Baseline Assessment and Methods of Evaluation

Knowing what one needs to learn is an obvious prerequisite to achieving professional mastery. The student achieves such mastery through engagement in self-assessment and the supervisor’s assessment, and subsequent written evaluation, of the student’s abilities and performance.

It is important for the field supervisor to have a sense of the knowledge and skills a student brings to the field placement. The initial challenge to the field supervisor is figuring out the student’s level of competence at the beginning of the field placement. Students come with a range of experiences and nothing should be assumed or predetermined prior to the student’s arrival at the field site. Sometimes a BSW student may have had more experience than a first-year MSW student. In addition, the amount of experience alone does not guarantee competency. Therefore, each student should have an individualized baseline assessment. From this baseline data, the field supervisor and student can develop a plan to provide learning opportunities that fit with the individual student.

Some suggestions for establishing a baseline assessment of the student’s abilities:

- have the student write a brief summary of his/her strengths and weaknesses
- have the student observe your practice—discuss the student’s observations about the client, the problem situation, assessment and intervention, social work roles, values and ethics, etc.
- have the student write a summary of an observed transaction between client and field supervisor
- observe the student’s practice of beginning-level tasks
- assess the student’s verbal communication skills through role play situations
- assess the student’s written communication skills through case summary, letter, meeting notes, etc. using the format required by the agency
Evaluation of student performance is an ongoing, interactive process between student and supervisor culminating in an end-of-semester written evaluation. For a fair and complete assessment of student performance, the field supervisor should employ a variety of measures along with the repetition of such measures. This approach will increase accuracy and fairness in evaluating student performance and provide the field supervisor with more opportunities to offer professional direction, guidance, and specific feedback. Listed below are methods of evaluation that can be made use of over the course of the field placement to evaluate the student’s performance as related to the educational outcomes in the learning contract and the final evaluation instrument. Methods of evaluation include (but are not limited to):

1. **Observation**
   Direct observation of a student allows for direct assessment on all aspects of a student’s interviewing skills. While students may feel uncomfortable at this prospect, most realize that it is an invaluable opportunity to gain feedback. One suggestion is to phase in observation by starting with the student observing the field supervisor and processing what took place, then conducting a joint interview followed by discussion, and, finally, the field supervisor observing the student conducting an interview.

2. **Role Play**
   Simulating placement-specific situations can be used to identify the student’s strengths and weaknesses. A role play can be used to deal with challenges and obstacles that confront a student in practice. For a role play to be most beneficial, it should be carefully planned and structured. Some field supervisors use role play situations to develop benchmarks for specific skills and to determine assignment of student tasks.

3. **Case/Task Summary**
   The student’s ability to apply social work knowledge, skills, and values to practice can be assessed through a written case/task summary. Multiple summaries over time offer an opportunity to view how the student gathers and organizes information, makes assessments, sets goals, and identifies appropriate interventions. Through a written summary, the student’s writing abilities, familiarity with professional style, and ability to be clear and concise while highlighting significant data can be demonstrated. A case/task summary may be required agency practice or requested specifically by the field supervisor as a method of student evaluation.
4. **Process Recording**
This type of recording is specifically used for teaching purposes. Most of the time it is not placed in agency records. The process recording is a verbatim documentation of an interaction between the student and a client or a transaction between the student and another worker (e.g., information gathering on a project). It requires the student to write down both the verbal and non-verbal communications of the student’s interactions along with the student’s reflections and analysis. Although somewhat tedious, the process recording is a very effective method for assessing the student’s professional skills, knowledge, and values. The student engages in self-assessment and, in addition, receives feedback from the field supervisor. Two or three process recordings per semester are suggested.

5. **Video/Audio Taping**
The use of video and audio taping allows for an extensive evaluation of the student’s performance by the supervisor and provides an opportunity for self-evaluation. Both strengths and weaknesses can be identified. A student may be asked to submit a self-evaluation with the actual tape prior to the supervisor’s critique. Clearly, field supervisors must be selective about the transactions students are allowed to tape. The student must follow agency protocol in securing client permission to video or audiotape. Such protocol must include the acknowledgement of voluntary client participation in taping with continuation of receiving services not contingent upon participating, the educational purposes of taping, and tape disposal.

6. **Forms, Reports, Professional Letters, and Additional Disseminated Materials**
A student’s ability to write clearly and professionally, retrieve information from a variety of sources, and organize material in writing is intrinsic to the process of evaluating a student’s performance. It is helpful to offer opportunities for the student to write, in full or in part, court reports, grants, reports to funding sources, intakes, newsletter articles, program/agency descriptions for brochures/websites, informational handouts for clients, letters, etc. Although field supervisors may be able to complete forms by rote, this is a new task for the student. Having the student fill out forms can provide the field supervisor with information about the student’s knowledge of the agency, ability to gather data, basic writing skills, and ability to focus on purpose of the task.

7. **Written Assignments**
In addition to the variety of written items as part of routine agency practice, the field supervisor may ask the student to complete a written assignment in order to assess the student’s knowledge, values, and/or skills. Such assignments may be in addition to any assignments the student must complete for field seminar. A student and field supervisor may agree to use a required
field seminar assignment (e.g., agency summary, critiques of articles, daily/weekly logs, process recording) for evaluation purposes as well.

8. **Staff Presentation**
The student’s ability to gather, organize, and verbally present information can be evaluated through the student’s participation in agency meetings (e.g., staff, program, committee) and community opportunities (e.g., meetings, special events/projects, collaboratives). As an active participant, the student is not only able to increase his/her understanding of the agency, the community, and their interrelatedness, but is able to enhance his/her sense of professional self and connection to the agency.

9. **Supervisory Conference**
Weekly formal supervision enables the student to process his/her tasks and field experiences on a regular basis. Initially, the field supervisor may set the structure for the supervisory conference, but eventually the student should take on more responsibility in preparing an agenda and identifying challenging situations. Through the supervisor’s support and constructive criticism, there should be evidence of the student’s professional growth. It is recommended that both the supervisor and the student maintain written summaries of supervisory sessions to be used in completing the student’s final written evaluation.

10. **Feedback from Others**
Most students have the opportunity to work with agency staff in addition to the primary field supervisor. Some students may be assigned task supervisors. Other students may work on a joint project with a professional from another agency. In any case, a student will benefit from being given the opportunity to work with others, each with his/her own professional style. In addition, feedback from these other professionals can be useful in assessing student performance. The field supervisor should build in a mechanism for obtaining such feedback.

11. **Student Self-Report**
The student’s ability to recognize his/her strengths and limitations, personal biases/prejudices, and areas of professional growth are critical to the educational process. The final evaluation form may be used as a pre- and post-test measure to observe how the student evaluates his/her performance over time in the field placement. The supervisor may ask the student for a written self-assessment separate from the final evaluation.