REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A SHIFT FROM DYADIC TO EXPERIENTIAL AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

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Abstract

Covid-19 has significantly impacted teaching and learning in social work field education globally. Government mandated protocols and lockdowns encouraging individuals to work from home have challenged traditional field placement opportunities. With field supervisors working remotely the traditional face-to-face supervision of students within social service organizations ended abruptly. This resulted in a shift to virtual learning modalities. Virtual learning tools including e-learning and social media platforms were not typical of tertiary social work field education programmes prior to the advent of the pandemic. The social work field education programme at The University of The West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados addressed this immediate challenge to the delivery of the field-education programme by utilizing experiential and self-directed learning. This article discusses combining the theoretical foundations of experiential learning and self-directed learning in an innovative online programme designed to allow students to undertake their social work field education during the pandemic, affording new opportunities for learning that have transformed field education in the digital era. Given that a social worker's skill set includes reflection, critical thinking skills, and engaging in lifelong learning, incorporating research and technology is a vital pedagogic, which will enable them to develop professional competency.

Keywords: social work field education, virtual learning, experiential learning, self-directed learning, Covid-19 pandemic

REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC UTILIZING EXPERIENTIAL AND SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

The University of The West Indies, Cave Hill campus, Barbados undergraduate social work programme is comprised of a one-year block placement of 835 contact hours which students undertake in their final year. Traditionally a full-time programme comprised of mature students, over the age of 21, with prior work and volunteer experience who have been granted leave from their current place of employment. The programme also affords local and regional students the opportunity to

complete their final year of field education in their country of residence along with international student exchange. The programme uses the *Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training: The New Chapter in Social Work Profession* (International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Federation of Social Workers, 2020) as its point of reference with its main goal to ensure that students gain the requisite social work knowledge and skills required to successfully complete their social work degree. However, on March 25, 2020, The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the Commission on Accreditation Statement announced that although "As 2.2.4 requires field education through 'in-person contact,' the COA [Commission on Accreditation] will broaden its interpretation to include remote-based field activity…programs may also address the impact of COVID-19 in implications for program renewal and program changes explicit curriculum assessment and implicit curriculum assessment" (CSWE, 2020, p.1).

In March 2020, Barbados recorded its first case of Covid-19 and traditional social work placement opportunities were immediately impacted. Students who had previously conducted their field education placement at various agency settings prior to the pandemic were no longer accommodated within these same agencies due to government mandates that limited social interactions and encouraged individuals to work from home to alleviate the spread of the virus. The abrupt cessation of face-to-face supervision and direct engagement with client systems presented an immediate crisis for the field education component of the social work programme. The solution to this crisis was to fashion a structured environment for students to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills through remote learning using various online modalities and resources while developing meaningful student activities during the pandemic.

The pandemic has also questioned existing critiques of field education assessment, creating opportunities for social work programmes and educators to apply alternatives to the current programme that meet learning objectives without sacrificing academic standards (Morley & Clarke, 2020). Social work field education and supervision must adapt to online education and assessment (Azman et al., 2020), encouraging a learning-centred approach and problem solving through experiential learning (EL) and self-directed learning (SDL) has proven to enhance knowledge and skills acquisition, and the development of lifelong learners who can adapt to the demands of the social work profession.

Experiential and Self-Directed Learning

Applying SDL to social work field education provides adult learners the freedom to plan, execute, and evaluate their learning experience (Merriam et al., 2007). This process involves the development of goals for study, outlining assessment with respect to how the student will know when they achieve those goals, identifying the structure and sequence of activities, laying out a timeline to complete activities, identifying resources to achieve each goal, and the provision of constructive feedback by supervisors (Robinson & Persky, 2020). Applying the concept that educators are facilitators, not just transmitters of learning, is in stark opposition to the conventional content-centred practice, where educators are the bearers of knowledge, and the students' experience is of less concern (Loeng, 2020). Knowles (1975) claims that when adults engage in SDL, they take initiative with or without the help of others in diagnosing their learning needs and formulating learning goals.

Students also identify resources, engage in their own goal formation, evaluate their own learning outcomes (assisted by their supervisor/educator), and are intrinsically motivated to solve real-life problems through their existing knowledge and experience.

Kolb's (1984) model of EL is a holistic development process based on the reflection of active experiences. It consists of a circular reflective cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. EL, although mainly associated with face-to-face learning, can also be accessible through online modalities. Applying the tenants of EL and SDL in social work field education during the Covid-19 pandemic was critical since traditional field placement opportunities, face-to-face classes, and direct supervision were unavailable. Students integrated social work theories with EL and SDL, taking responsibility for their own learning, conducting continuous reflection, and gaining constructive feedback from both their colleagues and the lecturer/supervisor while the lecturer/supervisor provided guidance and created the environment for students to resolve their challenges. Throughout the process, students supported each other and engaged in stimulating class discussion often brainstorming views amongst each other which enhanced the field education experience. Research indicates that students want to take the initiative on their ideas and when the balance of power is equal between students and their supervisors, students develop skills and knowledge in a real-world practice setting (Vassos et al., 2017).

While EL requires the use and application of prior knowledge and skills learned in the classroom (professional use of self, and case management skills), as students immerse themselves in their macro-based projects the use of SDL learning principles (freedom to plan, execute, evaluate, and reflect on their learning experience) combined with EL allows students to adapt to the new virtual field education environment.

Framework and Programme Assessment

The goal of the field education programme during Covid-19 is for students to develop their own Covid-19 project within their local community or country. All students must conduct a thorough needs assessment via online surveys, literature-based searches, social media post, and local media sources and learn how to utilize any technology they deem suitable to execute their projects. The lecturer/supervisor provides feedback, guidance, and support to students creating an environment that encourages creativity, discussion of theory to practice, challenging students to think critically while allowing them to explore their challenges and their ability to overcome them. The lecturer/supervisor provides analytical support and conduct assessment of student's performance as they relate to the CSWE core competencies (Morris et al., 2020). The overall goal is to provide students with the opportunity to practice their theoretical knowledge and hone skills under the supervision of a professional social worker in a variety of learning opportunities to assist students in their personal and academic development. Students were also provided opportunities show autonomous growth by contributing to their communities while reporting and reflecting on experiences in the field as they put their classroom learning into practice with the objective of promoting social justice and social change. Students remain active in the learning process by setting and evaluating their own aims and objectives, developing a learning contract, and negotiating reports with their lecturer/supervisor.

During the academic year, the lecturer/supervisor continually assess students' competencies through biweekly class attendance and participation, presentations, self-reflection, and weekly project progress reports. Students' ability to take initiative and apply critical thinking while assessing, planning, and implementing interventions, exercising evaluation, and termination are based on the following:

- **learning contract:** Each student develops a learning contract within three weeks of the commencement of the programme. The learning contract represents the learning objectives of both the student and the lecturer/supervisor, it reflects the student's year in the field and serves to articulate activities that support the CSWE's competencies. Learning activities developed demonstrate the practice behaviours associated with each competency. Learning contract activities are project specific, measurable, and individualized with the goal of promoting the student's successful development of professional competencies.
- **integrative paper:** A theoretically grounded 20-page written report detailing the student's research, needs assessment, goals, and sustainability of their projects.
- **reflective journal:** A 15-page written report where students weave their personal and professional growth, buttressed by theory that challenges students' biases and judgements to develop critical exploration of self.
- **field education project:** Assessment of each student's ability to develop and manage their projects, think critically, manage constructive criticism, display a professional attitude, effectively engage a community using technology/social media/other creative forums, display proper time management throughout the practicum and the implementation of the project and,
- active class participation on the Zoom platform**.**

A Brief Summary of Projects Implemented by Students

At the commencement of the academic year each student developed their own projects after executing a thorough needs assessment and presenting their project proposals to the lecturer/supervisor. Students leaned heavily on technology to engage their client systems, network online, learn how to set up their own websites and social media platforms, and assist their colleagues who are not technology savvy. These projects provide the contextual reality of what students previously learnt in theory, incorporating theory to practice with an emphasis on sociocultural approaches to learning guided by the lecturer/supervisor. The following include a summary of some of the projects implemented by students over the course of the past academic year, namely, (a) an online resource website for Caribbean nationals in Boston, Massachusetts, providing educational resources, linkages, and support services to all Caribbean nationals residing in Boston; (b) a nationally televised programme in Grenada for older adults, providing access to and encouraging the use of technology to older adults during the pandemic; (c) sponsored by local businesses, a children's social media website providing resources to assist children between the ages of 12–18 years of age who are adjusting to online learning and need help with mental health concerns; (d) a national online support group for single parents, providing resources and support through webinars intended to reduce stress, alleviate loneliness and feelings of isolation faced by single parents during the pandemic; (e) an online university resource centre for students during the pandemic providing strategies for adapting to studying at a tertiary level institution

during the pandemic; and (f) a telephone outreach to older adults with the aim of providing wellness checks during the pandemic by volunteer student social workers who were provided with specialised online training during the pandemic.

Achieving Objectives and Learning Goals

The objectives and learning goals were successfully achieved through the execution of these project. Students were able to translate into practice, through their projects, the concepts and principles taught previously in the classroom; analyse and assess their own professional activities; and accept continuing responsibility for their own professional development. Students approached problem-solving tasks and interventions with a capacity for conceptual thinking, a grasp of the structure of knowledge and theory pertinent to a particular problem, an ability to transfer to a specific situation applicable concepts and principles, and a readiness to seek new knowledge when needed to guide their activities. They also demonstrated a commitment to affecting social change and improving social functioning.

Lessons Learned

Covid-19 did not only disadvantage social work students by suspending student placement opportunities, but also negatively impacted the client systems directly served by social service agencies. The restructured field education programme not only afforded each student an opportunity to acquire relevant learning objectives and skill development needed to successfully complete their field education but also to provide services to vulnerable persons impacted by the pandemic by implementing action-based projects. Action based projects are ideal for field education during a major crisis because they empower students to use their skills and knowledge (Morris et al., 2020), and critically engage and solve problems (Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018). Students benefited from being the driver of their own learning by taking initiative, building confidence, developing critical thinking skills, and the ability to engage in professional lifelong learning, which are all characteristics of a professional social worker.

With heavy reliance on technology and remote learning lecturers/supervisors must ensure that they are able to assess students learning and professional competence (Maidment, 2006) and provide students with guidance, structure, and clear objectives for them to transition successfully and smoothly throughout their field education experience. EL and SDL approaches in social work field education provide the opportunity for lecturers/supervisors to assess students' competence. This is achieved when students apply their prior knowledge of theory to the field education experience and continually engage in critical self-reflection, while guided by the lecturer/supervisor as they learn to adapt to a virtual learning environment.

Conclusion

Although Covid-19 posed many challenges, it allowed for alternative creative approaches in knowledge and skill development acquisition in social work field education. It also provided an opportunity to transition from a traditional apprenticeship model of field education emphasising the

need for an innovative and flexible models of field education during a pandemic or any other crisis. Applying EL and SDL in social work field education during a pandemic provides social work students with the opportunity to engage in self-evaluation, self-reflection, and develop their critical thinking skills, all factors that foster social workers in becoming lifelong learners. This alternative to traditional social work field education while providing opportunities for self-driven, flexible learning must be bolstered by a well-defined resource intensive programme structure, and close monitoring and evaluation of each student's application of theory to practice by the lecturer/supervisor. Ultimately, a face-to-face field education experience is optimum, however, utilizing technology in field education can only enhance students learning experience.

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