Making the Most of Your Social Work Placement

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WRITING YOUR PLACEMENT ASSIGNMENT

This chapter will provide generic advice on placement assignment writing, but also acknowledge variety across university placement assignments. It will look at the core themes that ask the student to write an assignment based on the ability to match an intervention to specified criteria; an assignment that asks the student to provide a case study that analyses theories and skills used; and an assignment that demands reflection on learning from placement. The style of assignment will vary, but the common theme will be an expectation for a more reflective style of writing. Therefore, this chapter will be usefully read in conjunction with Chapter 6. It will consider how to identify future learning needs and include them in assignment.

PLACEMENT PERSPECTIVE 9.1

Tutor’s perspective on placement assignments

For many students, the final practice assignment represents the culmination of placement. It is usually the final piece of assessed work and many marks can be at stake. In the case of final qualifying placements, degree classifications may depend on a good result. With so much hinging on one assignment, it is not surprising that students may be anxious, as well as having significant emotional investment in the assignment.

Students tend to select the most complex practice learning opportunity they have worked with as their focus and part of the reason for this might be in order to process the events. This may have some advantages because there should be ample scope to link in reflection, legislation, policy and theory, which will all attract higher marks. However, just because a piece of practice has not been ‘perfect’ should not prevent it from being a good focus to choose. There can be much to gain from analysing practice that has not gone entirely as expected or where problems have occurred. Indeed, sometimes it makes a better assignment as it enables you to reflect on your practice well.

What is essential, whether the work has gone to plan or not, is that the student draws out what they have learned and what can be taken forward into future practice situations.

As someone who has marked many practice assignments, I would always advise against

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telling too much of a story. There should be enough detail to convey what has happened but unnecessary details, which are not strictly relevant, can be left out. Students should make sure there are no identifying factors that could breach confidentiality. In a complex piece of work, it might be best to focus on a particular episode or event – that way the exploration of issues in sufficient depth is manageable. It may seem obvious, but students should also make sure that they address the module learning outcomes and familiarise themselves with any advice given to them by their university regarding the assignment. Remember that this may vary between first and second placement opportunities.

The best practice assignments tend to include a thorough discussion of ethical and value considerations. Descriptions of practice that centrally place the promotion of service users’ rights and responsibilities in a legislative and policy context tend to achieve high marks, as does evaluative and analytical discussion. It is very important to be aware of the language used within the work and to explain any professional jargon or terms.

Finally, I would advocate selecting a range of reading, researching and background sources that will inform your understanding of the situation both during your practice and at time of writing your assignment. It is important to remember that this is an assignment about practice, and practice should be central, but it is also vital to show how relevant knowledge has an influence, particularly when drawing out learning.

Mary Harrison, Senior Lecturer in Social Work

ASSIGNMENT WRITING SKILLS

By the time you are on placement, you will have written a variety of other assignments. Musson (2011: 2) argues that ‘effort + time + application of skills = work of quality’. He makes a valid point. If you want to produce a good quality assignment you will need to allocate time to plan, read, plan, write, review, read, write and submit. Gill and Medd (2015) recommend, as have many other authors, the use of a timetable to plan what you need to do when. Given that you will have to juggle placement, personal commitments (family, job etc.) and other academic work, this is no less true on placement. However, they warn of debilitating avoidance through timetable and to-do list creation.

There are some core tips that I would recommend when writing any assignment. Be aware of other assignment hand-in dates and plan to allow time to produce your best work for each piece of work. Ensure that you understand what is being asked of you, the title, the marking criteria against which you will be marked, and word count. Musson (2011) advocates a clear understanding of the assignment title and emphasises understanding the verb in the assignment title to ensure that your response is relevant. For example, if the assignment asks you to compare and contrast your skills at beginning and end within an assessment, but you only reflect on one assessment, you will not have responded to the assignment brief. Ensure that you know the hand-in date and hand-in procedure, which IT system it must be uploaded on or office handed in to. Such details will all be in your module handbook, but if in doubt, ask your module leader to ensure that you have understood correctly.
Furthermore, the marker will look for depth of knowledge. For example, do not just put ‘Children Act 1989’, state the section that you are referring to. Use the social work framework you have to support your discussion, do not just name the Code of Ethics for Social Workers, paraphrase its content to show you have read it and reference it correctly with author, page and year. In order to demonstrate professional writing, adopt a grammatically correct style, good spelling and avoid the use of slang within assignments. Do not use acronyms without first defining them, and avoid contractions such as ‘don’t’.

**POTENTIAL PLACEMENT PITFALL** Jakub was enjoying placement so much that he forgot he needed to provide a placement assignment. It was only when he saw on Facebook others celebrating that they had handed in that he realised he needed to write it. He pulled an ‘all-nighter’ between placement days and was able to hand in on time. However, he was disappointed with his grade. When he re-read the assignment he could see errors and recognised the feedback that it did not reflect his learning on placement.

**POTENTIAL PLACEMENT OPPORTUNITY** Nadja was enjoying placement as much a Jakub, but ensured from start of placement that she had assignment dates in her diary so that she could plan and write her assignment in good time. She was able to write a placement assignment that reflected her learning on placement and was academically solid. She gained a grade that she was delighted with.

Bottomley et al. (2018: 20) note that being realistic is key to successful assignment writing. They advocate a balanced yet reasonable mix of study and attention to non-academic tasks. This is good advice. On placement you will need to balance placement work, academic work, personal work or family commitments with time for yourself. Exercise and relaxation can be as important a part of the assignment writing strategy as the reading of books and writing the assignment itself, as they contribute heavily to your emotional wellbeing. Plan ten minute breaks into every hour study time or pre-book an exercise class, but look after yourself.

A good way to enhance your academic profile is to refer back to your feedback from previous assignments. Stogdon and Kiteley (2010) support its value to enhance your writing style. If you regularly get feedback that you need to develop your referencing or address your assignment structure, seek support with it. Every university has an excellent resource pool of e-learning, podcasts, books, and/or group or individual tutorials that are there to support your development, so use them. Markers spend time constructing your feedback so that you can improve your next assignment by learning from the advice, so take advantage of it.

**Reflective Task 9.1**

Think back to feedback on previous assignments. Can you identify themes of feedback that you need to address to enhance your assignment writing skills?
Time spent preparing your assignment is time well spent. Use your module handbook reading list: I can promise you that your module leader has checked out the most relevant books to access for you; do not just search online and then use an unknown (and sometimes irrelevant or misleading) source because you cannot get into the university library. Read from a range of sources, because academic marking will look for breadth of researching. Using recommended books, looking at relevant journal articles, and re-reading lecture notes and listening to lecture recordings will all enhance your understanding of the topic, and demonstrate academic commitment.

By this point you will start to have a feel for what you want to write about. Construct an assignment plan that sets out an introduction, three core themes to discuss, and a conclusion. Identify key areas to discuss within each core theme. If you are feeling overwhelmed by an assignment, this is a good way to break it down into more achievable tasks. Nevertheless, do make sure that there is a flow between the different themes so that you develop an argument. Send your assignment plan to the module leader or your tutor (depending on the support your university offers), allowing plenty of time for them to respond and you to still have time to write your assignment.

Once you have completed your first full draft of the assignment, you then need to spend some time on attention to detail, which always enhances your grade. By proofreading it after some separation (at least 24 hours) you will see spelling and grammar mistakes and be able to identify where the flow and structure confuses the reader. Musson (2011) reminds us of the importance of good sentence construction and avoidance of slang in assignments. Ensure that your academic referencing is correct. Your university will have a set referencing strategy and e-learning on it, so use the resources available to ensure that you are able to write to maximise your grade. Stodgon and Kiteley (2010) summarise referencing as recording all sources you use, and ensuring that it is clear when and how you have used their work. Smale and Fowlie (2015) remind you that copying some one else’s ideas or words without referencing acknowledgement is plagiarism. In a profession where honesty and integrity are key social work values, one can see the importance of good quality referencing.

**Ten Top Tips for Writing an Assignment**

1. Know and understand your assignment title.
2. Plan your time carefully, as you may have a number of deadlines at a similar time.
3. Understand your assignment marking criteria so that you understand what is expected of you.
4. Utilise your module reading list – it has the most relevant books for the assignment listed in it.
5. Write an assignment plan, and ask the relevant tutor or module leader to comment on its appropriateness.
6. Concentrate on a small number of themes in greater depth, rather than lots of themes in no depth.
7. Read the feedback from other assignments and apply learning to enhance this assignment.
8. Do not listen to social media gossip on the correct answer: check with your module leader when in doubt.
9. Allow time to proofread your assignment.
10. Ensure that your referencing is undertaken correctly.
Hopefully you will have developed strong assignment writing strategies by the time you go on placement. A placement-based assignment is likely to be a little different from some other assignments you will be asked to write whilst on your course as it requires reflecting on your work, so will be written in the first person (‘I’). Do not see placement as separated from university teaching. The phrase applying theory to practice is often used, and is most useful here. The placement assignment is an opportunity to demonstrate integrated learning and make those links, as we now go on to discuss.

DIFFERENT COURSES, DIFFERENT ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS

As referred to earlier in the book, your module handbook or placement handbook will contain the specifics in relation to your course. This book should not replace your understanding of your university’s academic requirements but supplement them. Generally, they fall into three key themes of assignments, which we will consider in turn:

- an assignment based on the ability to match an intervention to a number of domains
- an assignment that asks the student to provide a case study that analyses theories and skills used
- an assignment that demands reflection on learning from placement.

Domain-related assignments

When your placement assignment asks you to match an experience or intervention you have undertaken to a domain or set criteria, you will need to think about how you match these. Chapter 8 explains a good process to do this for an evidence folder, and the same principles can be followed in an assignment. Usually the university will ask that these are different examples to the evidence grid discussed in that chapter, but check their expectation of you. You do not want to self-plagiarise, but neither do you want to undertake unnecessary work.

Earlier we suggested that an assignment has an introduction, three key themes, and a conclusion. Domain-related assignments break that mould: if you have nine domains, there will be nine themes, and obviously fewer words per theme to use.

Assignment Plan 9.1

Introduction: Briefly set out that this will cover each of the PCF domains, utilising a range of intervention examples, supported where appropriate with theoretical perspective

Domain 1: Example of how you were professional, the skills your learnt and support it with theory.

Domain 2: Example of when your values were challenged and support it with theory.

Domain 3: Example of how you challenged a diversity issue, the skills your learnt and support it with theory.

(Continued)
Domain 4: Example of you advocating for a service user, the skills your learnt and support it with theory.

Domain 5: Example of how you have applied theory to an intervention to inform your practice.

Domain 6: Example of how you reflected on your practice and what you have learnt from it.

Domain 7: Example of an intervention, the skills your learnt and support it with theory.

Domain 8: Example of inter-professional working, the skills your learnt and support it with theory.

Domain 9: Example of leading a group or sharing information, the skills your learnt and support it with theory.

Conclusion: What skills you have learnt whilst on placement.

You will need to describe clearly and concisely the intervention you will refer to. It is a difficult and crucial skill to write concisely, to include enough information so that the reader knows the important and relevant information. This will be followed by critical analysis of the skill used, supported academically with relevant theory. If your assignment question asks you to reflect on a choice of three domains, for example, then you will be able to apply this pattern but in more depth.

POTENTIAL PLACEMENT PITFALL Penny had a wide range of excellent learning opportunities, so had a breadth of intervention examples to provide in her placement assignment. She began writing freely, but by domain 4 (of 9) had used the total word limit for the assignment. She wanted to ensure that the marker understood all the nuances of her work so submitted the first four domains only, but by being unable to address all nine domains she did not meet the assignment brief and received a low grade.

POTENTIAL PLACEMENT OPPORTUNITY Petra had a wide range of excellent learning opportunities, so had a breadth of intervention examples to provide in her placement assignment. Before she began writing she calculated the words she could allocate to each domain (word limit divided by domains) and saw each domain as a mini-reflection where she described the intervention, skill developed and provided an academic reference. She was able to address the assignment requirements and was delighted with her grade.

Often students struggle to fit everything in to such a small word limit, so stop for an hour and write a 300-word summary of a piece of work you have undertaken, the skills developed, and put in an academic reference. Hard isn’t it? You will need to accept that you cannot provide the breadth of discussion that you can luxuriate in in other assignments. Sometimes that is the hardest part of this style of placement assignment, so be prepared to argue with yourself!

Case study assignment

Many universities ask the student to provide a case study or case summary of a piece of work they have undertaken, sometimes called a critical analysis of practice (CAP). The first important step in this style of placement assignment is the choice of intervention. You need to identify it by interim stage in your placement to enable you to have enough time to write the assignment, but often the more complex works comes in the second half of placement. But be bold. Do not
keep changing your mind as more work is allocated, as it will confuse you and the assignment. Furthermore, choose a piece of work that is sufficiently complex to highlight your skills and knowledge, but that is time limited so that you do not spend most of your words saying ‘and then this happened’. I would advise concentrating your assignment on one event within your intervention (a home visit, assessment, interprofessional meeting etc.). This will enable you to provide depth of discussion on one piece of work, rather than spreading yourself too thinly covering a wide range of issues.

Earlier I suggested using a plan of introduction, three themes, conclusion, and this assignment lends itself to this model. Choose three areas that you want to look at to support your intervention. That could be a specific intervention skill, a value or ethical issue, a problem you encountered and overcame.

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**Assignment Plan 9.2**

*Introduction*: Set out the intervention that you will focus on, the theory that you will apply to your practice, and the reflections that you will make on your practice.

*Definition*: Briefly describe your intervention.

*Theme One – Values*: Describe an ethical dilemma that challenged your values within the intervention, critically explore different perspectives in relation to the dilemma, discuss the values and theory behind your dilemma, and conclude with your learning from this incident.

*Theme Two – Application of theory to practice*: Describe in a little more detail the intervention and explain the theoretical basis that you worked within. Ensure that you integrate the theory and the practice rather than describing in one paragraph and theorising in the next. Conclude with your learning from this theory.

*Theme Three – Professionalism through supervision*: Describe how you used supervision to support your development of and reflection on your skills and knowledge and understanding of the policies and procedures. Apply theoretical perspective and learning on how to best use supervision.

*Conclusion*: Summarise your learning from the case study, and identify any future learning needs that will inform your next placement or first qualified job.

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The important task in this style of placement assignment is the depth of discussion. Cover fewer themes in more depth to enhance your grade.

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**Reflective Task 9.2**

Think of a recent intervention (e.g. home visit) you have undertaken. First, list all the themes raised within that piece of work: the skills you used, the knowledge you drew on, the service user’s perspective, the
agency perspective, legislation used, your personal or professional values, any discrimination you observed, the context of the service, the context of the service user’s needs and so on.

Next, identify the three most significant themes. Do not think too hard, just identify them quite quickly. Start to reflect on why you chose those three themes, what interested you about them? What are the key issues within the theme?

You now have the basis for your assignment plan.

Reflection-on-learning assignment

This is the same as the previous assignment, but turned on its head. Instead of thinking of the intervention first and identifying learning from the work, you identify your learning from placement and then use an intervention to evidence it. Sometimes it is called a ‘learning highlight’. Your university may provide specific areas it requires to reflect upon, for example choose from how you have developed your professionalism, interprofessional working, values or self-awareness, or just name one area. As ever, ensure that you read the assignment question carefully.

If you have a choice, consider which area your placement has provided the greatest learning opportunities for you in. There is no point in writing on interprofessional working if you have had limited opportunities in that area. Give yourself the best chance to write a good assignment.

Reflective Task 9.3

Identify what you have learnt on placement so far in relation to professionalism and the skills you feel you still need to develop.

Can you provide an example to support each item on your lists?

This is your assignment plan.

In this assignment you need to be reflective first and foremost. Think back to your self-assessment in Chapter 1. I asked you not to be too self-critical, but neither to be full of yourself. The same applies here. The marker will look for a balanced reflection on both your skills and your areas for development.

Break the skill into three themes; in professionalism that might be time management skills, working in a person-centred manner and case-note recording skills. Within each theme you should provide the theory of the theme, an example of your practice, your learning from the work, and identify any learning needs in that theme. It is a relatively formulaic assignment, but undertaken well is very effective.
Assignment Plan 9.3

Introduction: Clearly state the skill (professionalism in this example) you intend to reflect upon, and state that you will explore it on a theoretical basis and reflect upon your skill development within it, supported by examples of your practice.

Definition: Briefly define professionalism. Use a relevant social work definition.

Theme One: Define time management skills, discuss the theoretical perspective, and apply to your practice by using an example of your work. Reflect on your skill development and learning needs.

Theme Two: Define person-centred practice, and repeat as above.

Theme Three: Define case-note management, and repeat as above.

Conclusion: Summarise the skill, your examples of work and learning from your experience. Conclude with your identified learning needs.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The link between all three types of placement assignment is the request for critical analysis. Your perspective, which should look at a number of different sides within one discussion, should be supported with academic reasoning: an evidence-based rationale (Bottomley et al., 2018: 54). Stogdon and Kiteley (2010) strongly advocate against simply paraphrasing from textbooks, recommending instead that you ensure that you demonstrate your own views within your interpretation of said textbook.

Chapter 6 explores how to write reflectively, and you should read that chapter in conjunction with this one when writing a placement assignment. But remember not to over-describe the event, as the reflection and critical analysis are the important aspect of the assignment.

APPLYING THEORY TO PRACTICE

In order to be able to undertake an intervention effectively, as a social work student you need to understand why you are undertaking the intervention, and the strategies that you are drawing on. Initially, you are likely to have used your natural skills, imitated your practice educator and colleagues, and focused on developing your skills, which you should explore the theoretical basis of in supervision with your practice educator. However, as you progress through placement, you need to become more proactive of your application of your knowledge of social work theory to understand the mechanisms that ensure effective interventions. This link of theory to practice is critical to your development as a social worker. Maclean and Harrison (2015) argue that theory helps you to understand a situation, explain why decisions are made and understand outcomes. It contributes to your effective professionalism.

Many students are able to describe the intervention and discuss the theory, but to enhance your understanding, practice and academic grade further, you need to integrate the two.
To integrate theory and practice you need, in the same paragraph, to describe the intervention and outline the theory you used.

--- Reflective Task 9.4 ---

Think about an intervention you have undertaken in your placement recently. Focus on one small element, perhaps how you introduced yourself or how you sought the service user’s wishes and feelings. Describe it briefly (100–200 words).

Next, consider the theory that you used. Explain the theory (200–400 words).

Finally, re-read both elements and start to intertwine the two.

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Students often struggle to name a theory, thinking of attachment or person-centred theory, when actually, the assignment needs to refer to the relevant books on subject. Applying theory to practice can simply mean, where you discuss communication, refer to social work communication books, when you discuss values, refer to values books and so on. Keeping this simple but integrated throughout your assignment is the key for a placement assignment. Nevertheless, some assignments benefit from a theme running throughout; for example, you might use Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle to build your discussion within. Similarly, the ASPIRE model – assessment, planning, intervention, review, evaluation – (Sutton, 1994) provides you with a framework that enables you to reflect on the different stages of your work with a service user. But do not let that be your only theory, still apply relevant references from books and journals throughout.

Authors such as Maclean and Harrison (2015) provide a summary of theories as a starting point for this task. Use it to identify the theory, but always read beyond that into more detailed discussions once you have determined the most appropriate one. Do not be afraid that you have used more than one theory in an intervention. Social work is often a hybrid of drawing on a range of theories that enables the social worker to understand a complex situation.

--- Reflective Task 9.4 (continued) ---

Now consider, is there a values issue or ethical debate in the example above? Can you add this into it (200–300 words)? Does this need a theoretical basis to support your discussion (100 words)?

What is the legislative basis for your work (100 words)?

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You are now layering the first section of your assignment and ensuring that you are applying theory to practice. Continue this with the next element of your practice and you will be well underway with your placement assignment.
FUTURE LEARNING NEEDS

Many placement assignments will require the student to look at their future learning needs in their next placement or ASYE to conclude. Refer back to your own learning needs identified in Reflective Task 1.2, and reflect upon what you have learnt whilst on placement and identify what you still need to learn in that area. However, one must recognise that you may have had other learning needs, not identified until part way through placement, or that it is only through developing one skill that a future skill is identified for future development. Completing Reflective Task 9.5 will be very helpful in ensuring that you are robust in your reflection on this area.

Complete Table 9.1 to help you to identify your future learning needs.

Table 9.1 Identifying future learning needs

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Finally, as a marker, I use the phrase ‘adding value’. What I mean by that is, does every discussion add to the final grade? A discussion on attachment theory in relation to the service user’s need may be excellent, but if the question is reflect on your understanding of the context of the placement, the attachment discussion does not add value to your grade. Make sure all your discussions are relevant to the assignment and module learning outcomes.

PLACEMENT PERSPECTIVE 9.2

Student Perspective

At the start of the placement I ensured that I organised my time, for example knowing when all deadlines were due and pre-scheduling study days. I set myself tasks for each study

(Continued)
day, and spoke to my practice educator for suggestions. I would recommend that you work out when you study most effectively. I quickly realised that placement was challenging and that by evenings I was too tired to concentrate effectively, so dedicated time in the mornings to study. I also tried not to study at the weekends in order to feel refreshed for placement, but recognised that I needed to as the due date drew closer.

I approached the reflective assignment by selecting an experience that I encountered where I felt I had made a positive impact, as I wanted to self-evaluate my strengths and key skills with a view to identifying areas that I could further develop. I linked the assignment structure to a theoretical model, which allowed me to structure the assignment into a logical order and guided me to explore and reflect upon specific areas. I reflected on each stage of my involvement, which allowed me to break down the case and to identify key areas where I applied theory and knowledge.

Adele Clark, MA Social Work Student

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The academic placement assignment often provides your grade for your placement, so is a critical element of the social work course. It can be easy to lose sight of its importance whilst out on placement, so ensure that you are allocating time to its construction in the second half of your placement. All normal academic advice applies, but the placement assignment also demands that you are critically reflective on your practice and skill development, whilst applying theory to your practice. Finally, see the placement assignment as an opportunity to learn from your practice and enhance your understanding of your practice.

CHAPTER CHECKLIST

In order to enhance your placement assignment academic grade and maximise your understanding of theory:

- be organised; ensure that you understand the assignment, know when it is due and write it in good time
- integrate your application of theory to your practice throughout your assignment
- critically reflect on your social work skills throughout and provide future learning needs.

Further reading