Preparing Online Students to Engage in Fieldwork Experiences

Fieldwork was one of the teaching methods of Jesus Christ. After teaching His disciples basic principles, He sent them to distant places to do their work and apply what they had learned from Him (Matthew 28:16-20; John 20:21). Fieldwork reinforces the lessons learned in the classroom and applies them to the real world. In online education, fieldwork is becoming more common as curricular requirements are adapted to address the needs of online students.

Preparing students to engage in field experiences online can be challenging since the teacher is not physically present to supervise and assess students' performance. As a teacher of several face-to-face courses with fieldwork components, I initially found it difficult to imagine how fieldwork requirements could be included in my graduate-level online courses. Several questions had to be considered: Is fieldwork feasible in online education? Will the process be the same as that used for traditional face-to-face methods? How will I prepare for this? What responsibilities will the students have? How will I know if the students are really doing the work in the absence of my physical supervision? This article provides responses to these questions gleaned from my personal experiences and those of others who have incorporated fieldwork into online courses.

Fieldwork Defined

Fieldwork, or field experience, is any work students complete outside the classroom that enables them to implement and practice what they learned as theory. This may involve collecting data (primary or survey

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data, observations, etc.) or performing practical tasks for educational and research purposes in the student's field of study.[1] Hvenegaard notes that "Most instructors incorporate fieldwork to help students understand theory, develop skills, integrate knowledge, build tacit knowledge, develop meaning in places, and work with peers and instructors in alternate settings."[2]

The Advantages of Fieldwork

As a health educator, I have found that learning theories alone are not enough to help students in health education or public health courses fully grasp concepts, theories, and strategies on how to improve health and quality of life. When students apply knowledge learned in the classroom in real-life settings, they better understand these concepts. This is where fieldwork becomes important as a teaching strategy. For students in online programs that require fieldwork, this experience enables them to immerse themselves in the community, where they can gain firsthand experience in conducting research, analyzing results, and developing and implementing appropriate strategies.[3]

While there are many benefits to fieldwork, unfortunately, in many cases, according to Ulovec et al.,[4] fieldwork can have legal implications, and for this reason, some online programs choose not to include it in the curriculum; those that do, proceed with caution. McKenzie, Neiger, and Thackeray[5] warned that it is necessary to give attention to safety concerns and risk of liability among participants when conducting fieldwork or implementing an intervention program. Failure to do so could lead to fines and legal penalties that tarnish the reputation of the school, discredit the program, and expose the teacher, student, and the school to litigation. Some safety concerns include harm caused to participants resulting from the program intervention or negligence by the program planner. To avoid this, online program administrators, course instructors, and supervisors at the various fieldwork locations must work closely with students to ensure that safety checks and informed consent are part of the planning and implementation process, and that foreseeable risks are considered.

Uniqueness of Online Fieldwork

Yet, despite these liabilities, many online programs successfully engage students in fieldwork. Lisa Richardson[6] interviewed the directors of two large, fully online Master of Social Work programs that serve national and international students regarding fieldwork practices at their institutions. Both schools have thousands of students in their full-time online programs.

Both interviewees said that the fieldwork component involved more rigor than the face-to-face program offered on campus. The two schools had different ways of preparing students for fieldwork. Hornsby's school partnered with a company that identified agencies where students could do fieldwork. The partner company interviewed the prospective agency, assessed the available learning opportunities, and contracted with potential field instructors. After necessary information was gathered, it was given to the program faculty for review, and if the sites were approved, students were then placed with various agencies. Gray, on the other hand, said that students in their program found their own place for fieldwork. The faculty only provided an orientation on how to find a suitable agency or community facility in which to work, along with a letter of endorsement. Both schools communicated with their students through Skype, phone calls, or e-mails.[7]

Compared to these and other schools where fieldwork is a full-time course requirement for a program (30 hours a week of participation for 12 to 16 weeks), in my classes, it is just one of the course requirements. Hence, actual fieldwork in my class is short-term (about 10 hours a week for approximately three to five weeks).

Advantages of Online Fieldwork Activity

My fieldwork class does not have a partner agency that coordinates the placement process; instead, students select the area or facility where they will conduct their fieldwork. Students begin the process by identifying and visiting possible facilities or community agencies in their local communities as early as the second week of the online course. They are then asked to submit a list of possible fieldwork site locations, after which I (the instructor) review and provide input regarding the appropriateness of the selections and how well the services provided align with course goals. Most of my students choose to work in places close to their workplace or home. Some advantages and disadvantages of doing fieldwork using this approach include the following:

1. **Location.** Most students are able to do fieldwork in a place that is familiar to them, either in their hometown or at their workplace. Doing fieldwork in a setting where one has social and emotional connections is often more relevant than working in an unfamiliar place. Baker and Härtel[8] observed that sometimes failure to understand the culture or history of a place can affect how people interact with one another. Having a knowledge of the people in a place before entering their space is essential.[9] An established relationship makes working together easier. This approach works for my course; however, students need skills that will enable them to work in any environment, not just those that are familiar or close to home or work. For this reason, program administrators and instructors can encourage students to pursue fieldwork experiences in a variety of environments, both the familiar and unfamiliar, since they will need these skills when they enter the workplace.

2. **Cultural competence.** When students conduct their fieldwork in a familiar place, they are better able to communicate with their target popu-

lation since they know the culture as well as the language. Failure to interact with the population being served in the learning experience can lead to failure and misunderstanding of the purpose of conducting the fieldwork. The period of time that my students are engaged in fieldwork is short compared to other programs where it is a full-time requirement, and building cultural competence takes time. This can be a disadvantage; however, during the short period of time, whether working in their own communities or in environments that are unfamiliar, students should seek to learn as much as possible about their fieldwork location to increase their understanding of the needs, assess potential safety concerns, and build cultural competence. This can be done through research (reading up on the area; studying demographic and population data), engaging in conversations with facility administrators or supervisors about social and cultural values within the community, and talking with participants.

3. **Community responsiveness**. Knowing the culture and language gives students the privilege of easily gathering people together and receiving better responses since they know more about the people with whom they are working. Regardless of how well the student knows or understands the culture or the dynamics of the fieldwork location, the potential for misunderstanding exists. Students should be aware of this potential and be encouraged to work closely with their facility and agency administrators.

The Challenges

There is a limited body of literature available on how to address the challenges of doing fieldwork online. I discovered that both the teachers and the students experience difficulties in implementing this process. Box 1 contains several common challenges that occur in online fieldwork

Box 1. Online Fieldwork Challenges Faced by Teachers and Students Teacher Challenges

Teacher Challenges

1. *Verifying the site*. The teacher must not rely only on the information that the student provides.

2. *Assigning the role of partner agency*. This entails a lot of paperwork involving how the partnership will operate in order to provide educationally sound implementation of skills and knowledge learned in the classroom.

3. *Monitoring and assessing student work*. This is especially problematic when there is no partner agency.

4. *Choosing technology* tools to use in submitting documents.

Student Challenges

1. *Time*. Online students generally work full time and have the responsibility to care for their families.[1] Despite the flexible nature of the online class, these students have limited amounts of time to invest in doing fieldwork. Further, procrastination can be a big challenge. Postponing or delaying the initiation of fieldwork is common. Students will often need to rearrange their schedules so that they can meet their fieldwork appointments.

2. *Access to technology and Internet connections.* Since most of the instruction and communication in online classes are through e-mail, Skype (or other video-conferencing platform), or the Learning Management System (LMS) forum, students must have adequate Internet and computer access. They must also be computer literate and able to use technology properly.[2] Whether communicating with the instructor and peers or submitting documents and fieldwork assignments, students need to be able to access the Internet and connect online.

3. *Lack of self-motivation*. Poor motivation[3] is a contributing cause of the high dropout rate for online courses. This also applies to fieldwork. Hartnett states that "motivated learners are more likely to undertake challenging activities, to be actively engaged, to enjoy and adopt a deep approach to learning, and to exhibit enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity."[4] Maintaining high levels of motivation is essential for students to succeed in the online environment, but for some this can be a challenge. Although online students spend a greater amount of time working independently, especially with fieldwork, they often must rely on their own initiative with less supervision than a traditional classroom setting. This can contribute to diminished motivation.[5]

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experiences. These are best addressed with careful preparation and planning on the part of the teacher.

Teacher Preparation for Fieldwork

Hobgood,[10] along with Hornsby and Gray,[11] note that preparing online courses requires more planning on the part of the instructor than what is necessary for traditional face-to-face classes. Successful fieldwork experiences likewise require preparation by the teacher. Here are some ways a teacher may prepare:

1. *Set up clear objectives*. Hvenegaard suggested that objectives for fieldwork assignments should be clearly stated, and goals should align with course outcomes. He added that "too many objectives can dilute the experience and leave students frustrated."[12]

2. *Provide clear instructions and expectations*. Clear expectations not only help students make decisions about how to begin the assignment, they also empower them to do their best in completing the assignment and help prevent confusion and misunderstandings, which may lead to poor performance and low grades.

3. *Choose a site*. This can be done through partner agencies or by letting the students choose their own site. Based on experience, although I allow students to select the location for their fieldwork, I still require them to identify several potential places or agencies. They then prioritize this list and give reasons for their choice. As the teacher, I reserve the right to approve or reject proposed sites. Approved sites have clearly stated goals that align with course goals; are supervised by facility administrators (whether hospitals, community centers, government agencies, churches, or schools); have safety and risk protocols in place; and can accommodate the student for the required period.

4. *Clarify to the students the ethical, safety, and legal issues* involved in conducting fieldwork. The course instructor must ensure that fieldwork locations have guidelines for ethical practice and safety. Resource materials such as handbooks or policy manuals can serve as verification that policies are in place. Orientation or training sessions can serve as proof that these are communicated to everyone who works at the site. Students should be able to provide a signed acknowledgement of the protocols. In addition to what is communicated at the fieldwork site, course instructors must discuss ethical, safety, and legal issues with students. Since students will be collecting data, making videos, and im-

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plementing strategies, they should be aware of the school's policies for gathering information and obtaining consent to use other people's information. Teachers should consult with the school's legal counsel if unsure of what to include when talking with students about legal issues.

5. *Prepare an endorsement letter* for the student to present to the agency/facility. This letter introduces the student to the site administration and should include the name of the school, the student, and the teacher, along with the teacher's e-mail address and other contact information for inquiries related to the student's work. Likewise, it should contain the purpose of the fieldwork, what the student intends to do, beginning and ending dates, and the teacher's expectations of the student. In return, the facility administrator should be required to approve or reject the request in writing, and address this to the teacher.

6. *Establish communication protocols.* Course instructors and site supervisors must decide how they will communicate regarding a student's progress. From conducting virtual site visits to communicating with site supervisors, protocols should be firmly in place. Supervisors at the fieldwork site should know what kind of oversight they are to provide during the fieldwork period, and how to communicate with the course instructor if the requirements are not being met or if there is a problem. Some may choose to provide weekly, signed progress reports, copies of which can be uploaded to the college's Learning Management System (LMS). Course instructors and site supervisors can also schedule virtual site visits through video conferencing or communicate through e-mail. These interactions should be stored as documentation of the student's progress. Students must also be informed how they can communicate with the teacher in case issues arise. Communication may be through e-mail, video conference, or LMS discussion forum.

7. *Provide clear assessment tools*. Prepare a tool (rubric) to measure performance expectations for field experience. This tool must be explained to and understood by the students. An assessment rubric can be helpful to the teacher because it provides a clear, objective criteria for evaluation and reduces the chances of grading bias. The rubric should be constantly updated. Course instructors should also provide site supervi-

sors with not only copies of the rubric, but also project guidelines and a final project assessment rubric. (See Table 1 for a sample of my fieldwork rubric.)

8. *Provide feedback within a reasonable time.* Feedback is critical for online classes, as it can help make students enthusiastic about accomplishing their tasks and active in class interaction. It also assures them that the teacher is there to provide guidance. Feedback in online education can be provided in a variety of ways, such as e-mails, video conferences/chats through platforms such as Skype or FaceTime, or LMS forum discussions.

9. *Prepare documentation and submission guidelines.* Clearly specify how students should document and submit fieldwork activity. This could include preparing templates, forms, and form letters and making them accessible to students. Submission guidelines should include where, when, and how to submit documents. Specific submission folders can be created on the LMS system.

10. *Prepare a certificate of completion* to be signed by the person who is directly involved in supervising the student's work. For example, if the student completes fieldwork at a school facility, the principal or the classroom teacher could sign the certificate; or, if the student works at a local health clinic, the administrator or shift supervisor could sign. The certificate should include the time, dates of involvement, and the activities or program implemented.

Preparing Online Students for Fieldwork

A successful and enjoyable fieldwork experience not only depends on teacher preparation but also on students taking responsibility for their

Table 1. Sample Fieldwork Rubric			
Points	**3**	**2**	**1**
Objectives/Goals	**Exceptional**	**Good**	**Needs Improvement**
Meeting requirements on time	Student not only meets all requirements and responsibilities related to the field experience, but also submits exemplary quality work.	Student has met all requirements and responsibilities related to the field experience on time, but the quality of work does not show satisfactory time involvement.	Student needs to be constantly reminded to perform tasks related to the field experience, and often fails to submit requirements on time.
Commitment to conducting fieldwork	Student communicates strong dedication and commitment to make the experience successful.	Student has made an effort to accomplish the task.	There is little or no evidence that the student is sincerely committed to conducting fieldwork.
Analytical/critical thinking skills	Student carefully analyzes the gathered information and chooses appropriate strategies to address the issues.	Student carefully analyzes gathered information but has no plan, or an inadequate one, for choosing strategies.	Student has completed minimal evaluation of data and has expended minimal effort in planning strategies.
Planning and instruction	Student's lesson plan has clear goals and objectives, and proposed strategies are scientifically valid and easy to implement.	Student's lesson plan has adequate goals and objectives, but the strategies will be somewhat difficult or impractical to implement.	Student's lesson plan is inadequate (lacks clear and meaningful learning goals and objectives) and uses inappropriate or inadequate strategies.
Portfolio	Submitted on time with all documents complete.	Submitted on time but lacks one or more of the required documents.	Submitted all documents but incomplete and/or late.
TOTAL SCORE (Maximum 15)			

learning. Students must take an active role and be accountable for the quality of their fieldwork. The teacher should discuss with the students their role in achieving success in fieldwork.

1. *Develop time-management skills.* Students should avoid procrastinating to prevent being overwhelmed toward the end of the course. They need to start looking for a target population as early as possible, make a timeline, and follow it consistently.

2. *Become knowledgeable about technology.* Students must know exactly what kind of technological support they need and equip themselves. They should know how to use technology to document fieldwork and submit their assignments. Access to high bandwidth or a strong Internet connection to communicate with the teacher and classmates is essential. Students should also be aware that technical issues will arise and be prepared to address them. While the college or university can make technical support available to online students, students will still need to have the ability to solve technical problems. For example, one of the biggest concerns among my students is submission of video clips through free video sites such as YouTube, which have video length restrictions. YouTube allows the upload of videos with lengths that do not exceed 15 minutes. Therefore, students need to be conscious about the file size and length of the videos they submit. They should be able to edit, cut, and minimize the size of their video files.

3. *Learn to collaborate.* Although online fieldwork may seem to be an independent task, students must learn how to effectively collaborate with the agency or facility with which they are working.

4. *Secure a student identification card.* The student must obtain an identification card from the school registrar (in our set-up, from the online division secretary who processes it). The personal identification card shows that students are enrolled in the school and gives access to online campus resources, such as the main school library.

5. *In collaboration with the site supervisor, assess safety risks.* Since students work in areas that are some distance from the school and course instructor, site supervisors must help students identify safety risks and conduct a risk assessment in the area where they plan to conduct fieldwork. Together, they should identify who will be at risk, identify potential hazards, and create a safety plan that includes actions that can be taken by the student, site supervisor, or course instructor to help minimize or eliminate the risks. Emergency contact information for the students, site supervisor, and course instructor, as well as the program administrators for both the school and fieldwork site, should be included, along with verification of insurance information for both the school and the fieldwork site.

6. *Explore and address ethical issues* before engaging in an activity in each facility. Since online fieldwork in my context means working in an environment that is not under the direct supervision of the teacher, the students are responsible to know and comply with the rules of the facility that dictate ethical practices. Most fieldwork sites conduct an orientation, either one-on-one or with a group, for individuals new to the facility. If this is the case, a signed compliance document verifying the student's knowledge of the facility's rules can be uploaded to the LMS. Just like those in traditional face-to-face classes, students in online classes must follow the "do no harm" policy. They must behave in a manner that does not damage the reputation of the school they represent or endanger themselves or others (see Box 2). Since the nature of the fieldwork that I require involves human subjects, students are also required to acknowledge the dignity of the person who participates and to maintain confidentiality of the information gathered. Students are taught that human subjects are children of God and for this reason, every care should be taken to protect and preserve their dignity. Additionally, if participants are minors, parental permission will be needed. Each country/state will have specific guidelines for conducting risk assessments, protecting minors, and disclosing how information will be used. Course instructors must consult with the school's legal representative to ensure that what is being required will not endanger students or cause them to be involved in lawsuits.

7. *Be aware of legal liabilities* and use good judgment when setting up programs. Students should be re-

quired to find certified professionals if their fieldwork demands professional assistance or special skills. These individuals should be vetted by the course instructor and site administrator. Students must make sure that the implementation plan has been approved by both the program director and the fieldwork site, and that participants sign informed-consent forms before implementation takes place. For more on informed consent, see resources provided by Adventist Risk

Dividing the fieldwork component of my course into distinct sections and using a variety of tools has helped me facilitate my online students' work. Below are several steps and tools that can be used to help online students successfully complete their fieldwork assessments.

1. *Search for a suitable target population*. Encourage students to identify a target population early in the course (within the first two weeks). Students can implement programs at schools, hospitals, clinics, churches, or similar facilities. Starting early to think about their target population will enable them to be more focused about creating implementation plans.

2. *Secure a fieldwork site*. Teachers must be prepared to provide oversight and suggestions during this stage. Some students will not know where to begin, so a list of possible site locations, based on previous courses, will be helpful. To assist online students in securing a fieldwork site, provide individualized endorsement letters they can take to the lead administrator of the facility or community agency where they intend to work. For example, if students work with a school, the teacher can address the letter to the principal.

3. *Assess needs*. A community-needs assessment is crucial in planning fieldwork activities. Provide students with methods of identifying, analyzing, and prioritizing the needs of the population they have selected.[1] For health-education programs, health issues in the community should be given priority, especially those that can be addressed with appropriate program planning. A good needs assessment helps to ensure appropriate intervention. If time allows, students may validate the data gathered to determine whether they really reflect the actual needs or the felt needs and prioritize accordingly. Many online resources include information on how to conduct a needs assessment.

4. *Determine priorities*. After identifying the needs of the target population, students are ready to set up their goals and objectives. The needs assessment may uncover several needs within the community, so students will need to decide which ones need immediate attention and whether enough resources are available to address the issue(s). At this point, students can create criteria to serve as a guide in prioritizing needs from the most urgent to the least urgent. Students must consult with the teacher and the site administrator by e-mail, Skype, or video chat during this decision-making period and before finalizing their plans.

5. *Identify intervention strategies*. Choose the best strategy to address the issue(s) based on the goals and objectives of the course. Students must consult with the teacher and the administrator/supervisor of the fieldwork site to make sure that the intervention is practical, appropriate, and clearly aligned with the goals of the course, as well as the available time and resources. Each intervention strategy has its own weaknesses and strengths.

6. *Document implementation*. Timmreck stated that "implementation is the most critical part of the planning process; a plan that is not implemented is no plan at all."[2] Since teachers in a distance-learning class cannot be physically present at the various fieldwork sites, they will need to use technology to conduct virtual interactions. For example, with permission from the fieldwork site and program participants, students should document as many activities as possible using video recordings or photographs of the activity and live video streaming through FaceTime. These can provide much detail. Factors such as lighting and audio clarity must be considered to ensure that the video is comprehensible.

7. *Submit documents showing completion of the assignment*. The teacher should require students to submit a portfolio documenting the fieldwork experience. Most often, the portfolio will include all the documents related to the fieldwork, including short reflections on what the student learned during the experience, and a certificate of completion signed by the fieldwork site administrator or supervisor. This can be submitted in an assigned forum or directly to the teacher through e-mail attachments.

8. *Debrief*. Once the fieldwork experience is completed, students must be provided with an opportunity to unpack their experiences through debriefing exercises. This should include exit interviews with the course instructor and site administrator or supervisor. Ideally, debriefing sessions should take place throughout the experience, with a formal, documented debriefing occurring at the end of the experience.

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8. *Be aware of and work toward the fieldwork activity assessment.* Providing the assessment rubric prior to beginning fieldwork helps students identify the teacher's expectations and allows them to measure their own progress. (See Table 1.)

Together, teacher and students can work toward making the fieldwork experience a valuable one. Table 2 provides a summary of seven steps that helped me and can assist other teachers in supporting students as they navigate the implementation process.

Summary

Despite the advantages of fieldwork online, there are challenges as well. Finding a suitable location with appropriate supervision, conducting virtual site visits and communicating with site supervisors, navigating informed-consent protocols, learning to manage time despite the flexibility of online education, and maintaining enthusiasm are some of the challenges students face. Technology may also pose a problem to both teacher and students. Teacher preparation is often more complicated and time-consuming than instruction in a traditional classroom, and observing student work when the teacher is physically absent is also a challenge, even with the use of live video recordings or live streaming. Yet, even with these challenges, fieldwork can be done in online courses as long as both the teacher and the student have access to a computer with an uninterrupted high-speed Internet access and cooperative support from the participating facilities and community agencies. Working together, course instructors, site supervisors, and students can address the challenges and ensure a successful field experience. ✐

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