FIELD EDUCATION Q&A

Q: What if I’m not getting enough cases or client contact at my placement?

A: The answer depends on the reason for lack of client contact. A low client census at the agency may be indicative of a field instructor being protective of students or clients. To understand the reasons for this, it is important to discuss your concerns with your field instructor. You may also consider the following if the field instructor is being protective in the assignment of cases:

A low census: If full case assignments are slow to come, consider approaching your supervisor with an interim proposal. Identify part of a case or group that you could assist with and offer to help out on that basis (specific opportunities will vary depending on your placement setting).

Protective Field Instructor: A) Open the topic with your field instructor for a dialogue and address his/her concerns directly. B) Invite your field instructor to shadow you. C) Offer to take parts of an assignment or share a case. Although your involvement may be modest at first, it’ll provide an opportunity to demonstrate your abilities. Client contact will likely increase as a result of your field instructor’s growing confidence in your abilities. D) Share class assignments and syllabi with your field instructor so that he/she has a better understanding of what you should be able to do with a client. E) Contact your field liaison for input if the situation persists.

Q: What if I can’t get the kind of case I need to complete a class assignment?

A: Try branching out. If the type of client or client contact isn’t available in your immediate situation, perhaps you could find it nearby. Your field instructor may know of an affiliated department or setting that may have just what you need and be willing to help. One student created the kind of contact she needed by proposing to do a follow-up visit with a client who was phasing out or discharged. Some agencies are quite receptive to such proposals, especially if they can serve a dual purpose. Of course the nature of the class assignment will direct your search and evaluation of possibilities.

Q: Staff members at my placement sometimes joke about their cases. Isn’t this unprofessional?

A: Your concern is understandable and delves directly into ethical practices. Is it…?

A) Disrespectful  B) Unprofessional  C) A Breach of Confidentiality  D) A Sign of Burnout

Before reaching a verdict, consider a couple of alternative angles.

A) In some settings “gallows humor” functions as a method for coping with high levels of stress. Hospital emergency departments, for instance, are often compared to combat zones by the people who work in them (periods of calm punctuated by unpredictable flurries of extreme stress and demand). This experience of being “in the trenches” means repeatedly bearing witness to people as they endure the worst events of their lives. The staff members share a common commitment that is seldom questioned. Under such circumstances, humor might be perceived as an important outlet and adaptive form of coping. (“This work will make you either laugh or cry.”) However, conduct that is blatant unprofessional should never be excused as stress management. Such instances
might include joking about cases in the presence of clients, family members or agency personnel unrelated to the case.

B) One tool that might assist with a “differential diagnosis” here is your own observation. How do staff members behave when working directly with clients? Are clients treated with respect? Does behavior toward clients reinforce or contradict your initial impressions? Is this a norm for this workplace? Does it reflect high or low levels of morale?

Such ethical dilemmas play an essential role in the task of developing one’s own professional identity. Students must consider to what extent their personalities, temperaments and values become factor into how such encounters are interpreted. An important skill for agency-based practice is learning how to reconcile our needs to both affiliate and differentiate within a work group. Finally, these experiences invite students to explore methods that can be used to help cope with work-related stress. Make a point of talking it over with your field instructor and/or field liaison.

Q:  Process Recordings seem like a burden to both my supervisor and me. Any advice?

A:  Weekly process recordings remain a firm requirement. It sounds like it’s time to reduce costs and increase benefits. The following tips are aimed at accomplishing this.

Streamline Process/Product:

- Instead of slaving three hours over refining a single process recording, strive for up to one hour of time invested.
- If your handwriting is perfectly legible you have the option of not typing it.
- Consider a significant portion of a client session that you can record on. You do not have to record an entire session.
- Using the template provided during orientation is also an option.

A thorough and accurate transcription of an entire client session should always be your plan. Under some circumstances, you may need to employ other methods. Examples include:

- At a school program for young children, there was initially little opportunity for full-length sessions with students. The intern assembled recordings from a series of brief encounters that showed continuity and evolution.
- If time constraints at an agency force you to shorten your process recording, select two sections that are strengths and two difficulties for input.

Process Recording Used for Skill Development:

A) Demonstrate Skills: If your field instructor has been slow to assign cases it may be because they are feeling protective of you or the clients. Process recordings may highlight your skills, which may increase the field instructor’s confidence in your readiness for practice.

B) Convert your Field Instructor into an Ally: Process recordings are sometimes used by faculty as the basis for an assignment. For instance you might be required to identify a number of interventions with a process recording. Why not ask your field instructor to
team up with you on this assignment and assist you? This shift in perspective from critic to ally can help expand your roles beyond that of sender/receiver of feedback.

C) Enforced Empathy: As a student learner you may feel an acute sense of vulnerability and exposure. It may help to know that your field instructor (when enrolled in supervisor training) was required to submit to the school a process recording from a supervisory meeting with their student. Having been in the same boat may provide an opportunity to share with one another what that’s like and what’s at stake. Keep in mind that your field instructor might also experience some level of risk and exposure. Their comments on your work reveal a level of expertise.

Q: My fieldwork has led to a reconsideration of Social Work as my career choice. What does this mean?

A: You’re definitely not alone. Whether entering the field as an intern or recent graduate, we may become troubled when we encounter things we hadn’t anticipated. Here’s a brief sample of possible encounters.

- I’m only able to give help that seems limited and incomplete.
- The system is sometimes fragmented and incomplete.
- Injustices abound.
- I take the lives and troubles of my clients home with me and can’t seem to turn it off.
- Sometimes it seems I’m surrounded by staff who are cynical and burned out. They don’t seem to try as hard or care as much as I do.

Whether you find such encounters intriguing, annoying or disturbing will depend on your temperament and personal values. It’s impossible to tackle the origins and implications of each example here. However, it may be helpful to examine a phenomenon that many professional social workers will recognize. As newcomers entering the field our expectations and pre-conceptualizations about the profession may at times collide with its realities and imperfections. The resulting impact can trigger an internal crisis of which there are numerous variations. The experience may include a sense of disillusionment or betrayal, wounded ideals, feelings of loss and grief. Here are two:

A) Single Event: All elements culminate within one particular instance. The crisis is acute.

B) Protracted: Smaller episodes create a progression that is incremental. A low-grade crisis of dissatisfaction is perpetuated.

Resolution: If resolved in favor of continuing in the profession, the crisis becomes a significant milestone in the evolution of one’s professional identity (loss of innocence being a presumed initiation). Such events serve as a definite wake-up call/reality check. Some input from a trusted friend might assist in your interpretation of the experience. And don’t rule out your Field Instructor as a sounding board. She/he may find your honesty and self-awareness both impressive and refreshing. They may also be encouraged to tell a story (stories) of their own. Keep in mind also that while some may be reluctant to admit it, many seasoned professionals periodically ask themselves the same thing you are.

Questions for Consideration:
How can I tell the difference between the burned out cynic and the seasoned veteran who has learned how to work and take care of her/himself?

How do I accept limitations without feeling defeated?

Are my feelings of helplessness associated with particular expectations?

Must I relinquish my ideals as I become socialized into the profession?

Which of my personal values are non-negotiable?

Is there a relationship between naiveté and idealism?

Q: What’s a macro project and how do I plan one?

A: The macro project for field is part of the generalist field experience and applies to first year students only. It is intended to provide you an experience with initiating change at a larger systems level. Ideally it should take place in the agency or community beyond the level of working with individuals or small groups. You can propose your own idea to your field instructor but the project should have practical benefit to the agency. If you know what you are going to do early on you include it in your learning agreement. The project constitutes a field assignment independent of any similar project that might be assigned in another class at school and they should not be substituted for one another. Once completed, the product or project description should be attached to the next field evaluation submitted to the field office when that evaluation is due. Conducting your project needn’t take the whole internship but it could depend on the scope. The important thing to keep in mind is not to procrastinate and have it haunt you down the home stretch.

A list of sample macro projects can also be found in this appendix.

Q: How can I be doing so well in class but struggling so much in my internship?

A: Big topic. There are several ways to address this question but one thing we’ve noticed is that these two performance arenas draw on different skill sets. Check out the two lists below.

**Different Demands for Thriving and Surviving**

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<th>Academic success</th>
<th>Internship Success</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time Management</td>
<td>Spontaneity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Note taking</td>
<td>Adaptability</td>
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<td>Writing Ability</td>
<td>Acceptance of learner role</td>
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<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<td>Analysis</td>
<td>Self Soothing</td>
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<td>Organization</td>
<td>Role Transitioning</td>
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<td>Study Skills</td>
<td>Establish and maintain boundaries</td>
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<td>Reading comprehension</td>
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These lists aren’t exhaustive nor are they mutually-exclusive. Effective functioning borrowed from one place can be transferable to the other.
The academic arena relies heavily on our intellect. If graduate school entails a continuation of the student role for you, then your executive muscles may be well exercised by now. In addition, requirements for success in class are usually spelled out in a syllabus and expectations are clearly defined. Successful behaviors are established more quickly when results and feedback are direct and rewards are clear. So one reason you might be doing better in class is that the rules of the game are clearer and you’ve been at it longer. There’s also more consistency between teachers and classes than between agencies and clients.

In field, conditions are more ambiguous and place heavy demands on a skill set characterized by integration that can be difficult to acquire without “trial by fire.” One prime task for students is managing the tension between two competing aspects within the role of intern. How does one balance the desire to prove competence with the vulnerability of not knowing? This is why self-soothing becomes a critical skill for mastering this task. We don’t go on and on discussing this skill now but it’s worth reflecting on a bit.

**Additional Considerations**

**Script Building**
In addition to the skill of self-soothing, script building can help us deal with the vulnerability of not knowing. Learners formulate and test acceptable ways of saying, “I don’t know”, which can minimize feelings of helplessness or incompetence. Many interns pose clarifying questions that buy time until they can organize their thoughts better for a response. Some students follow an “I’m not sure…” with a “…but I’ll find out for you.”

**Borrow from Yourself**
Identify something you can already do well and build it into your placement duties. One student with a teaching background offered to run a psycho education group at his clinic placement. His performance there fortified him for leading a relapse prevention group which was less familiar to him. Another student struggled with setting limits with mandated clients she found to be manipulative. Even though being the enforcer didn’t come naturally to her she thought of another time at a camp for kids when she had to get tough and it worked. This gave her confidence to relocate that part of herself and apply it when necessary in her new setting.

**Make it Your Own**
There’s little worse than feeling like an imposter in a costume soon to be discovered. To improve the fit try putting your own twist on a task and see if it works. Starting small will lower the stakes. One student tried out a pie diagram in some of her assessments with clients. It worked so well she began using it routinely and the rest of the team eventually adopted it. Though now a formal tool, it was originally devised to help her take ownership of her role- to feel less self-conscious and more authentic.

**Invite a Story**
This may require taking a chance. How welcoming are you and your field supervisor to admitting/discussing the not knowing and vulnerability that comes with it? Perhaps your supervisor could describe a time when they confronted and dealt with this experience. Many supervisors still haven’t forgotten what it was like and honestly won’t have to look far to find an
example. Telling stories can model interpersonal courage, normalize our experiences and give permission to disclose.

**Identify What’s at Stake**
Reflect on what’s at stake for you regarding your performance in field. You can do this not only with your overall performance but with specific instances. Trust permitting, consider sharing some aspect of this with our field instructor. Your field liaison may also provide a safe outlet or sounding board if desired.

**One Placement is One Agency**
Keep in mind that one placement setting doesn’t represent an entire field of social work possibilities. One task in developing a professional identity involves an agency and population sort process. Within each agency an organizational culture is imposed requiring some ratio of mutual adaptation. Ease of adaptation can impact our performance as we consider: Too fast? Too slow? Too big? Too small? Too formal? Too informal? Etc.