

A Little More Supervision Won't Hurt: Group Work as a Supplemental Supervision Method at the Bachelor's Level

Rolanda L. Ward and Cassandra Daniels

Abstract: Supervision is an important component of professional development for social work students. Supervision helps students process decision-making and link practice decisions to social work competencies, knowledge, and values. Even though social work educators know supervision is critical to the learning process, we also know the realities of field educators' schedules. Therefore, it is important for field staff to develop supplemental methods of supervision that will provide students consistent and thorough feedback. This article explores the implementation of a supplemental supervision model in field seminar in order to deepen students' connections to theory and practice.

Keywords: group work, supervision, field education

After graduating from a doctoral program, I began the quest of securing a tenure track position. My quest was filled with uncertainty about how I would perform as an academic. My very first academic offer was right in my wheelhouse: a growing BSW program in a rural setting needing a macro social worker. I knew I could teach the courses they were looking to fill, but there was one catch to their offer—the position also included coordinating field. I was a little reluctant about accepting the offer but, after consultation, I thought I could do this job. My rationale for accepting: I was once a field student and served as a field liaison for macro students when I was a doctoral student.

Of course, retrospection provides great insight, especially after spending years in the position performing the job, learning the program's strengths, and identifying areas for program improvement. But as I look back at my naïve thoughts—that is, my initial assessment of my field education skills—I certainly was not capable of performing at competency when I began my job as field coordinator.

My first year as field coordinator was filled with little guidance. There was limited instruction about how to do field and, without instruction, I did not know what to expect from students. I did not have much knowledge about what to do as field coordinator. The only source of information that provided some sense of direction was the field manual. After reviewing the manual, I thought field education was about securing placements, having students fill out learning contracts, asking field educators to keep track of students' practicum hours, sending field evaluations, securing those evaluations, and asking field educators to conduct weekly supervision with their practicum students. I was heavily focused on the task, and I did not have much knowledge about the process of supporting emerging social work professionals.

In addition to performing my administrative responsibilities, I had to teach a field seminar class. While I had never taught a field seminar class, I was well equipped to teach social work classes.

In my doctoral program, I had actually spent four semesters preparing to teach—how hard could it be to teach a class with only 11 students in it? When I asked for the syllabus for field, however, a quick glance left me asking, “What are students supposed to master in this course?” The syllabus essentially identified seminar as a place for students to link classroom theories and practicum experiences. Students were asked to come to seminar ready to talk about what was going on in field. There was no assigned text for the class and no assigned work products.

At the same time that I was teaching seminar, I also served as a faculty liaison. As the liaison, I had to meet with students on an individual basis and also with field educators. In these meetings, I soon learned that some students were not receiving consistent supervision in their field settings. Some students shared that they had not seen their actual field educator in a few weeks, that supervision only happened when their field educator could squeeze in a meeting, or that their supervision meetings consisted of mainly task discussions.

I quickly learned in my first year as coordinator that most of our students are placed in organizations that are doing more with less—less funding, less staff, less time. As a result, some of the more common statements students shared with the other field coordinator or me were things like “I never see my supervisor” or “I don’t have supervision with my supervisor”—this became a nagging critique of our field placements and a more clear indication that our students’ learning needs were not fully being met in their agencies. While their statements were at most times worse than the reality, their statements occurred in both seasoned and newer field placement sites. Even though we attempted to address students’ need to process field activities, we soon found it difficult to meet those needs through informal processes and office hours. And I have to admit, as a tenure-track assistant professor who had to teach, coordinate field, and conduct site visits, I did not have time to supplement students’ integration of field and theory on an informal basis. There simply wasn’t enough time in the week. Professionally, it would have been easier to defer to our trusted relationships with field educators who were undoubtedly doing their best to educate our students. Year after year, our field educators were accepting students and, in a rural setting, this was a make-or-break issue for our social work program. However, I knew we could not continue to educate our students in this cumbersome way. I knew that without supervision I was turning a blind eye to the settings our students sometimes had to negotiate. I felt compelled to consider what could be done formally to help students process their field activities and develop their skills in order to move them toward competence and graduation.

My reflections from this early experience left me with a significant quandary: How were students supposed to link theory and practice if they were just supposed to talk in class? The first few weeks in field felt more like chit-chat among friends. Students mainly talked about what they were doing in field. Some shared what happened when they went on home visits, others shared reports they filled out, and others talked about some of the community meetings they were able to attend. Seminar was unlike any other class I had taught. There was no contracting, no demand for work, and no summaries of learning.

After experiencing this format for one academic year, I knew more depth was needed. I attended

a field educator pre-conference session at a national social work conference, then began to learn from my peers different ways to think about seminar. Although I was seeking clarity about what to do with our class, I soon learned that seminar is a hodge-podge learning activity across social work programs (Dalton et al., 2011). I knew that my students were not being given a method to ground their conversations about their field experiences. I also knew BSW students did not have significant practice knowledge to know what to talk about in seminar and that they did not know how to respond to their fellow students without repeating things like “I agree with you” or “Wow, you get to do that in your placement?” After one year of learning how students were doing field education, I decided to ask the returning field liaison and the new assistant field coordinator their thoughts about how to strengthen field seminar.

The three of us met prior to school to talk about the goals of field seminar. We talked about some of the challenges students experienced in field, the key skills and knowledge students must be able to demonstrate as emerging social workers, and what resources were needed to support students in field. We each shared our experiences teaching seminar, focusing on not only students’ tasks but the process of students’ learning. After discussing our individual perspectives, our perceptions could be categorized into these areas: theoretical discussions about practice skills, discussions about individual experiences in field, and mutual support of classmates’ experiences in field.

Once we figured out what constituted field, we had to figure out how this content would be delivered. We wanted to provide students with an opportunity to show their skills on a weekly basis. We were particularly interested in elevating all students, including those who would rather not talk in class. Our ongoing conversations about the needs of students and our thoughts about how students become practitioners left us thinking about ways to stretch students so they might discover who they were as practitioners. Having experienced excellent supervision in my own foundation placement—particularly, consistent weekly individual and group supervision—I thought we could use the tasks of supervision to help our students complete the three goals we had established for seminar.

I knew from my MSW field educator that supervision allows practicum students to learn and develop new skills to determine their efficacy and to move from primary learners to practitioners (Kadushin, 1985). My supervisor used good old-fashioned process recordings in supervision.

I looked to the literature to help guide the team’s conversation about how we could support students’ growth in seminar. Bogo and Vayda’s (1998) Integrative Theory to Practice Loop is an established reflective process that helps students link theory and practice; it reinforces a social work perspective. Bogo and Vayda’s four-stage model links students’ practice to reflection, to knowledge, to their professional response. In our team conversations, we discussed the idea of building a seminar class that addressed our two needs: move students beyond chit-chat and provide consistent process opportunities. In other words, we thought about seminar as another form of supervision. Even though we felt our conclusion made sense, we also acknowledged the pedagogical difficulty some fellow educators would have with our use of seminar as a supervision strategy. Our profession broadly agrees that social work supervision is the primary

responsibility of the field educator and the current purpose of seminar is to facilitate the integration of practice and theory in a class-like setting. But given that social workers use supplemental supervision methods outside primary places of work, we asked ourselves this: Why shouldn't students be introduced to the idea that good supervision should be sought at all times, especially when it may be inconsistent at the primary source?

In order to move students towards our new model, we had to communicate a new set of expectations to students. At the beginning of the semester, we shared our expectations about seminar with students. Students were told they would engage in peer supervision and help to facilitate their classmates' learning. Students were educated on the roles individuals play in groups, the stages of group work, the benefits of using group work, and their role in assisting each other in processing field activities. We had to assign students readings about supervision and about group work. This provided students theoretical knowledge about the process we would use to support their learning. We also changed the syllabus to reflect the new goal. Work products were added to the syllabus. Two primary work products were added: weekly reflection/journal and facilitation.

Student movement from passive to active learning required the addition of weekly online journal reflections. We discovered that schools of social work already use journal writing to promote integration of theory and practice (Sullivan & Bibus, 1991) and these classroom products can be similarly meaningful in field seminar. Glazer et al. (2000) suggest journal writing allows students to record feelings (i.e., fears, frustrations, anxieties). While journal writing is a reflective tool for students, it can also be used as an instructor tool (Sullivan & Bibus, 1991). Journals were submitted on our learning platform. Students were given an assignment sheet that outlined what needed to be discussed, then wrote about the choices they made in field, any social work values observed in their practice, and how social work knowledge informed their decision-making. We stressed in class that weekly journal reflections were not simply a list of activities performed in field; rather, journals were a re-creation of communication choices (i.e., verbal and nonverbal encounters) with clients, community members, and/or staff.

Faculty liaisons read the weekly reflections prior to class. After reading, we selected excerpts from the reflections that supported the unit topic being discussed that day. I was truly amazed at the growth of students once we introduced our new method and when we grounded each week with readings. Journal excerpts were cut and pasted to a separate document. At the start of class, students were given a handout with de-identified excerpts about particular client/community interactions for all students in seminar that week. In addition, the handout contained that week's theoretical linkages, mainly taken from a field seminar workbook. For example, one week students read about and considered how to prioritize tasks when working with multiple clients. On the class handout, skills pertaining to prioritizing were outlined above the excerpts. Faculty liaisons led discussions about text readings in order to ensure students were building their social work knowledge and identity through common vocabulary. In addition, to promote additional group learning, facilitation, and mutual aid, students were assigned a week to lead at minimum a 30-minute group conversation about excerpts. Student facilitators were able to use the excerpts to generate initial observations about a particular field experience and were able to provide

feedback to classmates about the outcomes of their decision-making process (see example).

Example Handout

Week 7 Unit Topic: Prioritizing in Field

Knowledge, Skills, or Values: partializing, time management, Code of Ethics Value Integrity

Excerpt: This week in field, I had to meet with three clients in one day. This was a new experience for me. I had felt overwhelmed and I think I made my field educator angry because I forgot to file a referral that was needed that day.

Example Class Discussion: Readings

Faculty Liaison: This week, your reading discussed prioritizing the work in field. How does a social worker begin to prioritize the work?

After discussing the reading, the class is turned over to the student facilitator.

Example Class Discussion: Excerpts

Student Facilitator: Our first excerpt talks about how hard it is to prioritize clients when we are new to our field sites. Tammy, can you talk about any situations in your placement where you have experienced this scenario? Can you share what were your competing values when you felt overwhelmed?

Not only did this method take the pressure off of students to expose themselves when all of them were learning how to manage the workload in field, it promoted conversation by making this very familiar experience relatable. Students were easily able to share their experiences. This is the process we were seeking. For us supervision simply meant students would have an opportunity, every week, to discuss how they were becoming a social worker (i.e., how they were using skills, knowledge, and/or values).

Even though we were committed to the implementation of our supplemental supervision method, we also quickly realized that students were students and that our social work knowledge was needed to help integrate the more challenging practice experiences to theory and/or to challenge students if they missed opportunities to do so with each other. We accomplished this challenge in and outside of seminar. First, after reading reflection journals, we asked students to deepen their learning with quick electronic feedback about their field practice decisions. This activity ensured students were consistently being asked about their practice decisions, even if they were not discussed in seminar. Second, if students identified more sensitive practice decisions in their reflections, we could meet with students before or after class to provide supplemental supervision. Finally, we used elements of the kids' freeze game to stop the group process for a teachable moment. We had to keep a "students are learners" framework in the forefront of this pedagogical experiment in order to not allow the development and/or reinforcement of less competent skills. But we were also cognizant of the fact that freezes can be disruptive to the group process, so we used them minimally. Finally, at the end of a student's facilitation, we asked the rest of the group to summarize the group facilitator's successful skills and which skills needed more practice. The group concluded with the facilitator summarizing the group's work

that day.

We know social work programs are places of learning and practice. However, sometimes, we don't always get the learning process right. Therefore, it is essential that we, the field directors and educators, think about supplemental activities or learning opportunities that will help students apply and critique their learning in order to deepen their practice of social work. Our process worked for us because we were a small rural program. Our team was able to quickly check in with one another and schedule meetings to see if our process was making a difference in our program. We recognize that as professionals we are called to be consumers of knowledge and producers of knowledge. Therefore, it would be imperative to the development of field that our supplemental supervision method is researched to see if it can be scaled up. Good supervision not only has implications for students, but implications for our profession: Good supervision develops good social workers.

As field directors, we do believe the ideal location for supervision is in field placement with field educators. However, when the ideal cannot be accomplished on a consistent basis, it is also essential for programs to think outside the box and to provide students a supervision supplement that fulfills the function of good supervision. Therefore, we believe our supplemental model supports the thought that a little more supervision won't hurt.

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About the Authors: Rolanda L. Ward, PhD is Associate Professor, Social Work Department, Niagara University, NY (716-286-8520, rward@niagara.edu); Cassandra M. Daniels, MSW, BASW is Program Director and Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work and Sociology, Daemen College, Amherst, NY (716-839-8292, cdaniels@daemen.edu).