

	<p style="text-align: center;">PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING International Refereed/ Peer Reviewed Journal of Education Vol. 7 (2) April 2021, 30-37, E-ISSN: 2395-7344, P-ISSN: 2320-9526 <i>Abstracted and indexed in:</i> Google Scholar, Research Bib, International Scientific Indexing (ISI), Scientific Indexing Services (SIS), WorldCat, Cite Factor, Impact Factor: 0.787(GIF) Website: http://pedagogyoflearning.com</p>
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Recommended citation for this Article:

Guin, S. (2021). Open education practices in social work discipline: an effort towards skill development. *Pedagogy of Learning*, 7(2), 30-37. <http://pedagogyoflearning.com>

Open Education Practices in Social Work Discipline: An Effort towards Skill Development

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Article DOI: [10.46704/pol.2021.v07i02.004](https://doi.org/10.46704/pol.2021.v07i02.004)

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Article Publication Date: 30 April 2021

ABSTRACT

The article highlights the methodology adopted by IGNOU in imparting the Social Work degree programmes at IGNOU in the context of skill development. The first University to offer Social Work Education in the open and distance learning (ODL) mode in India is the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU). The University strives to promote inclusive education by reaching the unreached. The School of Social Work (SOSW) at IGNOU aims to provide quality education in the areas of social work, family studies and tribal studies. The School is currently offering eight programmes of study in Social Work leading to various certificate, diploma and degree programmes. On an average, over 30,000 students currently pursue these programmes from within India and twelve countries from India's neighbourhood and the African continent. The School is the first to take social work education to all the States and Union Territories in the country. It is the first school to have developed high-quality Self-Instructional Material (SIM) indigenously. It started with offering Bachelor Degree in Social Work in 2004. Currently MSW and MSW (Counselling) courses are also offered through ODL. Social work education aims to develop several skills of working with people, viz. listening, observation, etc. The paper will discuss the scope of social work education in developing skills through open and distance learning mode.

Keywords: Social Work Programmes, ODL, IGNOU, Skill Development, Social Work Education

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Indira Gandhi National Open University was established by an Act of Parliament in 1985. IGNOU operated through 21 Schools of Studies at the headquarters, 67 Regional Centres, around 2667 learner support centres located across India and 29 overseas partner institutions. The University offers about 228 certificate, diploma, degree and doctoral programmes (IGNOU Profile, 2014). The School of Social Work (SOSW) was established on

August 16, 2007 with the approval of the President of India (Thomas, 2015). The School aims to provide quality education in the areas of social work, family studies and tribal studies. The School is currently offering eight programmes of study in Social Work leading to various certificate, diploma and degree programmes. On an average, over 30,000 students currently pursue these programmes from within India and twelve countries from India's neighbourhood and African continent. The School is the first in India in offering social work in ODL system and to take social work education to all the States and Union Territories in the country. It is the first school to have developed high-quality Self-Instructional Material (SIM) indigenously (SOSW 2013).

The objective of this paper is to highlight the skill development components inherent in the printed study materials of the social work programmes offered through SOSW at IGNOU.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of social work discipline in skill development is well established. Role play which is one of the techniques of training of potential social workers involves purposeful use of group therapy in practical activities and active learning methods (Minzhanov, 2016 et.al). Field learning through social work practicum enable students to develop specific skills using individual approaches and socio-cultural learning approaches (Papouli, 2014). The use of adult learning models based on reflection on case study and other experiences to empower students while in work based training is emphasized in social work discipline (Yelloly and Henkel, 1995). Various models of learning (Schon, 1983), Kolb (1984) and learning organizations Senge (1990) explain the process of adult learning in social work placements. Sieminski & Seden (2011) explains how a student overcomes barriers during field work training and gain confidence. The student centred teaching methods in social work education viz. role play, case studies, group exercises and personal reflective activities enable them to draw on their own experiences and integrate them with the insights of others. The component of research dissertation in social work discipline helps in developing analytical problem solving and skills for conducting independent research (Offat & Zvidzai, 2013). Thus, social work discipline contributes to skill development of students.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to examine the skill development components inherent in field work practicum of the Social Work programmes offered by the School of Social Work at IGNOU.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology where content analysis method was adopted. Content analysis of Programme Guides and all field work practicum journals of BSW, MSW, MSWC programmes of IGNOU were conducted. Data were analysed using coding categories, which were derived directly from the text data. The following table shows the number of books used for content analysis.

Table 1: Description of Content Analysis

Sl. No.	Name of Book used for Content Analysis	Number
1.	Programme Guide of BSW	1
2.	Programme Guide of MSW	1
3.	Programme Guide of MSWC	1
4.	Field work practicum Journal of BSW	3
5.	Field work practicum Journal of MSW	2
6.	Field work practicum Journal of MSWC	4
	Total	12

RESULTS

Methodology of Field Work Practicum in Social Work Programmes

Field Work is an integral part in the BSW, MSW and MSW (Counselling) programmes offered by SOSW at IGNOU. Field work comprises of 40-50 % of the total weightage of each course as per with the University Grants Commission (UGC) norms. Each student is provided with a Field Work Practicum journal where he/ she need to record his learnings / activities during field work. The student is required to read the instructions given in the journal before proceeding to write the journal. Nevertheless, it is mandatory for every student to be guided by a professional qualified supervisor having post-graduation in social work.

BSW programme is a three year programme. However, a student in ODL may complete BSW within three to six years. Twenty five days of field work in each of the three years is mandatory in BSW programme. In ODL, a student in MSW programme may complete the programme within two to five years. Forty five days of field work is essential every year in MSW programme. In MSW (C), in the first year, a student has to do forty five days of concurrent field work and thirty days of block placement, and in the second year, one has to complete forty five days of concurrent field work and thirty days of internship.

Salient Features of Field Work Practicum

Keeping in mind a diverse student population, SOSW has incorporated a number of strategies to train students in learning various social work practice methodologies.

1. **Compulsory Attendance:** Hundred percent attendances are mandatory in field work. All components of the field work have to be completed after visiting the agency / organization. Attendance is also mandatory for a minimum of five individual conferences and five group conferences.
2. **Sequential Learning:** A student has to complete the first year of field work before proceeding to finish the second year, in MSW. During the first year of MSW, students are trained for generalist social work practice in a wide variety of fields ranging from rural, urban community development, schools, corporate settings, and non-governmental organizations etc., in their forty-five days visit to the field. During the second year of field work, the student has to visit another 45 days in the field and get oriented to the six methods of social work, viz. case work, group work, community organization, social action, social welfare organization and social work research (Thomas and Kumari, 2009a; Thomas and Kumari, 2009b).

PEDAGOGY OF LEARNING (POL)

International Refereed/ Peer Reviewed Journal of Education

Vol. 7 (2), April 2021 (E-ISSN: 2395-7344, P-ISSN: 2320-9526), Impact Factor: 0.787(GIF)

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In BSW, each year the student has to visit the field for twenty five days. In the first year the student equips him/herself with the generalist social work practice. In BSW second year, during the twenty five days field work, apart from the regular tasks assigned by the agency, the student has to do case work and group work. The field work recording should include the records of the twenty five days concurrent visit and also case work and group work activities undertaken by the student. In the third year of BSW, during the twenty five days of field work, the student has to undertake community development, social welfare administration, social work research and social action. The journal explains each of the components by giving appropriate examples of each of these methods. The students are expected to read these in detail, follow the guidelines, discuss with the supervisor and practice these methods during the field work (Thomas and Varghese, 2004; Thomas and Varghese, 2005; Thomas and Varghese, 2006).

In MSW (Counselling), during the 45 days of field work and 5 orientation visits, the student is equipped to work in social and welfare agencies focusing on different aspects such as open community, institution, health, education, correctional setting etc. Apart from concurrent field work, the student has to complete a one month block placement and practice any one or two methods of social work. During the second year of MSW (C), the student has to conduct 2 orientation visits and 45 days in any one organization/ institution/ social welfare agency and practice casework and record minimum five cases. Apart from 45 days concurrent visit, the student has to do 30 days of internship during the second year and practice social welfare organization.

Thus the field work is designed in such a manner that the student is gradually introduced to the nuances of field work practice in social work. All the field work happens under guidance of a MSW qualified field work supervisor (Thomas and Ramya, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e).

3. **Clearly specified components of field practicum:** All components of field work practicum are clearly specified in the journals for the benefit of the students and the field work. The various components of field work are orientation visits, placement, agency client relationship, assignment of tasks, nature of social work process (activities), team work, administrative assignments, recording and field instruction.
4. **Field work journals:** Field work journals are provided to the students which are printed books containing instructions and guidelines for conducting field work for that particular year. The journals also provide spaces to write the report in the respective sections. Performa for writing reports of orientation visits and concurrent field visits and examples of writing case work or group work are one of the unique features of journals.
5. **Field work manual for supervisors:** Field work supervisors are provided with a manual called 'Practitioner's Guide' that includes guidelines for supervising students' and evaluating students based on their performance and records (Thomas and Kumari, 2010).
6. **'Doorstep' Learning:** Students are given option to do field work in their own communities. This enables students from far flung areas to opt for the course and complete field work. Students from closed communities like those in prisons can also do field work in their setting. This is in tune with the philosophy of distance education.

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Skill Development Components in Field Work Practicum

There are nine components of field practicum in social work which are designed in the School of Social Work at IGNOU. A learner undergoing fieldwork develops specific skills by completing these nine components during their field work: (Ghosh & Kurian 2016):

1. **Orientation Visits:** Orientation visits are the first on hand exposure of the student to the field work component in social work training. The students coming from different backgrounds get exposed to the functioning of the agency and the various ways the functionaries are engaged for working with the poorest of the poor and the marginalized sections of the society. Orientation visits are conducted in five agencies/ institutions. The nature of agencies are specified, viz. health setting-hospitals, community health centres, primary health centres, clinics etc.; correctional settings, civic administration, educational settings, home for the destitute, disaster affected, refugees and migrants, homes for women, children, beggars, elderly, community settings, de-addiction and rehabilitation centres etc. A detailed proforma serves as a guideline for orientation visit. A learner develops the skill of observation through these orientation visits.
2. **Placement:** Field work placement is the major component of social work practicum where the students **physically** visit the agency/ organization/ field work setting for a required number of days. Usually for BSW it is 25 days per year, for MSW and MSW (C), it is 45 days per year. Students are placed in groups of three to six in order to understand the essence of team work. Some students who may be working are allowed to do their field work in the same agency, but they have to change their agencies in the subsequent years of field work. Field work supervisors are trained to facilitate students to place students according to their interest and locally available resources and community settings. Specific instructions relating to the objectives and tasks of field work are explained in the journal. A proforma mentioning the tasks to be accomplished per day is explained in the journal. A student is expected to gain experience regarding the various programmes/ activities of the agency and learn to apply the social work skills and principles during the field work.
3. **Agency-client System:** Social Work practice aims to facilitate effective social functioning of the client. It is with this objective that meaningful relationship has to be established with the client and the agency. Clients may approach the agency themselves or they may be referred by others. Occasionally clients are motivated to approach the agency as a result of some awareness programme conducted by the agency itself. The role of the agency is to facilitate the client by referring to the social worker and providing necessary resources. The student social worker tries to understand the relationship between the agency, the client-individual, group, community etc. The student is exposed to the major activities of the agency, the target groups, the stakeholders, the facilities utilized to solve the clients' problem.
4. **Assignment of Tasks:** Tasks are the initial preparations required for initiating an activity. These may be rudimentary in nature and may not be related to social work. The need of the target group and the **resources** available enable the choice of tasks. Some of the tasks may include meeting individuals and groups to arrange a meeting, interacting with them and enabling them to plan the task and implement it.

5. **Nature of Social Work Process:** This component enables students to take up activities and the processes involved in implementing those activities. Emphasis is given on the process of learning of the student in planning and initiating activities, implementing and evaluating them. **Students** are encouraged to analyse social processes like cooperation, conflict, association and resistance. The various processes required to practice methods of social work are also noted by the students.
6. **Team Work:** Social worker has to work in teams. Team members may be a person from the same **profession**, but they may also be from some other professions, viz. doctors, nurses, lawyers, correctional administrators etc. It is a common observation that a social worker is marginalized among a group of other professionals. The role of social worker is to adjust to the various approaches of team workers and integrate them in order to enable effective problem solving of the client. This component of field work equips the student in explaining their role as part of the team and analysing the impact of the functioning of the team on the implementation of the programmes.
7. **Administrative Assignments:** Administrative assignments are the inevitable component of any profession. Students have to understand the agency, its objectives, programmes, policies, rules and regulations. During field work, students have to learn official letter writing, maintain records and understand basic statistics regarding income and expenditure.
8. **Recording:** Recording is an important aspect of field work training. It helps in maintaining progress of the work, facilitate consultation and evaluate one's performance. The field work journal provided to the students explains the format for recording.
9. **Field Instruction Expected:** This component enables the student to record their guidance they require from the field work supervisor. This section enables the supervisor to be clear about the areas on which the student is facing difficulty and seeking guidance.

The above nine components in field work practice in social work programmes enable the student to develop several skills including observation, listening, skill of interviewing and report writing.

CONCLUSION

Social Work profession has now gained wide popularity in terms of job opportunities. More and more candidates are coming forward to take up the course. By offering social work through ODL, SOSW has reached the unreached and enabled learners develop skills of varied nature. This paper highlighted the skills components that are inherent in the social work practicum of IGNOU. However, there is a need for developing a mechanism to regularly orient field work supervisors in supervising students in the ODL mode.

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International Refereed/ Peer Reviewed Journal of Education

Vol. 7 (2), April 2021 (E-ISSN: 2395-7344, P-ISSN: 2320-9526), Impact Factor: 0.787(GIF)

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Acknowledgement

The paper was presented at the 32nd Annual Conference of the Asian Association of Open Universities from October 24th – 26th 2018 at Hanoi, Vietnam. The author acknowledges the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) for providing COL fellowship for attending the Conference.
