

SOWK 696 Advanced Practicum Journal #4 (January)
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What has been the greatest practice learning this past month?

A significant practice learning of this past month involved inviting a senior clinician whose work I deeply admire, to observe my sessions. I was very afraid to do this. It is always unnerving to be observed, never mind by someone who has extensive experience and whose opinion of me means a tremendous amount. I chose to be brave and I invited Dr. Karl Tomm to observe my work with a couple around their parenting and relationship issues. Our conversation after the session was very helpful and supportive. He encouraged my ability to connect and have positive relationships, and to make observations that guide the movement of the work towards strengths in a collaborative manner. Dr. Tomm also invited me to work on using questions more in my sessions, to create invitations that will prepare the ground, so to speak, for ideas I would like the family to consider. I am beginning to understand the significance of this part of the work, and I look forward to learning how to beginning to do this in my work. It is one of my goals for this semester, and this goal fits very well with my some of my course work.

Where did I feel stuck in the past month? Is there “gold in the shadows”?

My supervisor needed to be away for the first two weeks of the practicum after the break. I noticed that I quickly began to feel “untethered” – like a little boat on the great big sea, without an anchor or a sail. I feel some embarrassment about this – in the sense that, I ought to be more independent. At the same time, I see the need to be able to discuss the families I work with and to ask for help with understanding or addressing challenges, as a sign of my sense of responsibility and accountability to the families I work with.

I chose to ask for some support and advice from Dr. Tomm regarding supervision, to fill this gap until my supervisor became available. I don’t see the point of pretending I know things when I do not, to look like I know what I’m doing. But I also know that I sometime underestimate my abilities. I know that my supervisor feels confident in my skills and this helps. I also think it’s good practice to find ways to self-supervise and explore peer supervision going forward. I would say that the “gold in the shadows” in this situation is that, in my search for supervision, I gathered courage to invite Dr. Karl to observe my work, which lead to establishing a better relationship with him and to learn from his expertise. Following this session, Dr. Tomm gave me very positive feedback about my work.

I can think of one more example of an experience where I felt stuck this past month, and where I am needing to stretch significantly, with help. I am currently working with a new family, where the mother has a difficult time setting limits with her two children, 8-year-old twin girl and boy. The family structure has become somewhat stuck in a pattern of negotiating all interactions and limits, and where the children are unable to respond to limits or expectations. The mother does not feel able to enforce and set needed limits. This manifested in our first session together by the children’s inability to listen and engage in the conversation, and the mother’s inability to set any limits for her.

My struggle in this scenario has been about finding ways to help the family move towards different interactions without disqualifying or undermining the efforts that the family

has been making. I invited the new supervisor I mentioned above to observe this session. During the session, the supervisor phoned into the room and encouraged me strongly to empower the mother to set limits. I simply did not know how to do this in a non-confrontational way. I was not entirely clear how to proceed.

In the past, the experience of a supervisor calling into the therapy room with instructions would have raised a great deal of anxiety for me: not knowing how to do something, and being given very direct advice and instructed to do something right in the midst of a session. I decided to trust myself and relax after the phone call. Then I took a little bit of time to assess whether I agreed with my supervisor's advice, and how to implement the supervisor's ideas. My intuition kept telling me to stay very tentative and cautious with the family I was working with. I am not sure if this was the right call or not. Instead of directly confronting and giving instructions to the mother regarding her parenting, I proceeded to more actively ask the children to listen, to not interrupt, to practice asking for a turn and waiting for a turn. I did not point this out to the mother, nor did I discuss my actions in any open way.

The follow-up conversation (post-session) with the supervisor was somewhat critical of my inability to be direct and directive. So, this is my current growing edge: learning whether, when and how to be direct, and how to hold people accountable in a way that is not overly directive and fits with my personal values and style, and is effective.

How have I evolved as a Clinical Social Worker in the past month?

I think that the above anecdotes from my work in the practicum over the past month demonstrate development in a few different areas (like which areas). I am working on developing skills through supervision and seeking support from different supervisors, accepting and working with the constructive criticism I receive, and developing specific skills that are suggested to me with different case.

This month I had the opportunity to learn through Dr. Tomm's supervision and feedback, the supervision of a new clinical supervisor whose style is new to me again, a chance to present a case to the interns, supervisors and a visitor at the agency, and the opportunity to present my case study in our seminar. I received a good mix of positive and constructive feedback, and have had very lively conversations about my work with two of my current families. I have also noticed that a few of my peers at my practicum and in classes have chosen to confide in me and share their difficulties. I have received the feedback that I am easy to connect with and that I establish positive connections with people.

Throughout these experiences I am recognizing a nervousness and a hesitation to accept the positive feedback – I seem to be searching for the negative within the positive, doubting its authenticity and worrying that people are “just saying things” or “covering up their true feelings”. I don't fully understand why I have this perspective, and I plan bring this conversation to a therapy meeting with my therapist. I am moved by the positive responses I have been receiving, and I want to learn how to work with and build on the positive feedback I receive.