



“Is this REALLY Social Work?” Facilitating Practicums in a Pandemic

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Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many university institutions across the globe have moved to online learning platforms and remote practicums, to reduce in-person contact in compliance with local public health requirements. While this has meant significant changes to teaching and learning, schools of social work have maintained their ethical obligation to prepare students to support the individuals, families, and communities they work for and with (Morris et al., 2020). Both the stay-at-home orders and the significant reduction of in-person interactions impacted those with whom social workers and students work, as well as social workers, educators, and the students themselves. In response, our MSW field practicum team developed flexible strategies to support students through the pandemic, while continuing to ensure a rigorous field placement learning experience that prepares them to enter the field. In this article, we use the lens of transformational learning theory to explore macro strategies that help MSW students grow into competent professionals, and micro considerations that support student success. This exploration is based on our experience as a social work field team.

Context

Our school of social work is located at a university situated in a mid-sized city in southwestern Ontario, Canada. The school offers a generalist-focused education at the BSW, MSW, and PhD levels. The BSW includes two combined honors degrees:

Combined Social Work and Women’s Studies, and Combined Social Work and Disability Studies. The MSW is offered in two formats: the regular program located on the main campus, and the weekend MSW for Working Professionals, which, prior to COVID-19, was offered at two sites, one at the main campus and one in the Greater Toronto area. The MSW for Working Professionals, which will be referred to in this article, offers the same curriculum as the on-campus MSW program, but is offered in a weekend course delivery format.

When public health officials called for face-to-face services to be curtailed, the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) quickly offered guidance on how to best support students in field practicum with this transition. This included allowing students who satisfactorily completed 75% of the required 450 hours to be evaluated as having completed the placement, as well as offering a remote learning plan option for those students who had completed 60-74% of their hours (CASWE, 2020). This was a great help in the first semester. At the time, we did not know that virtual practicums would continue to be the norm for nearly two years.

Transformational Learning Theory

Transformational Learning Theory “provides a framework for promoting positive change in students’ cognitive and/or affective frames” (Davis & O’Brien, 2020, p. 61; Mezirow, 1997; Pinar & Peksoy, 2016). This theory posits that learning happens through the interpretation of experiences, based on a dynamic of personal and environmental factors throughout the learning process (Kitchenham, 2008). COVID-19 has been a catalyst in transforming how social work agencies and schools serve communities. Viewing this shift through a transformational perspective allowed us to be flexible in supporting students in their transition to social work field education during a tumultuous time.

Even before the pandemic, we recognized that entering field placement can be an uncomfortable experience that may come with anxieties and discomforts that can offer insight into the learning process. Mezirow (1997) describes the integral role that discomfort plays for an effective transformative learning experience to occur, since changes to how learning takes place do not happen within already existing frameworks (Davis & O’Brien, 2020; Mezirow, 1997). For learning to occur, change must take place. As a field team, we have endeavored to create safer spaces for students to reflect critically on their perceptions of the profession and the roles that social workers can play in service to humanity during this global crisis (Davis & O’Brien, 2020).

According to the framework proposed by Davis & O’Brien (2020) (adapted in Mezirow, 1997), Transformational Learning Theory involves four stages: a disorienting

dilemma, self-reflection in debrief, experimenting with a new role, and reintegration (Davis & O'Brien, 2020; Mezirow, 1997). The phases of transformational learning theory are used below to highlight both student and field placement staff experiences.

Phase One: Disorienting Dilemma

Typically, the disorienting dilemma in Transformational Learning Theory is introduced as a learning tool and may be a hypothetical simulation (Davis & O'Brien, 2020). However, the pandemic did not allow for the luxury of planning ahead using hypotheticals. In March 2020, due to the orders of Canadian public health and other government officials, many social service agencies quickly pivoted away from face-to-face services, which affected staff, clients, and students. With the introduction of virtual (or partially virtual) practicums for many, we sought to support students in shifting from questioning whether this modality constitutes “real” social work to examining the most effective and supportive ways to deliver social work services during a global crisis, while encouraging critical and reflective practice.

Taylor (2007) highlighted the benefits of transformative teaching and learning in less formal settings that are more heavily influenced by external factors, such as the public or the environment. There are multiple disorienting dilemmas brought forward by COVID-19. In this article we refer to the disorienting dilemma as that of completing a field placement during the pandemic, and discuss how we hoped to focus on critical conversations and new learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought forward many intertwining challenges for MSW students and schools of social work. Many students in our MSW for Working Professionals program experienced a lack of employment stability: losing their jobs due to layoffs, receiving reduced or increased hours due to increased and decreased workloads, and experiencing burnout. Some students worked from home while caring for children, parents, or others. Students who were parents or caregivers had to change their working conditions, homeschool children, or find alternate care arrangements to complete work or if the student themselves fell ill.

Rudolph et al. (2014) described the challenging dynamic inherent in creating an environment that allows students to feel safe and supportive while going through a disorienting dilemma (Davis & O'Brien, 2020). Prior to engaging in a transformative learning exercise, they recommended the use of “prebriefing,” or sharing important points including the purpose and “importance of creating a learning environment based on the group members’ mutual trust, respect and shared vision” (Davis & O'Brien, 2020 p. 61; Rudolph et al., 2014). The intent is to help students feel supported and safe, and ideally decrease feelings and behaviors based in defensiveness (Davis & O'Brien, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2014).

In the preliminary stages of the pandemic, a “proper” prebriefing was not possible before the introduction of the disorienting dilemma, as unpredictable news continued to be delivered throughout the country and world. However, as we continued to meet with new students about field placements, the field team delivered prebriefing both in individual meetings with students and through larger, full-group email communications and orientation meetings. While the impacts of the pandemic were not choices, there were many choices in how we, as a school of social work and a community, chose to respond and shape the field learning experience. We continued to prioritize student, agency, and client needs. In the initial stage of the pandemic, prebriefing to the field placement experience was shared as quickly as possible, through communications by email, in class, and through individual meetings. These prebriefs included acknowledgment of the challenges students were experiencing, both in their personal lives and in the MSW program, in both the academic and field components.

Navigating vaccine and testing requirements is an ongoing challenge, with some agencies introducing vaccine mandates to students and educational settings with short notice. Students must make decisions about receiving vaccines to meet their educational and placement goals. If students are unable to complete placement, they are unable to complete their degree. Seasoned social workers in agencies were no more experienced in these models than the social work students that were placed in their agencies, and so this process occurred concurrently. We all pivoted alongside placement agencies.

A strength of our program lies in its generalist nature, but this focus was at odds with the specific agency needs and opportunities during placement. The virtual environment allowed for increased access to online trainings that would otherwise be inaccessible in a classic placement setting. Students were encouraged to access a university database of trainings. Some chose relevant trainings with their supervisors, while others reviewed the repository to find opportunities to expand their learning in multiple directions. This allowed for a broader placement experience, complete with new avenues for learning and networking. Further, these online trainings allowed students to expand skills and strengthen resumes, sometimes with certificates or even certifications to support future career planning. While this was a strength in that it added to learning, it was also disorienting, as the trainings were often much more targeted than the generalist MSW perspective taught in class.

Phase Two: Self-Reflection in Debrief

It is crucial that each student can engage in critical conversations before, during, and after the field placement (Davis & O’Brien, 2020). This was as much true before the

pandemic as it continues to be. Along with our preplacement conversations with students, our site visit process allows time for reflection on how students and field instructors use creative ways to build their mentor/mentee relationship, meet learning goals, and support the community.

Davis & O'Brien (2020) recommended using the *National League for Nursing Guide for Teaching Thinking*, as it is an excellent debriefing framework for engaging students in critical conversations. The guide includes three key stages to the debriefing process (Davis & O'Brien, 2020; National League for Nursing [NLN], 2017):

1. Context: Identify the patient's story;
2. Content: Understand and guide thinking;
3. Course: Integrate into practice.

The critical thinking prompts are useful for reflection in social work practice by shifting the idea of the “patient” to that of an individual, family, or community being served. Students are encouraged to think of the population they are serving, what services clients might want to access, and how the experience could be different during the pandemic. We continue to encourage students in supervision sessions, integration seminars, and during their site visits and evaluations to reflect on how they feel about a particular situation, prompting them to ponder questions such as “What source of knowledge influence/should have influenced your thinking?” and “How have past experiences helped you make sense out of the current situation?” (NLN, 2017, p. 1). In the third step, the NLN encourages students to reflect by asking “So based on... what are the next steps going forward?” and “What will you do differently moving forward?” (p. 2).

Peer learning encourages increased critical thinking, promotes an inclusive environment in which students share diverse perspectives, and supports ongoing professional social work development (Garrett, 1998; Gillespie, 2012; Steiner et al., 1999). Throughout placement, students focus on sharing ideas with peers. and revisit the step of self-reflection in debrief as they attend their weekly field integration seminar. This is a graded, mandatory, online course students attend concurrent with field placement. During the seminar, students are encouraged to share about a variety of topics, such as ways to transition to the placement agency, new service delivery methods, strategies for identifying gaps and advocating for clients, self-care, how to access support in difficult situations, and strategies to work through anxiety related to placement.

Phase Three: Experimenting With a New Role

Students were encouraged to analyze both how the placement experience would enhance their learning and what that they could contribute to the organization, clients,

and community. During the experimenting stage, students practice their social work skills by actively providing a helping service in a practical setting (Wayne et al., 2010). Integral to this stage is the consideration of how the student would enter the new role, thinking about how they could be actively involved with making change, both within the agency and within themselves in their approaches to learning and practice (Wayne et al., 2010).

As a field team, we had many conversations with both the students and with each other to remind us that even the most seasoned social workers were working in virtual environments and experimenting with new roles. This normalizing of such unprecedented experiences helped to normalize some of the students' anxieties. After discussing how virtual case management, counselling, and referral services were a new adventure for many organizations, and how facilitating virtual field placements was fresh territory for field teams, many students jumped into the challenge with enthusiasm. Students shared specific ways that they felt they could make virtual contributions to an organization. From a structural standpoint, with antiracist and antioppressive work at the forefront for many community agencies, some students were able to understand how agencies could focus on strategies to incorporate antioppressive practices into virtual service delivery models. Many students expressed a commitment to this work. Students also identified the importance of equity in assisting others to access opportunities and communities that were previously inaccessible due to geography, resources, and other constraints. Lastly, due to an increased focus on equity and accessibility, agencies needed more support than ever before.

Finding one specific role to which to apply these reflections proves to be challenging in a generalist social work program, especially as students are in such vastly diverse types of placements. As Wayne et al. (2010) mentioned, there are not “across the board educational routines that foster social work ‘habits’ or ‘rituals,’” with field instructors not necessarily having any shared view on the best ways to share knowledge with students (p. 331). Everything can vary, from documentation and schedules to supervision structure, as well as, with the addition of the potential for virtual placements, placement format (Wayne et al., 2010). To support students with preplacement anxiety, we asked students to reflect on ways they could build relationships in a new virtual environment.

Phase Four: Reintegration

Reintegration represented the fourth phrase of the transformational learning process, and the return to in-person learning for some students. This process was a new experience for students, agencies, and the field teams. Collectively, we began to integrate new values, strategies, and ideas into the present options for learning

through field education. Ideally, students began to transform their anxiety related to placement into feeling inspired and empowered to be an agent of change within the agency or community, a feeling that continued to grow throughout the semester (Davis & O’Brien, 2020). Continued learning and sharing with peers has proven to be a valued component of adult education (Knowles, 1980). With the integration seminar, we encouraged students to further examine and understand the levels involved in advocacy and enacting change, learning how to identify barriers and when and how to speak up and advocate (Davis & O’Brien, 2020). Some organizations offered several practicum opportunities, with the intent to offer increased opportunities for peer connection (Wayne et al., 2010). Anecdotally, several students shared their appreciation for the support of connecting to peers within their agency who were navigating similar experiences.

Parallel Processes: Transformational Learning Theory and the Field Team

Upon reflection, we see how our work as a field team can also be viewed through the lens of the four phases of Transformational Learning Theory.

Phase 1: Disorienting Dilemma

Like the students, the field team experienced these disorienting dilemmas in diverse ways. The field team had to challenge previously held notions. First, we were confronted by our bias that an in-person field placement was the best and only way to facilitate student learning. Second, we did not anticipate that personal choices in health care (e.g., what if students decide not to be vaccinated?) would impact a student’s ability to complete their field placement. As new questions arise, we shift our approach to student support accordingly.

Phase 2: Self-Reflection in Debrief

We cannot speak about student transitions and critical thinking without discussing our own. Along with being forced to explore our own hesitations about online work, we were also confronted with ensuring that our relationship(s) as a team would stay strong although we were not working within the same building. Just as students had hesitations about the rigor of online experiences, and we had some thoughts about the efficacy of virtual placements in preparation, so too were we challenged in ensuring that our collaboration remained strong. We sought creative means of collaboration to keep our work fresh and our connections robust, and have emerged a stronger team because of it.

Phase 3: Experimenting With a New Role

Members of the field team found themselves disseminators of knowledge concerning online practices. We had the opportunity to share information concerning the successes of remote work with students and staff, and we became increasingly comfortable looking for remote opportunities for students worried about the health risks of face-to-face work due to personal vulnerability or close contact with those with increased risk of severe illness.

Phase 4: Reintegration

Increasingly, as public health guidelines shift, we have seen agencies return to face-to-face service, while others have incorporated more permanent virtual services into their policies and procedures. This offers students a choice in modalities, to fit their comfort levels regarding exposure, or to accommodate their other responsibilities.

Discussion

Each of these phases in critical engagement has led us to personal and professional reflection, resulting in the lessons described above. We are reminded of the importance of flexibility in student support. Without willingness to consistently revise and review, we would be unable to meet students’ changing needs. Similarly, as we need and expect students to be flexible in choosing and entering their field placements, we must be flexible as well. This highlights the relationship(s) between students and field staff, and has given us an opportunity to model some of the approaches and attitudes necessary for future success.

Another opportunity has come via our focus on centering social workers in the field and their creative experiences in meeting social work demands during the pandemic. We have many seasoned social workers – the very ones who students hope to receive mentorship from – who were also learning, as they adapted to changing landscapes. The requirement to adapt expectations was not unique to students, and showing that even the most senior social workers were grappling with change was essential.

Conclusion

Transformational Learning Theory continues to provide a solid framework for guiding us in supporting students through uncertain circumstances. We prioritize flexibility in meeting student and agency needs, to facilitate strong learning and professional growth. At the outset of the pandemic, we were forced to pivot quickly to face an unprecedented situation. The experience brought challenges for students, agencies, and university staff, but the lessons we learned have proved invaluable. While more placements shift back to in-person, and the original disorienting dilemma changes, we are unwilling to go back to our old processes. The learning, collaboration, and

creativity we discovered during this time will continue to inform our future practices.

Before the pandemic, we had a surface understanding of the importance of self-reflection, but now see it to be an inextricable part of learning and growth, for academic and professional reasons, for both students and staff. Self-awareness is a tenet of social work learning and practice, amplified by self-reflection, and many parts of our identities have shifted in the past two years. This has allowed for experimentation, not only with how we place students and the placements themselves, but also in how we relate to the process before, during, and after placement. This is especially valuable for students as they reflect on their learning in the years after placement. Lastly, reintegration is occurring on many levels, as we transition back to more face-to-face contact. We are confident that this will continue as we hold on to the lessons we learned and continue to apply them in ever-changing contexts.

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