

*Article*

## **Self-directed discovery in experiential learning: Innovating BSW curriculum design**

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### **Abstract**

This paper describes the process of redesigning the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) curriculum for the field education (practicum) courses. Insights from our experiences with self-directed learning in practicum and recognition of the ongoing crisis in field education including the continuous pressures on social work programs to find placements will be discussed. The structure for the community engaged practicum in the redesigned BSW program will guide students through learning experience about themselves and social work practice that is at once situated in both collective and individual contexts.

### **Keywords**

practicum, self-directed learning, innovation, experiential learning, social work supervision, curriculum redesign.

### **Résumé**

Cet article décrit le processus de refonte du programme d'études du baccalauréat en travail social (BSW) pour les cours de formation sur le terrain (stage). Les enseignements tirés de nos expériences d'apprentissage autonome en stage et la reconnaissance de la crise actuelle dans la formation sur le terrain, y compris les pressions continues sur les programmes de travail social pour trouver des stages, seront discutés. La structure du stage engagé dans la communauté du programme BSW repensé guidera les étudiants à travers une expérience d'apprentissage sur eux-mêmes et sur la pratique du travail social qui se situe à la fois dans des contextes collectifs et individuels.

### **Mots-clés**

stage, apprentissage autonome, innovation, apprentissage expérientiel, supervision de travail social, refonte du programme d'études.

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**Introduction**

The Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary is redesigning the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program, which has involved a process of faculty engagement, and feedback from students and community members. Practicum coursework is an intentional space where students integrate the knowledge and skills required for competent social work practice (Bogo, 2015). Practicum involves experiential learning that connects students with social work supervision, opportunities to engage in critical reflection, and ongoing evaluation to refine their professional social work identity (Ayala et al., 2018; Drolet, 2020).

Literature focused on social work education documents the exponential growth in social work education programs resulting in a demand for practicum experiences in community settings and a concern about the quality and consistency of these experiences for students given the demand (Ayala et al., 2018; Drolet, 2020). Field educators and community agencies are impacted by the political and economic contexts that influence post-secondary education including neoliberalism, budget cuts, increased workload, and limited resources (Fulton et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2022). Fiscal restraint from neoliberalism has transformed the experience of field educators as they seek placements in community agencies with fewer staff, often overwhelming workloads, and limited support or resources (Fulton et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2022). Despite these constraints and pressures to host students for practicum, the crucial importance of field education remains the cornerstone of where students learn the skills required for ethical practice (Fulton et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2022).

**Self-directed practicum: Dreaming about possibilities and transformation**

One response to the concerns shared by field educators about the availability of social work practicum experiences and supervision for students was a pilot that was student centered, emphasizing social work supervision, experiential learning, and reflective practice. This self-directed model of learning was a response to both the challenges in finding practicum experiences and an approach to meeting student learning needs in a new way (Allemang et al., 2021). Not all students could participate in a traditional practicum experience for a variety of factors including geographic location, economic, and/or caregiving responsibilities.

The self-directed practicum was virtually hosted by the Faculty of Social Work and led by qualified social work field instructors who took the place of a traditional agency practicum. Students were supported to create a learning plan that included active experiences of applied social work practice projects, service in the community or research and self-directed learning such as reading, learning about social justice including reading, podcasts, conferences or knowledge and skill development through workshops, and mini certifications. The anchor for each student was the following guiding question: what do you want to learn and how will this specific activity support your development as a social worker? Social work supervision and peer

learning emerged as cornerstones for this model offering relationships through which students could learn, grow, and transform as individuals and as a collective. The initial pilot was a positive experience for students and practicum supervisors, so we continued to offer this option to learners seeking practicum opportunities.

Through learning with and from self-directed practicum students, as well as feedback from self-directed social work supervisors and alumni who stayed in touch upon graduation, we were able to continue to grow and evolve the model while responding to relevant political, cultural, and real world events occurring in the students' communities or areas of practice. When the COVID-19 global pandemic resulted in the suspension of on-site learning, this led to emergency response to shift to online teaching in March 2020 that went beyond solely distance students and the model rapidly expanded (Archer-Kuhn et al., 2022). Insights were glimpsed from these experiences, including the importance of student mindset and willingness to engage in the work, and preparation required to learn via this model. Students and field instructors noted increased capacity by students to focus on activities which aligned with the values of social justice and anti-racist practice.

## **Redesigning the Bachelor of Social Work practicum**

Starting in 2021, an extensive process began to redesign the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program at the University of Calgary. This redesign arose from several shifting realities such as updated accreditation standards for BSW programs by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), priorities from the Faculty of Social Work Strategic Plan, and the need for a unified BSW curriculum across various programs. The redesign process included extensive consultation with faculty, staff, and community partners in a collaborative process. Through this consultation, it was determined that there would be a “pronounced emphasis on experiential learning through field education and centering field education as an integral component of students’ BSW program experience” (Perrault et al., 2022, p. 3).

From the learnings with the self-directed practicum, feedback from community in the consultations, and research into the context of field education in Canada, a *community-engaged practicum* has been designed to be implemented in the fall of 2024. This Community Engaged Practicum (CEP) will provide an opportunity for students to participate in experiential learning that is reflective, and curiosity driven. Students entering the BSW program from a university transfer route<sup>1</sup> will complete the CEP in their first academic year of the program (as third year students<sup>2</sup>). Students will receive social work supervision from their instructor of record, who is a registered and experienced social worker, while students will also engage in peer learning in the

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<sup>1</sup> BSW students enter the program in one of two ways: university transfer students have at least 60 credits of university courses prior to starting a BSW or as a post-diploma student. Post-diploma students have completed a social work diploma from an accredited diploma program in Alberta. Post-diploma students only complete one practicum in the BSW program as they are credited with their previous practica in the diploma.

<sup>2</sup> Because students enter the BSW program with a minimum two years of other education, their first year in the program is considered a third year.

classroom (in-person or virtual). These students will prepare and orient themselves to the approach while identifying areas of interest, learning opportunities, and connections to the community in the classroom, then following these preparatory activities will engage meaningfully with the community to meet their learning goals. This will be guided by a formalized learning plan and reflection structured through a practice journal. They may identify learning activities that are project-based, connected to volunteerism, social activism, research, or other community-based opportunities.

This approach creates student-centred learning that acknowledges diversity within our student population. A student-driven process that is guided by curiosity and inquiry can provide varied pathways and avenues for BSW students to become practice ready when they complete a final practicum in the last year of their program. This final practicum will focus on offering students the opportunity to engage in traditional, agency-based practicum with options to complete research, workplace, project-based, and self-directed practicum experiences.

## **Community engaged practicum structure**

Based on learning from the self-directed practicum pilots and feedback from faculty, staff and students, a structure to support learning in the CEP has been developed to include core components including: an orientation, training, planning a social justice response, and developing a learning plan that is implemented to support intentional learning activities. Each opportunity to engage in knowledge acquisition will be linked to the students final learning plan document with guidance and supervision to reflect on the learning and how this applies to social work practice.

### ***Orientation***

The first step in the CEP process is to orient to self-directed, curiosity-driven learning founded in experiential inquiry. Practicum orientation will include support for first-time students to consider their learning guided by the question of “what do you want to learn?” Centering learning and curiosity will support students to align with natural strengths and curiosities, explore what those are and then create their learning based on internal motivations as well as core learning objectives. We are in the process of creating orientation materials for students and practicum instructors/supervisors including foundational materials for learning in this way, self-assessment tools such as learning styles inventories, written reflective components, and information about the guiding values and ethics of the profession.

It is also important to note that instructors/supervisors in the CEP will also require orientation to this approach to experiential learning. The field education team will offer teaching materials, ongoing support and mentorship to support others in the role teaching and supervising students. This will include asynchronous resources sharing, group meetings, and individual consultation. These touch points and resource development will continue to evolve as we learn through each term and offering of the CEP practicum.

### ***Training and professional development***

Students will engage in knowledge building activities. The focus for students when they engage in professional development or training will be intentional engagement in skills-based training related to social work practice to build practice knowledge. Potential topics will be offered to students such as suicide awareness, mental health first aid, crisis intervention, trauma informed perspectives, social activism, and offering and receiving feedback in supervision. We are currently exploring partnerships and on campus offerings with organizations including the University of Calgary Wellness Services, continuing education, and professional associations who might offer training or professional development opportunities for students. Each field instructor will have a teaching package of potential training opportunities and learning events including a draft course outline, a learning notebook to guide student reflection and engagement in supervision and an online course in Desire to Learn that can be customized each semester.

### ***Plan a social justice response***

In the redesigned curriculum all students will explicitly have assignments and space to explore social work practice to understand the roles of social work in the community, research, structurally, and through activism. As students engage in learning activities to understand the profession and our mutual responsibilities, they will be supported by their field instructor and peers. Each student will have an opportunity to customize their learning with their inherent strengths and their social location and community. This will be linked to their learning plan and make clear the commitment each student has to social justice in preparation for their final social work practicum.

Supporting each social work student to understand the many ways social workers engage in practice at various levels of micro, mezzo, macro practice and claim their commitment to social justice aligns with the responsibilities of the social work profession (CASW, 2023). This fosters a professional commitment in working collectively for just and inclusive societies while honoring the inherent dignity of individuals. Including this as a cornerstone of the CEP aligns with the Faculty of Social Work strategic plan, the program level outcomes, and the course level outcomes that focus on ethical and professional social work practice skills, recognition of social injustice and racism and intentional efforts to engage in anti-racist practices and activities that foster human dignity and human rights.

### ***Develop a learning plan***

Orientation, training and professional development, and commitment to social justice will scaffold into a learning plan for each student. This will be supported by the instructional activities, individualized by their specific actions and events, and discussed and evaluated in supervision. The ultimate creation will be a list of goals that are motivating and can be evaluated. This learning plan will guide the work in the following term and outline specific learning activities that students will engage in the intended outcome of the learning. There will be creative

space for students to engage in self-grading and peer evaluations to develop and practice skills in giving and receiving feedback.

Social work field instructors will have a course package that includes a list of core activities that can be customized in a student-centered and community responsive approach in their class. The learning plan and a reflective journal will offer students spaces to think intentionally about their practice, focus and frame their practice actions and knowledge acquisition, and serve as a place to continue to re-evaluate learning and progress in the journey and as they continue through the CEP into the winter term. The winter term portion of the CEP will involve more accountability and active practice supporting projects, service activities, or social justice initiatives. By the end of the journey the students will acquire the knowledge and skills linked to social work practice that will help inform the journey into the final practicum in the fourth year of the program.

## **Final thoughts**

The field education team has met extensively and engaged with students to discuss the student experience of learning through the CEP. This initiative has included the need to create ongoing opportunities to celebrate learning, recognize milestones, and create practical learning experiences that activate reflection and evaluation. Ensuring that the activities the students engage in are relevant and linked to the overall practice objectives and that extraneous, stressful assignments are not added will be an important accountability strategy we hold as we implement the CEP going forward.

The intention of this practicum is to create learning experiences for students to engage in consultation with each other and their supervisors, to receive feedback and engage in ongoing reflective practice to build a solid foundation of social work values and actions. Offering practicum in a new way is in one way a response to the current contexts impacting post-secondary programs and communities while also honoring each learner where they are on this journey, and where we are going together to create wellbeing and healing for individuals, families, and communities.

## **Declaration of conflicting interests statement**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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**Angela Judge-Stasiak** is a registered social worker, practicum coordinator, and doctoral candidate. She is deeply committed to fostering positive change and growth within individuals and communities. Grounded in the principles of social work ethics and human dignity, her work embodies a dedication to fostering meaningful connections in post-secondary contexts. With a focus on adult learning, reflective practice, and the ethics of care she supports others through responsive and relational approaches. Her experience includes providing

guidance and support to adult learners in various capacities, including career counseling, self-directed and experiential learning coordination, and mental health advocacy. Her practice is guided by a commitment to caring, responsive and human-centered relationships. She is passionate about supporting others on their journey towards growth, fulfillment and professional accountability.