Improving the quality of teaching and learning in the first fieldwork placement of social work students—A fieldwork preparation model

LEE Tak-yan
Department of Applied Social Studies
City University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong SAR, China
Tel: +852 2788 8978 Fax: +852 2788 8960, E-mail: sstakyan@cityu.edu.hk

Cheung Chau-kiu, City University of Hong Kong
Department of Applied Social Studies
City University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong SAR, China
Tel: +852 2788 7841 Fax: +852 2788 8960, E-mail: ssjacky@cityu.edu.hk

Abstract: The paper will report and discuss major findings of an action research to increase social work students’ understanding, expectations and reduce their learning anxiety before they go for fieldwork—three days a week for 18 consecutive weeks. The study made available a comprehensive set of variables for tracing the learning process of students. The learning process essentially reflects a path model having an initial input of a newly designed fieldwork orientation program to enhance students’ understanding of and orientation to fieldwork which is a precursor to their subsequent performance in fieldwork. The primary achievement of the study is that it is a first step to build up a theoretical model of fieldwork preparation which makes explicit factors important for students’ fieldwork learning and performance.

1. Introduction

Field instruction is part and parcel of social work education. Degree level social work students in Hong Kong have to go through at least 800 hours of supervised practice before they can be eligible to register as a Registered Social Worker. Social welfare agencies are demanding about their professional competence of their recruits. The expectations of the clients, agency, professional body, the faculty, and the community are very high. But the ability and motivation levels of students are varied. How to improve the quality of professional trainees remains a vital question for social work educators. Fieldwork can play an important part in improving the quality of professional practice, yet very few local studies on field instruction can be found (Carter et al., 1992; Leung & Tam, 1995; Sung, 1997).

The aim of this study is to establish and test a theoretical model of fieldwork preparation to improve the quality of teaching and learning of degree level social work students during their first fieldwork placement.

2. The Fieldwork Instruction Module

Degree level social work students of the City University of Hong Kong have to be placed in a social service agency to take their fieldwork three days a week for 17 consecutive weeks in Semester B of the second year and Semester A of the third, the final, year. Every student is assigned to a fieldwork instructor to help the student through weekly individual supervision of about one-and-a-half hours at the placement agency. The number of hours usually excludes transportation and reading and giving feedback to the recordings and other paper work of the student. Therefore, field instruction is very labour-intensive and costly. Students have high expectations of the fieldwork and the instructor in their learning experiences (Leung and Tam, 1995). Before students start their placements, there are orientation programs to provide information to students and prepare them a little for their placement.

In the past, the fieldwork orientation program of the university was organized to help students prepare for their fieldwork by means of a full-day program or at the most one-and-a-half day program. Students found that there were many areas for improvement. Table one shows the aggregated students’ feedback...
on the stipulated areas given by students on a structured questionnaire that was designed to find out the areas that needed improvement in the orientation program for the past three years.

Table 1 Need for improvement identified by students after the orientation programs 1995-1997 (N=462)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need and Specific Areas for Improvement in the orientation program</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fieldwork assessment</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of knowledge in practice</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective practice</td>
<td>51.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of supervision</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting-specific and agency-specific information</td>
<td>49.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to learn in field training</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recalling and reporting practice</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparing recording and its use as a learning tool in field training</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student-teacher relationship in field training</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative arrangements</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The aim of field training in social work education</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of video in field training</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. The Aims of this Study

The study aims at establishing and testing a theoretical model of fieldwork preparation to improve the quality of teaching and learning of degree level social work students during their first fieldwork placement.

A newly designed pre-fieldwork placement orientation program was conducted to enhance students’ fieldwork performance by increasing their understanding of fieldwork learning environments and themselves. It is hypothesized that through this increased understanding (1) students’ expectations are clarified and enhanced; (2) their adaptation to the agency and the instructor is enhanced; (3) their social work values are upgraded; (4) their learning effort is increased; (5) their self-control is enhanced, and, (6) finally, their performance in fieldwork is enhanced.

4. The Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is built on the following premises:

1. Anxieties adversely affect social work students’ learning process and outcome in fieldwork.
2. Unclear expectations on standards of performance and perceived incompetence increase anxieties.
3. Prolonged anxieties hamper learning motivations and reduce learning effort input.
4. Other major sources of anxieties of social work students include insufficient information about the learning tasks, and unfamiliarity of the learning environments.
5. Inappropriate learning methods will not result in better learning quality.
6. The orientation program serves as an intervention.
7. Appropriate learning methods promote better learning through reducing ambiguity and promoting learning motivation.
8. Increased preparation leads to increased effort
9. Increased effort will enhance students’ fieldwork performance.

5. The Fieldwork Preparation Program

This experimental study began with a newly designed 14-hour orientation program provided to all Year 2 students one semester prior to their fieldwork. Compared with previous orientation programs, this program has the following features:
1. It spreads into 14 weeks rather than one day or 1½ days as before. Students meet two hours bi-
weekly rather than one or two days as before. This gives students ample time to digest the
materials presented (for example, Kwong & Lee, 1997; Kwong, Lee, & Chee, 1997; Lee & Chan,
1997a and 1997b).
2. It is one semester ahead of the actual fieldwork placement. Students gradually feel the pressure of
having to take up fieldwork.
3. Attendance at this program is compulsory. These 14 hours will be counted as fieldwork hours. In
the past, it was compulsory but did not count as fieldwork hours.
4. Teaching Methods: Lecture, presentation, video shows, case discussion, self-understanding
through questionnaires, and an assessment exercise.
5. Assessment exercise in the form of true-and-false question. There are 116 statements. The
Department has set up a Recommended Quality Assurance Level for students. Those who do not
meet the level of 80% correct on this test will be required to be further assessed on a specified day.
Those who do not meet the standard for the second time will have to meet the Practice Board to
decide the suitability to have their fieldwork placement in Semester B.
6. The program had the following aims:
   - To promote understanding of the unique way of learning in fieldwork;
   - To promote self-understanding by means of an aptitude test;
   - To help students understand their own learning styles;
   - To help them understand assessment criteria for fieldwork;
   - To help them understand legal, ethical and professional requirements of social work
     practice and departmental expectations for fieldwork placement.
6. Program Content

The fourteen topics of the newly designed program include “Understanding Fieldwork - Commonly
Asked Questions,” “Learning new roles,” “Understanding Learning in Fieldwork,” “Understanding
Your Own Learning Style,” “Integration of Theory with Practice in Fieldwork,” “Code of Ethics,”
“Workload and Structured Tasks,” “Personal Data (Privacy) Ordinance,” “Recording Practice,”
“Working with Field Instructor and Agency Staff,” “Administrative Briefing,” “Assessment and
Moderation,” “Revision,” and “Assessment Exercise.”

7. Hypotheses of this study

It is hypothesized that through this increased understanding
   a. students’ expectations are clarified and enhanced;
   b. their adaptation to the agency and the instructor is enhanced;
   c. their social work values are upgraded;
   d. their self-control is enhanced;
   e. their learning effort is increased; and,
   f. their performance is enhanced.

8. The Sample

We collected data from 78 social work second year students of the Department of Applied Social
Studies, during and after both the orientation program and the fieldwork placement. Each student
completed four structured questionnaires. At the middle of the orientation program, the study
administered a structured questionnaire to assess students’ social work values and learning styles. At
the end of the program, students’ social work aptitudes were measured.

9. The Measures and Data Collection

At the end of the orientation program, students’ achievement was assessed by means of a 116-item
true-and-false written test on their understanding of the topics covered in the program. This will serve
as a predictor of this study. Their social work aptitudes (Yeung et al., 1994) were measured by other
Instruments, including the California Personality Inventory—Chinese version (Yang, 1984), Humanity Attitude Scale (Howard & Flaitz), Chinese version of Empathic Tendency Scale (Mehrabian & Epstein, 1972), Social Responsibility Scale (Chan et al., 1997; 1998; Lee, 1985), and Social Work Values Scale (Kam et al., 1997). Students’ learning styles were also measured by the Learning Style Inventory (Kolb, 1976). Students received results of these assessments in the form of an individual report which they were encouraged to share with their fieldwork instructors before their field placement started. The results could facilitate (1) students’ own planning to design contents of their learning in the field; and (2) instructors’ design of the best possible teaching strategies to meet individual students’ learning needs. The instructors were reminded of the existence of such a profile and they were encouraged to take the initiative to know about the results.

Both at the middle and end of fieldwork placement, the study administered a structured questionnaire to assess students’ expectation, learning experiences, learning styles, learning effort, and other concerns arising from fieldwork. Students’ grades and marks for the fieldwork, assessed by their fieldwork instructors after the fieldwork placement were also collected.

10. Analytic Strategy

To analyze data, we performed regression analyses controlling for other significant background predictors screened by the stepwise procedure. The background predictors were: sex, religion, father and mother occupation, education. The metric coefficient (b) indicated the possible maximum change.

11. Research Findings and Discussion

Hypothesis 1: Through this increased understanding, students’ expectations are clarified and enhanced.

Table 1: Effect of the fieldwork preparation grade on the evaluation of the fieldwork orientation module

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need for improvement in the orientation module from fieldwork evaluation</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for improvement in the orientation module from fieldwork evaluation</td>
<td>41.28</td>
<td>.153</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p < .05 (One tailed)

Students’ request for improvement in the orientation is enhanced. This sounds a bit odd as it was predicted originally that the need for improvement should be reduced after attending a more intensive training program. However, the phenomenon can be perceived from another angle. It can be argued that based on information in table 1, the hypothesis should be reversed—the more students learn, the more they want to learn.

Hypothesis 2: Through this increased understanding, students’ adaptation to the agency and the instructor is enhanced.

Table 2: Effects of the fieldwork preparation grade on students’ evaluation of the instructor and the agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation of the instructor from fieldwork evaluation</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of the instructor from fieldwork evaluation</td>
<td>29.81</td>
<td>.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching effort of the instructor from fieldwork evaluation</td>
<td>23.95</td>
<td>.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edifying teaching of the instructor from fieldwork evaluation</td>
<td>35.12</td>
<td>.142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpfulness of the instructor from fieldwork evaluation</td>
<td>20.65</td>
<td>.101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of the agency from fieldwork evaluation</td>
<td>37.83</td>
<td>.165</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p < .05 (One tailed)

The hypothesis is not supported as there is no significant relationship. However, subjects had positive evaluation of the field instructors who were key persons to help them learn in fieldwork. Their evaluation of the agency was also positive.
Hypothesis 3: Through this increased understanding, students’ social work values are upgraded.

Table 3: Effects of the fieldwork preparation grade on students’ social work values

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social work value</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belief in the Possibility of Change</td>
<td>10.56</td>
<td>.083</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for Welfare</td>
<td>18.19</td>
<td>.100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification for Community Participation</td>
<td>9.10</td>
<td>.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarianism</td>
<td>29.53</td>
<td>.172*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuation of Caring</td>
<td>53.69</td>
<td>.253*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for Choice</td>
<td>-5.03</td>
<td>-.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall social work value</td>
<td>18.39</td>
<td>.156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in people</td>
<td>9.56</td>
<td>.091</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal level</td>
<td>17.88</td>
<td>.173*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal level</td>
<td>9.33</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p < .05 (One tailed) N=78

Subjects did show significant improvements in two sub-scales of the Social Work Value Scale (Kam, et al., 1997), i.e., Humanitarianism and Valuation of Caring. They also showed improvement in the Social Responsibility Scale: interpersonal level (Lee, 1985). There was only very minimal improvement in the Justification for Community Participation sub-scale as the program paid very little or no attention to this aspect. Except for the Preference for Choice sub-scale, all other measures of their values showed positive change. The same reason may apply as the orientation program did not specifically deal with issues related to this aspect.

Hypothesis 4: Through this increased understanding, students’ self-control is enhanced.

Table 4: Effects of the fieldwork preparation grade on students’ self-control and sense of responsibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-control from the California Personality Inventory</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15.83</td>
<td>.121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responsibility from the California Personality Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responsibility from the California Personality Inventory</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10.16</td>
<td>.110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p < .05 (One tailed) N=78

Regarding the fourth hypothesis, subjects showed positive improvements in two scales in the California Personality Inventory. However, the hypothesis is not supported as it does not have a statistically significant relationship.

Hypothesis 5: Through this increased understanding, students’ learning effort is increased.

Table 5: Effect of the fieldwork preparation grade on students’ learning effort

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective style of learning</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8.81</td>
<td>.145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theorist style of learning</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.31</td>
<td>.112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p < .05 (One tailed) N=78

Subjects showed positive change in two learning styles, i.e., the reflector style and the theorist style (Honey and Mumford, 1997). The positive change could have been due to the emphasis on reflection and integration of theories with practice in the orientation program. However, as the results are not significant, this hypothesis is not supported.

Hypothesis 6: Through this increased understanding, students’ performance is enhanced.

Table 6: Effect of the fieldwork preparation grade on students’ final fieldwork grade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade of fieldwork</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>β</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.65</td>
<td>.188*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: p < .05 (One tailed) N=78
This hypothesis is supported as it yields a significant relationship.

12. The Significance of this Study

The study made available a comprehensive set of variables for tracing the learning process of students. The learning process essentially reflects a path model having an initial input of the fieldwork orientation program, which resulted in the student’s understanding of and orientation to fieldwork. As the model unfolds, the student’s increased understanding would be a precursor to his or her performance in fieldwork.

![Chart 1: A path model of this study](image)

13. Limitations

The present study involved several limitations in design, sampling, and measurement that may or may not affect the validity of its findings. The present study could not employ an experimental design as it may violate the ethical requirement of education. A prospective, longitudinal design would be needed to track the learning of the social work students before and during their fieldwork placement.

The sample of students was only drawn from one institution. Statistical inference would not be valid if the sample deviated largely from the population. Hence, it is not possible to make inferences about the social work students in Hong Kong. All respondents were City University students, so that proper interpretation of findings should take the unique culture, system, curriculum and characteristics into account. More thorough examination of the learning process of students should include a wider range of respondents.

Our measures of various student variables may not be comprehensive enough. Further research is necessary to illuminate the learning process. More adequate measures of the process are essential for a fair test of the program effect.

References


Fieldwork Handbook (Bachelor of Social Work [Hons.]) published by the Department of Applied of Social Studies.


**Questionnaire 1: Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory**

**Questionnaire 2: Honey and Mumford’s Learning Style Questionnaire (Abridged version)**

**Acknowledgment**

The authors would like to thank Prof. Vic George for his valuable comments on the first draft of this paper.

**Note:** copies of the structured questionnaires are available from the authors upon request.