

Spring 1982

## Supervision of Field Instruction by Objectives and Results

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Lohmann, Roger A., "Supervision of Field Instruction by Objectives and Results" (1982). *Faculty & Staff Scholarship*. 2555.

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# Supervision of Field Placements Using Management by Objectives and Results<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Supervision of social work students in field instruction is one of the most persistent problems in the social work curriculum. Such issues as whether students must be loosely or tightly monitored, whether to engage in an extensive or intensive series of supervisory sessions and whether to lay out a tight schedule of activities and events or simply to let the placement evolve are just a few of the major issues and questions that students, agency-based field instructors, faculty-based consultants and field instructors, the Field Coordinator, faculty members and the Dean continue to debate.

My purpose in this presentation is to suggest a Management by Objectives and Results (MBOR) approach to dealing with some of these problems and uncertainties in field placement supervision of undergraduate and graduate social work students. The acronym MBOR will be used for the remainder of this presentation simply because it is shorter and easier to say than spelling out all four words. For those of you unfamiliar with recent management and evaluation thought, MBOR is a formal model of goal setting and monitoring that has been widely discussed in the general and human services management literatures over the past fifteen years. While it is often abbreviated as MBO that shortening leaves out the key term Results and the evaluation process, both of which are in my view essential.

I must also note one additional caveat in beginning. MBOR is ordinarily treated as an organization-wide management system. That is as much an issue of “the imperialism of a proposed innovation” as it is a requirement of anything inherent in the technique. We will be concerned with it here, however, only as an individual, idiosyncratic, application involving a single field instructor and one or a small number of students. I do not wish to suggest or imply that it will be necessary for a complete reorganization of your agencies, or the School’s field instruction program in order to introduce it. Also, please note that I am using MBOR as an organizing framework to stimulate your thinking and discussion about field instruction and not merely as a set of mechanical procedures to be dropped into all situations.

## The Learning Contract

The main point I wish to make in this short paper is that applying the MBOR model to field instruction elaborates and clarifies several of the issues implicit in the WVU model of field instruction as outlined in our official Field Manual. First, let me suggest that there are five key elements in the field instruction experience

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented to the WVU Faculty Field Association meeting, Spring, 1982.

from the standpoint of the curriculum reflected by the Manual. The first of these is the ***initial contact phase*** which is primarily concerned with the problem identification, goal setting and data collection. Students and field instructors both ordinarily have a number of questions that need to be addressed during this phase. Is the agency currently seeking a student for placement? Are there specific tasks already in mind for the student during the course of the placement? What background information, history and context will the student need in order to fully understand the situation they are getting into? Would the student be accepted at the agency or treated as an outsider and potential threat by existing staff? And finally, what would the student be expected (and expecting) to learn in the placement? This is, above all, primarily and fundamentally an educational experience.

It is important to note that during this phase of the placement experience many of the initial bounds and directions that will later guide and constrain the placement are set.

In the second, or ***contract phase*** that usually occurs during the first week or two of the actual placement the student and field instructor should be jointly concerned with assessment of the student's educational and professional strengths and deficiencies. With this in mind, contracting becomes a process of spelling out goals and setting measurable objectives for the period of the placement and planning of actual events expected to take place. It is interesting to note that the basic learning contract idea in the WVU curriculum schema is that professional education should not be a bulk, one-size-fits-all "people processing" procedure but rather that each and every placement experience should be tailored to the individuals strengths and needs of each individual student. The MBOR framework offers additional rationale for our reliance on the learning contract during this and all other phase of the student placement experience. Such learning contracts can also reduce misunderstandings between student, field instructor, faculty consultant and others. Further, contracting can also contribute to the modeling of good professional behavior and finally assuring the due process rights of students.

Rather than viewing contracting as a tedious and unnecessary obligation, as we know some current field instructors do the learning contract be used to structure an individualized practice curriculum with each student. This is, perhaps, the essential insight of viewing the field experience through the MBOR lens. We know that in some placements actually writing the learning contract is viewed as meaningless busy work and left to the individual student to develop, with the field instructor only involved to the extent of "signing off" on it. I must confess, I've done that myself at least once. This approach, however, fails to take full advantage of the potentials of the learning contract in actually defining, shaping and setting the expectations for the placement experience.

The third major component identified in the WVU field curriculum model is the call for ***weekly supervisory sessions***. One of the real advantages of having a clearly articulated learning contract is that it offers a schematic or agenda for these

supervisory sessions. In fact, forethought about what will occur in such sessions may well be one of the elements that goes into the initial drafting of the contract. Indeed, the model spelled out in the Field Manual suggests that the learning contract should be done in sufficient detail that the actual topics or at least the general direction of these supervisory sessions are clear from the start.

The fourth event of the WVU School of Social Work approach to field instruction is the *mid-term evaluation*. This is the time for consideration not only of questions of how well the student is doing in the placement but also of whether the right goals and activities have been identified and whether or not satisfactory results have been achieved to this point. It is worth noting that the answers to such questions will not always be satisfactory, or even clear. One question for the mid-term evaluation, however, should be whether any revisions in the learning contract itself are necessary at that point, or whether the placement just requires additional time to work out any problems or issues.

The fifth and final event in our curriculum model is the *final evaluation*, which will ordinarily occur during the last week of the placement. The primary question in this evaluation should be whether the student's performance in the placement measures up to professional standards and expectations for practice and meets the terms spelled out in the learning contract. In some cases, where inadequate contracts have been set out this final evaluation winds up being a kind of subjective, intuitive, "well, I guess you did okay but I really can't say for sure." This may mean that the student goes away with an uncertain, or even negative sense of their own accomplishments. Or, it may mean that the student has a general sense that they've done well, but haven't really met the expectations of the agency or field instructor. This is hardly the best way to launch a professional career. Also, in those cases without a strong contract, the student may be vaguely aware of certain deficiencies or weaknesses without being able to lay their finger on what exactly the problem may be. In both of these instances, a clearly articulated learning contract would have been useful, either for pointing out specific successes and weaknesses or for developing evidence of unsatisfactory performance.

#### Supervision by Objectives and Results (SBOR)

I would now like to review these major considerations in light of the MBOR approach as it can be applied to supervision in field instruction. The model of MBOR I am using here contains four principle elements: A *mission statement* that is a broad, general statement of the overall purpose of the placement and the role of supervision in it. Out of this general statement, a series of *more specific goal statements* that deal with specific desired states of affairs or conditions are developed. The third level of consideration involves the articulation of objectives, or *desired outcomes*. And finally we are concerned with operationally defining those objectives or desired outcomes through the use of *milestones* or indicators of achievement. Please keep in mind here that measurement in this sense doesn't always have to mean counting or quantification, although in many instances, such quantitative measures will be useful. In general, however, we are more concerned

here with intersubjectivity; that is, with sufficient clarity that virtually all ambiguity is reduced or eliminated. Thus, for example, if the student's goal statements include learning to write grants, and an identified desired outcome is to write at least one submitted grant application, then the milestone will have been achieved when the application package is in the mail.

Likewise, contracts that indicate attendance at specific training sessions, completion of a specific number of interviews, or correction interpreting cases in light of agency policy can all be handled in this manner, even though some involve quantification and others do not.

Some learning contracts I have seen stop at the level of mission statements and broad goals and fail to follow through on specifying outcomes or milestones. They may contain such statements as the student will "learn to become a professional social worker" or refine skills in hospital social work". The CBOR model would recommend taking the next steps and detailing what it means, in this case, to become a professional social worker, or what specific skills are involved in hospital social work.

Based on such statements, for example, a suitable objective might be to develop a working knowledge of quality assurance systems in the particular hospital where the placement is occurring. Within that, a specific milestone might be mastery of basic quality assurance terminology by the fifth week of the placement.

I hope that you can see already that this approach has the basics of developing genuinely "pretty" contracts which give at least the more rationalist among us heart-warming feelings. However, the question must still be asked whether anything else will result from this. My answer to that question is yes. Properly utilized, student learning contracts built with SBOR principles in mind can be an integral component for organizing and supervising the entire field placement, for it brings together the three essential elements of planning and anticipating of events, the events themselves, and follow-up evaluation of the importance, or impact of those events.

Supervision by objectives and results offers real opportunities for field instructors, students and faculty consultants to engage with the important basic education questions of the field experience within a coherent organizing framework.

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