate a seminar course. Potential challenges and complications with this design include boundary and ethical issues, as well as the readiness of student facilitators to manage complex field matters. These limitations were addressed following the same training and supervision model traditionally used in social work field education. First, training and orientation were provided to the student facilitators regarding their role prior to engaging in the

group practice assignment. Group supervision from faculty was provided to guide the facilitators in the learning experience, and individual consultation was available and utilized as needed to address concerns that arose in the seminar. Complex issues that required more advanced intervention were rare and were managed by the field coordinator.

The first-semester field seminars were designed primarily for support and professional socialization, which are within the scope of practice for the student facilitators. The second-year MSW student facilitators had prior experience as first-year MSW students and were learning and applying skills in group facilitation, but they were not in the role of faculty. As mentioned earlier, a small number of students had trouble understanding the value of the seminar course. Beyond simply providing an opportunity to share field placement experiences, the seminar enables faculty to more effectively reinforce values and ethics, integrate practice course material, and augment evidence-informed practices. Thus, faculty provide close supervision of the student facilitators in the first semester and then facilitate the field seminars thereafter.

However, for programs interested in the possibility of considering this method of delivery, the MSW student facilitators also offered suggestions for improving their experience and success. One of their recommendations was to provide additional orientation. Currently, the orientation provided to them is only one hour long. While some feel this is adequate, some facilitators do not feel fully prepared when they first start this process. Additional preparation could increase the chances of success, and an hour may not be enough time for an adequate orientation for every facilitator.

Facilitators also felt that they would benefit from specific training on skill building before or during this experience. The skills they identified specifically were dealing with conflict in groups and handling silence in a group. Historically, the field seminar is not a place where there is a great deal of conflict to be managed, but when the occasion did arise, facilitators often felt wholly unprepared for it. They appreciated being able to process this experience with a faculty member after the group was over, but would have preferred to have the skill to better manage this before the issue was encountered. Dealing with silence, on the other hand, was an issue that almost all facilitators were faced with at one point in their seminar experience. Many felt uncomfortable with silence and did not know how long to let the silence last. Some student facilitators were candid about their fears that the silence was an indication of their lack of skill in facilitation as opposed to being part of the group process. Many indicated a desire to have the skills to engage their group more effectively, without raising students' defenses by simply calling on group members. Some felt that having the opportunity to role-play around these skills as part of the group supervision would be a useful way to improve their skills.

As mentioned earlier, self-care was also perceived as a benefit of the seminar by the foundation-year MSW student participants. Based on this finding and research conducted by an MSW student in the department (Santana-Garcia, 2019), Fresno state has begun formally to build a self-care focus into the foundation field seminars beginning in spring 2021. Capitalizing on this benefit of the field seminar process is believed to be a useful direction to consider, especially given the risk that social workers run for job burnout and the negative impact this can have on their well-being (Lizano, 2015).

The data presented here is not without its limitations, but both the participant and the facilitator outcome data appear to offer support for the effectiveness of this method of design and delivery. The data also support previous research on the educational purpose of field seminars, as well as the value of the increased use of group learning structures to enhance field education. In these days of budget shortfalls, incorporating graduate students as field seminar facilitators appears to have the potential of creating a win-win scenario by providing meaningful professional and educational benefits both for the student participants and for the student facilitators.

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