“Alex”

Alex’s first practicum in a hospital did not go well. He had always followed instructions well at his previous jobs and received high praise. However, he felt unprepared for his first professional experience. Alex completed all the work given to him and thought that he was doing well. He did not think that arriving a few minutes late, leaving a few minutes early on occasion, completing homework assignments when not busy with practicum activities and taking several sick days was a problem, because he had always informed his field instructor.

However, his field instructor gave him a mediocre evaluation at the mid-practicum site visit and for the final evaluation. He heard himself described with phrases such as “needs more initiative,” “floundering,” and “unreliable.” After consulting with his faculty field liaison, he decided to take a much different approach to his second practicum.

For his next practicum at a community mental health facility, he familiarized himself with agency materials prior to the start of the practicum and arrived the first day ready to observe staff conducting intakes and assessments. He made sure to arrive ten minutes early every day and never left early, even if it meant that he had to pursue assignments from other staff. He only took one day off to attend a friend’s wedding that had been pre-arranged before the practicum began. He worked hard to get his assignments completed in a timely manner, and he asked his field instructor for an extra project. With the help of his research professor, he re-designed the evaluation form for a group he facilitated and piloted the use of the tool during his practicum. Based on his initial use of the tool and the feedback received, he revised the instrument and left notes for the staff member who took over facilitating the group. The evaluation from this experience was glowing, and included such phrases as “a valuable asset to the organization,” “demonstrates a high degree of professionalism,” and “great promise for the profession.”

Introduction

Practica experiences are opportunities to gain new skills and test waters for your professional career as a social worker. As the scenario with “Alex” demonstrates, the transition from non-professional to a professional position can be difficult. While your university-based and agency-based instructors may assist you with obtaining placements, arranging learning experiences, and fulfilling the practicum requirements of your program, what type of approach and personal habits are going to serve you well in your field placement? If field placements are to be a training ground for your practice after graduation, implementation of “good habits” in your placement will serve to maximize your learning experiences and ingrain good habits that you can carry with you into your post-graduation practice.

The practicum experience can be the mechanism used by students to begin building a professional reputation. Your practicum experience can allow you to network with other professionals in a practice area, both in and outside of the practicum agency. The resulting relationships can be the foundation of your employment searches in the future (Webb, 1999). What makes for effective practica experiences that will assist you to build a positive professional reputation? The following are suggestions that, if adopted, can increase your effectiveness in your practicum.

1. Hit The Ground Running.

Ideally, you should do some background research on the agency when you interview for the site, and be familiar with the mission, services, and demographics of the clients served by the agency. If you have not done so in advance, be sure to gather this information at the very beginning of the practicum experience. When possible, talk to other students who have completed a placement or are currently placed at the agency to gather information about the function and roles of the staff members. You may obtain agency materials, such as policy and procedure manuals, prior to your first day, so you can familiarize yourself with policies and procedures before you arrive. Assure your field instructor that you are eager to contribute to the work of the agency as soon as possible, and ask about observing other staff members from the beginning. Ask about the timing of beginning to work with clients under close supervision. Make it clear that you would like to contribute to the agency as a team player as quickly as possible and that you are willing to work hard to do so.

2. Assume Responsibility For Your Own Learning.

The field instructor, student, and faculty field liaison work together to develop a satisfactory learning experience for the practicum. However, the practicum is often much less structured than a course, and you would benefit from viewing the practicum as a process rather than as a product. Seek out learning opportunities that will challenge
you. If opportunities are not presented, you may need to create opportunities for new responsibilities. Ideally, your field instructor and faculty field liaison will assist you to make the transition from being a passive learner to an active professional (Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 1996). Being proactive about your learning experiences can empower you to take responsibility for obtaining the type of experiences you are seeking. For example, look for opportunities to attend relevant workshops and in-service training opportunities, facilitate staff or committee meetings, or take on extra assignments.

3. Seek Opportunities to Go Beyond Expectations (Yours as Well as Others).

Do you know what your expectations are for this experience? Your field instructor’s? Clearly, reasonable expectations for roles and responsibilities, as well as level of performance, vary widely depending upon the agency, program, and level of experience. When possible, articulate your expectations for your performance in the practicum, and ask your field instructor to do the same. Set high goals for yourself. Is it possible that you would be able to write an entire grant rather than parts of a grant? Could you testify by yourself before a legislative body? Can you facilitate a group meeting without your field instructor (or another staff member) in the room? Can you serve as a client’s primary therapist? Oftentimes higher expectations will involve more effort and the risk of failure, but your student status should encourage you to take appropriate risks and see “failure” as a learning experience. Should you fail when attempting an activity, your field instructor, other staff, and faculty field liaison can provide constructive feedback and support.

4. Manage Your Time Effectively.

Time is often a scarce resource for students. You may be earning your social work degree while juggling a job and family responsibilities. When possible, seek to establish a reasonable schedule that you can maintain for your practicum over the course of the semester or year, even if it means temporarily sacrificing other areas of your life (such as time with friends and family, “down” time relaxing, and so forth). A practicum should take more time than a course, so budgeting your time carefully is essential to both your well-being and your effectiveness in practice. Try to work on assignments in advance of due dates to avoid completing assignments at the last minute.

5. Clarify and Abide By Expectations for Professional Behavior.

Professional behavior includes such areas as work ethic, relationships, and responsibilities with co-workers and clients, and representation of the agency to the community. Students often experience higher expectations of work-related behavior when transitioning from non-professional to professional responsibilities (Ross, 1997). For example, students may have experienced employment situations in the past where friends and family could make brief visits while working, personal calls were allowed, the completion of homework was allowed, arriving a few minutes late or leaving a few minutes early was common, uniforms were worn, sick time was taken liberally, and engagement in organizational politics was the norm. A professional practicum experience will likely include more responsibility and higher expectations about work-related behavior. With your field instructor, clarify expectations regarding such issues as:

- time spent at work (Are personal calls allowed from the agency? Can you run errands during lunch time?)
- dress expectations (What are the agency dress code policies? Are Fridays casual dress days?)
- expectations around sick and vacation time
- the importance of timeliness (What should you do if you must arrive late or leave early?)

Additionally, ask about key players in the organization and seek to avoid office politics whenever possible (Webb, 1999).


While you might not be able to define all of your learning activities, seek to gain experience in the areas in which you wish to attain skills and knowledge. While some flexibility will enable you to pursue unexpected learning opportunities as they arise, being focused will help you to maximize your learning. Stephen Covey, in his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (1989) describes the principle of “beginning with the end in mind” (p. 98). He states that a truly effective person “starts with a clear understanding of your destination...so that the steps you take are always in the right direction.”

Unless you have an idea of the skills, knowledge and experience you think will assist you in your long-term plans, you might be very busy in practicum, but not engaged in learning the skills and knowledge most valuable to you. If you decide to change your goals as you move through your practicum experiences, you can change your focus.

Commitment to this habit will involve a high degree of investment at the beginning of your practicum in crafting an accurate and detailed Learning Agreement, as well as monitoring the completion of activities throughout the semester.

7. Leave a Legacy for the Agency.

Look for opportunities to leave your mark on the agency after you have completed your practicum. Completing a product or resource needed by the organization or organizing a process demonstrates that you can take initiative and have the drive that can ensure your positive reputation at the agency and, more than likely, in the field of practice in the area (Berg-Weger & Birkenmaier, 2000). You might ask your field instructor about where the most attention is needed in the program or organization and offer your help in undertaking an unfinished project.

Examples of a legacy include: setting up a new computer software program and training the other staff, attending a workshop and presenting an
Embrace the Change

Embrace the challenge to discover within yourself strategies to cope with the situation. Try this common approach: Think of the four R's: React, Realistic, Recreate, Re-energize. Begin by focusing your reaction to the change. Find someone who will allow you to vent all your feelings, thoughts, and concerns associated with the change. This will help you to move on. Ask yourself this question: “What does this change mean to me and my learning experience?” Practicum students are often unable to see the practicum director or a field liaison until they believe the worst possible case scenario is at hand. More often than not, the university will perceive the change as minor or as a good learning experience; however, students may not be informed about the change until field placement begins. The sense of not having a voice in the matter fuels the fire in reaction to the change, a reaction that may not in fact be to the change itself, but to not being considered and feeling as though our voice has been negated.

The second concept is to be realistic. What is the change? You may find that the person you wanted as a field instructor is no longer available, but remember to try to determine whether the personnel change means a real difference in your field experience, and try to determine what those differences are. The changes may have no direct impact on you. Ask yourself whether you are more concerned with how others might perceive the change than the change itself. To move toward being realistic about the change, write out questions that you may want to ask of the university field director, field liaison, or field practicum instructor. What did you expect in your field practicum experience, and how is it different? In what specific ways will the change affect your learning experience?

Aim for recreating. Are there any benefits to the change? You may learn new approaches to try, you may have increased opportunity for experiences that are more varied or varied staff, or you may be given enlarged or expanded responsibilities as a result of the change. You may have the opportunity to become a specialist in a narrower field.

Change occurs, but what you do with the change is what really makes the difference. The change in practicum may in fact mean that you will have to move to a different agency to get the field practicum experience you desired. It is crucial to discuss this with your field director, field liaison, and the agency.

Finally, re-energize. Try to find ways to invest in the change. What benefits do you see in the change for yourself, your clients, or the systems you are working with? It is erroneous to not accept change. To feel you are just biding your time until graduation is wasted energy. Field practicum is an essential educational opportunity, one that requires investment of all parties—students, university, and field agency personnel—to be a successful venture. It is the crucial experience of trying everything together and gaining confidence in your professional skills and abilities.

Conclusion

Change is a reality. You will face changes throughout your professional career. Emotional reactions to change will occur. The suddenness and shock of the unexpected is natural. However, it is vital to move beyond reacting, to become realistic and explore ways to recreate learning opportunities through the change, and to re-energize yourself, so you can benefit from what you’ve invested in the field experience.

Field practicum is the ideal place for you to explore and refine your skills and strategies for change. All too often, we—students, university, and agency faculty—fail to explore those reactions. By emphasizing staying on track, we overlook exploring reactions, being realistic, recreating opportunities, and staying invested in the learning process.

You need a strong voice for yourself, as well as for your clients. It is important to develop interpersonal skills for dealing with change for yourself, your clients, your agency, and your community. Having those skills will empower you to provide a sense of control in the face of the unknown. Moreover, all changes cannot be planned changes—never for the change agent!

Denise Goodrich Liley, Ph.D., ACSW, is assistant professor of social work at Boise State University.

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