

Article

Remote field placements during the pandemic: Lessons learned at the University of British Columbia School of Social Work

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Abstract

COVID-19 and the global pandemic significantly shifted social work field education and required innovations in how practicum experiences could simultaneously meet experiential learning objectives and maintain safety. Remote practicums where students were connected to an agency/organization but completed all their learning/service delivery and supervision virtually was one of these innovations. As a quality assurance exercise, the Chair of the Field Education Program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) School of Social Work interviewed four MSW students about their experiences in remote practicums. This article describes some of the benefits and challenges outlined by the students and illustrates possible practices and policies that the UBC School of Social Work field team can make to harness the learning from these experiences.

Keywords remote practicums, field education, pandemic placements, virtual practicums, student experience

Résumé

La COVID-19 et la pandémie mondiale ont considérablement modifié la formation dans le domaine du travail social et ont nécessité des innovations dans la manière dont les expériences de stage pouvaient simultanément répondre aux objectifs d'apprentissage expérientiel et maintenir la sécurité. Les stages à distance où les étudiants étaient connectés à une agence/organisation mais effectuaient virtuellement tout leur apprentissage/prestation de services et supervision étaient l'une de ces innovations. Dans le cadre d'un exercice d'assurance qualité, le président du programme de formation sur le terrain de l'École de travail social de l'Université de la Colombie-Britannique (UBC) a interviewé quatre étudiants MSW au sujet de leurs expériences lors de stages à distance. Cet article décrit certains des avantages et des défis soulignés par les étudiants et illustre les pratiques et politiques possibles que l'équipe de terrain de l'École de travail social de l'UBC peut mettre en œuvre pour tirer parti des enseignements tirés de ces expériences.

Mots-clés

stages à distance, formation sur le terrain, stages en cas de pandémie, stages virtuels, expérience étudiante

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Introduction

COVID-19 and the current global pandemic created unprecedented challenges for social work practice and education across the globe. Field education, considered the signature pedagogy for social work, (CSWE, 2008), had to be creative and innovative in adapting practicum placements that continue to meet the objectives of this experiential learning, while also meeting the public health guidelines for social distancing and reduced contact. Like other Canadian Schools of Social Work, the University of British Columbia (UBC) School of Social Work, in partnership with community organizations and agencies offered several fully remote online practicums to MSW students from May 2020 to April 2021. These practicums involved students being connected to an agency/organization, but doing all their learning/service delivery/supervision remotely.

At the UBC School of Social Work, along with many other schools of social work across Canada, we returned to in-person practicums as the primary mode of delivery for field education in May 2021. However, it is useful to reflect on what we learned during this unusual time in field education. As the Chair of Field Education at the UBC School of Social Work, I invited MSW students who participated in these remote styles of placements to share with me their ideas regarding what learning, practices and/or processes might be preserved from this unique year of field education.

I identified six students who had remote placements in this timeframe and sent an email invitation for a Zoom meeting to provide feedback regarding their experiences in remote practicums. Four MSW students agreed to participate in this interview. Two students were in macro level, research-based practicums and two students were in clinical settings providing one-to-one counselling virtually. I sent all students the questions I was going to ask them which included: describing what skills and knowledge they felt they obtained in these practicums, inquiring about the quality of their relationship with their field instructor and any facilitators or barriers to developing this relationship in a remote placement as well as asking about their perceived successes and challenges in this placement. I also asked students about their sense of “practice readiness” after completing a remote practicum. As these interviews were primarily for quality assurance and quality improvement of our Field Education program, ethics approval was not necessary. As I reflect on these discussions and my observations of field learning in a pandemic, several recurring benefits and challenges were identified as well as some ideas for possible adaptations of our future practices in field education. In sharing the results of these discussions, it is important to bear in mind that generalizations should be limited due to the

inclusion of only four students. Also there may be some selection bias as these students had a choice of whether or not to accept a fully remote practicum.

Benefits of remote placements

Two of the students I spoke with were placed in research-based practicums where social policy, research and advocacy were key focuses of the organization. These students found project-based learning to be extremely meaningful. By organizing their learning around a particular real-world project that had expected deliverables and outcomes, they were able to engage deeply in collaborative learning and acquire a variety of skills and competencies including research skills, facilitation and community engagement skills, report writing acumen, presentation skills, and skills for teamwork. Project-based learning in other contexts has been found to allow for relevant, in-depth exploration of a particular topic, as well as the acquisition of essential skills for real world success (Kokotsaki, Menzie & Wiggins, 2016).

Several students indicated that remote practicums provided them flexibility that would not have otherwise been possible in a traditional placement. They were able to adjust their practicum hours to participate in events, meetings and/or learning opportunities that happened outside of what would be their regular practicum days. One student who was in a clinical placement was able to see clients in the evening due to remote service delivery. The flexibility in the schedule benefitted both clients and the student as it allowed them both to use daytime hours for other priorities. For instance, the client was able to work a full day, and still access support in the evening. A student who was a parent, was able to assist their children with online schooling. Being virtual reduced the rigidity of our regular two day/week practicum schedule and allowed for increased adaptability to meet client needs, enabled learning opportunities outside of traditional practicum hours and created flexibility for other roles and responsibilities in the student's life.

Learning the skills required for remote service delivery was also identified as a benefit of remote practicums. Several students became proficient with video conferencing platforms as well as using other communication technology for service delivery. Facilitating Zoom or Microsoft Teams virtual meetings, using small breakout rooms to encourage community engagement and discussion, and giving presentations using other technology were all examples of skills learned. The students at the clinical placement developed skills and learned some of the legal and ethical considerations for conducting counselling sessions virtually. Remote service delivery can provide greater accessibility to a wider array of clients including underserved populations, people in remote locations and the elderly (Dorsey et al., 2020, Griffiths et al., 2006, McCarty & Clancy, 2002). These students indicated that learning about legal, ethical and relationship issues in remote service delivery was a significant benefit of their remote practicum learning.

Lastly, several of the MSW students acknowledged enhanced skills for self-regulated learning as a positive unanticipated outcome of this type of practicum. The students indicated that by not being co-located in a worksite with their supervisor, they had to organize and manage their learning tasks more independently. They felt they developed improved skills for time management, increased capacity for being self-directed in their learning and were able to curate

their own learning activities more readily. They described taking more autonomous control over their learning process.

Challenges of remote placements

Despite the intentional efforts of most field instructors to purposefully connect with students on a personal level, prioritize supervision time and remain supportive and positive about the student's field experience, the students I spoke with still felt that remote learning posed barriers to having more satisfying relationships in the practicum. Although the students were extremely grateful for the efforts of their field instructors, they missed the informal opportunities to get to know their field instructors and agency staff on a more personal level. Going for coffee, the casual discussions before a meeting or eating lunch with staff were examples of the informal experiences that a remote practicum did not offer. The MSW students recognized the importance of these relationship and community building activities in a traditional practicum setting as contributing to their sense of belonging in the organizations they were placed.

Delayed communication and lower productivity were also identified as challenges in these remote practicums. Some students had questions for their field instructor that impeded their progress on a learning task. Where a student in a traditional placement might be able to drop by their field instructor's office, these students needed to wait for an email reply before they could proceed with their task. The students sometimes felt hindered in their learning because of this lag time. Screen fatigue from being in a full-day Zoom meeting or long hours in front of a computer were also cited as barriers to productivity in their learning.

Lastly, several of these MSW students expressed some anxiety and fear about having the necessary skills and competencies for social work practice without having completed an inperson practicum. Even in the clinical setting practicums where the students worked with clients virtually, the students worried about the transferability of their skills to a face-to-face environment. Although these students recognized the wide array of knowledge and skills they had learned in these remote practicums, several of them felt uncertainty regarding whether these remote learning experiences truly prepared them for social work practice in the real world. Although "being prepared for practice" is a common worry of many students upon graduation, this worry seemed to be exacerbated by remote practicums for these particular students. **Implications for our field education program**

Remote placements were a necessity during a global pandemic as we strove to maintain authentic, experiential learning while also prioritizing the health and safety of clients, students, and field instructors. Despite some challenges experienced with remote field learning, there were benefits and discoveries described by these students that are worthy of reflection and possibly maintaining to strengthen our field education program at UBC.

Project-based learning, which is a less common pedagogical approach in our field education program, could be expanded as a unique and learning-intensive model for practicums in both remote and face-to-face practicums. We envision our field co-ordinators initiating conversations with existing and new practicum sites about potential "projects" that students can center their

practicum learning around rather than focusing solely on the apprenticeship model of practicum that is currently favored. These projects can provide opportunities for deep, collaborative learning of social work skills including research, engagement of interested parties and teamwork. In addition, project based learning can hone students' self regulated learning skills such as being self-directed and maintaining motivation throughout a project (Stefanou et al., 2013). Further guidance from the field office for both students and field instructors will likely be necessary to help these project-based practicums be successful.

Secondly, despite going back to primarily “in-person” practicums, we plan to continue to offer students the option of remote practicums where possible. Remote practicums provide increased flexibility which may benefit students who are single parents, working students and others who find our traditional, two day/week model of practicum too restrictive. As we emerge from the pandemic, many agencies and organizations will likely maintain some element of virtual or hybrid service delivery as it provides increased accessibility for clients. Providing students opportunities to learn about the legal, ethical and relationship considerations for virtual service delivery in these types of practicums is a key area of learning for field education that will benefit future practitioners.

Finally, while maintaining the option of remote practicums, our field team will continue to address some of the identified challenges. Working with field instructors and students to consider multiple modes of communication for various needs (i.e., texts for quick check-ins, emails for longer questions, and phone calls for more in-depth discussions) in remote practicums may help students to feel more connected and less time delayed in their tasks. Highlighting the importance of relationship building between students, field instructors and agency staff and helping placement sites strategize ways for strengthening these relationships will also create a stronger sense of belonging for students. Lastly, for students who choose remote practicums, we can better highlight and reassure them of the transferability of many of the skills they will learn to future face-to-face practice.

While the global pandemic created many challenges for social work field education, it also spurred innovation and creativity in how we conceptualize field practicums. From conversations with four MSW students who participated in remote practicums during the pandemic, several benefits and challenges were identified as well as possible implications for how our school could harness this learning in our future field education program.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Author biography

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