

SOCW 419/420

Reflective Experiencing

An Ignatian Model for Writing Reflection Journals

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Field Education is often referred to as the capstone experience. It is where the classroom and real life come together for the student. A critical part of field education is reflecting on your experiences and integrating them with what you have learned in the classroom. One of the educational outcomes for field education, as articulated by CSWE, is a development of the professional self. Having opportunities to think critically about your experiences and share your insights is an important part of developing that professional self. Cohrane and Hanley (1999) discuss the importance of reviewing your work and emphasize the need for self-reflection and critical analysis of the work you are doing. They state,

You are responsible, in many ways, for the depth and breathe of your learning by how honestly and openly you evaluate your work. This is not only the hardest part of being a student, but the most important part of being a professional? (p. 65).

They emphasize the need to engage in journal writing and encourage students to find a quite comfortable space to explore the journal assignment and thus learn how to process the work that is being done.

Canada and Furman (1999) emphasize being reflective as a critical part of both personal and professional growth. They state that, "Personal engagement in learning is a transformative experience that requires reflectivity, the practice of introspective self-reflection about how one's inner life reflects on the outer world" (p. xxi). They relate reflection specifically to what they call, "reflective reading" and state that the prerequisite is, "...silence-that is, quieting in order to know oneself, the inner stirrings of the heart, and the discerning wisdom of the intellect (p. xxi). They go on to explain that reflective silence requires, "a willingness to become introspective", to "get centered," and to pay, "gentle consistent attention to oneself and one's situation" (p. xxi).

The idea of reflective reading is a useful concept that can be applied to the reflection process for field education and one that I rename as "reflective experiencing" by placing the emphasis on ones experiences. Canda and Furman (1999) discuss the importance of building this skill by being regular, consistent and disciplined. Thus, I encourage you to set a time for reflection and keep to that, by building it into your day or week. When you write about a field experience, it is important to go beyond the restating of events. Although setting the stage is helpful, the reflection journal should be more than a blow by blow or a laundry list of activities, it should reflect the thinking, feeling and doing aspects of the experience. Ruth Barton (2006) discusses the concept of "a rule of life" and describes it as an important part of the Christian tradition that supports a process of spiritual transformation "day in and day out".

"A rule of life seeks to respond to two questions: Who do I want to be? How do I want to live? Actually, it might be more accurate to say that a rule of life seeks to address the interplay between these two questions: How do I want to live so I can be who I want to be? (pg. 147)"

The idea of a "rule of life" supports the development of the skill of reflection. Meaning, reflection is not something that comes easy to all students. Thus, by approaching reflection as something that is important and needs to be incorporated into your day to day life will help you develop your skill at reflection.

A "rule of life" is decidedly Ignatian in its philosophy and applicable in your process of professional development. Ignatian pedagogy refers to a model of education that looks at the whole student and is concerned with developing "men and women of competence, conscious, and compassion" (Traub, pg. 12). This is accomplished through faculty considering several key areas. First, it is important for faculty to consider the context of student's lives and encourage students to reflect on past experiences. Through a process of learning the skills of reflection, students are challenged to consider their actions. Although, the goal of a "rule of life" as applied to field education is not spiritual transformation, the idea of what is it that you need to do daily, weekly, and monthly to support your personal and professional growth is an important one to reflect on. Consider how you want to start and end each day of field, when and where you will build in quiet time for reflection and how reflection will contribute to your development as a social worker. It is my hope that reflection becomes a skill and practice that you will build in your professional life beyond field and that will sustain you throughout your professional life.

One of the values of Jesuit education is discernment. Discernment refers to, "a process for making choices when the option is not between good and evil, but between several possible courses of action all of which are potentially good" (Mooney, p. 6). An important aspect of discernment is that it is a process. The discernment process includes thinking, feeling and listening with an open heart. This is accomplished by reflecting on present and past experiences and noticing your reactions to people, events and ideas. All of this is used to help mitigate between two worlds, one, your outside experiences and the other, your inner dialogue. Traub (2002) states that,

For Ignatius the process involves prayer, reflection, and consultation with others- all with the honest attention not only to the rational (reasons pro and con) but also to the realm of one's feelings, emotions, and desires what Ignatius called "movements" of the soul (p. 2).

Thus, discernment becomes a way of knowing oneself and the world which is another important value of Jesuit education.

The ability to engage in ethical decision making and resolve ethical dilemmas, grounded in discernment, is a critically important skill in a professional social worker. However, ethical decision making is not always innate and often complicated by ones development. For traditional aged student, during late adolescence, students are often coming to grips with who they are and how they see themselves engaging in the world. Thus, how they see themselves as a professional social worker is impacted by development. Even nontraditional students engage in a process of

self-reflection and also question who they are becoming as a professional. Thus, it is necessary to develop the skill of discernment through a process of listening; reflecting, through attending to thoughts and feelings; and finally acting. It is critical to be able to take in information, sit with it, integrate it with what you already know or have experienced, and finally, make some determination about that information. It is as equally important to be truly open and **listen** to the experiences you are having. One of the tools that can help develop your skill in reflection is writing reflection journals, thus, each week you will have the opportunity to sit down in a quiet place and think, feel, ask questions, make determinations and take action about the experiences you have had and write about them. This is such an important part of the educational process that students will be able to count ½ hour of field a week toward this endeavor.

In order to develop the skill of reflection which leads to discernment for ethical practice, you are asked to engage in reflective experiencing. This term was adapted from Canda and Furman's (1999) idea of "reflective reading" (p. xxi). In order to accomplish this, you will engage in a four step process (**LEDS**) which consists of,

1) **Listen**- through the skills of observation and focus during your days in field, select an experience(s) that is/are speaking to you, and demanding your attention. This step is closely aligned with the Jesuit value of "knowing the world". In professional development this is important because one of the measures of a true professional is the ability to fully understand the whole client system. Similarly, Ecological System theory suggests that the self is the result of the interaction between the individual and the environment, thus it is important to be as aware as possible of both the individual and the environment. This also relates to the value of listening and having a dialogue for the sake of understanding and not attending to things with an agenda. However, at some point in the helping process the professional social worker must have an agenda, a goal and a plan; however, in the initial engagement phase listening is very helpful. You might pay attention to:

- the specific experiences or tasks of that week
- various successes, concerns and challenges that which stood out to you
- that which has stuck with you during the day or over the week , and
- feelings, thoughts, and ideas.

2) **Explore**- through critical thinking, process the experience, consider the context, what stands out, why this is important to explore, what you think and feel about this, and what in your life and social work education relates to this event. The skill of critical thinking is at the heart of Jesuit education as much as it is an outcome for Social Work education. Thus, some of the questions that you might ask as you are thinking critically about your experience might first be related to you, such as:

- how/why this is important to you
- what your reaction was at the time
- what you think about it now as you look back
- how it relates to you (For example, does this relate to your areas of interest, life experience, strengths, limitations, feedback you have been given before?)

3) **Document**- write about the experience, and the process of reflection, in your journal entry, by writing down the exploration you will learn from and be able to act upon the field experiences; and, lastly,

4) **Share**- it is important for you to share your reflection and what you discern from the reflection for both ethical practice and an increased understanding of your overall development as a social worker.

This 4 step process, grounded in Ignatian pedagogy and the values of Jesuit education, emphasizes reflection and the context of your life, encourages you to go beyond a blow by blow account of the day to day experiences in field and delve more deeply into your experiences, and lastly discern the meaning of your reflection in the context of ethical practice and professional development. The primary purpose of the 4 steps is to facilitate deeper reflection journals, and better develop the skill of reflection. This is critical to both your success in field and will become an important step in the process of your overall professional development. As Kiser (2008) states,

...while experiential education can be a powerful pedagogical approach, students need to learn how to learn most effectively from experience...Experience is a powerful teacher that proves to be more effective when combined carefully with critical thinking, self-evaluation, and reflection (pgs. xiv-xv).

General Reflection Journal Writing Guidelines:

1. Find a quiet place and get comfortable.
2. Compose your journal.
3. Although the length is not as important as the time and content, a general guideline is as follows a minimum of 2-3 typed pages (Times New Roman font, standard margins, 1 ½ spaced, 12 pt font).
4. The reflection journal is for you, it is a place to process, ask questions, and explore your thoughts and feelings about the specific content areas, the placement/field process, field experiences, and general questions concerning field.
5. Additional areas that a student could write about would be:
 - diversity issues,
 - legal or ethical concerns
 - organizational or systemic concerns
 - your role
 - process and content of supervision, and
 - overall learning.
6. Read the Field Director's comments. One of the purposes of the feedback is to improve your journal writing skills so that you will get the most from the readings, discussions and experience and be well prepared for seminar.

7. For your mid-term and final reflection journal, review your past journals and reflect on any themes and discuss your overall learning.

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