"Making The Most of Field Placement"
Cleak + Wilson
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GETTING STARTED – SUPERVISOR

Introduction

Preparation for a student placement should begin some weeks before the date of arrival of the student in the agency. You may need to remind your team leader and other staff of the pending placement, and you may need to prepare material and check office availability. Organising and executing the orientation program will take time and the student is likely to want to consult with you regularly. In the current environment, it is most unlikely that you will be able to reduce your workload during the first few weeks of the placement; however, requesting that you are not given extra duties or making arrangements to minimise time out of the agency will be appreciated by the student as well as by other agency staff.

Little gestures – having a pigeon-hole ready with the student's name on it, or having some stationery items already in their office drawer – will make the student feel welcome. We should not underestimate how students may struggle with the demands of suddenly having professional expectations placed upon them, and also dealing with the feelings that emerge when confronted with people and situations that are difficult, complex and sad.

The first weeks

The following checklist, adapted from Doel et al. (1996, p. 40), outlines points you may need to consider when the student begins placement.

Welcome

- Are there any office traditions to welcome a new face?
- Are there flowers on the student's desk? (It does happen!)
- What introductions are planned?
- What are the lunch arrangements?

Orientation

Where can the student go for ...

- a quiet chat?
- a noisy chat?
- a quiet phone call?
- a cup of tea or coffee?
- lunch?
- exercise?

Where is the ...

- toilet?
- photocopier/fax?
- student's workspace?

Necessary items

The agency should provide ...

- a desk and chair
- a telephone
- access to drinks
- access to fresh air
- stationery, diary, pens, identity cards
- a 'starter' pack of relevant policies and procedures.

General issues

Building on the checklist, the following issues should be discussed with the student in the early days of placement.

- What are the student's hours of attendance and lunch breaks?
- Does the student need to sign in and out?
- How will the student be addressed? (It is generally not advisable to encourage students to hide their student status.)
- Where may people smoke?
- May the student make personal phone calls?
- Who should the student contact if he or she is late, sick or unable to come to work?
- What are the occupational health and safety arrangements?
- Are there any security issues? Does the student need a name tag or keys?
- How will issues of equal opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice be addressed in placement? (Students should be directed to the policies of the agency that relate to this..)
- What are the regular meetings or functions that the student must attend?
- Are there any protocols or issues of etiquette that the student may not be aware of, but which are important informal rules (for example, what parking spots should be avoided, the need for tidiness if the student is sharing an office, whether the student will need to pay for coffee and tea, and so on)?
- What decisions may be taken by the student without confirmation by you or another staff member (for example, using the photocopier)?
- Are there any variations to the negotiated placement arrangements?
- What is the timetable for supervision sessions?
- Are there any significant changes to the tasks that were agreed on at the pre-placement meeting? (It may no longer be appropriate for the student to work with a particular group or client or on a specific project, so replacement tasks need to be negotiated.)

Starting work

Learning principles

Other important considerations for the start of placement relate to how you establish the teaching and learning relationship with the student. The first consideration is to start where the student is, moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar (Pettes 1979, p. 65). An assessment of the student's knowledge and confidence in completing a task can be obtained from the self-assessment they did in Chapter 1 (p. 5). For example, previous work experience may have given the student confidence in answering the telephones during a busy lunch hour.

It is important to design an orientation program that covers a range of learning modes: for example, you give the student a list of staff names but they may not be able to retain the names until they meet the staff in person (visual), hear them talk (auditory) or perhaps connect the name with some other piece of information about them.

Information should be presented in stages (Collins, Thomlison & Grinnell 1992, p. 128), moving from the simple to the more complex. It is acknowledged, of course, that work in the human service industry has a high level of uncertainty and the unexpected often happens. Using different methods to teach the same thing, making use of different learning styles, will help reduce any tedium (Collins, Thomlison & Grinnell 1992, p. 128).

When you ask a student to complete a task, the reason for the task needs to be explicit and they should be able to learn from it, rather than it being a time-filler or something that the supervisor decides is required. The student must see that the task is relevant to their learning. For example, if a student is required to routinely document every intervention undertaken with a client or community group, the reason for doing so – that such documentation is the main form of communication between team members and is a legal record of the agency's contact and assessment – should be explained.

With any learning task during the first few weeks of placement, immediate feedback, discussion and positive affirmation will help to reinforce learning. Illustrations from the student's own experience will also reinforce learning. For example, if a student is anxious about working with younger clients, ask the student to recall his or her experiences with a younger person, and then to describe his or her responses. This experience can be used to reinforce that the student already has ideas about how to engage a younger person.

The orientation program

Orientation may begin before the official start of the placement. The student may be invited to an annual general meeting, a staff-development day or another event, or you may send out some preliminary reading so that the student eases into the agency at a pace he or she dictates.

Two basic models for inducting a student into the placement, as suggested by Ford and Jones (1987), are outlined below.

1 *The planned program approach (or deductive or taught approach):* In the first week, most of the time is taken up with a series of sessions in which the emphasis is on giving the student basic knowledge about the agency and its work.
2 *The acquire-it-as-you-go-along approach (or inductive approach):* The student picks up the information in more informal ways through opportunities to experience his or her new role in the agency (p. 51).

Your approach to orientation will depend on the student's learning style, the length of the placement and the nature of the agency. For example, an anxious or inexperienced student may appreciate the carefully planned and slower start of the first approach. A confident and more experienced and motivated student may become bored and disillusioned with this approach, yet, using the second approach, may only acquire superficial and fragmented knowledge. This is a problem if the student is placed in an agency that requires in-depth statutory understanding. Placement in complex agencies, such as large hospitals or statutory organisations, may require the student to have a solid understanding of the place before being able to practise. This may be frustrating but unavoidable for students.

Whatever approach you decide to use – which may, in fact, be a mixture of the two – a guided beginning should give students a balance of direction and elbow room, so that they can find their own way (Doel et al. 1996, p. 43).

Understanding the context of practice

Students need to understand the ecological environment of which the client group is part, as well as gain knowledge of the resources in the environment to provide support and referrals. Understanding the history and strength of relationships between agencies in the community will give the student insight into affiliations between services and the constraints on networking and building ties in the community.

EXERCISE 1

Students can be asked to complete the following activities to develop their understanding of the physical, socioeconomic and cultural systems surrounding them.

1 Locate your agency's resource file for information about other agencies in the vicinity. If your agency doesn't have one, the student could develop one. Organising the data for services by problem types and/or fields of practice will alert students to the links and overlap in service delivery.
2 The student could start a personal resource file filled with information from the local paper, community news, pamphlets, and so on.
3 The student could take a trip to the local supermarket, park or other community space.
4 If appropriate, ask the student to assume the role of a consumer in the placement agency or in another agency. Ask them to wait in a queue for some information or sit in the waiting room for an hour. Get them to keep notes that they can use for reflection later.
5 Ask the student to locate any research, reports, needs studies or program evaluations that analyse the community and its constituents.
6 The student could attend a community meeting about a local social issue or concern.
7 The student could read case notes and community files that offer insights into the profiles of the client group.
8 The student could create an ecomap and include all the organisations with which the placement agency has a relationship. An ecomap is a visual description of the relationships between a person and his or her environment. In this instance, it could be used to show the connection between the agency and the external organisations by using different types of lines (for example, bold lines to depict strong connections, broken lines to depict tenuous relationships).
9 The student may have selected your agency because of his or her interest and previous study in this field of practice. You could ask the student to find relevant research or to undertake an Internet or library search to collect pertinent information about the relevant field.

In the initial supervision sessions, you could ask the student the following questions:

- What have you observed about the agency environment? Is it friendly, alienating, resource-rich?
- How would you describe the demographics of the area and ethnic make-up of the community?
- What social problems could exist as a result of this demographic make-up?
- What resources in the community have you noticed?

You could develop a hypothetical case and ask the student to assess what services your agency or other ones could offer.

Meeting the staff

A student is on placement with the agency as well as with the supervisor (Ford & Jones 1987, p. 16), so it is important to make more than cursory introductions to staff to reinforce that there is a team approach to the student's learning.

Staff should be reminded, perhaps by email or at a staff meeting, of the student's expected date of arrival and what the main focus of placement will be. Enlisting their support is important, as there will be times when they will be asked to back you up or respond to the student's questions. Some staff may take a formal role, such as taking the student on a home visit or being interviewed by the student, during the orientation period. Others, such as senior administrative staff, may be introduced as protocol or a courtesy.

Introduce students gradually to agency staff. Get the student to make appointments with staff members – students will experience the difficulties of trying to fit into other people's schedules. Administrative staff should be included in the introductory sessions as their role and stressors are part of what a student needs to understand.

An organisation chart can help to orient the student to the positions, roles and names of staff, as well as help them to learn about hierarchical structures and authority.

Understanding the agency's services

The student would have gained a simplistic picture of the agency from the initial meeting, but now will require a more comprehensive understanding of its activities in order to carry out learning tasks. Ask the student to undertake one or more of the following activities.

- The student could sit with an intake worker and observe a telephone or face-to-face assessment. The student can be asked to take notes and to complete a genogram from the information discussed. A genogram is a visual description of the relationship between different members of a family.
- The student could sit with the receptionist for a few hours to listen to the types of calls that are received, and to observe the clients who come in and the agencies who make contact and for what purpose.
- The student could read case files selected from the supervisor's caseload. If need be, the cases can be randomly selected from closed files or from among current cases from other program areas.
- The student could read studies or reports completed by the agency.

In a supervision session at the end of the orientation period, you could assess the student's knowledge of the agency's services by asking the following questions: Which agencies refer clients to your agency? To what agencies does your agency refer clients? Can you see any gaps in meeting the needs of your client group?

Understanding the agency structures

Most agencies have developed structures and policies to ensure uniformity and to communicate the lines of accountability. In other agencies, however, it is possible that the lines of authority are ambiguous.

Reading legislation, staff manuals and other regulations governing agency functions can be useful but boring. This task can be enlivened by linking it to a problem-solving exercise, giving students a fictitious or real case study in which they devise interventions and determine the relevance of these resources in solving the problem.

Students could acquire or create an organisation chart and examine the following:

- the formal hierarchy
- the formal relationship between positions
- issues of independence
- areas of potential conflict
- communication and work flow.

An organisational analysis is more than an organisation chart. The following exercise, adapted from the School of Social Work and Social Policy (2003b, pp. 27–8), encourages the student to develop a more in-depth understanding of the agency. An alternative format for analysing organisations is outlined in Exercises 1 to 3 in Chapter 3.

EXERCISE 2

ORGANISATIONAL ANALYSIS

1 Briefly describe the auspice arrangement of your placement agency or program (for example, is it government or non-government, community-based, voluntary?).

2 Describe the agency's organisational structure (including its legal basis and decision-making processes), sources of funding, and significant links with other agencies and organisations.

3 Briefly describe the social and community context of your agency or program in terms of where it is located (for example, is it an urban, rural, regional or suburban area?) and the client group or target population serviced (for example, age and gender, economic status, ethnicity, and so on).
4 Identify the goals towards which the program officially works, and comment on how you see them being translated into action.
5 Think about the agency's theoretical approaches.
   a Describe how particular theoretical models or frameworks (for example, the behaviourist, psychosocial, feminist, radical, problem-solving model, and so on) are applied within your agency or program.
   b Critically evaluate how these approaches match, accommodate or come into conflict with social policy, relevant legislation, and agency or program procedures.
   c Critically evaluate how these approaches match, accommodate or come into conflict with professional values, ethics and principles of social work.
6 Think about the agency's practice.
   a Describe how particular practice methods are applied within your agency or program (for example, casework, case management, groupwork, community work, social and political action, community education, direct-service provision, research, advocacy).
   b Critically evaluate how these practice methods match, accommodate or come into conflict with social policy, relevant legislation, and agency or program procedures.
   c Critically evaluate how these practice methods match, accommodate or come into conflict with professional values, ethics and principles of social work.

Understanding the informal structure of the agency and its norms is important, as this is part of the rea life of the organisation. The informal structure includes all the policies, rules, relationships and norms tha are unspoken and unwritten, yet clearly influence the behaviours of the workers. In fact, it can be considerec the 'grease' that allows tasks to be completed.

An example of the difference between explicit and implicit norms and rules, as adapted from Berg-Wege and Birkenmaier (2000, p. 101), follows.

Explicit norms and rules	Implicit norms and rules
Take all concerns to the team leader.	Take concerns elsewhere, because the team leader's door is always closed.
Everybody's voice should be heard.	Don't speak up, because dissenting opinions are not appreciated.
Students are welcome in the agency.	Students create more work for the staff.
The receptionist is employed to do photocopying.	Don't ask the receptionist to do photocopying.
Office hours are from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.	Staff don't leave the office before 5.30 p.m.

The informal communication has been built up from daily interaction over time, so how can you help the student, who has to operate and function within these structures, learn this information?

EXERCISE 3

Ask the student to observe a typical group activity such as a staff meeting, a planning meeting or even a staff lunch.

1 Which staff members spoke most?
2 Which staff supported or disagreed with each other?
3 Does the organisation chart reflect the decision-making that actually occurred?
4 Which staff member(s) does the student feel more comfortable with? Why?

Recording requirements

Workers in human services are required to record information for a wide range of purposes; therefore, during orientation, students need to be introduced to the particular kinds of reports, case notes, timesheets and other forms of recording the agency employs. Students will probably have a theoretical knowledge of recording requirements, but may not have put it into practice.

Reflective time

Self-awareness and an ongoing willingness to examine feelings and beliefs lies at the core of successful helping (Alle-Corliss & Alle-Corliss 1998, p. 16). Supervisors can promote a positive beginning to this lifelong process by creating time and space during the orientation program for the student to reflect. This discipline can be encouraged by the use of the personal journal and other tools described in Chapter 8.

Most training institutions suggest that students should only be asked to undertake about 50 per cent of the workload of a full-time worker, on the basis that students need to have the time and 'headspace' to reflect on and read about their learning experiences. Some students, especially those who may not feel comfortable with this more 'abstract conceptualising' about their practice (see Chapter 2), may want to resist spending time away from the direct learning tasks, so it will be important to reinforce and encourage this important part of their learning through the use of personal journals and other tools described in Chapter 8, as well as including this expectation in the learning agreement.

Understanding broader structures

Understanding of the agency's activities will be enhanced by knowing about the legislative and social policies that, through funding and programs, influence the agency's functioning. This understanding will also highlight the realities of service delivery and will influence the dreams students have for their placement. Students can learn about this background by reading annual reports, budget papers, staff manuals, mission statements, policy and procedural manuals, by-laws and relevant legislation. Students who have studied social policy in their course can be encouraged to read relevant policy to further enhance this knowledge.

Encourage the student to browse national and daily papers, cutting out editorials and features in which public debates relevant to the placement setting are discussed. This task reflects how theory can be related to practice and highlights the level of political awareness that human service workers must possess.

Evaluating the orientation program

By the end of the orientation program, the student should be able to:

- describe the main legislation affecting the agency's functions
- outline the agency's structure
- know where the funding comes from
- describe the staffing and their main roles
- describe the client group and the main services offered by the agency
- know where to find relevant information, manuals and records
- identify personnel issues and informal norms and rules
- comment on the culture, values and politics of the agency.

It can be useful to devise a brief feedback sheet to evaluate the usefulness of the orientation program. It marks the end of the first stage of the placement and begins the transition to the next stage. Exercise 4 will help you to get this feedback from the student.

EXERCISE 4

Ask students to think about the orientation program and answer the following questions.

1 Name five important things that you have learned.
2 Name five things that you want to learn more about.
3 What was the best part of the orientation program?
4 What are your feelings about being a student in the agency?

At the end of the orientation stage, you should have developed a stronger sense of the level of competency of the student, and the student should have a clearer sense of their learning goals and the opportunities that are available in the agency. Some tasks may have already been started.

Initial tasks should be selected carefully to ensure that students experience early success and don't feel overwhelmed, and to ensure that there is adequate time for debriefing afterwards. This supports and encourages students, but also models to them that professionals need to constantly reflect on their work, however routine or simple the task.

Just as it is irrational to think that you are entirely responsible for your client's progress, it is equally irrational to feel totally responsible for the success of the placement. Be clear from the outset about the limits of your responsibilities (Alle-Corliss & Alle-Corliss 1998, p. 184). The trick is finding the balance between independence and support for students. They should be comfortable and curious about the next step and will demonstrate this by asking to do more complex tasks.

Summary

Students will be on a steep learning curve in the first weeks of placement and how you, as supervisor, construct this experience can influence their confidence and ability to progress to the next stage. Planning your approach to these first weeks will benefit the student and your agency, as everyone will be clear about what to expect and, most importantly, the student will feel welcome. Students will require background knowledge of the agency and client groups, as well as of the broader structures in which the agency operates.