

I. Writing Learning Agreements

Using clearly written learning objectives in the Learning Agreement (See Appendix Q) adds structure to the student's field experiences, helps to individualize the experience, and makes the evaluation process easier. A well-stated learning objective is content specific and focuses on the performance expected of the student. It answers the questions:

- What is the student to learn?
- What will the student do when he/she has learned the concept or skill?

1. For Students

- a. Review the three field placement goals. These are major areas of interest under which objectives and activities will be specified (see Field Placement Learning Agreement, Appendix Q.)
- b. Review the Personal Assessment Questionnaire and the learning objectives. Make a list of the skills and knowledge that you would like to develop during the coming year. This list may include both skill gaps as well as skills and knowledge that need additional development.
- c. Pare the list down to a manageable size. Keep in mind career objectives, agency setting, past work and academic experience, which may be applied to the field education.
- d. Edit the shortened list of field learning objectives and begin to tailor them to fit individual learning needs. Use the following guidelines:
 - Be specific. Avoid global or general statements.
 - Describe what is to be learned in terms that can be seen or heard, not in feeling terms. It is difficult to measure feeling states.
 - Include only one concept or skill in each statement.
 - Write simply. It is not necessary to include jargon or buzz words.
 - Use examples if it will help the reader understand the intent.
 - Learn to condense material (putting the emphasis on quality not quantity).
- e. Objectives often reflect an experience which can be broken down into a number of smaller activities. For example, the objective, “develop social work skills in working with adolescent groups” can be broken down into the following activities:
 - Observe Field Instructor leading adolescent treatment group for three sessions.
 - Co-lead with Field Instructor three adolescent group sessions.
 - Lead three adolescent group sessions.

- f. Print out the Learning Agreement form and write in your goals and objectives. Give this to your Field Instructor for review and comments.

2. For Field Instructors

Some students find learning objectives easier to write if approached from an activities perspective. To use this approach, brainstorm a list of the experiences that you hope to have during the field placement. Group like activities together and write a learning objective that communicates the content to be learned through those activities. Proceed to refine the learning objectives as described in (e) above.

Identifying Educational Experiences. Educational experiences refer to those activities that a student undertakes to accomplish a particular objective. These activities should provide an opportunity for the student to practice a specific concept or skill. The following questions are useful guides to assess the value and relevance of an educational activity.

What is the purpose of the activity? Will it give the student an opportunity to practice the kind of behavior implied by the objective?

Does the activity build upon or encourage the student to examine knowledge or skills from past experience? A learning activity needs to be appropriate to the student's present attainment

Does the activity challenge the student's interest and provide satisfaction in carrying it out? Doing what one is familiar with or going through the motions with "busywork" does not put many demands on the student to increase competency.

Is there a balance between observational and participatory activities? It is important to provide ample opportunity for the student to put theory into practice.

How feasible is the activity? Once an activity is begun, there should be sufficient agency resources to assure its completion.

Does the activity focus on the incremental nature of learning? Does the activity give the student opportunity to increase independent performance? Activities should permit the student to progress from supervised to self-directed practice.

As the above questions illustrate, selecting educationally useful activities that are tied to learning objectives requires thought and planning. If this process is followed, however, the job of evaluating the student's performance will be much easier.

EVALUATING STUDENT PERFORMANCE

A. General information

The ongoing evaluation of a student's performance is an integral part of the Field Instructor's responsibilities. During their weekly conferences, the Field Instructor can help the student identify performance strengths and weaknesses, evaluate progress towards achieving learning objectives, and demonstrate professional responsibility. The formal evaluation conference at the end of the term, which includes the Faculty Field Liaison, can be used to summarize the student's performance in relationship to the Learning Agreement. It should also provide the student with a clear sense of the direction for future learning activities.

The Field Instructor documents the results of the end-of-term conference in the field evaluation, which is a part of the Learning Agreement (Appendix R). It includes the ratings attached to each learning objective, and a narrative summary of the student's performance for the term.

When the field evaluation is completed, it is signed by the Field Instructor, the student, and the Faculty Field Liaison, who transmits a copy to the Field Education Office. The evaluation is kept in the student's academic file. A grade is not assigned until the field evaluation is received.

B. Preparing the Field Evaluation

1. End-of-semester Conference

The Field Instructor's assessment of the student's progress in learning during the semester is the foundation of the field evaluation. The evaluation also includes a review of the Learning Agreement and the semester's work with the student. The following questions may be used to guide this review.

- a. *According to the Learning Agreement, what was the student supposed to learn and do this semester?*

If it contains clearly written objectives, the Learning Agreement can provide a focus for the evaluation process. Similarly, if the Field Instructor and student took the time earlier to discuss or negotiate performance expectations for the objectives, they can avoid misunderstandings now.

Sometimes Learning Agreements include more objectives or activities than the student can realistically achieve, or planned-for activities have not yet materialized. These anticipated variations in field instruction should be allowed for when reviewing the student's performance.

- b. *What kinds and sources of information were used to evaluate the student's performance?*

The use of several kinds of information from multiple sources can increase the reliability of an evaluative judgment. That is, the Field Instructor can be more confident of the overall evaluation if he or she has assessed the student's progress, using different information collected in different situations.

For example, the student provides information through written reports, case evaluations, and recordings; verbal briefings and discussions; audio or video recordings; and his/her self-evaluation. The Field Instructor has gathered information by observing the students conduct in an interview, presentation of a case, or participation in staff meetings. Information can also be collected from other colleagues (i.e.: reports from a consultant or other staff members with whom the student has worked, and people from other agencies).

- c. *At what level of performance were the learning objectives achieved?*

Evaluating a student's level of performance requires a decision about how well the student achieved the agreed-upon learning objectives and a judgment about his/her overall performance. The field learning objectives provide a focus or direction for the student's activities, but they do not measure how well he/she has completed them. Performance ratings are difficult to ascertain and necessarily include high levels of professional judgment.

While there may be general agreement that performance ratings are useful, there is little consensus about what kind of rating scale to use or what standard to use for assigning values. The rating scale used on the Field Learning Agreement form has five points to allow for variation in performance. The standard of measures used to anchor the end and mid-points in the scale reflect the student's progress toward self-directed practice. The figure below illustrates this scale.

1	2	3	4	5	N/A
Needs intensive work. Must make significant progress to meet expectations for year/term.		Meets expectations for year/term/or previous experience. Competent for supervised practice.		Ready for MSW practice. Competent For self-directed practice.	

Thus, students who achieve a learning object at the “1” or “2” level demonstrate the same mastery of skills or techniques that one would expect from an MSW already in the field. They may use supervision more as collaborative consultation, and they can be entrusted with high levels of professional responsibility. When a learning objective is rated in the mid-range scale (“3”) the student performs at a level considered appropriate for

his/her experience. This is especially true of students who enter the program with a limited background in social work knowledge of practice. Their Learning Agreements and performance ratings should reflect their need to master “beginning” skills. Students who perform at the low end of the scale (“4” and “5”) may have such minimal mastery of the required knowledge or skills that they can not make effective use of supervision. Finally, a category “NA” has been included for objectives that could not be addressed during the term. These objectives should not be rated unless the Field Instructor thinks their omission suggests incompetent student performance. The “Comments” feature is included so that the Field Instructors can explain the basis for the rating.

This rating scale still leaves open the discussion about the behavior that constitutes “self-directed” or “entry-level MSW practice” as well as what the expected competence for each year/term might be. These are issues that may never be resolved; however, open discussion among the student, Field Instructor, and Faculty Field Liaison will add some clarity.

If the student does not agree with either the ratings or the content of the narrative summary, he/she should still sign the field evaluation to indicate that it has been read. The student may attach a statement explaining why he/she disagrees with the Field Instructor’s judgments. These differences of opinion should be discussed with the faculty field liaison.

2. The Evaluation Summary

The last page of the Field Learning Agreement provides space for a summary in which the three main areas of emphasis may be commented on. Some Field Instructors prefer to be guided by the following points:

- a. a summary of the student's activities and progress during the term;
- b. a description of outstanding performance or strengths;
- c. a description of specific weaknesses in his/her learning patterns, knowledge, or skills;
- d. changes in the agency that will affect the student's educational experience;
- e. plans for the following term; and
- f. other pertinent information.