

Connecting MSW students to community-based practicum: Feasibility and acceptability of panel presentations.

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Connecting MSW students to community-based practicum: Feasibility and acceptability of panel presentations.

Abstract

Foundation-year MSW students in Canada often have their first practicum in community-based agencies. Orientation can be challenging as many students aim for hospital placements. Site visits are widely used for practicum orientation in Canada, however drawbacks include intensive resources and difficulty standardizing the experience. As a site visit alternative and to inspire students for community-based practicum, panel presentations were piloted to assess feasibility and acceptability. Thirty-seven panelists (primarily field instructors) presented to 135 MSW students in October 2017. Most students (90%, n=122) completed an evaluation form and 54% of panelists (n=20) completed a follow-up survey. Panels were feasible and acceptable to students and presenters. This paper details the orientation activity with considerations for research and practice.

Keywords

Field education; Issues/MSW – Foundation; Social work with communities; Program or practice evaluation; Student issues: general

Introduction

Schools of social work face challenges with first-year students in two-year Master of Social Work (MSW) programs: a) orienting students to social work so that students can articulate the unique role of social workers in contrast to other related professions; and b) preparing students for practicum on a short timeline. This challenge can be exacerbated by strong emotions (such as anxiety and excitement) that students may feel about practicum (Maidment & Crisp, 2011). In Canada, these students have one semester of coursework prior to their first practicum, which is often in a community-based setting. Practicum orientation activities (e.g., site visits) are important to provide students with a realistic sense of practicum and to socialize students to the social work profession (Leichtentritt, Davidson-Arad, & Wozner, 2002). Site visits, which involve a student visiting a direct service organization (e.g., hospital, community agency) to work with a social worker for a day by attending meetings and client sessions, have been widely used to prepare students for the field within this short timeline; however, there are many drawbacks to this approach (Patton, 2015; Sankar & Perlstein, 2013). These drawbacks include: a) a substantial amount of student and staff time – both at the faculty and coordinating site visits – to secure appropriate certifications (e.g., vulnerable sector check, immunizations) for the student to actively participate (i.e., observe a social worker interacting with a client, attend an interprofessional discussion of current cases) in a single-day site visit; and b) difficulty in standardizing the site visit experience, as an organization may be experiencing a challenging situation on the visit date (or, alternatively, the visit date could coincide with little action at the site) that could compromise student experience (Patton, 2015). Additionally, many students believe that health care placements are more appealing than community ones; site visits to health care settings contribute to this perception by virtue of exposure. There is benefit to integrating

community and academic contexts in social work education, as students may experience a more tactile sense of the link between theory and practice (Katz, Serbinski, & Mishna, 2017). An alternative to site visits must maintain that activity's ability to simulate the practice experience, discuss practical applications of theory, acquaint field instructors with potential students, and offer an overall active learning environment as these are key facets of effective orientation (Bogo, Lee, McKee, Baird, & Ramjattan, 2016; Katz, Tufford, Bogo, & Regehr, 2014; Eaton et al., 2018). Exposing students to community practitioners, alongside the hospital exposure that is a common practicum in Year Two of an MSW, may help students further develop their professional identity as community workers can often identify with their agency's client population and there can be a wider range of educational backgrounds in community spaces, as Foundation-year MSW students enter a graduate program with education in a separate field. Community panel presentations may offer similar benefit as site visits with regards to problem-based learning, as students could be similarly challenged by diverse perspectives from the field (Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Further, community-based practitioners may better acquaint students to social justice issues such as housing, disabilities, addiction, and diversity than practitioners in hospital settings.

Theoretical Approach

This study was informed by the theory of professional socialization and by the guiding framework of field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education. Professional socialization theory considers the process of individuals acclimating to their desired profession (McGowan & Hart, 1990; Miller, 2010; Locklear, 2017). For social work, this theory has been further defined as the process of understanding the profession's ethics and values, adapting one's behavioral habits, learning practice skills, achieving balance between role expectations and

reality, and re-orienting the self from student to service provider (Miller, 2013; Valutis, Rudin, & Bell, 2012; Varley, 1963). This theory fit within the framework of the field experience as social work's signature pedagogy, as an individual's professional identity is largely built through engagement with field education (practicum supervisors, practicum office, faculty-field liaisons, etc.) (Shlomo, Levy, & Itzaky, 2012; Valutis, et al., 2012; Wiles, 2013). Field education as the signature pedagogy of social work education considers how the integrated practicum process – orientation, matching, interviews, learning contract, supervision, practice class discussion, evaluation – builds necessary competency in social work students and introduces them to essential contacts to attain employment following graduation (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; Wayne, Bogo, & Raskin, 2010).

This framework and theory were applied to the development of the community panel presentations that comprise this paper's focus, as the panels were designed to: a) give Foundation-year MSW students broad exposure to the field at an early stage in their studies; b) allow students the company of a group of field instructors for networking and mentorship purposes; and c) for students to observe social workers report on their daily work for the purpose of balancing expectation with reality and enhancing students' professional socialization to the social work field.

Objectives

To mitigate the challenges that arise from site visits, and to inspire students to consider community-based practicum, we piloted panel presentations in a study of feasibility and acceptability. This study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. How feasible was the coordination of the panels?
2. How acceptable were the panels to Foundation-year MSW students and presenters?

Feasibility was measured by calculating: a) the number of confirmed panelists compared to the number of potential panelists who were invited to participate; b) the proportion of confirmed panelists who attended their panel presentation; c) the proportion of enrolled students who attended; and d) the overall amount of time required to coordinate this panel presentation compared to site visits. Acceptability was assessed through a mixed-method student evaluation (Likert and dyadic scales, and reflection questions) and a mixed-method panelist survey.

Methods

Study design

A quasi-experimental posttest-only design with no control group was used to evaluate panel presentations for first-year MSW students in a large, urban Canadian social work faculty. The evaluation was two-pronged: a) a mixed-methods student evaluation; and b) a mixed-method online panelist survey. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Toronto's Health Sciences Research Ethics Board. (Protocol #35204).

Intervention

The panel presentations were planned as a partnership between field instructors, the practicum office, and faculty. Panels were held from 9:00am to 4:00pm on 18 & 19 October 2017. The panels replaced one session of the Elements of Social Work Practice course that all Foundation-year (first-year of a two-year MSW) students are required to attend at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto. Approximately half of the students attended on day one with the other half on day two, based on when their class was scheduled. The presentations were split into four separate panels, timed at 1:15 hours each and categorized under the themes of: a) homelessness; b) addictions; c) diverse communities; and d) disabilities. Students attended panels in small groups (approximately 20 students in each panel),

with their instructor serving as facilitator. Each panel session had three to six presenters, who were primarily field instructors based at community-based agencies. Each panelist presented for 10-15 minutes, followed by a question and answer period. Panelists were advised to speak on: a) an average day in their work; b) information about their organization (e.g., population served, services offered, etc.); and c) details of Foundation-year MSW practicum that their site offers. Panelists could supply a handout (such as an organizational brochure) and business cards.

Participants

Students. All Foundation-year MSW students (n=135) attended and completed the evaluation form, with 90% (n=122) consenting to have the form used as study data. These students entered the MSW program with no prior social work education or experience and had completed six weeks of coursework prior to the panels. No demographics **were** collected for this study.

Panelists. There were 37 panelists across both days, comprised of 29 field instructors (i.e., practicum supervisors) and eight presenters who worked for an agency that offered Foundation-year MSW practicum but did not currently supervise a student themselves. All panelists worked for community-based organizations in Toronto, Canada, such as community centres, population-specific services, community-based health centres, and children's aid services. Approximately half the panelists (54%, n=20) completed an online follow-up survey.

Data Collection

Students. Students completed a paper evaluation that was submitted via an assignment box at 5:00pm on the day following their panel presentation. This evaluation was considered a pass/fail assignment as part of their course, so a unique identifier (001-135) was used to link the evaluation with the student's consent form. Faculty and the practicum office were blind to the

identity of students; a research assistant prepared the de-identified data for analysis and advised individual instructors that their students had completed the assignment. *Measures.* A mix of dyadic, Likert-style, and open-ended questions were developed based on the panel activity's context and the coursework content that students had received in their first six weeks of the semester (refer to Table 1 for the student questionnaire).

Panelists. All presenters (n=37) were emailed a link to complete a follow-up survey via Qualtrics (online survey software) that was open from 20 February 2018 to 16 March 2018, which 54% (n=20) panelists completed. Of these 20 panelists, 75% (n=15) had completed their MSW at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto with ten graduating in the past ten years (graduation range: 1993-2016). Current field instructors comprised 70% (n=14) of panelists who completed the survey, with an average 4.4 years of practicum supervision experience. Of the 30% (n=6) who were not current field instructors, three had supervised students in the past and the other three would consider supervising a student in the future. *Measures.* A survey (combination of dyadic, scale, and open-ended) was developed based on the panel's context and based on some panelists having completed site visits as part of their MSW (refer to Table 2 for the panelist survey).

Data Analysis

Quantitative. Data were entered into Microsoft Excel for the purpose of developing descriptive statistics and visual representations (e.g., bar graph). This level of analysis was sufficient for the panelist survey, as there were few open-ended responses that have been reported in their entirety below, however a more sophisticated method was needed to analyze the student's qualitative contributions.

Qualitative. Thematic analysis was employed by the research team (PhD student, faculty member, two practicum office staff) as it allows for the flexibility to examine multiple perspectives across various contexts (i.e., each group of students received a unique panel experience) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first and second authors each read through all student responses twice, and then separately identified representative quotes that addressed the seven open-ended areas of inquiry (i.e., interest, emotions, classroom materials, social work activities, classroom learning, social work roles, and overall takeaways). These first two coders then met to compare findings, and agreed upon a set of representative quotes to share with the third and fourth authors. The third and fourth author then read and reread through all responses and confirmed that the quotes identified by the initial coders were representative of the data collected. ***Validation and reliability strategies.*** Peer debriefing was utilized in May 2018 whereby the authors shared a draft version of this paper with two instructors on the Elements of Social Work Practice teaching team who were familiar with this activity; they agreed that the qualitative results presented below matched their perception of the student experience. Thick description has been used to provide context to responses. Finally, negative case analysis has been employed as dissenting opinions on the panel activity have been reported.

Results

Overall, the panel presentations were both feasible and acceptable. Quantitative results from both student and panelist data are reported below under feasibility and acceptability subsections, and the acceptability subsection includes the entirety of the panelist's qualitative contributions. Qualitative data from students is presented under a student experience subsection.

Feasibility

Panels were feasible as: a) 55% (n=41) of community-based field supervisors who were contacted agreed to present or found an agency representative to present in their stead; b) 37 panelists actually presented (there were four sick calls); c) all Foundation-year MSW students attended; and d) it is estimated that the panel presentations took significantly less time (approximately 40 hours less) to coordinate than site visits.

Acceptability

Overall, the panel presentations were well received by both students and panelists.

Quantitative student responses. Students (n=122) scored panel usefulness as 4.16/5, panel quality as 4.22/5, and personal interest as 4.3/5 (where 5 = outstanding). Nearly all students felt that the presenters were prepared (99.2%, n=121), engaging (98.4%, n=120), respectful (100%, n=122), able to answer questions (100%, n=122), and able to provide practicum information (99.2%, n=121). Group discussion and interaction time was sufficient for 97.5% (n=119) of students.

Quantitative panelist responses. All panelists who completed the survey (n=20) agreed that they received clear and sufficient information about the purpose and goals of the activity, that communication was timely to assist with preparation, and that the timing was appropriate both for individual presentations (10-15 minutes + question and answer) and for breaks (half hour between panels 1-2 and 3-4, hourlong lunch between panels 2-3). Most panelists (90%, n=18) felt that panel categories (addictions, homelessness, diverse communities, and disabilities) were representative of current community issues. The 15 participating panelists who had both completed their MSW at the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto and who had experience as a practicum supervisor, and had therefore participated in site

visits as both a student and a supervisor (as this study was year one of switching to panel presentations) agreed, for the most part, that the panels were equally effective, or more effective when compared to site visits (refer to Figure 1).

Qualitative panelist responses. There were few panelist responses to open-ended survey questions. Two participants thanked the organizers and three had recommendations: a) “questions beforehand so can come prepared for more particular topics”; b) “Have a general networking period for students to speak with panelists”; and c) “mental health” as an additional panel category.

Student Experience

Theme 1: Interest in panels. Students were most interested in panels that aligned with their professional goals (i.e., which sector they wanted to work in) and with their personal experiences, as evidenced by the following quote:

[An addictions panelist] explained how addiction was something that could soothe someone in response to something they were missing or hurting them. It caused a strong reaction in me because I realized I had behaviours in my past that were almost like an addiction. I sought those out in order to fill something missing. It made me reflect about my own situation and how I could use that to connect with future clients. (P006)

Overall, it was easier for students to connect with panelists who spoke in more detail about themselves and their work, and connecting this to classroom learning: “...the most personable and easy-going in their nature allowed the class to be comfortable opening up...I also liked [a panelist’s] process of separating threads using narrative-based therapy” (P059) and “[Panelist] gave a comprehensive account of what he does on a daily basis and the types of issues/conflicts that arise. He spoke about utilizing all the learnt academic skills and applied in real life contexts”

(P015). Presentations were of less interest when they were unclear, or when jargon was used: "...I found some panelists" narratives to be disorganized and full of acronyms that I didn't understand" (P126).

Theme 2: Emotional responses. Students reported a range of emotional responses to the panels, such as relief, nervousness, excitement, and anxiety. Some found the activity helpful for orientation:

I feel hopeful and optimistic. I was really worried about practicum placement – in the sense that I was worried that I might not get exactly what I am looking for. Meeting some of the panelists has informed me that I may find more possibilities and interests through practicum. (P119)

Others reported nervousness and excitement: "I found myself torn between feeling energized/excited and feeling nervous/afraid...I can't see myself doing such complex and busy work as some of the presenters." (P107) and the following quote:

I felt excited learning about the various capacities and areas social workers can work in on...micro, meso, and macro levels. I am also a bit nervous about the skill set required and knowledge needed especially for direct practice but being reassured during the panel that it is all a learning process. (P036)

Anxiety was also frequently mentioned: "Hearing about the high stress, low resource environments many of these workers work within brought [up] feelings of anxiety about cutbacks, trying to take on a larger caseload" (P086). Students also considered how these community-based opportunities may differ from their clinically-oriented placement goals: "I noticed my thoughts were being challenged...I want to do practicum in a hospital setting but this challenges me to consider smaller community organizations" (P121).

Theme 3: Preparation for panels through classroom material. Classroom instruction in the six weeks leading up to these panel presentations helped prepare students, as one summarized:

Learning the jargon, core values, skills, and types of services provided in the field of social work has made it easier to better understand what each guest speaker and their respective agencies do. Learning about the history of social work and Canadian policy helped me to understand how agencies were founded and funded and why they provide the service that they do. (P009)

Specific skills taught in class were emphasized: “Some such as empathy, group work, person in environment, boundaries” (P028). A progression in content was frequently noted: “[Class] introduced many of these roles on a very surface level and the panelists expanded in much more depth” (P123). However, not all students felt prepared: “I have no idea. I am not sure how the classroom material would have prepared me for listening to panels about social work and the roles social workers play in the community” (P052).

Theme 4: Social work activities of presenters. Many social work activities of presenters stood out to students: “Case management, patient advocacy, housing support, psychosocial assessments, counselling and psychotherapy, crisis management, program development, staff and client training, funding proposals” (P067). Some students were relieved by activity descriptions:

One social work activity that stood out for me was the idea of working in the community with clients and in particular conducting home visits. This is an area I’ve been concerned with in terms of safety on the part of a social worker but the panelists helped to relieve my reservations [by saying] ‘no’ when need be or conducting visits as a team (P036).

Other students were uncomfortable about the reality of some social work roles:

In the homelessness panel, all presenters identified aspects of their job that make them uncomfortable such as doing room checks or discharging clients for example if the client is found under the influence of drugs or alcohol or these substances are found in their rooms. These aspects of the job resonated with me in a negative manner because thinking about these aspects of the job I know I would feel uncomfortable as well. The two presenters in the disability presentation also addressed the enormous amount of responsibilities they have with their jobs which resonated with me in a negative manner because I can't imagine how they cope with having all of these responsibilities and this must be very stressful. (P076)

Supervision was specifically identified: “The importance of consultation and supervision. People and their issues are complex, and the responsibility of supporting and being supported stood out as key” (P135).

Theme 5: Classroom learning connected to presentations. Overall, students identified an integration between class instruction and the panels: “Almost all themes the panelists presented have already come up in class. Examples: ethics, advocacy, group therapy, policy, etc. Getting their real life examples allowed for me take these concepts and view them through a different lens” (P043). Another quote that illustrates this integration is “The role of creating a strong therapeutic relationship and how the first portion of meeting the client is crucial. Many panelists touched on this and we have learned this heavily in class” (P078). Students highlighted advocacy links between class and panels: “Applying anti-oppression perspective and...being an advocate for social change came up” (P117). Yet not all panel components had been covered in class:

One aspect of the program and learning that seems to be missing is an understanding/knowledge of specific theoretical foundations. So listening to panel presenters talk about using specific theoretical approaches, I felt a bit unknowledgeable and worried about when that would come! (P016)

Theme 6: Social work roles. Participants were surprised about the scope of social work practice: “I had a preconceived idea that working in a hospital would be the only way I could do clinical social work in a mental health setting. This is clearly not the case as I’ve seen [today]” (P104). Students also learned about roles beyond the front lines: “Social workers play a large role in management and administration that has not yet been covered in our coursework” (P123). Participants identified practical knowledge gaps following the panels: “How long did it take you before you got hired? Are agencies picky about relevant experiences as a criteria for job application? How long did it take you before you arrived at this position?” (P015) and “policy is still quite an abstract concept to me and I think I would benefit from listening to the roles of social workers at [more] macro levels” (P024).

Theme 7: Takeaways. Students learned about core social work competencies: “The common competencies needed across fields/areas of social work such as advocacy, case management, self care/burnout awareness, cultural competency, and constant professional development” (P039). Modalities of practice were also identified as highlights: “Trauma-informed practice in identifying symptomatic expression of anger/aggression. Rational emotive therapy” (P115). The link between social work values, competences, and continuing education was also frequently mentioned: “To promote autonomy in clients rather than dependence on your helping relationship. Also to constantly continue learning [to be] an adequate social worker” (P020) and this quote:

The key piece of information that I will use is the be open and flexible in my role as a future social worker...the profession requires creativity and adaptability in order to succeed in any agency setting and client population...I will remember to strengthen my skillset and [pursue] additional opportunities to develop my practice. (P093)

Discussion

The positive feasibility and acceptability results may be derived from aspects of the intervention's design that include: a) partnership between practicum office, field instructors, and faculty to develop these panels and promote their importance to students (Bogo et al., 2016); b) field instructors' ability to meet groups of students, to get a better sense of who their future practicum student may be (Katz et al., 2017); and c) students' opportunity to enhance their professional socialization (Shlomo et al., 2012). Students identified greater engagement with the social work profession (Leichtentritt et al., 2002) which was fostered through active engagement with the panelists (such as question and answer) more so than through passive activities (such as brochure distribution) (Eaton et al., 2018; Hmelo-Silver, 2004). Students reported that their attention levels varied throughout the panels; their ability to regulate their affective experience may strengthen throughout their practicum (Katz, 2015). Emotional responses were also based in concern that the Foundation-year practicum, often in community-based settings, may not align with students' clinically-oriented goals. However, some students acknowledged that the panelists were applying clinical skills in the community environment and observed the transferability between the sectors. The classroom environment appeared to prepare most students for the panel presentations, with connections made between theory and practice. This may encourage greater attention from students to class materials, as their opinion on the necessity of course instruction for field preparation and the importance of social work values may have been enhanced (Valutis

et al., 2012). Finally, students identified a better understanding of social work roles and took away the key message of developing and displaying competency in social work practice; this fits within professional socialization theory and the signature pedagogy of field education in social work, as students transition their identity to that of service providers (Miller, 2010; Wayne et al., 2010).

Benefits to this panel approach as compared to site visits include: a) students gaining a broader view about practicum opportunities (multi-site compared to single site); b) exposure to more social workers; and c) opportunity for field instructors to bolster their presentation skills and connect with practicum office and faculty members onsite. Students identified that exposure to multiple presenters across four categories helped broaden their scope of social work in the community sector, which can enhance their ability to orient themselves to their professional roles (Miller, 2013). As 58% of panelists stated that panels were more effective at introducing them to potential students, there may be a stronger sense of shared understanding at the commencement of the supervisory relationship and drafting of the learning contract (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). Drawbacks to panels compared to site visits include: a) potential loss of depth regarding the daily activities of social workers in the field; b) potential loss of interprofessional educational opportunity; and c) possible misunderstanding concerning practicum expectations and reality. The potential loss of depth may be an acceptable risk, given the difficulty in standardizing the site visit experience and that students may visit a site on a low-intensity or underwhelming day (Patton, 2015). While this panel comprised of social workers did not introduce students to other regulated health professionals, as site visits would, the panels did expose students to a range of approaches within social work. This deeper understanding of social work's scope may help

students build interprofessional relationships once their practicum commences (Leichtentritt, et al., 2010).

Limitations

As a proof-of-concept study, this paper is unable to claim that these panel presentations resulted in outcome change with regards to social work skills or practicum readiness. Further, there is a risk to social desirability bias as students participated in the study as a component of their course time. While the consent form advised students that only a research assistant would know their identity, it is possible that student contributions were based in a desire to please their instructors. With just 54% of panelists responding to the survey, it is possible that non-responders had different views on the activity than what is presented here.

Implications for Practice

This panel activity was coordinated as a partnership between field instructors, the practicum office, and faculty; this may have contributed towards a sustainable model of practicum orientation that is less stressful than yet just as effective as site visits (Ayala et al., 2017). Compared to site visits at this one faculty, this panel activity appears to be more cost-effective, an easier experience to standardize, and results in equal or greater integration between academia and the field; these benefits respond to changing dynamics in Canadian post-secondary education that call for greater standardization (Regehr, 2013) and may ease some burden experienced by Canadian field education coordinators (Ayala et al., 2017). Schools of social work can consider implementing this activity, especially if they wish to enhance student's interest in community-based practicum, if their existing practicum orientation activities are run solely by the practicum office without a partnered approach, and/or if their current orientation model appears to be too resource-intensive.

Implications for Research

With the feasibility and acceptability of these panel presentations established, it is possible to test the intervention's effect from pre- to post-test against standardized measures. Scales that could be employed with similar samples (students and field instructor panelists) could include the Self-rated Social Work Skills Scale (Lee & Fortune, 2013), the Measures of Successful Experiential Learning (Abe, 2011), and the Practicum Setting Preferences Scale (Mahoney, Perfect, & Edwinston, 2015). Further, a study that includes follow-up with students to inquire about their experience over time throughout the practicum process – from orientation to graduation – could provide greater insight into how best to prepare social work students for the field.

Conclusion

This study provides proof-of-concept that panel presentations can feasibly orient MSW students to community-based practicum opportunities, especially when undertaken as a partnership between field instructors, the practicum office, and faculty. As schools of social work focus on the signature pedagogy of field education in social work education and adapt to competency-based shifts in the post-secondary landscape, standardized group activities such as panel presentations may be of use in orienting students to their future as social workers.

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