

Practice Reflection

The 7Rs of Field Education

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ABSTRACT

Field education is a priority within the social work profession with organisations and individual supervisors making a significant commitment to students. This article outlines the 7Rs of field education: *routine, relationships, ritual, reflection, risk, replenish* and *rehearse*. These 7Rs provide a framework for organisations and for individual field educators when thinking about field education. At any one time, large agencies typically have multiple students, sometimes more field educators (with co-supervisors), and are in the process of field education throughout the year, with pre-placement considerations occurring months prior to day one of placement. The 7Rs of field education can be used as a communication tool or a reference summary when preparing for students or in the midst of field education. The framework sets a context which highlights expected requirements whilst also focusing on the critical processes involved in student supervision: both task and process, both a science and an art. This is a reflective piece by a social work educator, whose role includes supporting social work peers in field education, organising student group learning and development and being a liaison point for students and universities prior to, and during, placements. The framework may also be of use to students and for universities.

Keywords: *Field education; Social work supervisor; Student supervision; Learning and development; Social work educator*

INTRODUCTION

Field education is a central element of social work education (Cleak & Smith, 2012), a “signature pedagogy” (Shulman, 2005) and considered by many to be the most memorable and important component of the training (Fortune & Abramson, 1993). The 7Rs of field education: routine, ritual, relationships, risk, replenish, reflection and rehearse, summarise critical components of field education. The 7Rs framework can assist organisations and field educators preparing for, or in the midst of, student placements and provides a host organisational perspective for students and universities. This practice reflection is written by a social work educator whose role includes oversight of and support to field education across two hospitals. Quotes have been used with permission.

Routine and ritual

Field education routines can feel intimidating for potential supervisors, universities and students. In NSW Health, routines include managing placements online, student verification requirements, pre-placement interviews and online training – all occurring before placement day one.

Routine requirements provide a structure for the placement, for example learning contracts and mid-placement reports, and provide students with an insight into organisational processes. These routines can be ritualised, marking milestones of learning and becoming important vehicles for understanding workplace and social work culture, contributing to the rite of passage from student to social worker.

A ritual is an event or process, recognising a milestone, imbuing it with meaning. An example is the first time a colleague asked her student to carry her pager, a professional badge in hospital settings. This could have been a convenience (supervisor going off-site); however, the supervisor instilled this moment with meaning by noting the student’s readiness to respond to the page. This ritual conveyed trust in the student’s progress and skills.

Within field education, rituals can be any event where meaning-making is occurring. It is an opportunity for supervisors and organisations to be creative and a reminder of the developmental aspect of placements, wherein students come of age over the course of the placement and are initiated into the profession.

Relationships

Relationships are core to successful field education experiences; the heart of placements. Three of five sub-scales in Dunn and Burnett’s (1995) Clinical Learning Environment Scale are relational: staff–student, patient and interpersonal relationships. As one student highlighted, “The best thing about placement is the people; from your supervisor, student educator, fellow students, the whole social work department, teams in your clinical area, to patients and families.”

Initially it is the relationship between the university and the organisation or field educator. Henderson, Heel, and Twentyman (2007) refer to strategic partnerships between universities and organisations as enabling student placements. These relationships can also bring benefits beyond field education, such as through collaborative training and research partnerships.

The most critical relationship is that between the student and their supervisor, a key influence on student learning and level of placement satisfaction (Cleak & Smith, 2012). If this falters, students feel vulnerable (Barlow & Hall, 2007), learning is compromised and, at worst, the placement can be in jeopardy.

Learning also occurs when other professionals demonstrate good practice, share knowledge and provide feedback to students (Henderson, Briggs, Schoonbeek, & Paterson, 2011) and are welcoming and happy to help (Doyle et al., 2017). Other significant relationships include those with clients and with other students.

Risk and replenish

With risk comes the opportunity to stretch oneself beyond what has been possible before and, once achieved, the gain is always present. In field education learning edges are pushed and professional selves, for students and supervisors, are extended. As a student highlights, placements are, “Ultimately a learning experience where it’s ok to make mistakes and to learn from them.”

Done in the context of safety and support, risk opportunities are provided for students when supervisors deem the student is ready. This is a display of confidence in the student and a mutual trust exercise where students trust supervisors to provide skill-appropriate tasks and then student’s risk in undertaking new tasks. “Go outside your comfort zone. Your supervisors are there to keep you safe and if they feel you can do it, you can – so trust them and JUST DO IT” (Student).

Ensuring there is sufficient risk, to grow a student ready for social work, is a supervisory role. “Supervisors can facilitate a placement which allows a student to develop and push their own boundaries” (Tillotson, 2017). Some students want to take on everything (the “yes” student) and supervisors assist in boundary-setting. Other students need to take more risks (the hesitant student). As one supervisor put it, “You can’t pass a placement by observing.” Students must gradually learn to work independently. Supervisors manage individual student differences and ensuring opportunity for skill development over the life of the placement. “Take advantage of every opportunity that is given to you – this is a placement that will shape you as a social worker” (Student).

Being a field educator can replenish social workers’ energy and help keep professional passion alive (Middlemiss, 2017). The process of helping someone learn and develop is rewarding. Students bring energy and curiosity to placements and can also be highly impressed by supervisor’s practice. Students respond positively seeing professional role models and having a contextual framework for what they are doing (Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001). This positivity can replenish field educators, convincing again of how important what we do as social workers is, and the skill we bring to our work.

In big social work departments, other social workers are involved with students, for example by facilitating student seminars or shadowing opportunities. In this way field education contributes to a learning-oriented workplace culture; an aspect of organisational self-renewal (Jaw & Liu, 2003). Student supervision is also excellent preparation for supervising staff

and in this way replenishes careers, building toward other opportunities. Having students: *Is rewarding and definitely bolstered my readiness for a more senior position. The support, systems and resources available to me as a student supervisor were transferrable to supervising staff* (Team Leader).

Reflect and rehearse

A primary aspect of field education is rehearsing what it is to be social worker, 'learning to socialise the student to perform the role of practitioner' (Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010, p. 327). Active experimentation and reflective observation comprise two of Kolb's four learning stages (Raschick, Maypole, & Day, 1998). Students reflecting, then doing (rehearsing) and reflecting again is a critical process. Rehearsal can occur in supervision, simulation or training and should include repetition, allowing skills to be consolidated and students to feel a sense of mastery and expertise (Fortune et al., 2001).

CONCLUSION

For a few students, field education may show that social work is not for them. More likely, students have incredible learning experiences on placement and, through this, the excitement of confirming their *professional fit*: the social work profession is for them and they have a lot to offer. As organisations taking students, we continue to look forward to growing social workers ready for the profession and by doing so keeping our own learning alive.

The 7Rs of field education; routine and ritual, relationships, risk and replenish, and reflect and rehearse provide a framework to highlight aspects of field education, as both task and process, both science and art.

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