

## Online Facilitation of Field Instruction for the Social Work Programs of UP Open University

Finaflor F. Taylan<sup>1</sup> and Paula Grace Muyco<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>finaflor.taylan@upou.edu.ph, <sup>2</sup>paulagrace.muyco@upou.edu.ph

Faculty of Management and Development Studies, University of the Philippines Open University, Los Banos, Laguna, Philippines

### Abstract

*Experiential education refers to programs that are created to widen the learning experiences of individuals beyond the four walls of the classroom and extending to work and community context. Internship programs, in particular, are seen by studies as beneficial to graduate study programs and develop practice skills and enable the transition from theories to practice. The University of the Philippines Open University, a pioneer and advocate of online teaching and learning and distance e-learning in the Philippines, has the Social Work program under the Faculty of Management and Development Studies that requires its students to undergo internship inside reputable institutions. These courses are supervised and guided online by the faculty-in-charge via the MyPortal course site. However, there are few studies addressing the effectiveness of clinical preparation of students especially with online facilitated programs. The study aimed to identify emerging themes in the reflective outputs vis-à-vis the fieldwork experiences of Social Work students in UPOU given its online mode of facilitation. A review of relevant practicum and field instruction documents and records as well as an analysis of learner's reflections based on twelve reflection videos and integrative papers of the social work students were conducted.*

*Results of the study on students' reflective outputs show that students went through the cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Reflections of the students were also made in reference to the self (as a human being), the profession (as a social worker), and their multiple responsibilities (as an online learner).*

**Keywords:** *online learning, experiential education, field instruction, social work*

### Introduction

Field experiences are seen as a means to develop practice skills and enable the transition from theories to practice (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2008). Internship programs, in particular, are seen by studies as beneficial to graduate study programs (Dotson and Bian, 2013). Initially, internship programs were created for the field of business and medicine. However, with the increasing interest in these programs, internships were also offered in different disciplines such as in the social sciences (Spradlin, 2009). Today, universities have created internships to benefit the students by including course credits and as a way for students to have the work experience which can help them become a choice by future employers. It also gave students a chance to try out possible careers for their future (Spradlin, 2009). It is also a means to transition to the workplace which is also vital in terms of job placement (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2008). Research conducted on internship and service learning schemes show students that constantly reflect during their field experience are seen to be more capable of conveying a strategic learning orientation to new challenges (Eyler, 1993).

With the rise of programs facilitated online to address the changing needs of learners, internships within academic programs were also facilitated online. The effectiveness of such online facilitation of field internships are necessary to be documented and assessed to ensure that online academic programs with internships facilitated online are as effective, at the very least, as face to face counterpart. Dotson and Bian (2013) cited that there are a few studies addressing the effectiveness of clinical preparation of students especially with online facilitated programs.

The Diploma in/Master of Social Work (D/MSW) program of UPOU is a very relevant academic program which necessitates fieldwork to apply and generate knowledge systems with clientele and communities. The program's students are located in various areas in the Philippines and even around the world, which then suggest the need to have an effective online program, particularly the fieldwork component of the curriculum. There is a need then to document and assess the online facilitation of fieldwork of the Social Work program of UPOU, leading to the development of effective strategies for online facilitation of fieldwork, in pursuit of UPOU's mission and leader in open and distance e- in the Philippines.

### **Objective of the Study**

The objective of the study was to identify emerging themes in the reflective outputs vis-à-vis the fieldwork experiences of Social Work students in UPOU given its online mode of facilitation.

### **Review of Related Studies**

In 1938, Dewey stated that there was a close and essential connection between actual experiences and education. He suggested that progressive education required academic content to have experiential elements. His view posited that content alone hindered the opportunity for students to generate their views regarding concepts according to their interaction with knowledge. Experiential elements were likewise different for diverse students as it was influenced by their past experiences.

The term experiential education, as defined by Miller (1982), referred to programs that were created to widen the learning experiences of individuals beyond the four walls of the classroom and extending to work and community context. These programs also utilized planned experiences to build linkages with academic institutions and other sectors of the society such as with businesses, government institutions, community, and industry. Other definitions of experiential learning included education that was acquired through direct participation in life's events (Houle, 1980) and direct experience of concepts studied and not just an idea about a concept or a discussion on the possible experience with the concept (Borzak, 1981).

According to Coffey (2009), experiential education sees ideal learning as a function of experience. It is the combination of active learning and experiences, concepts, and reflection where students are encouraged to participate actively in practical opportunities and must integrate content of their studies to their life.

Experiential education enables students to engage actively in pursuing questions they believe is relevant and significant which can lead to knowledge. Teachers in this approach are not the traditional source of knowledge but rather students are seen to be capable of generating valid

and significant ideas based on their experiences. This type of learning is seen as more meaningful compared with accepting conclusions made by other people about other people's lives (Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman, 1995).

The advantages of experiential learning includes in depth understanding of concepts beyond the institution, capacity for critical thinking and application of knowledge in difficult situations, and capacity to participate in lifelong learning as well as workplace learning. Experiential education also enables students to learn to finish their tasks not as students but as workers or as part of the community. This is in direct contrast with students who learn to take and pass their exam (Eyler, 2009).

A vital part of experiential learning is the feedback and reflection (Eyler, 2009). An effective learning experience merges direct experience that holds significance to the student with guided reflection and analysis. This process is seen as student centered, active, and challenging that drives students to take the lead, take responsibility, and make decisions (Chapman, McPhee, and Proudman, 1995). Reflection allows students to connect the abstract ideas to concrete situations, as well as their reflection with actions. It is a vital practice in experiential learning as it assists the students in connecting their experiences with theories which leads to a deeper understanding of the topic and develop their capacity to utilize their own wisdom (Eyler, 2009).

Grise-Owens and Crum (2012) cites journaling and agency supervisory consultation as means for social work students to practice reflection when they are doing their field practicum. These reflections are specifically on significant client issues that impacted their view on their personal effectiveness and their practice (Jamissen, et. al., 2017).

Furthermore, Proudman (1992) noted that experiential education is defined by the various two way and active relationships the student has. These relationships include learner and the self, learner and the teacher, and the learner to the learning environment.

The first relationship, learner and self refers to the individuals' sense making of their experiences. This includes guided and structured reflection of their experiences. An example where this relationship is practiced is through journaling or any task that requires introspection and self-reflection.

The second relationship, learner and teacher refer to the interaction with which the teacher delineates the parameters of the learner's interaction with the environment. The teacher would need to ensure the physical, emotional, and intellectual safety of the learners. Also, the teachers function as someone who poses a problem, a mediator and coach.

The third relationship is learner and learning environment. The latter refers to the content, the physical environment, as well as the people involved whether directly or indirectly with the learner and their relationships. The interaction within this relationship between the learner and the wider coverage of the learning environment differs in terms of intensity (Proudman, 1992).

The broad scope of experiential education encompasses different types of learning schemes such as community service learning, experiential learning, service learning internship, cooperative education program, academic service learning, applied practicum, and internship programs (Miller, 1982).

Using experiential learning as a lens, it will be a good learning opportunity for an academic program manager to document and assess experiential education of the Social Work program of UPOU through fieldwork particularly the feedbacking and reflections of UPOU Social Work students, the various relationships present, and how these are facilitated to ensure the effectiveness of the whole fieldwork experience, an important component of a curriculum.

### **Internship Programs in UP Open University**

One of the three faculties of studies in UPOU was the Faculty of Management and Development Studies (FMDS). Under FMDS is the Diploma in/Master of Social Work (DMSW) which requires its students to undergo internship inside reputable agencies. The internship courses are supervised and guided online by the faculty-in-charge via the MyPortal course site which serves as the virtual classroom.

In a study conducted by Taylan (2015) on the experiences and lessons of UPOU regarding the technologies used by the Social Work program with its FI courses, ICT was seen as a vital component in facilitating communication and instruction between the FIC and the students especially as both are located in different parts of the world. These technologies enable the students to access continuing education towards professional and personal growth regardless of their location or time zone. The conduct of the FI also allows the student to contribute to social transformation through the agencies where they will be placed and their experiences during these placements will contribute greatly to the discipline and practice.

### **Internship Courses Under the Social Work Program of FMDS**

All courses in D/MSW are administered online. However, Field Instruction courses require learners to physically integrate and work in approved agencies for 320 hours or 10 hours per week for each FI course in a semester. The FI courses are seen as a way to integrate the analysis, application and assessment of the learner's existing knowledge as well as their competencies, their capacity to develop new knowledge and practice, and the enhancement of their self-identity and commitment to the social work profession.

Besides this rationale behind the offering of FI courses, the Philippine government also mandates all social work students to undergo supervised practical training to be permitted to take the licensure examination for social workers by the Professional Regulation Commission. The Republic Act 4373 in 1965 also known as an Act to Regulate the Practice of Social Work and the Operation of Social Work Agencies in the Philippines and for Other Purposes states that a minimum span of 1,000 hours should be accomplished in any established social work agency and supervised by a qualified and trained social worker. An amendment to this Act has been made in 2016 under Republic Act No.10847 which lowered the age requirement for applicants taking the exam to 18 years old (Philippines, 2016).

### **Experiential Learning Cycle**

The study was guided by Kolb and Fry (1974) Experiential Learning Cycle which sees the experiential learning theory as the creation of knowledge through transformation of experience where knowledge is the function of combining the grasping and transformation of experiences.

In this cycle, the learner undergoes the concrete experience referring to encountering a new situation as well as a reinterpretation of past experiences. This is followed by reflective observation where the learner reviews and reflects on what he or she has experienced which will show consistencies or inconsistencies between experience and understanding. Abstract conceptualization refers to the learner gaining new knowledge and ideas from the reflection as they learn new things from the experience. Last is active experimentation where the newly acquired learnings are applied in the real world to generate outcomes.

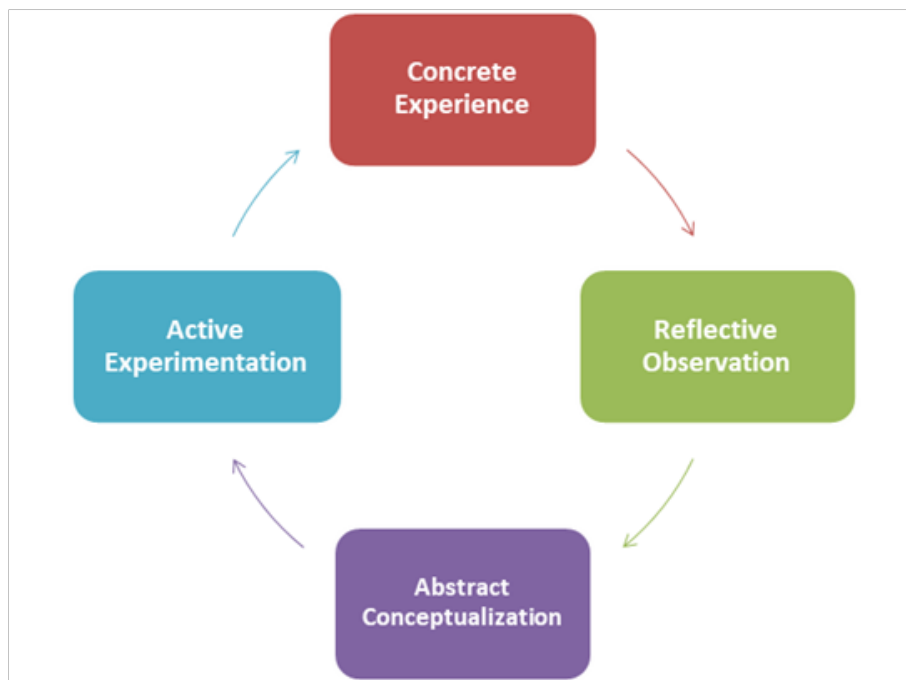


Fig. 1 Kolb and Fry (1974) Experiential Learning Cycle

The study operated on the framework that stages of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and testing are practiced by the students as presented in their practicum/field experience outputs. These are the themes that will be looked into in the reflective outputs of the students.

## Discussions

The study used thematic analysis of the learner's reflections as indicated in their Final Sharing video and their Field Instruction (FI) integrative paper. These outputs are part of the final requirements of the students. The final sharing may be done through a synchronous video conferencing among the agency supervisor, the FIC, and the student. Taking into consideration the challenges faced by students with multiple responsibilities, a recording of the final sharing may be developed for an asynchronous presentation to be posted in the course site. The content of the final sharing video includes information about the agency, the field instruction framework used to assess the experience and/or the framework recommended based on the learning outcomes of the student, semestral plan and accomplishments, lessons and insights learned, challenges encountered, and overall recommendations. This same outline of contents was used for the integrative paper which is a narrative of the students' overall FI experience with annexes of accomplishments and relevant documents included upon submission. Students are also given the option to email their submissions to the FIC for confidentiality rather than posting it in the course site.



The study analyzed 12 final sharing outputs submitted for SW 280 and SW 281 during AY 2016-2017 by Social Work FI students of UPOU. The qualitative design of the research allowed deeper analysis of the reflections of the students which cannot be extracted from surveys and questionnaires. In addition, the reflections were made as the students were conducting their internship.

### **Emerging Themes from the Final Sharing Videos and Integrative Paper**

Based from these results and the supporting reflections extracted from the final sharing videos and integrative papers of the students and following the Experiential Learning Cycle, further categories emerged under the experiential learning cycle:

#### Concrete Experience

- Framework, Agency, Activities and Accomplishments

#### Reflective Observation

- Challenges (Emotional, Multiple Responsibilities, Practice)
- Realizations (Academic discipline and profession, competencies, roles/ niche, frameworks, self)

#### Abstract Conceptualization

- Technical Knowledge and Life Skills (new practice framework)

#### Active Experimentation

- Recommendations and students' plans

Discussions and results of the analysis follow:

In terms of the Concrete Experience stage, all students were able to provide exhaustive details of their field instruction experience. Details such as agency profile, mission, vision, goals, organizational structure, stakeholders, and current situation were discussed at the start of the video. Besides details about the agency, the students also discussed the process of starting their field instruction course such as with choosing an agency and conducting a dialogue with the faculty of the online course, the supervisor from the agency, and the student. A framework which guided their field instruction practice was also discussed in the video and how it was applied in the activities conducted by the students. For the actual field instruction experience, the students' accounts are organized into categories based on their semestral plan: objective, activity done to meet this objective, outcomes, and recommendations.

In terms of the Reflective Observation, the students' reflections of their field instruction experiences were divided into two themes: reflections on the challenges they encountered and realizations or learnings from what they experienced. Reflections on the challenges encountered are further subdivided into three themes: emotional challenges, challenges brought by multiple responsibilities, and practice-related challenges. Emotional challenges include statements about the students' fear "*Sometimes I fear to become a social work administrator someday*" and "*I'm afraid to share my observations*", doubts "*However, we are doubtful that we cannot make it until year 2020 since the programs are still not yet institutionalized*", and hesitations "*the student was hesitant to take her Field Instruction I at...*"

Multiple responsibilities of the students were also mentioned in the reflections “multiple and equally pressing demands from work and FI/school requirements”, “*time management between work demands and deliverables versus FI/school requirements*” and “*limited immersion and in-depth exposure due to the location of the FI agency and the student’s place of work and residence*”.

Practice related challenges reflected upon by the students include their minimal training in terms of handling clients and cases “*difficulties such as minimal training on providing intervention to very young children*” and interaction with their stakeholders “*find it hard to establish a better relationship towards our stakeholders*”.

Realizations held by the students according to their final sharing outputs discussed the social work’s role and niche in society, social workers’ competencies, the need for advanced framework, the importance of self-awareness, and praxis as detailed below:

Social work’s role and niche in society:

*“As social workers we must not be “crippled” by the method or approach that we want to do rather we must be guided by the need of the organization.”*

*“she realized that there are many more things to be done in relation to social administration”, and “she hopes that she was able to help in this aspect”*

*“we cannot put “ourselves in a box” and say that this is what we are just mandated to do.”*

Social worker’s competencies:

*“as social worker we must be conscious enough to take care of ourselves, face and settle our own issues and concerns and to consciously develop ourselves as a social worker.”*

*“she realized that it is important to adapt to the informal culture of the agency.”*

*“she was able to assess her competencies”*

*“she realized that she can be a competent advanced generalist social worker armed with all the right knowledge, attitude and skills.”*

Frameworks:

*“realized that the social welfare policy development cycle is similar to the helping process but its target system is on a higher scale.”*

Self-awareness:

*“we must first settle our personal issues or concerns.”*

*“she discovered more about herself in order to become an advanced social worker”, “experience had been more of a self discovery”*

*“she realized that she has tendencies to become too comfortable asking what others think”*

Praxis:

*“the student was able to translate theories learned in her two (02) social administration courses into practice”*

In terms of Abstract Conceptualization, the students’ accounts of new things they learned include technical knowledge and skills they acquired based on the field instruction placement and its influence to their lives such as “*learning many things about social administration can make me a different person than before because I became more knowledgeable about my work*”, “*student generally learned about Social Work Administration particularly social welfare policy development*

cycle.”, *“FI experience has given me different exposures and paradigms about our profession.”*, *“It gives me higher understanding and clearer paradigms in the integration of social work theories and knowledge vis-à-vis the actual social work we perform.”*, *“Throughout the experience, the student realized six (06) important points that differentiates a social administrator from the rank and file.”*, *“The student was able to gain knowledge about the social administration process in a residential care facility.”*, *“The attitudes that the student developed during her field instruction experience are anchored in the agency’s values of respect for human dignity, integrity and service excellence.”*

In addition, the students were able to generate practice frameworks according to their experiences based on the various reflections and learnings or insights as stipulated above. The mentioned practice frameworks are usually narrated in the context of their FI focus in the agency context and presented in a form of a diagram or matrix.

In terms of Active Experimentation, the students’ reflections included their recommendations and plans. Their recommendations included what the agency can do to improve its programs, services, administration, and functions and the social work profession: *“I have the basis already on what are the things that I will be defending in relation to my work in the social welfare field.”*. With regards to DMSW’s administration of its FI course, the students cited difficulty when facilitating requirements such as bilateral agreements with the agencies and recommended for the program to require its students to submit their proposed agency at least one semester before they take the course to accomplish the needed requirements on time. Also, the students recommended for the institution to come up with partner agencies with long term agreements to have available placements and prevent delays caused by searching for possible agencies and facilitating MOUs.

In terms of plans, some of the students expressed their desire to continue working with the clients even after the field instruction course was finished *“even after the semester is finished I will continue (my work with) the girls of the Aftercare. This is to finish with them what have been started and to continue the plans which we have set together.”* while others were willing to have their plans adapted by the agency for sustainability: *“since the FI worker will eventually have to leave the Center at the end of the semester, remaining planned activities have to be turned over to the Center social worker and the house parents who may continue with the group work activities.”*



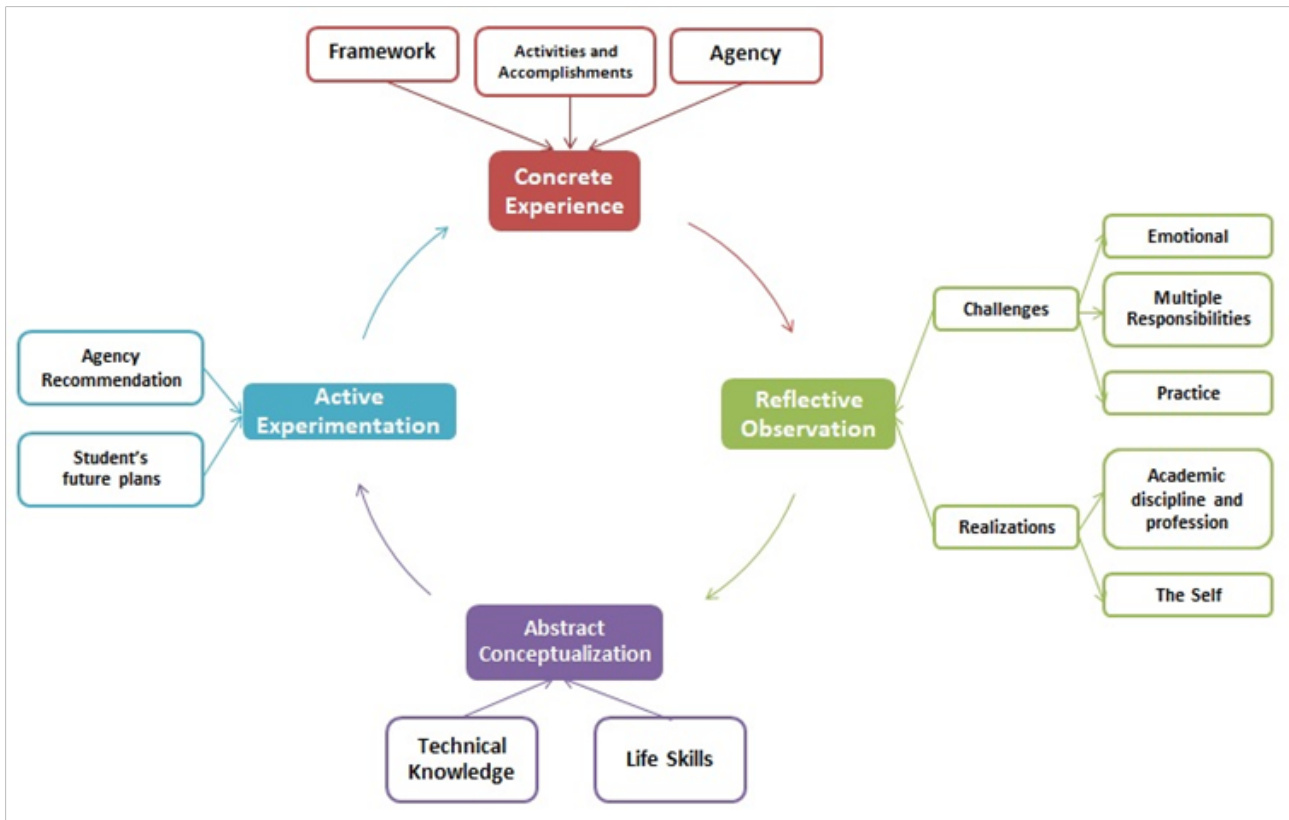


Fig 3. Emerging categories from the Experiential Learning Cycle according to the reflections made by the Field Instruction students of the Social Work program for AY 2016-2017

Figure 3 provides the diagram of the themes extracted from the students' outputs based on their reflections and facilitated through the strategies employed by the supervisors particularly the faculty-in-charge, within the open and distance e-learning context.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, based on the students' reflective outputs, the videos detailed their concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Their reflections were also made in reference to the self (as a human being), the profession (as a social worker), and their multiple responsibilities (as an online learner). In addition, their reflections under realizations were further subdivided into realizations about the social work discipline and profession and realizations about themselves.

Indeed, the online nature of the FI courses and the online strategies used paved the way for the facilitation of FI amidst geographical limitations and learners' changing needs. The open and distance e-learning as a framework was able to maximize the experiential learning of the students through their reflection and learning that will help them become better practitioners and contributors to social transformation.

## Recommendations

As co-creators of knowledge, the students' inputs should be considered as part of the regular Social Work program review and improvement of FI courses of Social Work in UPOU. Further and continuous studies about the FI program are necessary to be conducted to help in the sustained effectiveness of the experiential learning of the students. More updated and varied strategies and technologies can be explored as a result of these researches.

In relation to the Social Work curriculum, it is further recommended for Social Work program to develop additional and updated modules per area of specialization (Social Administration, Clinical Practice, Community Organizing) through the Resource Based Course Package (RBCP) format. These modules may be based on the existing study guides per area of specialization developed by the FIC. In addition, FI courses that have not yet been offered since the program's creation should have its own module, course guide, and study guide in preparation for future students who might be required to take the courses, specifically those coming from the Diploma track and proceeding to the Master's program. As for the practicum guide of existing FI courses, this must be reviewed and finalized to be formally used during the regular offering of FI courses as part of the materials available for the students, agency, and the FIC.

## References

- Borzak, L. (ed.) (1981) **Field Study. A source book for experiential learning**. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Chapman, S., McPhee, P., & Proudman, B. (1995). What is Experiential Education?. In Warren, K. (Ed.), **The Theory of Experiential Education** (pp. 235-248). Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.
- Coffey, H. (2009). Experiential Education. Retrieved 04 October 2017 from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4967?ref=search>.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*. New York, NY: Collier Books.
- Diploma in/Master of Social Work (D/MSW) Program. (n.d.). *Manual on Field Instruction*. Unpublished, University of the Philippines Open University, Los Banos, Laguna, Philippines.
- Dotson, K. and Bian, H. (2013). Supervision on Site: A Critical Factor in the Online Facilitated Internship. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 14(2), 51-62.
- Eyler, J. (1993). Comparing the impact of alternative internship experiences on student learning. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, 29(1): 41-53.
- Eyler, J. (2009). *Effective Practice and Experiential Education*. A paper commissioned for the conference on Liberal Education and Effective Practice, Mosakowski Institute for Public Enterprise, Worcester, Massachusetts.

- 
- Faculty of Management and Development Studies. (2012). Program Guides. Unpublished.
- Grise-Owens, G. & Crum, K. (2012). Teaching writing as a professional practice skill: A curricular case example. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 48(3), 517-536. doi:10.5175/JSWE.2012.201000030
- Houle, C. (1980). **Continuing Learning in the Professions**. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Jamissen, G., Hardy, P., Nordkvelle, Y., and Pleasants, H. (2017). **Digital Storytelling in Higher Education: International Perspectives**. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG.
- Kolb., D. A. and Fry, R. (1975). Toward an applied theory of experiential learning. In C. Cooper (Ed.) **Theories of Group Process**. London: John Wiley.
- Miller, J. (1982). Experiential education. Overview: Eric file sheet No. 1. Washington D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse microfiches. Retrieved from <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/5433903>.
- National Association of Colleges and Employers. (2008). **Experiential education survey**. Bethlehem, PA: National Association of Colleges and Employers.
- Philippines. (2016). Republic Act no. 10847: An Act Lowering the Age Requirement for Applicants Taking the Board Examination for Social Workers, Providing for Continuing Social Work Education, and Upgrading the Sundry Provisions Relative to the Practice of Social Work. Metro Manila, Philippines: Professional Regulation Commission. Retrieved from <http://www.prc.gov.ph/>
- Proudman, B. (1992). Experiential education as emotionally-engaged learning. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 15(2), 19–23.
- Spradlin, J. I. (2009). The evolution of interns. Retrieved from <http://www.forbes.com/2009/04/27/intern-history-apprenticeship-leadershipCareers-jobs.html>.
- Taylan, F. (2015). Technologies for the Social Work Program's Field Instruction: UPOU's Experiences and Lessons. Paper presented at the Asian Association of Open University (AAOU) 2015 Conference, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

