MODULE 6: INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTICE


Competency Objectives:
1) Describe the importance of integrating theory and practice in field education;
2) Define the essential knowledge, values, and skills in social work practice;
3) Create learning opportunities to assist students in integrating social work knowledge, values and skills;
4) Practice and use methods designed to assist students with the process of integration

I. Integrating Theory and Practice

CASE EXAMPLES: Solicit or provide three examples of student practice areas and situations for reference throughout the module to help participants apply learning to practice.

Review of Relevant Material from Other Modules:
- In field education, the focus turns from the acquisition of knowledge to the application of knowledge in an agency setting;
- The mission of the field experience is for students to learn how to use social work knowledge and skills with clients in practice situations.
- The BASW/foundation practicum prepares a student for generalist practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, exposing them to the social work professional identity, ethics, resources, and principles, while the advanced MSW practicum prepares them for autonomous practice in an area of specialization.
- By the end of their advanced placement, students should have a thorough understanding of how to use social work skills with clients and how to draw upon social work theory to inform their actions, thereby making them ready to begin autonomous social work practice.
- The purpose of field education is not for students to learn how to work at a particular agency, but to learn how to apply knowledge so that their skills are transferrable to any agency setting;
- The field instructor must help students see how social work knowledge, values, and skills are used within the agency.

Integration of Theory and Practice
Integrating theory and practice refers to the process of making connections between the social work knowledge, values, and skills learned in the classroom and the current practice experiences students have in the field.

For every client interaction, students should be given opportunities to discuss the social work skills that were necessary during the interaction, the social work knowledge that informed these actions, and the social work values that influence the interactions.

Students need to understand how their field experiences are connected to social work practice by answering the following questions:

-- Where do these actions fit in the overall helping process?
-- Why was this interaction necessary for effective social work practice with this client?

Field Instructors Role in the Integration Process

- Students in field education are likely to focus on task completion rather than on the reasons behind the tasks.
  - Students may become so focused on their tasks that they do not think about social work knowledge or skills – they are simply imitating the actions of their field instructor or others they have observed.
  - Students rarely critically analyze their actions. When one task is completed they often just move on to the next task.

- Students must be prompted to make the connections between the tasks and the reasons behind the tasks. This process of making connections is the process of integrating theory and practice.

- It is the role of the field instructor to assist the student in making these connections.

II. Essential Social Work Knowledge, Values, and Skills

QUESTION: Ask participants: “Before you can teach students to integrate theory and practice, what do you need to know?” Solicit responses; best answer is ‘theory’.

ANSWER: Before field instructors can teach students to integrate theory and practice, they must know and be able to articulate social work theory, which includes knowledge, values and skills.

ACTIVITY: ESSENTIAL SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE

Objective: To provide a review of essential social work knowledge, values, and skills and to emphasize the need for field instructors to maintain their knowledge base in order to effectively teach students.
DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 6A: ESSENTIAL SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE, VALUES, SKILLS

Instructions:
- Ask participants to brainstorm principles of social work under the three categories of knowledge, values, and skills; ask for clarifying definitions of the elements listed under ‘knowledge’; place generalist and advanced knowledge in two subsections.
- Write the responses on a blackboard, whiteboard, or flipchart

Cover the following points verbally:

- This handout provides a list of the essential social work knowledge, values and skills that students are generally taught in a social work curriculum.
- Use this handout as a reference and as a reminder for the theory that should be integrated into each practice experience in which your students participate.

III. Creating Learning Opportunities

- The first step in successful integration involves the creation of learning opportunities that will allow students to put social work knowledge, values, and skills into practice in the agency setting.
- To create these learning opportunities, field instructors must have a thorough understanding of the social work principles necessary for effective practice in their agencies.
- This involves analyzing your own practice to identify these elements and develop tasks and activities that allow students to practice social work knowledge, values, and skills with agency clients.
- For many social workers with significant practice experience, this process may take some thought, as the theory behind practice tends to become unconscious with experience.

ACTIVITY: CREATING LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Objective: To create learning opportunities that incorporate the social work knowledge values, and skills necessary for effective practice in an agency setting.

Part I: Identifying Social Work Knowledge, Values and Skills

DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 6 B: IDENTIFY SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE, VALUES, SKILLS

Instructions: Review directions: “The goal of field education is for students to learn to use social work knowledge, values, and skills with clients in an agency setting. In small groups, identify the knowledge, values, and skills you feel are necessary for effective social work practice in your agency. Write your ideas in the space provided.”

Allow 10 minutes for participants to identify and discuss agency needs.
Part II: Teaching Social Work Knowledge, Values and Skills

DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 6C: Teaching Social Work Knowledge, Values, and Skills

Instructions: Review directions on the handout.

- “Now that you have identified the knowledge, values and skills necessary for effective practice at your agency, how are you going to teach these elements to your student?”
- “For each element identified previously, determine agency-specific tasks you can have your student conduct in order to learn these social work elements.”
- Ask a spokesperson from each group to share the tasks their group identified with the larger group.
- Invite comments and feedback.

Summarize the participant’s work in the two-step process of creating learning opportunities:

- Identifying knowledge, values, and skills necessary for effective agency practice;
- Developing tasks and assignments that allow students to practice these elements.

Emphasize the importance of including important tasks on the student’s Learning Contract.

IV. Methods for Integrating Theory and Practice

Once learning opportunities are created, field instructors must help students make the connections between their knowledge of social work practice and the experiences provided by these opportunities.

This section will present three methods that can be used by field instructors to facilitate this process.

The first method involves processing this information with students immediately following client contacts via the Ongoing Integration Model; the second, the ITP Loop, provides a visual model for including reflection and linkage to theory between assessment and formulation of a plan; and the third method incorporates the use of a Field Journal.

A. The Ongoing Integration Model

DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 6D: ONGOING INTEGRATION MODEL

Review and discuss the following points with participants:

The Ongoing Integration Model (OIM) involves processing the following questions with students after each client interaction:
1. What was the purpose of the client interaction?

2. What were the knowledge, values, and skills used in the interaction?

3. How were these elements used and why were they necessary for effective practice?

4. How can your use of SW knowledge, values, and skills be improved in future interactions?

DISCUSSION

To practice using the Ongoing Integration Model, ask a participant to share a recent experience with a student or provide a case example relevant to their client population.

Ask participants to walk through the steps of the Ongoing Integration Model with this example, identifying the social work knowledge, values, and skills they would address with this student.

B. The ITP LOOP

DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 6E: THE ITP LOOP

Review the following points:

- Bogo and Vayda’s (1998) Integration of Theory and Practice (ITP) Loop Model trains students and practitioners to cover four parts of a process during supervision of cases or projects, and to include review of four content elements in each process section.

- The process is seen as a continuous learning loop for discussion in supervision, repeating the following components as needed during the course of the student’s work:

  Retrieval: assessment, data-gathering, information both verbal and non-verbal;
  Reflection: personal concerns, conjectures, responses to the situation; biases, assumptions;
  Linkage: theoretical knowledge useful in developing and guiding interventions; and
  Response: The professional plan developed and implemented as a result, then its assessment

- Each process component includes four content elements that should be addressed to help students reflect on the multiple factors influencing social work practice:

  Psychosocial factors: facts about the people, situation, and social problems at hand;
  Interactive factors: communications, interpretations, emotions, personalities, relationships;
  Contextual factors: cultural and community factors, beliefs, systemic, structural, power factors;
  Organizational factors: agency approaches and response, protocols, culture, system issues.

DISCUSSION

To practice using the ITP Loop Model, have a member of the class share a recent experience with a field student or provide a case example relevant to your client population.
Ask participants to walk through the steps of the ITP Loop Model with this example, identifying the factors present or possible in each of the four content and process areas.

C. Field Journal

- The format of the Field Journal expands on the OIM and the ITP by giving students the opportunity to write out an analysis of a client contact.

- In the Field Journal, the student describes a recent contact with a client and then links this contact to social work literature by identifying the knowledge, values, and skills used during the interaction;

The student is required to cite the social work literature linked to each aspect in order to strengthen these connections.

The Field Journal can be assigned weekly and can be used by field instructors during weekly supervision sessions to expand on the connections made throughout the journal.

DISTRIBUTE HANDOUT 6F1 and 6F2: FIELD JOURNAL (instructions and blank)

Review the Field Journal Format with participants, giving or soliciting examples of how this format can be used in supervision.

SUMMARIZATION

- Regular use of the Ongoing Integration Model, the ITP Loop, and the Field Journal can help students apply their existing social work knowledge to field learning activities.

- These tools will help your student achieve the vision you identified in Module 1.

DISCUSSION

Seek feedback from participants regarding use of these tools and how they can be incorporated into their current agency practice.
HANDOUT 6A: ESSENTIAL SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE, VALUES AND SKILLS

Instructions:
This handout provides a list of essential social work knowledge, values, and skills that students are taught in our social work curriculum.

Use this handout as a reference and reminder for the theory that should be integrated into each practice experience in which your students participate.

Social Work Knowledge:
- Human Behavior in the Social Environment
- Populations at Risk
- Poverty and Inequality
- Multicultural Practice, Cultural Sensitivity, Cultural Competency
- Strengths and Empowerment Perspectives
- Structural Systems of Privilege and Oppression
- Micro, Mezzo, and Macro Practice: Analysis and Interventions
- Intergroup Dialogue
- Evidence-Based Practice and Research
- Social Welfare and Policy Services

Social Work Values
- Ethical Practice according to NASW Code of Ethics
- Service
- Social Justice and Social Change
- Dignity and Worth of the Person
- Importance of Human Relationships
- Personal Integrity
- Professional Competence
- Cultural Competence

Social Work Skills
- **Interviewing Skills**: engaging, attending, focusing, building rapport, encouraging
- **Communication Skills**: following, paraphrasing, clarifying, reflecting, summarizing, focusing, reframing, reflecting feelings, empathy, confronting, listening, dialogue;
- **Assessment Skills**: observing; gathering data, analysis of psychosocial, cultural, community, and organizational factors, research, documentation; self-reflection;
- **Interventions**: client-centered, goal setting, prioritization; identifying/implementing tasks, contracting, educating, reviewing, evaluating, advocacy, coordination, planning, writing;
- **Professional Development**: Reliability, accountability, ethical practice, initiative, self-directed practice, critical thinking, workload and stress management, leadership;
- **Specialized skills**: Policy analysis, administration, therapy, community development, eg
HANDOUT 6B: IDENTIFYING AGENCY-SPECIFIC SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE, VALUES AND SKILLS

Instructions

The goal of field Education is for your students to learn to use social work knowledge, values, and skills with clients in the agency setting.

In small groups, identify the knowledge, values, and skills you feel are necessary for effective social work practice in your agency. Write ideas in the space provided.

Social Work Knowledge

Social Work Values

Social Work Skills
HANDBOOK 6C: TEACHING AGENCY-SPECIFIC SOCIAL WORK
KNOWLEDGE, VALUES AND SKILLS

Instructions

Now that you have identified the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for effective practice at your agency, how are you going to teach these elements to your student?

For each element identified previously, determine the agency-specific tasks you can have your student conduct in order to learn these social work elements.

Tasks to Learn Needed Social Work Knowledge

Tasks to Develop Specific Social Work Values

Tasks to Learn and Apply Social Work Skills in the Agency
Bogo and Vayda’s (1998) model for helping students learn how to integrate theory and practice suggests the use of a loop as a visual, one which continually spirals between assessment, reflection, links to theory, and planned actions in a professional response to a social work situation. Assessment and intervention elements are more concrete and observable to the outside eye, but the practicum instructor and student must build in opportunities for personal reflection and integration of theory and practice.

The ITP Loop has four process elements and four content elements, which provide a structure for the development of professional social work skills as students move along the loop.

**Visible / Conscious**

**Retrieval**

**Response**

**Invisible/Unconscious**

**Reflection**

**Linkage**

**PROCESS ELEMENTS ALONG THE LOOP**

1. **Retrieval:** Factual elements of the practice situation; assessment variables, observations, etc.

2. **Reflection:** Personal thoughts and feelings about the retrieved information, interactions, identification of personal values, attitudes and assumptions which affect response to facts, ethical concerns, etc.

3. **Linkage:** Connecting the situation to professional knowledge that can explain and inform findings and help the student channel personal feelings about a situation into professional action;

4. **Professional Response:** Informed response to practice situation based on personal awareness and professional knowledge.

**CONTENT ELEMENTS RELEVANT TO EACH STAGE OF THE LOOP**

1. **Psychosocial Factors:** Facts, reactions to, and knowledge about the characteristics of people in the situation and the social problems at hand

2. **Interactive Factors:** Communication styles, areas of comfort and enthusiasm or discomfort and anxiety, tendencies to interpret meaning which may or may not be accurate, personality styles, cultural and power differentials, need for or avoidance of relationships, formality, etc.

3. **Contextual Factors:** Relevant cultural or community factors, life experiences, belief systems, awareness of the influence of specific and systemic and structural factors.

4. **Organizational Factors:** Agency’s approach to clients and social problems, reactions to agency response to client needs, awareness of inequities, agency response to suggestions for innovation or change, protocols for response to specific situations, rigidity or flexibility, etc.

**TIPS for Integrating Theory and Practice:**

1) Schedule some time every week (or month at minimum) to delve deep into the complexities of client/community situations, student response to it, and how to practice from theory.

2) Case or project based supervision and instruction, using the four process and content elements;

3) Review and discussion of syllabus for each class, relevance to practice, specific applications;

4) Discuss agency models and tools for practice; how are they the same or different than class theory?
HANDOUT 6F1: FIELD JOURNAL (instructions)

Contact Analysis for Interaction with Client / Colleague / Constituent

Describe at least one interaction with a client, constituent, or colleague from the past week. Be specific in your description – discuss the purpose of this interaction, what was said by both you and the other person, and the outcome of the interaction. Then answer the following questions based on this interaction.

Social Work Skills

1. Identify all of the social work skills that were used by you during this interaction. Name the skills and then discuss how you used these skills. Be specific in your description.

2. What does the social work literature say regarding these skills?

3. Based on what the literature says, did you use these skills appropriately? What could you have done differently? How could you improve in your next interaction?

Social Work Knowledge

1. What knowledge was required of you as a social worker during this interaction? This knowledge could be in regards to a theoretical perspective, an intervention, the specific client population (or constituent or colleague), or an issue you were addressing.

2. What does the social work literature say regarding this knowledge?

3. How did the use of this knowledge help you in your interaction with the client? How can this knowledge help enhance your future interactions with the client / colleague / constituent?

Social work values

1. Identify a social work value that was involved in this interaction.

2. What does the social work literature say regarding this value?

3. How does this value relate to the interaction and why is this value important for effective social work practice in this situation?

4. Discuss any value conflicts that arose for you as a result of this interaction.

HANDOUT 6F1: FIELD JOURNAL (blank)

Describe Interaction with Client / Colleague / Constituent for Analysis

Describe social work skills used

Describe social work knowledge needed / utilized

Describe social work values involved
