From
Learning to Teach, Teaching to Learn
A Guide for Social Work Field Education
CSWE Press, 2005

Carmen Ortiz Hendricks
Jeanne Bertrand Finch
Cheryl L. Franks

Pages 37-49

STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

Well-crafted assignments early in the field placement are essential even before we understand and assess who our students are and what they can do. As the experience unfolds, students can have greater input into designing their assignments, but it is important to anticipate and prepare a range of activities that will help students get started working with people from a micro-, mezzo-, and macro-system perspective.

Social workers practice in highly complex organizations with diverse staff and clients. The agency context frequently determines the kinds of assignments and activities available to students. But despite the vast range of social problems agencies address, student roles and activities generally fall within three interrelated areas of intervention, each of which is united by a core of common values and ethics, skills, and knowledge. The three areas involve micro (work with individuals), mezzo (work with families and small groups), and macro (work with communities and organizations).

This chapter presupposes that student assignments are shaped by the realities of agency-based practice. These realities demand that over the course of training, students have exposure to as many of the following components as possible:

- *Diversity* – Exposure to a diversity of client populations, problems, and needs and a diversity of resources to meet those needs;

- *Timing and pacing* – Work with different time dimensions and foci, e.g., crisis intervention, intakes, short- and long-term contacts, information and referral, assessment and multi-axial diagnosis, intervention planning, advocacy and empowerment, substance abuse monitoring, etc.;

- *Environments* – Experiences that enable students to interface with clients and their environments, e.g., community and home visits, community board meetings, case conferencing, interagency collaboration, community resources and referrals, etc.;

- *Settings* – Assignments may also include opportunities to experience different settings, such as hospitals, prisons, schools, employee assistance programs, preventative services, and other community-based agencies.

It is important to consider the multi-method orientations represented within our settings. Begin by assessing the range of methodologies employed by the agency, including individual counseling or casework, family work, group work, administration, community organizing, research, policy analysis, and advocacy. For example, what methods does the agency generally employ or prefer? Is one method used more than others? Are some methods ignored by the agency? Does the agency have an ideology about the use of certain methods? Are there unmet needs among the client populations that the agency can best address through the use of different methods?

Next, become familiar with the curriculum of each student's social work education program. Each social work education program has an individual curriculum that reflects the program's mission and objectives. These distinctions reflect historical, philosophical, and theoretical positions that emphasize certain curriculum content or approaches over others. As a result, it is important to refer back to the social work program's curriculum and Field Education Manual for additional information or for clarification when selecting students' assignments.

The challenge is to identify student assignments that meet both educational and service delivery goals. Assignments need to be developed that are balanced to meet: (a) students' learning needs and their educational levels of study, i.e., 1st year, advanced standing, or work/study students; (b) coursework requirements and the demands of students' chosen methods of practice, i.e., generalist practice, direct practice, administration, or policy analysis; and (c) the needs of the agency, clientele, and community served.

Regardless of the social work program's focus, it is increasingly clear that social work practitioners are expected to move in and out of a variety of roles and activities that require a repertoire of skills and knowledge ranging from micro to macro practice. Without question, the majority of social workers choose to focus on developing clinical skills to help individuals on a one-to-one basis, as well as the skills to work with families and small groups. However, it is also evident in today's practice environment that social workers are required to intervene within organizations and communities and to influence policy in order to effect change (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2001; Netting, Kettner, & McNurtry, 1998).

Identifying a broad range of assignments to prepare students for today's practice presents special challenges when we are immersed in one aspect of practice over others, or when our agencies are limited in the range of modalities used. We can begin the process of identifying what types of assignments to allocate to students by considering the following questions:

- What skills will students learn through these assignments?
- What explicit learning objectives are associated with the assignments?
- How will students understand the assignments and their role in them?
- How do students' education level and work or life experiences affect the choice of assignments?
- To what extent do assignments meet students' learning needs?
- To what extent do they help students learn about varied perspectives in client engagement?

- To what extent do the assignments fit into the field instructors' expertise?

- To what extent do assignments have agency support and sanction?

- How does the social work education program's curriculum support the assignments?

MICRO PRACTICE ASSIGNMENTS

The majority of social work students need assignments that expose them to work with individuals, pairs or dyads, and families in order for them to experience themselves responding to these client systems through the helping process. This work focuses on an assessment of the bio-psycho-social needs of people and includes the direct influence the worker has in working with people, problem-solving skills, and the strengths people bring to the work at hand (Barker, 1999).

> Clinical social work shares with all social work practice the goals of enhancement and maintenance of psychosocial functioning of individuals, families, and small groups. Clinical social work practice is the professional application of social work theory and methods to the treatment and prevention of psychosocial dysfunction, disability, or impairment including emotional and mental disorders. It is based on knowledge of one or more theories of human development within a psychosocial context. The perspective of person-in-situation is central to clinical social work practice. Clinical social work includes interventions directed to interpersonal interactions, intrapsychic dynamics, and life-support and management issues. Clinical social work services consist of assessment; diagnosis; treatment, including psychotherapy and counseling, client-centered advocacy; consultation; and evaluation. The process of clinical social work is undertaken within the objectives of social work and the principles and values contained in the NASW Code of Ethics. (NASW, 1984, p.1)

The range of problems that may fall into this broad definition include:

- *Personal problems* – Mental or physical illness (or both), substance abuse, financial problems, developmental crises, friendship/peer relationships, work/education problems, etc;

- *Family-centered problems* – Marital conflict, divorce, addiction, parent-child conflict, illness of family members, etc;

- *Environmental problems* – Unemployment, discrimination, inadequate housing and education, and the personal impact of other limited societal resources, etc.

Micro practice requires workers to move freely among these three interrelated categories and to use different modalities of intervention. In addition to cases that require ongoing concrete services, case management, and clinical services, students benefit from a range of client interactions that expand their perceptions of their roles and interventions with people. These include:

- Outreaching to clients by telephone or in writing to set up appointments for interviews;

- Preparing for first contacts with a new client population by seeking out and using existing sources of data, including case records, anticipating clients' perceptions of their needs or situation, and their feelings about seeking help;

- Gathering data, preparing assessments, and developing intervention plans for clients, including data on:

    - Individual functioning
    - Family relationships and roles
    - Cultural background
    - Language abilities and preferences
    - Spiritual beliefs and practices
    - Financial status and economic conditions
    - Education and employment history
    - Medical history/health status
    - History of victimization and survival (trauma, violence, abuse, systemic disadvantage or barriers to service)
    - The presence or absence of support networks and activities;

- Distinguishing between external and internal stressors on clients such as discrimination, systemic disadvantage or barriers to service, unemployment, homelessness, and institutional inadequacies versus intrapsychic, interpersonal, physiological, or psychological challenges;

- Identifying clients' strengths and vulnerabilities, coping and adaptation skills, resiliency, capacities, opportunities, and motivation for change;

- Drawing eco-maps to identify the major systems clients are involved in, including the transactions among these systems;

- Preparing genograms to assess family patterns, intergenerational transmission, and varied perspectives in client engagement.

- Helping clients apply for government benefits and needed services, like public assistance, Medicaid, public housing, food stamps, or day care. This involves finding out about eligibility requirements, helping clients locate needed documentation, assisting and accompanying clients to apply for services;

- Understanding the differences between contracting with mandated/involuntary clients and contracting with voluntary/self-referred clients;

- Providing varied perspectives in client engagement & competent services to clients who are different from or similar to students' backgrounds;

- Writing process recordings that describe the process of working with individuals, the feelings associated with helping, transference and counter-transference reactions, self-awareness, brief summaries of work done together and plans for the future ;

- Learning about the broad range of community services that exists or evaluating the lack of community services for populations served;

- Working with clients in crisis, learning skills of crisis intervention, and using good judgment when working under pressure in emergency situations;

- Advocating for clients and implementing steps to social change;

- Collaborating with collateral contacts and learning to work within multi-disciplinary environments;

- Planning for the termination of assignments or transfer and referral of clients.

MEZZO PRACTICE WITH FAMILIES

> A family is far more than a collection of individuals sharing a specific physical and psychological space… [a family] is a natural social system…one that has evolved a set of rules, is replete with assigned and ascribed roles for its members, has an organized power structure, has developed intricate overt and covert forms of communication, has elaborated ways of negotiating and problem solving that permit various tasks to be performed effectively. (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000, p. 3)

Social work students are frequently exposed to families in a variety of settings and from different perspectives. In some cases, we may teach students about the centrality of family systems as the unit of attention or encourage them to develop a family-centered approach to practice (Hartman & Laird, 1983). Sometimes we have the opportunity or the agency has the expertise to introduce students to specific models of family treatment – psychodynamic, experiential, transgenerational, structural, strategic, systemic, cognitive-behavioral, postmodernist, and constructionist, or psycho educational (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Since the early days of family treatment in the late 1950s, numerous schools of thought have evolved and influenced the way social workers work with families. Much has been written about the different pioneers of family therapy – Bowen, Jackson, Ackerman, Bell, Haley, Satir, Whitaker, and Minuchin to name a few, and the many models of family therapy that have evolved over time – Psychoanalytic, Systems, Structural, Cognitive-Behavioral, Object-Relations, Strategic, Solution-Focused, and Narrative (Hartman, 1995). Today, work with families is considered so important that family treatment is often a major priority and focus for social work education programs in particular during the advanced or 2nd-year curriculum.

Students sometimes feel overwhelmed by so many different models of working with families and may be tempted to use one model with every family whether it is appropriate or not. Kilpatrick and Holland (1995) suggest the use of an integrative model for practice that is based on assessing the level of functioning in families within the context of the broader ecosystem. Although the skills necessary for family-centered practice encompass the core skills applicable for social work practice (Hartman & Laird, 1983), these skills take on greater complexity when applied to work with families. For example, what was an assessment of a client's readiness to discuss feelings now becomes an assessment of the client's readiness to reveal feelings in the presence of other family members, and it is important to assess the role this may have in the dynamics of family intervention.

Over the years the focus of work with families has shifted from a pathological perspective to a strengths perspective, from dysfunction to resilience, and from remediation to prevention and early intervention. Today's family therapist needs to attend to issues related to changing family life cycles (Carter &

McGoldrick, 1999) and other factors affecting the family. These include members moving in and out of the family because of divorce or immigration patterns, single parenthood, remarried or blended families, gay/lesbian families, families with adopted or foster children, families with young children, and families with older family members. There are also many stresses on families, including poverty, unemployment, and homelessness; the need for two or more wage earners to support a family; the intersectionality of family violence, substance abuse, and child abuse and neglect; catastrophic illness, medical insurance, and health care costs, to name a few. The emotional and financial toll experienced by caregivers as a result of increasing needs of all family members must also be factored into work with families.

Sample Family Practice Assignments

- Preparing genograms for each family the student is working with;
- Planning an interview with a family; taking into consideration different roles, ages, and development levels of family members; thinking about ways of differentially engaging the family in family therapy; assessing the impact of authority issues, boundary structures, and communication patterns;
- Contracting with families in clear, specific terms and eliciting from members their perceptions of the problems/issues to work on and the conditions needed for solutions;
- Writing process recordings of family sessions proving both verbal and nonverbal communication patters among members;
- Selecting family and assessing family system dynamics, including the family's history, culture, structure and roles, resources, physical environment, and economic and social supports;
- Examining different family therapy approaches and determining which models are best suited to particular families and the rationale for the selection.

MEZZO PRACTICE WITH GROUPS

Group work theory and practice is not always well conceptualized in the field and the classroom despite the demand for group work services (Birnbaum, Middleman, & Huber, 1989). "Students underexposed to group content in the classroom are often supervised in their group work by field instructors lacking solid group work education" (Cohen & Garrett, 1995, p. 136). Steinberg (1993) found that social workers without group education were more controlling as group facilitators, less aware of the functions of group conflict, and more focused on individual group members than on the group as a whole. This suggests the need for "a carefully executed, multi-pronged approach aimed at strengthening academic, field, and continuing education curricula in group work" (Cohen & Gerrett, 1995, p. 137).

Most placements have the opportunity or potential for work with a variety of groups, including: educational, socialization, recreational, self-help, problem-solving, milieu, discussion, mutual-aid, and task-centered groups. Garvin, Gutierrez, and Galinsky (2004) provide an overview of group practice models that serves as a useful resource to field instructors and students. Groups also vary in structure

from open-ended to closed membership and have different time frames, from a single session to long-term, ongoing treatment. Although the type of character and intervention in these groups may differ, field instructors should focus on the engagement of students in the process of the group as a system. Students should have the opportunity to appreciate the power of "effective group work, in which people interact personally to support and challenge one another as they consider, understand, appreciate, respect and build upon each other's experiences, situations, problems, dilemmas, and points of view" (Northern & Kurland, 2001, p. vii).

Certain core skills and knowledge are essential for students to learn as they begin to study and work with groups, including: the facilitator's role, stages of group development, group process, roles of members, dealing with conflicts and silence, promotion of mutual aid, use of activity, and assessment and evaluation. To the greatest extent possible, opportunities for student group work assignments should be available in the placement even if groups are not a general modality of service in the agency.

Creating group work assignments requires sensitivity to the fact that students often fear taking on a group. Shulman (1999) identifies the "fear-of-groups-syndrome" that relates to generalized worries about performance. These worries are connected to the complexity of groups – "After all, there are more of them than me!" – and a fear that whatever acting out occurs among members, the group will become uncontrollable and it will be impossible to maintain any semblance of competence. Lack of exposure to groups may account for some of this fear, but even if the student has some experience with groups, the next group is different. Students must learn to be comfortable with different personalities in each group, the vast array of information that emerges, and how to begin groups in order to set the climate for the work ahead (Wayne & Cohen, 2001).

Our task as field instructors is to convey the essential dynamics of groups and to focus on the following elements:

Group formation – There are several variables that may influence the educational experience of suitable group assignments for students. For instance, students may be assigned to a new group, an existing group, or a student-developed group, or they may begin their exposure to groups through co-leadership experiences. The experience of planning and developing a group provides students with a very rich, oftentimes neglected, aspect of group work practice (Wayne & Cohen, 2001). Planning a group allows students to learn about group purpose, composition, duration and meeting patterns, membership norms, physical environment, and use of group activities. However, it may be preferable that students be assigned to groups that are formed in response to a real need experienced by clients rather than to develop groups solely to meet students' interests or the social work program's requirements. Although the student has an interest that motivates the development of a group, there may be insufficient client response unless the group focus meets a real need.

Group development – This refers to the process of growth that groups experience over time, the predictable stages that occur, and the challenges groups must address in order to continue to grow and move forward. The role in assessing developmental stages and facilitating growth is critical to progress and increasing group maturity over time. There is general agreement that "the stages of group development are orientation, dissatisfaction, resolution, production, and termination" (Berman-Rossi, 1992, p. 244).

Group workers' roles – Students may be co-facilitators or the primary worker. Co-leadership may involve field instructors, other staff, or other students. The issue of co-leadership has assumed

increasing interest in social work practice with groups. Co-leadership may be valuable for beginning-level students with little or no group work practice experience. However, co-leadership is not easy and requires mutual honesty, considerable planning efforts, and frequent evaluation of group sessions. Frequently what is defined as co-leadership is in reality not a situation of "equals" working together, but rather one where students function as observers, or as assistants to staff members with greater power and authority. The reluctance to provide genuine hands-on experiences for students is sometimes rationalized by field instructors who believe the client group is too difficult if the student is not experienced enough (Glassman & Kates, 1988; Toseland & Rivas, 1984). However, the reality is that practice skills are acquired through the actual "doing" of the work, and students need to transform knowledge into action by forming, running, and evaluating their facilitation of groups.

Group process – This refers to changes that take place in groups from session to session and over the life span of the group. Group work students need to identify and monitor the following interrelated characteristics of effective group facilitation: (1) goal determination and pursuit, (2) values and norms, (3) roles, (4) communication, (5) conflict resolution, and (6) attraction/cohesion (Garrett, 1993).

Group work supervision – As field instructors, we need to discuss group processes as regular parts of weekly field instruction conferences with students. If we do not feel as competent with group assignments as with other assignments, we can ask someone else in the agency to supervise or supplement students' supervision around groups or we can arrange for special group work seminars to be offered to students and staff. Students are expected to process-record selected group processes as part of their learning experience, and we need to give explicit instructions about how they gather information and present group interactions in an organized and logical manner.

Sample Group Work Assignments

- Observe a group, prepare a process recording on the group that focuses on group dynamics within the group, leadership patterns, and interventions that facilitate group processes.

- Co-lead a support group and discuss in field instruction the differences in leadership styles between the co-leaders and the strengths and limitations of each style. Also discuss how conflict in leadership styles can be addressed.

- Prepare a needs assessment questionnaire to determine client interest in a group.

- Prepare an outline on a specialized topic area to present to a group that is currently running.

- Prepare an outline for planning a group.

- Discuss the types of communication patterns that exist in a group and ways to promote mutual aid environments.

- Describe the skills required to sustain the resiliency of members once the group comes to an end. Anticipate the kinds of reactions to ending that members will have and what techniques are needed to facilitate the group ending well.

PRACTICE RESEARCH

Research assignments are appropriate within each practice method described, and designing such assignments emphasizes the significance of practice research in all aspects of social work practice.

Sample clinical research assignment: Using a single-system research design, students can be asked to identify client change or progress in achieving goals by gathering quantitative data. Include the following steps in evaluating the efficacy of a particular practice intervention.

- Provide data on client's behaviors or attitudes as the client/worker relationship begins
- Describe the specific intervention model to be used with the client
- Use an established research instrument to measure (pre- and post-test) interventions
- Provide systematic data on client's behaviors or attitudes after the intervention model is employed
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention model chosen

Sample family practice research assignment: Formulate a research project that compares the advantages and disadvantages of strategic family therapy approaches (Minuchin, 1974) with diverse, single-parent families in which there is little family organization or delineated roles and responsibilities. After several sessions, how have strategic family therapy techniques helped to restructure and reorganize families? What techniques were most and least effective? How did the families participate in the process? What diversity factors were recognized in the process?

Sample group work practice research assignment: Design a research project to assess the effectiveness of a series of time-limited, educational groups with court-mandated youth in a community-based organization.