

My Life as a Practicum Director

M. Diane Calloway-Graham

This is an account of my personal experience as a practicum director over the past 21 years. The intent is to provide a practical context for theoretical ideas about the signature pedagogy of the field practicum. Through a narrative lens, I pay particular attention to the intricate process of maintaining a practicum program that meets the needs of the community and students, while adhering to the standards of social work programs.

My Beginnings

The field practicum experience can be expressed in a quote by T. S. Eliot: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” I started my journey as a practicum director over 21 years ago fresh out of my PhD program. Prior to receiving my tenure track position as Assistant Professor and Practicum Director, I worked as a professional counselor at another university's Women's Center and taught courses in the Social Work Department. In the beginning, my exposure to the essence of a practicum program consisted of my own experience as a practicum student and an unusual assignment at the Women's Center supervising a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) student in need of a successful field experience, but who was challenged because of a disability. When I was hired in my new position I thought it sounded fun and exciting. It seemed to parallel my love of teaching, mentoring students, program development, and working in the community. In the beginning of my journey this is what I knew about being a practicum director.

Lucky for me, I have always been a networker. As a social work therapist I considered it my primary obligation to make connections with other professionals in the community and to know the full range of resources and opportunities that existed for my clients. My own internship experience helped me understand the general framework of the

practicum. My approach to the practicum was to be responsible, proactive, and assertive, all of which translated into success. My valuable experience supervising that BSW intern taught me that students come to the field with different degrees of developmental readiness. I soon learned the value of these orientations.

My first day as a faculty member consisted of me showing up to my office with no other faculty member in sight. I sat in my temporary office and wondered why social work was located in this strange building (Animal Science) while trying to determine what a practicum director should be doing. As a doctoral student I was trained to be a teacher and researcher, but no one ever mentioned the word practicum. Reflecting back after 21 years, I find this to be an interesting notion given the fact that there has always been general consensus that the field experience is the most significant, productive, and memorable component of social work education (Kadushin, 1991). In today's jargon we refer to field education as the signature pedagogy of social work. Signature pedagogy means it is the central form of instruction and learning through which students are socialized to perform the role of social work practitioner (CSWE, 2008). I think we still have much to learn about the implementation of field education as the signature pedagogy. Much of the research today focuses on the challenges of field education being validated and the creation of pedagogical standards that extend beyond required hours and qualifications of field

instructors (Lyter, 2012; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010).

Now back to my beginnings. I sat at my desk in Animal Science and decided to take a proactive stance and look through the old practicum files that my predecessor had left behind. I soon found a current list of practicum instructors, students, and agencies. Given my orientation toward assertiveness, networking, and building relationships, I got on the phone and made appointments with agency practicum instructors. I took responsibility for orienting myself to the community and our placement sites. I also reviewed the current practicum manual and prepared myself to meet the practicum students for the first time in seminar. However, I soon found myself challenged with the following issues: (a) students' lack of trust toward me because I had replaced the former practicum director, (b) field instructors who also had a connection to the former practicum director, feeling that she could not be replaced and (c) working with a student exhibiting potentially harmful behavior at his practicum site.

The role statement of my position was based on teaching, research, and service. This means those components were the basis of faculty evaluation. However, these did not acknowledge the leadership qualities, energy, and time involved in building trust, establishing positive relationships, gaining acceptance with others, and resolving problems so necessary to a practicum director. In the context of social work practice, I would have been evaluated as an effective therapist with these types of qualities but not in higher education. Generally, no one trains or educates you to be a practicum director. You just grow into that job and create your own direction and path based on social work practice experience, the shared experience of others, and CSWE educational guidelines to try and make sense of it all. Bogo (2010) suggests that our understanding of field education today comes from the shared experiences of field directors who have contributed theoretical ideas and influenced the research on what it takes to provide a quality field education with concrete guidelines.

In my second year as practicum director I applied for and was awarded a course development grant from the college to do an extensive revision of

practicum materials. I took the opportunity to immerse myself in the practicum literature, as little as there was at the time. My responsibility as practicum director in the midst of trying to work towards tenure was a challenge. I became a sort of educational specialist for my tenure committee and others, helping them to understand my role as practicum director. With practicum being its own domain, it is much different than the university conceptualization of teaching, research, and service. It is an ever changing process of student growth and development, student challenges, agency challenges, and evolving expectations based on CSWE educational reform. It requires continual engagement with student development, community development, program development, and traditional problem-solving. The literature today would suggest that if the field is intended to carry the prominent position of signature pedagogy then we must recognize the essential leadership provided by the practicum director in understanding the curriculum, the competencies of students, and the needs of the practice community (Lyter, 2012). In my beginnings I felt like a newborn kitten just waiting for this new world to unfold before my eyes. I had the natural instincts to direct the field but at the same time I stood before a vast new world that I had to learn to navigate.

Experience: The Master Teacher

Firsts or first experiences, are part of life. I consider my experiences to be pivot points that have informed my process. My first year as a practicum director built the foundation for my ongoing story. I learned that my primary responsibility was to orchestrate the overall learning experience of the student and act as a facilitator between student and the field work agency. I emphasize the word orchestrate because it communicates the sense of complexity that is inherent in composing and arranging field experiences.

For example, I will share one experience that illustrates my point. I mentioned earlier that one of my initial challenges was working with a student exhibiting potentially harmful behavior at his practicum site. At the beginning of the school year this student was dismissed from his practicum site for inappropriate relationships with a client. The student was from a well-known and well-respected family in the community. My process for working

through this situation was to make sure that I consulted with all the appropriate people needed to resolve the issue. The program director and I met with the student to inform him of his due process rights according to existing student policies and procedures. For the rest of the quarter I met with the student, the agency, and college administrators. The situation was reviewed by student services, the college dean, and social work faculty. We met on several occasions with the student and agency to hear their stories. The student also had a lawyer and family guiding him through the process, which later became a court case. The looming question remained: should the student be dismissed from the program? In the end, the student chose to withdraw from the university with no future intention of majoring in social work.

Unfortunately, endings are never really endings. After the student won the court case he would periodically show up in my office again wanting to major and graduate in social work. No became a regular part of my vocabulary. I think the word no symbolizes the need to create a structure to ensure student and agency success in the practicum and to protect the public interest. Over the years I have had numerous experiences with both students and agencies that posed challenging situations for success in the field. All of my experiences have informed my practice as practicum director and influenced my frame of reference about what makes a practicum program great. Becoming a field education director is like using my own global positioning system (GPS) for the first time. I had to study the instructions and learn how to navigate this vast new world of the practicum.

The Student

I have had a variety of both positive and negative experiences with students for many years. I view my students as if they were clients, and it is part of my task to know their strengths and empower them for success in the practicum. My most negative experiences have been those when the only option left was to counsel students out of the program. Although those numbers are relatively few in comparison to a much larger number who successfully graduate, there is a lingering sorrow that those students' hopes and dreams could not be realized. Even as I write this, the images of those students flood my mind, and a sense of sadness

enfolds me. On a happier note, I have the privilege to say that many of my former students are now my colleagues and lead social service agencies in our community. When social work faculty and I attend community events, we all laugh because I am constantly pointing out that most of the practitioners in the room are my former students. In that context, I would like to share several student situations that have informed my practice over years.

In working with students I have tried many approaches to ensure a good fit in the student placement process. I believe the process is an essential foundation for student success in the field. Effective field placement strives for a process that matches students' interest, personalities, cognitive and interactive skills, learning styles, career goals, and other factors with agency settings and individual supervisors. Students are interested in knowing the tasks they will perform, roles and responsibilities, and supervisory styles (Kiser, 2012). For a number of years I would set up an initial placement orientation that consisted of practicum instructors presenting information about their agency to the students. With the number of agencies involved it generally lasted for three hours. I used this format because that was the program process prior to my arrival. With this format even I was falling asleep from boredom. The amount of information shared with the students in this context did not seem to inform their interests and desired choices for the application process. I was spending too much time helping students sort through the information. I decided this process needed to be more fun and informative at the same time. Having an inclination toward being creative, I visualized all the agency practicum instructors and students coming together for dinner and having the opportunity to visit with agencies at their respective tables.

On the designated night of the first event in this format, agency practicum instructors and students ate dinner together. After dinner the students visited different agencies every ten minutes for the next hour and a half. I spent most of my time helping students with questions about who to visit and worrying about the empty tables at the less popular agency sites. The noise volume was loud and it seemed chaotic. The beauty of having a GPS is that it is constantly recalculating our destination. I have

refined the process over time and used this format for the last seventeen years. It is fondly referred to as the Practicum Orientation Buffet. We meet in the student center ballroom. One side is set up as a social with a buffet meal. Senior practicum students, practicum instructors, and students applying to the practicum eat and mingle together. We then adjourn to the opposite side where students are assigned seven agencies to visit with one free choice based on their interest. It is quiet and organized, and everyone is happy. I have learned that success in the placement process is based on a practicum director's conceptualization of the process and that even small corrections matter when recalculating our destination. I have come to view the practicum as a partnership between the student, the agency, and the program. This partnership is based first and foremost on the relationship that exists between all the players. Secondly, it needs to be a collaborative process which elicits commitment and investment from all parties. Lastly, it is a learning process that empowers students and agencies to make the necessary connections that inform the rest of the placement process handled by the practicum director.

I recall a situation where a student placed in a school setting came to me two months into the practicum experience feeling lost because her practicum instructor was not providing quality supervision or opportunities for a valuable experience. She was a skilled student and ready to succeed at her practicum. I asked her why she had waited so long to talk with me. She confessed that she feared I might be disappointed in her, and she wanted to first try to work it out herself. We strategized together and decided that we would both meet with the supervisor. I had developed a positive relationship with the supervisor over the years and my student trusted that I had her best interest in mind. Initially, when I was challenged with trust issues I learned that putting my energies into forging a positive relationship with students and agency supervisors helps built trust.

A positive resolution and understanding was reached in this situation, which resulted in a successful practicum experience. In the field, viewing relationships as a collaborative partnership enhances the probability that the educational goals of the student will be achieved (Bogo & Vayda,

1998). I think the essence of problem-solving is based on well-established relationships that are collaborative and the utilization of assertive skills. I now teach assertive behavior to my students in the integrative seminar. I believe when it comes to challenges, assertive communication sooner is always better than later. Assertiveness is a useful skill for understanding and managing emotions that help students to identify issues that need to be addressed in the internship and express those needs to others for problem resolution (Kiser, 2012). I like to think of assertiveness as one of the power sources for using a GPS. When using a GPS to navigate through the field, one must have a power source in order to operate.

The Agency

Working with the community to make a difference has been exciting for me. I am a firm believer that students should be assets to the agency. It is our responsibility as a social work program to prepare our students for practice in the real world. I view the practicum as integral to social work education because it represents the culmination of undergraduate and graduate education. The field experience forms the basis for the transition from student to professional and is a critical component of student training. Thus, the role of the agency supervisor is pivotal to the students' professional development. The agency supervisor is an essential key to guiding students, like a GPS, to a positive experience as a helper, and enables students to gain a thorough understanding of social work practice. As practicum director I recognize there is a delicate balance in meeting the needs of both students and agency supervisors.

At this point, I would like to share a significant experience in the community with an agency supervisor. One year about two months into the practicum placement, the agency supervisor from a corrections agency called me to express concerns about a practicum student. Those concerns revolved around the student's professional demeanor. The student was inconsistent in her attendance, exhibited ineffective communication skills, and lacked follow-through on some assignments. My first question was, "Do you think these issues can be resolved?"

As the agency supervisor thought the issues could be addressed, I arranged a meeting with the student

to hear her version, and then met with both of them to develop an improvement plan. Together we developed the plan and for the next two months the student was successful in her performance. After two months I got another concerned phone call, and asked again, “Do you think these issues can be resolved?” The supervisor replied yes, and I met with both of them to discuss and revise the improvement plan. All was well for the next couple of months until I got a third call with the same issues. As I conversed with the agency supervisor about the situation I sensed his ambivalent feelings. At this point, he expressed frustration, and yet felt responsible to help the student succeed. I posed a new question to myself, “What is most important in this situation: to preserve the university’s relationship with the agency and maintain the integrity of the practicum, or to let the student continue this pattern of behavior?” I answered in favor of the agency and the university practicum program. I found that my GPS was continually recalculating my destination as the situation unfolded.

Through this experience, and many others, I have learned that a practicum director has to answer tough questions and deal with challenging issues. To do this effectively, I had to establish ownership of decisions to be made in the practicum and develop a structure of procedures and policies that informed my practice in that setting. Not only is it important to empower students, but it is vitally important that agencies have positive experiences with their students so these practicum sites can be maintained for future interns.

Field Seminar

An essential responsibility of a practicum director is to ensure integration of academic and practice learning during the field experience. In our program, we have always had a weekly field seminar, which is valuable for several reasons: (a) to influence student socialization and inculcate a sense of self as a professional, (b) to provide an opportunity for me to keep in touch with the students’ developmental experiences, (c) to offer an opportunity for peer learning, (d) to communicate support, (e) to promote the development of reflective practice, and (f) to make the connection regarding how academic learning influences practice and development in the field. I believe the

field seminar is the appropriate place for students to experience a sense of competence in their professional development during the internship. The seminar is like a GPS for students; it helps them to successfully navigate the road of professional development. Sweitzer and King (2009) identified five developmental stages that students experience in the field. These stages, which help us understand student concerns and the resolution of those concerns in their journey of learning, include: anticipation, disillusionment, confrontation, competence, and culmination.

Let me share a story that illustrates my ongoing commitment to provide a structured format for student socialization, professional development, and integration of learning. For a number of years I have been reading the literature that promotes the idea of blended learning in social work education; blended learning consists of on-line and in-person learning formats. After reviewing the literature and talking with other faculty, I decided to pilot test a blended approach in seminar.

Typically, seminar had always been held on a weekly basis at 7:30 a.m. I am a morning person with a high energy personality, so I have never minded this time, but students do mind. Student lives are filled with practicum, work, relationships, other classes, and many other activities. I discussed this new structure with the students and explained the class format would now consist of in-person meetings every other week mixed with on-line discussions. Because of the students’ frequently-stated dislike of early morning classes, I expected that this would be a relief for them so I was not fully prepared for their negative reactions. Apparently, the students felt abandoned, disillusioned, and disconnected within this new format. The disillusionment elicited unexpected emotions, frustration, confusion, and disappointment in the students (Sweitzer & King, 2009). It became apparent to me that students needed a sense of ongoing connection with and support from the faculty, especially because they spend more time in the field than on campus.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) suggest that effective teachers possess the capacity for connectedness with their students and choose methods that encourage students to become

involved in their learning. I learned that, regardless of my willingness to experiment with a new approach, I needed to stay connected with the students regardless of the format. Again, my GPS was recalculating my eventual destination. As practicum director, I think the field seminar is essential for “best practice” in the signature pedagogy of social work education. It provides a forum for students to stay connected and receive guidance to overcome obstacles associated with professional development in the context of the social work program.

The Essence of Leadership

Now that I have shared some stories and ideas, I would like to revisit the word orchestrate and its meaning. When a practicum director orchestrates the overall learning experience of the student and acts as a facilitator between the social work program, student, and field work agency, it is a complex process with varied commitments to those involved. The student seeks a valuable and positive experience. The agency expects interns who are well-prepared and ready to engage in social work activities. The social work program expects both student and agency to meet the goals and objectives of the program. Bogo and Vayda (1998) suggest that all of these players come from different frames of reference. The social work program and agency have different purposes, values, and processes. The social work program is focused on education and knowledge building while the agency is focused on service. The student also has a personal sense of purpose, value, and process that is vested in their career choice.

As practicum director I have learned I am responsible to negotiate a process that meets the needs of the student, the agency, and the social work program. In all of my knowing I can tell you that the most important quality for negotiating these needs rests in the context of the relationship with students and agencies. Relationship is the key component for ongoing development, maintenance, and resolution of challenging issues in the practicum. Relationship is another key source of power for a GPS. The other key factors are ongoing commitment toward developing effective structure, procedures, and operating policies, as well as evaluation of the practicum program. The field education director is an essential leader in social

work education that represents an essential link to the community, and understands the needs of students and the social work curriculum (Lyter, 2012). As practicum director, my vision and understanding of what it takes to lead the field is crucial for success.

My World

I end my story back where I began, with T. S. Eliot: “We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” What is it that I have come to know? The practicum is a pedagogical process that empowers the professional development of students in part through linkage to the community where the reality of social work practice exists. It is a process of relationships, connections, partnerships, collaborations, and problem-solving complex challenges. The practicum is the essence of teaching students what it means to be to be a professional social worker. While many faculty continue to struggle with the value of field and liaison roles in social work education, I embrace them and understand what they can provide. I consider myself a scholar of field education who knows the value of leadership, building trust, establishing positive relationships, making connections, and resolving problems.

What is it that I have come to be? My life as practicum director has allowed me to make a positive impact as a social work professional and educator. I have had an opportunity to influence the field of social work through mentoring and teaching students who become a part of us. It has been my life, my career, and my calling.

What is it that I hope for in the future? I hope the signature pedagogy of field education moves from a belief to a substantial reality. That we develop more pedagogical standards that actually define leadership in the field and the important functions embedded in the process. That in our doctoral programs we would actually train future faculty to become field practicum directors – now that is a novel idea. I have added many maps to my GPS over the years to calculate my destination, and even more exciting is the fact that I have so many more maps to add!

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About the Author: M. Diane Calloway-Graham, Ph.D. is Associate Professor and Practicum Director in the Social Work Program at Utah State University (435-797-2389; diane.calloway-graham@usu.edu).