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Expanding Student Learning During COVID-19 in a Virtual Environment

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Abstract

During the COVID-19 pandemic social work educators strategized so that students could complete field requirements safely, successfully, and on time while adhering to the mission of the profession. A large, national school of social work in the US adapted their field education programming to meet the requirements set forth by the Council on Social Work Education. These programs evolved with limited time using asynchronous and synchronous delivery methods. In the spirit of the Social Work Grand Challenge of “harnessing technology for social good,” this field note details how one school leveraged its virtual capacity to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: online learning, field education, telehealth, school social work, experiential learning labs, COVID-19

Introduction

During the early months of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic schools of social work across the world faced disruption in field education (Beesley & Devonald, 2020; Kourgiantakis & Lee, 2020; Morris, Dragone, Peabody, & Carr, 2020). Students began to report agencies closing their doors in fear of interns contracting or spreading the virus. According to Wayne, Bogo, and Raskin (2010), in social work, field education is the signature pedagogy because of the process of teaching and learning that happens during interactive, hands-on actual experiences. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) requirement of 900 hours of field education for students in an MSW program (2015) during a pandemic seemed unattainable. In addition to concerns about the accrual of hours, there were also concerns about the quality of the learning opportunities. However, faculty members collaborated and provided two programs for students to earn quality field education hours.

Due to the uncertainty of the pandemic, students could elect to complete a remote field placement even if they envisioned their field experience in a school, clinic, or social service agency. The alternative was a leave of absence, which results in a delay in graduation, financial concerns, and starting their career as a social worker. On September 9, 2020, CSWE conducted a “pulse” survey to understand the impact of COVID-19 on social work education. Over 65% of MSW social work students preferred to complete their placement in person, approximately 20% preferred virtual or not in person, and almost 9% preferred to postpone (CSWE, 2020). At the same time, social work educators strategized and planned for continuity so that students could complete field requirements safely, successfully, and on time while adhering to CSWE educational policy and accreditation standards (CSWE, 2015).

The school of social work offers a CSWE-accredited MSW program to on-campus and online students within a large university. Students may reside across the US and attend synchronous course sessions offered on various days and times to accommodate student schedules. This program requires a minimum of 1000 hours of immersive and comprehensive field training to prepare students to work in clinical and macro settings adequately. Students may experience both virtual and community-based field placements depending on their campus of choice.

This brief note will describe two programs, School Social Work Field Training (SSWFT) and the Experiential Learning Labs (ELLS). These solutions were created or adapted within one school of social work to ensure inclusion and effective delivery using technology to meet field education requirements. SSWFT, a virtual program already in existence within the school for students in school social work, increased roster size and adapted the program delivery format to accommodate the specific field hour requirement.

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A specific concentration of the adaptations was to increase experiential learning and build engagement with large numbers of students in a virtual classroom. The school also recognized a need for all students to earn field hours virtually and created ELLs where students could earn up to forty hours per semester with their assigned Field Instructor approval. Students experienced an interactive learning opportunity rather than a lecture and received immediate feedback on competencies demonstrated during ELLs.

School Social Work Field Training (SSWFT)

The School Social Work Field Training (SSWFT) program enhanced the learning of K-12 school-based social work students during summer semesters when the K-12 summer break altered direct practice opportunities. Additional learning experiences were required during academic breaks across the country to meet the needs of students completing field practicum year-round. In collaboration with the National Center for School Crisis & Bereavement (NCSCB), the initial resolution to enhance learning from 2015 to 2019 was a virtual summer grief and bereavement training program. Approximately 25 to 30 students participate each year, and this program, while successful, solely focuses on grief in schools. In 2019, the Director of Field Education, Dr. Marleen Wong, recommended expanding topics with a trauma-focused lens as school social workers often respond to cumulative and acute student trauma. A 12-week trauma training program emerged known as School Social Work Field Training (SSWFT).

Two theoretical frameworks, the Trauma-Informed and Ecobiodevelopmental models, guided the conception of SSWFT. The Trauma-Informed framework concentrates on recognizing trauma symptoms and implementing trauma-sensitive interventions that do not cause retraumatization (SAMHSA, 2014). The Ecobiodevelopmental Model (Garner et al., 2012) addresses the impact of toxic stress and trauma on the developing brain, learning ability, and future health outcomes. Utilizing both lenses reinforces the purpose of the training—to aid school social work students in work with individuals presenting with histories of trauma. The multi-week curriculum uses psychoeducation and selected trauma inter-

ventions to equip school social work students and their field instructors with effective micro and macro interventions.

The faculty designers of the SSWFT program quickly realized the likelihood that the COVID-19 pandemic would dramatically increase roster numbers. Most K-12 schools across the country transitioned to virtual learning. MSW Field Instructors could not devote the attention needed to modify the learning agreement for their MSW school social work interns. As a result, students experienced decreased field hours and limited opportunity to work with K-12 students. Field Faculty Liaisons assumed the responsibility of assisting students with modifying their learning agreements given the physical proximity limitations of COVID-19. Many referred students to the SSWFT program to enhance their field experiences and prevent interruptions of their course progression. Consequently, the SSWFT roster almost tripled to include 63 students.

The original SSWFT program structure was virtual, experiential, and process-focused to increase student engagement. The students enrolled in the SSWFT program met once a week for two-hour training sessions via Zoom. These sessions provided an interactive opportunity for learning and processing. The program maintained the same structure with over 60 students but altered the delivery from an interactive process to a lecture format.

SSWFT faculty leads altered formats and adjusted content. Meeting times increased from once to twice weekly. The first weekly session focused on two and a half hours of content delivery with all 63 students. The second session separated students into smaller groups of approximately twenty with a faculty facilitator to explore content and discussion. In these synchronous sessions, the chat function promoted student engagement with different learning/participation options and encouraged sharing experiences, ideas, and materials between participants and facilitators. The adaptation of this program necessitated additional weekly sessions and more faculty facilitators.

Adults have a range of learning styles, and SSWFT delivered content through a lecture for-

mat, interactive media, and group demonstration. The virtual setting allowed the benefit of real-time polls to assess learning outcomes and interests, breakout groups for processing and role play, and access to subject experts across the United States. Survey outcomes at the close of the program revealed students valued the opportunity to dialogue in smaller-sized processing sessions for a more experiential learning opportunity that was much needed, especially when COVID-19 limited student interactions. Adaptations allowed for the integrity of the program to be maintained.

Experiential Learning Labs (ELLS)

The need for additional interactive learning opportunities for all students grew while existing programs expanded their capacity. COVID-19 impacted the in-person access that students had to their field agencies and clients (Morris et al., 2020). The sudden interruption of in-person learning opportunities at assigned field placements required the development of virtual social work practice skills. The ELLs provided quality field education through single- or multi-session virtual training opportunities led by faculty members or content experts.

The Experiential Learning Cycle guided the ELL design process: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualization, and Active Experimentation (Kolb, 1984). For example, a collaboration of clinical teaching faculty and field faculty created an ELL where students learned empathic communication. Students were then provided an opportunity to role-play with instructors, received real-time feedback, and then reflected on their observations using a written Reflective Learning Tool. In another lab session, students received a self-care assessment to complete before the lab session, explored self-care concepts and burnout prevention strategies during the session, and received a follow-up email with additional self-care resources. The Experiential Learning Cycle guided lab leaders on structuring the labs while the CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards recommended integrating theory and practice in field education.

During the pandemic, over 50 content experts created approximately 100 ELLs that 300 students attended. During the ELL development, it was essential to make some early logistical deci-

sions to ensure quality delivery, engagement, and application. For students to earn field credit, they were required to participate on camera. Students who needed accommodations were provided a point of contact before the session. Students resided from coast-to-coast, which necessitated a variety of session times to accommodate variable schedules. Faculty Lab leaders tailored sessions by the number of students registered and the student registration information, including department curriculum and field course number. Session sizes ranged from 10 to 50 students, and students were offered asynchronous materials in advance to promote interactive engagement.

To say that the ELLs filled a necessary gap for students to earn field hours became an understatement. During the initial launch of the ELLs, the labs were filling up within hours of opening. Towards the end of the semester, students attended ELLs out of curiosity rather than for field hours. Faculty members engaged with students after the ELLs, beyond the scheduled time, to receive feedback and answer questions.

Throughout COVID-19, social work field education created and expanded programs to support student learning in a virtual environment. This field note provided two examples of how to minimize disruption in MSW field education during a pandemic. In reflection, many lessons were learned over the last year, such as one of the most critical aspects of adapting an existing and creating a new program is the faculty.

The faculty members immediately began developing and adapting existing infrastructures to accommodate the increasing need for virtual field education opportunities. Utilizing existing knowledge and experience in building virtual learning environments, they created consultation teams to problem solve, embrace change, and innovate. The inclusion of staff also filled in knowledge gaps in technology and allowed for further capacity building. Team members frequently met to discuss and reflect on successes and barriers in the programmatic changes and plan for the next cohort of students. What initially began as a crisis will result in long-term programmatic changes.

The SSWFT program will continue to host smaller processing sessions even when roster

numbers decrease. Students have expressed that meeting several times a week with different foci has been beneficial to their learning. A session devoted to discussion and processing enhanced their ability to connect theory to their practice. The COVID-19 pandemic required an additional processing session, which the faculty had not considered before.

Similarly, the urgent need for quality field hours resulted in the development of ELLs, which subsequently resulted in unintended benefits. First, students gained access to supplemental practice information from content experts and built relationships with faculty outside their enrolled courses. Next, field faculty presented on topics that were outside of the formal curriculum. Lastly, faculty collaborated across lines, and faculty who were previously opposed to the virtual delivery format recognized the power of technology. The school recognizes the benefit of the content and structure of ELLs, and their existence will likely continue after the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it will be essential to review the evaluations, reflect upon the process, and revise for future sessions.

As the school continues to endure the COVID-19 pandemic, the SSWFT and ELL programs continue to evolve to overcome new challenges and create best practices to provide real-time solutions to field education disruptions. While these programs were adapted and developed due to an immediate need, they resulted in meaningful learning experiences for students and an opportunity for the school to embrace technology further. This forced pivot in field education was an example of social work ingenuity and leverage.

Conclusion

As discussed in this field note, the SSWFT and ELL programs provided MSW field hours during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the SSWFT program was expanded and the ELLs were created, both programs emphasized experiential learning with simultaneous processing and feedback. The beneficial effects of these virtual programs go beyond filling an urgent need to creating real-time solutions in response to a pandemic to an opportunity for students and faculty to interact beyond the departmental curriculum, build relationships, and practice social work. Schools of social work should be prepared and plan for large-scale inter-

ruptions to field education using lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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