Module – Remote Field Instruction

Purpose of this Module

The COVID-19 global pandemic and the need for physical distancing has resulted in a shift in how social workers deliver services while fulfilling their obligation to wise practices for public health and safety. Technology has been key in facilitating this continuity and exchange of information. E-counselling, e-therapy, and videoconferencing are becoming as familiar as emails, texts, and telephone calls for engaging with clients, students, colleagues, and stakeholders.

In recognition of the critical role that field instructors play in the education of social work students, we have developed the following module addressing how to provide field instruction to social work students remotely.

Learning Objectives

Upon completing this module, field instructors will be able to:

➢ Describe modalities and develop basic technical competencies in remote field instruction
➢ Discuss the elements of an effective field instructor–student relationship in the context of remote field instruction
➢ Demonstrate knowledge of the important ethical considerations in remote field instruction
➢ Identify strategies and approaches in remote field instruction to enhance the education of social work students

Activity

As an introduction to remote field instruction and remote practica, review and reflect on the following video. Consider what remote learning opportunities may be available in your agency and what challenges you might face in hosting a remote field practicum.

In the following video, the field instructor and student discuss their experiences of an MSW field practicum interrupted by the pandemic and the resulting need for social distancing. Their experience is applicable to beginning a full practicum as well.

https://youtu.be/X0MLftRrqx0

Developing Technical Competence in Remote Communication Modalities

Modalities for Remote Field Instruction

There are several options for communicating remotely in the provision of field instruction. The choice of modality is dependent on available technology as well as

personal preferences. It is recommended that, where possible, field instructors use a variety of modalities for communicating with students, depending on the nature of the communication (Martin, Kumar, & Lizarondo, 2017).

The most commonly used modalities include:

Teleconferencing
A teleconference is a telephone meeting held between two or more people in different locations through a telecommunication system. Terms like telephone conferencing, phone conferencing, and audio conferencing also describe this modality. The advantage of teleconferencing is that it requires very little technology in comparison to videoconferencing.

Emailing and Texting
Emailing and texting are methods of written communication via a computer, tablet, or smartphone. Emails and texts can be a great way to communicate small pieces of information or brief questions between students and field instructors. It is important to remember that emailing and texting are one-way communication modalities, so the tone and subtext of the communication may be difficult to read. As such, misunderstandings and misinterpretations may occur. It is recommended that field instructors and students keep emails and texts brief and to the point and ask if clarification is required.

Videoconferencing
A videoconference is a meeting between two or more people in different locations by means of a computer network to transmit both video and audio concurrently. Videoconferencing (using Skype, Zoom, Microsoft Team, etc.) allows all parties to both see and hear each other. Body language and other nonverbal cues are important for effective communication (Bambaeeroo and Shokrpour, 2017; Segal et al., 2015; Foley and Gentile, 2010; Mast, 2007), which is a major advantage of this modality. However, technology problems (audio or camera) and poor network connection or bandwidth can present challenges in using videoconferencing.

Considerations for Videoconferencing
When using videoconferencing for field instruction, the following factors can improve the effectiveness and impact of the communication.

Platforms for Videoconferencing
It is important that both the field instructor and student are familiar with the chosen platform. There are many useful guides, including:
  - Getting started with Zoom https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/categories/200101697-Getting-Started
  - The beginner's guide to Skype https://mashable.com/2014/07/09/skype-for-beginners/
  - A beginner's guide to Microsoft Team https://www.chorus.co/resources/news/microsoft-teams-a-beginners-guide-to-teams-in-office-365

Lighting
Where possible, natural light and front lighting are the best options. Beware of natural light sources behind you, as the image may look drawn and/or appear in black-and-white.

Camera Height
The most suitable angle occurs when the camera is slightly above eye level. Laptops and other portable devices can be propped on books or boxes to achieve this level of focus.

Audio
Hearing and being heard are the most important components of e-communication. Test the device's microphone before the meeting. For meetings with groups larger than four people, it is helpful for all participants to mute their microphones when not speaking. For one-to-one meetings, it is easier to leave both microphones open for free-flowing conversations.

Background
If the physical space is visually distracting, consider using a virtual background. It can be fun to explore static graphics or videos as backgrounds. However, best practices suggest using a solid background with no distractions (OTN, n.d.).

Activity
Review and reflect on the following video. Consider how you might improve your skills in communicating remotely.

       How to Look Professional on Zoom
       https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5AxcjUHBEE

Technical Difficulties
Regardless of which modality or combination of modalities used, it is important to formulate a plan to manage technical difficulties. Issues with technology will arise – and often at the most inconvenient moment. It is helpful to have a proactive plan of how both the field instructor and student will orient to the technology, who can support them to problem-solve (i.e. technology support at the organization), and the backup plan for communication.

Safety and Encryption
Field instructors can develop technical competence by understanding encryption, the process of protecting data and its transmissions through encoding. Encryption prevents unauthorized third parties from viewing or changing the data. It also provides security in allowing individuals working remotely from their organizations and agencies, while enabling a connection to other remote users. When using technology, especially for

work-related activities, considering encryption is important.

Implementation of encryption is complex and may require additional hardware or software, in addition to the support of technology experts. Field instructors can connect with their agencies to learn more about encryption, to receive technical support, and to obtain help in ensuring that they have the proper security measures in place.

Activity

Review and reflect on the following resources. Consider what you might do to enhance privacy and safety in your use of technology.

8 Tips on Basic Computer Safety
https://www.lifewire.com/computer-safety-tips-153314

Encryption and public keys | Internet 101 | Computer Science | Khan Academy
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6-JjHa-qLPk

Building Relationships with Students While Using Technology

As discussed in other modules, the working alliance between a field instructor and a student is an integral component to developing competency in social work practice. Field instructors engaging remotely with students need to make a more concentrated effort to build a relationship with the student. It is important to be mindful that, depending on the technology used, nonverbal communication may or may not be visible. This may require purposely setting aside time for engaging in "small talk" and building rapport before discussing student learning. Field instructors also need to practice transparency and explicitly explore with the student how they will deal with problems and concerns in the field practicum and in the field instructor-student relationship.

✓ **TIP:** When videoconferencing with a student, pay close attention to the student's body language on the screen. At the same time, it is important to recognize that by looking towards the camera, rather than at the student on the screen, you create the feeling that you are looking at the student. It is helpful to discuss with the student that looking at the image on the screen does not facilitate the same experience of eye contact as looking at the camera or being present in person.

Defining Roles, Expectations, and Learning Goals

It is important that field instructors, at the beginning of the relationship, initiate a discussion with the student about roles and expectations for both parties. It is essential to explore learning goals and how best to fulfill them. Clarifying the student's role and the field instructor's (and the field setting's) expectation of them will encourage student productivity and confidence in their new role. These discussions may evolve over time, as expectations and learning goals change and develop.

Students and field instructors are expected to set a mutually agreed upon time and timeframe for remote field instruction. Guidelines for the structure of these meetings (a systematic review of learning activities, the integration of theory and practice, student questions, etc.), and clear expectations regarding preparation for field instruction need to be discussed in the first field instruction session. Access to the field instructor during an emergency or on an ad hoc basis needs to be negotiated. It is important to review the remote field instruction plan on a regular basis so that adjustments can be made to enhance the remote field instruction experience for both the student and the field instructor.

Communication

In order to build an effective relationship remotely, a process of ongoing and open communication between the field instructor and the student is essential. There need to be opportunities for dialogue wherein the field instructor can provide meaningful and constructive feedback for the student in reference to their learning, their performance, and their personal development (Cicco, 2014). Building a positive relationship based on open and respectful communication, including considerations for critical cultural consciousness, invites the student to be comfortable in debriefing, discussing their concerns about their development, and obtaining support when faced with challenges throughout their practicum experience. With remote field instruction, communication is an even more vital aspect of the practicum experience and the field instructor-student relationship.

- ✓ **TIP:** Field instructors need to be mindful that they have the power to set the tone for the development of the relationship with the student. In the beginning stage, field instructors need to take the initiative to reach out to the student first. Signalling warmth and welcome to the student will provide a foundation for building a solid relationship.

Discussing Learning Styles, Providing Support, and Demonstrating Professionalism

Effective relationship building requires the field instructor to observe, actively listen, and be open to the needs of students. As there will be ongoing conversations remotely, field instructors need to invite a discussion of the student's learning style and preferences, and how they can be supported in their professional and personal development. Field instructors also can offer opportunities for students to participate in self-evaluation and self-reflection, in addition to the feedback provided by the field instructor.

It is essential that interactions are based on mutual respect and trust. In supporting student learning, the field instructor demonstrates that they value the efforts of the student in taking the initiative to improve and challenge themselves. Doing so encourages the student to value the efforts of the field instructor in showing a genuine interest in their professional development (Cicco, 2014).

Activity

Review and reflect on the following resource. Consider how you might better engage with field students in an online environment.

Teaching Strategies of Award-Winning Online Instructors
https://www.edutopia.org/article/teaching-strategies-award-winning-online-instructors

Ethics in Remote Field Instruction

The current global pandemic has compelled our work and learning environments to shift quickly to remote platforms and virtual spaces, and the use of digital technology has been consistently on the rise nationally and globally. Nearly all Canadians access the internet daily, although inequities in digital access exist among low income and rural and remote populations. Digital technology is rapidly changing the way we communicate and relate to the world in which we live and the people around us.
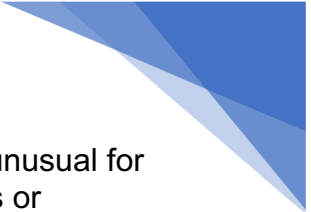
While we are dealing with a new context, we must continue to refer to our Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) to guide our approaches and strategies in integrating digital technology into field instruction. Field instructors and students must continue to uphold the CASW Code of Ethics and its values and principles.

Technical/Professional Competence

It is important for field instructors and students to understand the systems used to manage electronic communication (i.e., access, storage, communication) and applications used by their organization to ensure that the confidentiality and integrity of records are protected. Field instructors and students need to familiarize themselves with practice guidelines and relevant legislation (e.g., professional regulations, local/provincial/national legislation) involving the use of communication technology, as applicable in their geographic locations. Field instructors must possess adequate technical knowledge to work remotely and to ensure compliance with security requirements of their organization when communicating with students. As such, discussions with students may include the potential benefits and risks of professional practice using technology (McInroy, 2019; NASW et al., 2017; Van Sickle, 2014).

Professional Boundaries

Field instructors need to provide clear boundaries regarding expected response time to communications, permissible means of communication (i.e., email, video, texting, social media), and preventing conflicts of interest and dual relationships (e.g., friending on Facebook). Expectations regarding the use of personal devices in field instruction, including accessing confidential student records and carrying out practicum learning activities, need to be discussed within the agency and with students. Field instructors also need to discuss and model professional communication using technology (e.g., not using casual or cryptic texting language when communicating professionally).

Given the increased use of social media and other digital platforms, it is not unusual for people to randomly and unexpectedly encounter each other in online settings or participate in online events (these random encounters are considered digital chance encounters). Proactively discussing and setting expectations around digital chance encounters (outside of professional activities) with students, colleagues, and clients will help to clarify professional boundaries.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Social workers have the responsibility to adhere to the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and applicable regulations and legislation, including Canada's Privacy Act and Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA). Field instructors and students need to recognize that the field setting is responsible for the protection and security of their data and that people within the field setting, including students, are required to follow the rules (CCPA, 2019). Field instructors need to discuss and clarify the field setting's policies and procedures regarding the collection, use, and disclosure of personal information as well as the access, storage, and overall management of private and confidential information. The ease of access to digital technology makes it convenient to transfer information. However, to avoid confidentiality breaches, it is not ethical to discuss or post client, colleague, or student information in social media, websites, or blogs. Googling clients and colleagues, particularly for non-crisis information, is unethical.

Furthermore, it is important for field instructors and students to be aware of their surroundings and prevent accidental disclosure of personal information through their audio or video conferencing background.

✓ **TIP:** Consider using virtual backgrounds during videoconferencing to limit access to your personal information. Many platforms offer a virtual background of your choice. For more information, refer to the previous section, *Key Considerations for Videoconferencing*. For example, the following video describes how to change your background in Zoom.
How to Change your Background in Zoom - Zoom Virtual Background
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d0ZIE5Ynuxc

Social Media Policy

Most social work education programs and many field settings have social media policies and guidelines. Field instructors may consider further social media guidelines regarding personal and professional relationships, including their interactions with students. The field setting policies and procedures regarding social media need to be provided to and discussed with students.

Field instructors may choose to use one platform for personal use and another for professional use. They also may establish boundaries regarding online exchanges with students, and reiterate privacy and confidentiality in handling personal and organizational information while in their field practicum. It is important to promote professional online behaviour, including respectful communication, confidentiality,

academic integrity, and social work ethical standards (CCPA, 2019; NASW, 2017; Van Sickle, 2014).

Understanding that online posts may be permanent may compel users to be thoughtful and intentional in their communication. Field instructors need to caution students regarding their use of unfounded, derogatory statements or misrepresentation of organizational principles and operating standards (Renison, 2013).

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Decolonizing Approaches

There is a great deal of information about individuals and communities not transmitted when communicating remotely, including body language, and vocal and nonverbal cues. Technology, software, and platforms are designed, written, and tested primarily among peoples from dominant cultures and groups. It is important to be mindful of not reproducing discrimination, marginalization, and oppression in virtual spaces (McInroy, 2019). Online microaggressions can and do frequently occur. Field instructors are challenged to facilitate inclusive and decolonizing learning, as well as to engage with racialized and marginalized students in ways that respect their ways of being and knowing. Remote field instruction can multiply the challenges in respectfully engaging with diversity, equity, inclusion, and decolonizing approaches.

Learning Activities for Remote Field Practica

Many agencies are exploring options around carrying out their mandates remotely in response to the physical distancing requirements accompanying the current pandemic. Staff may be working offsite and using technology to meet with clients, colleagues, and stakeholders. Subject to an agreement between the social work education program and the field setting, BSW and MSW field practicums may be completed remotely, with the student situated off-site (usually in their home).

The learning objectives and activities for each individual field practicum will vary, depending on the field setting's mandate and their provision of services. Each student and field instructor will need to consider remote learning activities relevant to the practicum requirements and the opportunities available in the field setting. Listed below are possible learning activities that may be completed remotely:

➢ Orientation to site: students can explore the agency's website to become familiar with the mission, mandate, programs, policies, and structure. Students may participate in teleconferencing or videoconferencing with various team members.

➢ Literature reviews on wisest practices with particular social issues or individuals, families, groups, and communities.

➢ Community networking and resource development: students may contact service providers in local communities. They may create a resource listing agency names, contacts, and description of the services offered.

➢ Review ethical decision-making tools used in the field setting or write ethical guidelines for online engagements with clients, colleagues, and other service providers.

➢ Engage in online direct practice with individuals, families, and/or groups, based on agency guidelines, wisest practices, and relevant legislation.

➢ Policy formulation or advocacy: review laws, policies, and procedures impacting the population served by the agency. Write a summary of the review, a policy brief, or draft guidelines for new policy.

➢ Research activities, including needs assessment and program evaluation: literature reviews, development of research tools, ethical reviews, data collection, data analysis, report writing.

➢ Case management and family support for child welfare and family resource centres (liaising with social workers to support clients virtually).

Please contact the assigned Field Liaison or Field Education Coordinator at the student's social work education program for other ideas for remote learning.

Activity

Review and reflect on the following resources. Consider what remote learning opportunities may be available in a field practicum hosted by your agency and what challenges you might face in hosting a remote field practicum.

https://caswe-acfts.ca/committees/field-resources/

https://www.nanfed.org/policies-re-covid-19-and-other-disruptions-to-field

All remote learning is shaped by the particular agency context in a manner that assists students in situating that agency and population within the larger formal and informal social service and health care systems. The field instructor and their colleagues can identify viable learning activities and projects that are both significant for their agency and can provide important learning opportunities for students.

The following table below provides a template to capture and organize various activities and timelines.

Week 1 Dates:	
Learning Opportunities/Tasks/Activities This week, I will complete the following remote learning activities:	**Week in Review** Learning activities and accomplishments this week: Most significant points of learning this week:

Direct Practice Learning Opportunities in Remote Field Practica

As the pandemic situation evolves and if physical distancing remains a daily practice, there may be more opportunities to provide support remotely to individuals, families, groups, and communities. There are particular skills and strategies used in telephone and video support work for students to learn (refer to the previous section, *Building Relationships*). These opportunities will vary geographically, depending on the public health orders within each province and territory, and the strategies developed by agencies to provide services during the pandemic. In working with individuals, families, groups, and communities, debriefing and feedback can be provided by field instructors virtually via telephone or videoconferencing.

Activity

Review and reflect on the following resource. Consider the impact of working remotely with individuals, families, groups, and communities, and the learning opportunities available to students in your agency.

Toolkit for e-Mental Health Implementation
https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/sites/default/files/2018-09/E_Mental_Health_Implementation_Toolkit_2018_eng.pdf

Please complete the following Quiz and Reflection Questions before proceeding to the next module.

1. Zoom and Skype are two examples of platforms for what type of modality for field instruction?
    a. Teleconferencing
    b. Videoconferencing
    c. Social media
    d. Texting platforms

2. Which of the following are recommendations for "best practices" while videoconferencing?

   a. Look down at the camera, use good lighting, and use virtual backgrounds
   b. Have the camera at eye level, use mood lighting, and just jump into trying the technology
   c. Have the camera at eye level, use good quality lighting (ideally in front of you), and have a non-distracting background
   d. None of the above

3. Name three skills and techniques important for building a relationship with your student while providing remote field instruction.

4. A field instructor in a rural community is invited to remotely supervise a SW student from another rural site of their agency, within a geographic area where services to vulnerable populations are very limited. The field instructor, who has extensive practice experience, is not familiar with the use of technology in field instruction, yet feels obligated to mentor the student and support the local community. What ethical dilemmas does this situation present? What steps do they need to take in order to proceed?

5. What issues need to be addressed in field instruction with a student who indicated plans to complete a Google search of a client to gather information to complete their assessment?

6. List three projects that could be completed remotely by a student in a field practicum in your agency.

References and Further Reading

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