Social Justice Practicum in Non-clinical Online Programs: Engagement Strategies and Lessons Learned

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Social justice, the equitable distribution of resources within a community, can be nourished through structured practical experiences that align with content in educational programs. A significant body of research demonstrates the benefits of including practicum when training adult learners (Sanabria, & DeLorenzi, 2019). Further, research elucidates the need for formal social justice training, which may increase equity within our society. This paper summarizes the launch of a social justice practicum within seven non-clinical programs offered through an online campus. Facets of student experience are examined through the lens of adult learning theory. Model adjustments and future directions are also discussed.

Keywords: online program administration, virtual practicum, social justice training, online student engagement, online faculty, social justice practicum, Adlerian theory

INTRODUCTION

Based on the premise that preparation for social justice work can be effectively nurtured through experiential learning, universities have offered practicum in areas pertaining to social justice for many years (Moody et al., 2022). Social justice is generally discussed in terms of access to resources, participation, diversity, equity, and human rights and there exists a multitude of definitions, creating confusion regarding effective training (Gushue, 2022; Reisch, 2002). Further, social justice tends to be discussed in terms of injustice, leading educators to have trouble designing experiences that provide students with the opportunity to learn about justice in society (Hailes, Ceccolini, Gutowski, & Liang, 2021). Despite these challenges, there is certainly consensus regarding the need to include social justice training in educational programming (Feather, Bordonada, Nelson, & Evans, 2019; Hage, Miles, Lewis, Grzanka, & Goodman, 2020; Joe, Martin, Kelchner, & Borland, 2021). Educational programming that lacks content pertaining to social

justice fails to address the needs of the community and produces graduates that do not have an understanding of current issues facing society, such as racism, discrimination, and inequity (Burnes, & Christensen, 2020; Richards-Schuster, Espitia, & Rodems, 2019). One of the most effective strategies for learning a complex skill is to practice said skill.

Practicum can be defined as hands-on experience (Grant-Smith, de Zwaan, Chapman, & Gillett-Swan, 2018; Sanabria, & DeLorenzi, 2019). The concept has historically been utilized in such fields as counseling (Marshall-Lee ET AL., 2020; Melamed, Casado-Pérez, & Hunt, 2020) and teaching (Alghamdi, 2022; Ersin, Atay, & Mede, 2020) to allow students to practice the skills about which they have learned in the classroom in the real world. Practicum is consistent with best practices of adult learning theory (Abedini, Abedin, & Zowghi, 2021; Kuk, & Holst, 2018) in that is allows students to engage in activities with real-world relevance and, as such, it is undoubtedly a beneficial strategy for inclusion in a graduate program. Practicum can be utilized to teach students strategies for applying the principles of social justice (Levine, & Murray-Lichtman, 2018; Treichler, Crawford, Higdon, & Backhaus, 2020). For instance, experiential learning contributes to self-awareness (Knutson et al., 2020). Further, effective engagement in anti-racism initiatives may be nurtured through practical experience (Brown, Johnson, & Miller, 2019; Buchanan, & Wiklund, 2020; Lemieux et al., 2021). The incorporation of practicum into educational programming adds significant value to the student experience, but there are challenges to implementation (Cook, Brodsky, Gracia, & Morizio, 2019; Grzanka, Gonzalez, & Spanierman, 2019; Johnson, Archibald, Estreet, & Morgan, 2021). When working in a remote setting, additional challenges present themselves (Pappa, 2021; Phillips et al., 2018). This paper details the implementation of a social justice-focused practicum within seven non-clinical graduate programs delivered through the online campus of a small university. Included is a consideration of student experience, the adjustment of practicum parameters, and future directions for the program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social justice can be defined as the equitable distribution of resources, such as access to services, resources, advancement, and engagement (Gushue, 2022; Reisch, 2002). The degree to which social justice is nurtured and felt within a society is determined in large part by those individuals who hold the most power. An important aspect of power is position and, the position is partially determined by role. As such, it behooves us, as educators, to ensure that those individuals granted advanced degrees that will position them to wield power within their communities are trained in a manner that embraces social justice. In this way, higher education has the potential to become a conduit for equity.

Aspects of social justice have long been included in the curricula of clinical training programs. Particularly in the case of social work (Quinn, El Ghaziri, & Knight, 2019; Pawar, 2019) and counseling (Marshall-Lee et al., 2020; Melamed, Casado-Pérez, & Hunt, 2020), society has long been aware of the importance of social responsibility among professionals. Clinicians who value the principles of social justice will be better able to serve their communities due in part to an increased level of self-awareness (Marshall-Lee et al., 2020; Melamed, Casado-Pérez, & Hunt, 2020) and less prone to violate ethical mandates by providing inequitable care for their clients. It is also important for those who work in non-clinical fields to learn about social justice. For instance, the area of talent management requires a justice-focused stance to avoid harming individuals throughout the recruitment process (Rotolo, 2018). As a second example, the field of leadership requires training in social justice, as leaders have the potential to harm others in cases where they lack the self-awareness to manage bias (Diem & Carpenter, 2012; Gümüş, Arar, & Oplatka, 2021). Public administration is another field where social justice is a highly relevant focus (Hooker, 2018). It is imperative that the tenants of social justice education are presented in a manner in which students may absorb the content and learn how to apply the relevant principles. One strategy for training professionals to apply the principles of social justice is through the practicum.

A great body of research demonstrates that adults learn by doing (Abedini, Abedin, & Zowghi, 2021; Kuk, & Holst, 2018). Educational experiences for adult learners should include content that is focused on practical applications and provide opportunities for practice. Practicum has long been utilized in teaching

and counseling, and it provides a phenomenal opportunity for learners to practice engaging with their communities in a way that embraces social justice (Grant-Smith, de Zwaan, Chapman, & Gillett-Swan, 2018; Sanabria, & DeLorenzi, 2019).

Translating practicum into the online space involves unique challenges. First, in terms of supervision, research on thesis advisement may be used to inform best practices for supervision. For instance, Grendler & Harland (2022) found that using technology to support advising for doctoral students focused on capstone projects was an effective strategy for increasing engagement. Dennis et al. (2020) found that a course-embedded faculty advising model increased satisfaction among online graduate students. Alexandra & Fahmi-Choirisa (2021) found that student loyalty to an online practicum in a hospitality management program was influenced by information quality, system quality, and system interaction, highlighting the importance of effective technology combined with relevant content. Archer-Kuhn et al. (2022), in a study on self-directed learning within the practicum context, found that allowing students to have a voice in the trajectory of their practicum experience led to positive outcomes. Vasiliki & Psoni (2021), in a study on teachers engaged in an online practicum, found that learning outcomes were not compromised by the virtual format of the training experience and that flexibility and adaptability were also noted as important outcomes. There are certainly challenges associated with a practicum in general,pecifically with an online practicum.

Street (2019) notes that challenging behaviors on the part of students sometimes present themselves. Further, in a case study, Merlin-Knoblich, Taylor, & Newman, (2022) found three key categories of challenge: the intersection of supervision experience and external factors, feelings about social justice, and professional growth. In fully online practicum experiences, the need for innovative pedagogy and intentionality emerge as key factors mitigating the potential for disengagement (Kidd & Murray, 2020). Further, research indicates that many of the challenges associated with a practicum that is delivered remotely may be reimagined as opportunities (Baciu & Trancă, 2021), such as

The implementation of the practicum described here was based on the Adlerian concept of social interest, which holds that community engagement is the cornerstone of health (Levitt & Shoshana, 2019). The model had the following aims:

1. Raise awareness regarding implicit bias, the cycle of socialization, privilege, and community organization.
2. Acquire skills needed to advance social change within communities.
3. Provide experiential education by placing students in community settings where they work alongside organizations to support community wellbeing and the transformation of policy.
4. Present a formal white paper to peers, faculty, and administrators demonstrating mastery of all core concepts.

METHOD

There were several goals for the practicum described in this study, key among which was to provide students enrolled in non-clinical online programs with an experience comparable to that of students enrolled in programs on the ground. Regarding educational outcomes, exposure to civics was vital, as this exposure has been shown to impact socially responsible practice (Cook, Brodsky, Gracia, & Morizio, 2019). Further, the goal of nurturing community engagement was a key priority of this initiative, as it aligns with the mission and vision of the institution which houses the campus. Additionally, increasing student ability to advance social justice was a goal. Research demonstrates that practical experiences are a preferred method of training in social justice (Brown, Johnson, & Miller, 2019). A related goal was to enhance student ability to increase equity within the communities they serve, thereby impacting society in positive ways. A final goal was to increase student skills in the ability to advance social change.

Social justice-focused practicum experiences offered through the ground campuses of the institution described here involve several key features. First, students attend workshops that focus on social justice issues with relevance to the community. Further, students are required to select the workshops they attend to inform their experience, which is an essential contributor to engagement outlined in adult learning theory

(Abedini, Abedin, & Zowghi, 2021; Kuk, & Holst, 2018). In addition to workshop attendance, students select a community placement and engage with an internal and an external supervisor during their completion of 200 hours. Upon completion of the required hours, students produce a formal white paper, which is presented to the entire campus community, commemorating their experience and its impact on the community. Some, if not all, of the aforementioned parameters could be effectively translated into the virtual realm.

Considerations for Online Launch

One primary consideration for the online implementation of the practicum was the need for an experience that was equivalent to the workshops utilized in the on-ground programs. The development of online workshops which could be delivered to the large student population on the campus was not supported by the level of administrative resources allocated for the initiative. This challenge was addressed through the development of Online Modules. In each module, essential resources and activities were provided to ensure that students were engaging with the material on a regular basis. One disadvantage to using online modules was that students were not permitted to select from options, which could have contributed to their sense of ownership of their learning experiences.

A second consideration for implementing a social-justice-focused practicum in an online format was the need for regular engagement to assess learning. Assessing student learning of material involving difficult dialogues, such as implicit bias, can be challenging when working in online settings. This is due in part to the anonymity enjoyed by participants in online classes. It is difficult to assess tone in the written format, and students can type responses they do not truly understand. Due to resource restrictions, extensive courses were required, which further impacted the ease with which faculty could assess student learning in a meaningful way. This challenge was addressed through the inclusion of synchronous sessions in online modules. During each synchronous session, students were required to interact with one another and the instructor, engaging in dialogue and sharing views. The final consideration pertained to the need for flexibility.

When working with online students, flexibility is a crucial predictor of student satisfaction, engagement, and retention (Harsasi & Sutawijaya, 2018). Injecting flexibility into the practicum experience was a top priority and was achieved using two strategies. The first strategy was identifying multiple remote community sites and nurturing relationships with each. Further, students were permitted to propose their own sites for vetting by the practicum administration. Additionally, students were to complete their hours through their employer, where relevant, so long as they worked with a supervisor different from the one they typically reported. The second strategy involved the implementation of a research activism option for students in online doctoral programs. This option allowed this group of students to conduct research with relevance to social justice in lieu of completing a service placement.

Model Implementation

In addressing the considerations outlined above, the online practicum was developed as a 200-hour placement within a community organization accompanied by four eight-week courses covering topics about the cycle of socialization, white privilege, and related concepts. Each course was designated one-half credit, and all four courses were graded on a pass/fail basis (see Table 1). Upon completing the final half credit of the practicum, students were required to present their learning to the campus community. Challenges in online implementation centered around student and faculty experience and key lessons learned are being utilized to inform changes to the practicum.

TABLE 1
SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICUM MODEL

Course	Focus	Experiential Component	Credits	Grade
Practicum I	• Theories of Social Justice • Find a Site		.5	Pass/Fail
Practicum II	• Theories of Social Justice • Community Placement	External Placement	.5	Pass/Fail
Practicum III	• Community Placement	External Placement	.5	Pass/Fail
Practicum IV	• Presentation of Project		.5	Pass/Fail

Lessons Learned

First, in terms of the student experience, feedback centered around a potential misalignment between the number of credits and the workload. As students did not report this feedback on the ground campuses of the institution, the online courses were examined to assess workload and findings led to a revision in structure and the development of a revised model (see Table 2). The strategy utilized was a credit expansion initiative to address the workload concerns. The credit expansion initiative added one full credit to the practicum. This was accomplished by removing a one-credit Adlerian theories course from each program and distributing its content throughout the practicum courses. This recent change added content to practicum courses, which may create more engagement opportunities for students, thereby lessening reticence when engaging in difficult dialogues.

TABLE 2
REVISED SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICUM MODEL

Course	Focus	Experiential Component	Credits	Grade
Practicum I	• Theories of Social Justice • Find a Site	-	.5	Pass/Fail
Fieldwork I	• Theories of Social Justice • Find a site	-	.5	Pass/Fail
Practicum II	• Community Hours • Adlerian Theory	External Placement	.5	Pass/Fail
Fieldwork II	• Community Hours • Adlerian Theory	External Placement	.5	Pass/Fail
Practicum III	• Community Hours	External Placement	.5	Pass/Fail
Practicum IV	• Presentation of Project	-	.5	Pass/Fail

In terms of faculty experience, challenges centered around the compensation model and perceived student engagement with course content. First, in terms of the compensation model, the campus uses adjunct faculty who are compensated on aper-credit basis. This works well for 3-credit courses but serves to undervalue faculty teaching half credit courses. To address this, we adjusted the compensation model, limiting class size within each section and increasing base compensation for faculty serving the practicum. The second challenge was not so easily addressed. Student engagement with course content that focuses on self-exploration is impacted by factors such as implicit bias. One in-progress strategy we are engaged in implementing involves the use of course-embedded advising to prepare students to deal with difficult dialogues within the practicum. In course embedded advising (Dennis et al., 2020), students meet with their current faculty members to discuss their career goals and respond to prompts that align with the content from the course Module in which the meeting takes place. Adjusting prompts for course-embedded advising sessions may help to socialize practicum content prior to course scheduling. The planned prompt revision (see Figure 3) will be delivered in the course directly preceding the second practicum course.

TABLE 3
COURSE-EMBEDDED ADVISING IN PREPARATION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE WORK

Pre-Session Work	Review course descriptions for all Social Justice Practicum courses
Prompt 1	Describe two ways that participation in the social justice practicum may help to support your career goals
Prompt 2	Describe two ways that the social justice practicum aligns with the content of your current course
Prompt 3	Describe one way that the social justice practicum aligns with your chosen field of study
Post-session Work	Complete online implicit bias inventory

DISCUSSION

Lessons learned through the implementation of this pilot have relevance for student engagement and faculty experience. First, in terms of student engagement, the credit expansion of the practicum is expected to increase the ease with which students identify a site for their placements by extending the time they have to complete this task. Further, this change should improve student perceptions regarding workload. Based on student feedback, the workload was not initially aligned with the designated number of credits for the practicum. The positioning of this change is expected to serve as a validation of student feedback, which should impact student perceptions regarding the degree to which the institution values their experience. An added benefit of the credit expansion is that it will allow students who are taking the practicum during a term in which they are not concurrently enrolled in another program course to be considered part-time students, thereby further increasing the level of flexibility of this practicum experience. Student engagement will also be nurtured by the planned implementation of revisions to the course-embedded advising session referenced in Table 3 above. This experience will allow students to meet with faculty individually to explore prompts relevant to the practicum, and this should increase student engagement with faculty and practicum alike. Faculty experience should also be improved with the revisions described here.

First, in terms of the credit expansion, this provides adjunct faculty with more opportunities to teach and, consequently, with more compensation, thereby contributing to higher satisfaction rates. Further, the course-embedded advising session changes will allow faculty to engage in individual student mentorship, which is associated with increased faculty engagement (Meixner, Kruck, & Madden, 2010). Faculty who are provided with opportunities to mentor their students also tend to experience higher levels of community, which is associated with increased faculty satisfaction. Future directions for the practicum center around

implementing and evaluating the revised course-embedded advising session, and launching practicum circles to provide students with peer-to-peer engagement surrounding the practicum.

Future Directions

Following the implementation of the revised course-embedded advising session described above, an investigation of faculty experience is planned to assess the impacts of the session in terms of perceived student engagement and readiness to participate fully under challenging dialogues. The results of these analyses will help to inform future iterations of the practicum. Additional next steps involve the implementation of practicum circles.

Practicum circles will be modeled after dissertation research circles, which were implemented on this campus over the past year and involve bringing together students at various stages of the dissertation process for unstructured synchronous meetings, with rotated facilitation by dissertation chairs. Practicum circles will similarly be open to students at all stages of the practicum experience and will be facilitated by students who have completed the practicum and faculty serving the program. These sessions will be unstructured in nature, and students will have the opportunity to pose questions or concerns and to seek out mentorship from other students or from the faculty member facilitating the session. The intention of this initiative is to encourage interaction, provide space for peer-to-peer mentorship and lighten the load of the faculty members serving the program, many of which are inundated with questions from students who are starting their placements. In sum, the results of our program evaluation indicate that online students can be effectively prepared for social justice work through remote training. Flexibility and the timely incorporation of changes in response to student and faculty feedback are key to ensuring positive learning outcomes and a favorable student experience.

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