

What makes for good practice learning? the student perspective

This digest is for social work students undertaking practice learning. The advice that follows is drawn directly from student responses to a survey conducted at a British Association of Social Workers (BASW) student conference. They provide a rich source of tips based on first hand experience which is why they have been presented without alteration or supplementary comment. SWAP would like to thank BASW and all the students involved for their contributions.

Make the most of it!
Visit other agencies and
make the most of being
able to question everything.

Try to ensure you can talk
to students who have
been to placement before.

Be prepared for hard work!
Practice placements should
challenge and stretch your
thinking and values, but
make sure you make clear
what your starting point is.

I loved my placement!!
I got out what I put in.

Be prepared through
further reading.

Decide what you want out
of your learning experience.
Although there will be
constraints, there may be
opportunities for you to
exercise choice about where
you go and what you
do on placement.

Enjoy it. Remember
you're a student!
Mistakes are allowed.

It's tough - be warned.

One of a series of short learning and teaching guides designed by SWAP to support learning and teaching in social policy and social work. Each digest includes some top tips, more detailed information on their application in practice and a list of further resources.

What helps when you are in practice?

The contract

- Identify which units and elements are to be covered, the finish date, any holiday, study days and days in.
- Discuss workload allocation - clarify who can allocate work to you.
- Make your goals clear - ensure you get what you need. Don't become an extra member of staff.
- Don't be scared to ask questions. Make sure you have a two-way discussion.
- Get the contract completed within first 2 weeks of placement.

Assessment

- Read everything, go everywhere, make notes.
- Allow plenty of time, don't leave it to the last minute!
- Work continuously rather than trying to figure out why you did what you did retrospectively.
- Assessed work should be done in consultation with your practice assessor, who can help you reflect.
- Planning pays off as placements 'hot up'. Towards the end you have to juggle finishing casework with saying goodbye to service users and completing your portfolio.

Managing yourself

- Be positive, get the most out of your experience!
- Be realistic. Always admit if you are struggling with workloads.
- The reality of what you experience can be difficult. Make use of support throughout placement.
- Listen to, and look after your emotional self.
- Understand dress code and behaviour expectations before you start. Try to get on with other members of your team - offer to make tea!
 - Discuss concerns and issues.
 - Do not collude with poor practice.
 - Manage other people's expectations - you are not fully qualified - but also try to be professional in attitude and manner.

Expectations

- Find out exactly what is expected, and if you can meet these expectations (e.g. hours, travel and costs).
- Be honest and open about your experience and placement expectations.
- Have meetings and discussion prior to and at the start of the placement, to clarify your expectations and vice-versa.
- Be assertive, discuss concerns you may have.
- Make it clear how flexible you can be and your desire to learn.

Supervision

- Clarify how, when and what form supervision will take.
- Supervision needs to be regular. You should aim to build a good relationship with your supervisor.
- Be active in supervision. Prepare well in advance so it works effectively for you. Challenge practice and explore your own thoughts and feelings. Reflect actively and seek clarification.
- Talk through any issues or difficult decisions.
- Check out your understanding.
- Raise agency issues with your tutor.
- Use supervision to link theory with practice.
- Use supervision to establish good practice for the remainder of your career.

Peer support

- Share experiences with other students and think how they relate to what you learn on the course.
- Talk with other students! It will make you feel less overwhelmed. Everyone finds it difficult - share your experience.
- It's good to discuss your feelings on placement with students and staff - it helps to maintain a realistic perspective - a lifeline.
- Share any pertinent information which may impact upon your placement, work or university studies.
- Recall days are important to reflect and catch up.

Dealing with problems

- Don't be embarrassed if you struggle.
- Discuss problems early in supervision before they get too big: no one knows there's a problem until you tell them!
- Think about an effective reporting chain: supervisor – practice assessor – university tutor.
- Refer to the university for clarification, with written evidence if necessary. Be clear about problems - challenge if necessary. Don't make problems personal - criticise (if necessary) the system support offered or expectation - not the person!
- Don't be afraid to talk things through with your placement supervisor. But also don't expect everything to be perfect.



Further resources

Web resources

- British Association of Social Workers. BASW provides a professional home for social workers and students working across the whole range of professional and national settings. www.basw.co.uk/
- Community Care diary of a social work student www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2008/07/09/108761/diary-of-a-social-work-student.htm
- Meet social workers <http://bethedifference.cwdcouncil.org.uk/site/#/home>
- Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE). This site offers a one stop shop for free social care information and good practice guidance. www.scie.org.uk/student/index.asp
- General Social Care Council. The GSCC website actively seeks current comment and feedback from social workers by hosting polls, surveys and case studies. See for example the case study of Lisa, a final year social work student www.socialworkconnections.org.uk/features/121/case_study_social_work_student_lisa_cassius
- Skills for Care. Their website includes tools to support Newly Qualified Social Workers through their first year of practice and beyond www.skillsforcare.org.uk/socialwork/introductionsw.aspx

- Making practice-based learning work student materials page. This provides downloadable learning materials for students both to prepare for and use during placements www.practicebasedlearning.org/students/materials.htm.

Book reviews

- Healey, J. and Spencer, M. (2007) *Surviving your placement in health and social care: a student handbook*. Reviewed by a practice assessor and a student reviewer: <http://www.swap.ac.uk/resources/pubs/reviews/placement.html>
- Lishman, J. (ed) (2007) *Handbook for practice learning in social work and social care*. <http://www.swap.ac.uk/resources/pubs/reviews/handbookpl.html>

Journals

- Wilson, G. and Kelly, B. (2010) 'Evaluating the effectiveness of social work education: preparing students for practice learning', *British Journal of Social Work*, pp. 1-19
- Buck, J. (2006) 'Social work placements: a student perspective', *The Journal of Practice Teaching in Health and Social Work*, 7 (1) pp. 6-12
- Wilks, S.E. and Spivey, C. (2009) 'Resilience in Undergraduate Social Work Students: social support and adjustment to academic stress', *Social Work Education*, 29(3) pp. 276-288



The Higher Education Academy
Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)

Contact us:

SWAP, Social Policy and Social Work Subject Centre,
Higher Education Academy, School of Social Sciences,
University of Southampton, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK
Tel: +44 (0)23 8059 9310 Fax: +44 (0)23 8059 2779
Email: swapenquiries@soton.ac.uk

© SWAP May 2010



Printed on
recycled paper

www.swap.ac.uk