

How to Be a Good Practicum Student

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Many graduate students in professional psychology find themselves going off to a first practicum very early in their graduate experience. Programs vary greatly in how much time is allotted graduate students to orient them to the profession and to provide a set of values and expectations for working as representatives of the program outside the department. Because students will find that experiences in practicum are professionally cumulative and will follow them into their career, getting a good start is extremely important.

What follows is a set of thoughts and values that most agencies that provide therapy services to clients and supervision to graduate students will endorse. The list is not comprehensive, but can help you begin an internal dialogue to help you be your best.

1. Practicum is a job – the agency where you go hopes you will have good employee behavior even though they aren't paying you, so
 - a. Attendance – be there, on time, don't cut corners with your time – Be sure you can be at the agency when you are supposed to be there. Being late to a client appointment because a professor's lecture ran late means you did not plan your schedule effectively.
 - b. Policies and procedures – know the rules of the agency – paperwork, process, file handling, supervision, etc. Follow the rules. In most cases they were created for good reasons. It's OK to ask your supervisor about the history of a policy or procedure and even to raise concerns about its effectiveness. It's probably less OK to let everyone know that if it was your agency, you'd change everything and that the current policies and procedures are bad.
 - c. "But I have too much work besides practicum" – this is not the place to try to cut a few minutes or miss a meeting or two. If you're too busy with other things to give practicum the time you need, don't do the practicum. Graduate programs are notorious for over-selling your abilities ("You can do it, everybody does.") and under-selling the time involved in things ("It won't take as much time as that."). If a practicum site expects you to be at that site 15 hours per week – remember that equates to two full business days out of your week. Trying to take 3 or 4 graduate classes (one of them a practicum) may make it impossible for you to do all the things you need to do (including providing high quality services to your clients).
 - d. Calendar – be absolutely sure it's correct – never miss an appointment with a client because "I didn't know". Missing an appointment is unprofessional.
2. Supervision is invaluable, no matter what – so use it well.
 - a. Attitude is one of the most important attributes of a practicum student that supervisors look at. Having the attitude, "You have nothing to teach me" will surely lead to disaster. "I really want to get the benefit of your experiences" will most likely be very helpful to you and your supervisor.
 - b. Be prepared – negotiate with your supervisor how supervision will be conducted and then prepare for each session as if it was the most important one you will ever have. Do you need to review tapes? How far in advance do you need to get tapes to your supervisor? What written materials do you need to bring? Are there supervision forms to complete? etc. Being prepared communicates that you care about your work and your clients.
3. Structure your time to be most effective.
 - a. Scheduling clients – Each agency may have its own rules about how clients are scheduled. In addition, you may want to think about what would work best for you. Thinking about and talking with supervisors about how many clients to schedule in a row, what times of the day you are most alert and can be "present" with clients, will make your life a lot easier.
 - b. Leave time for paper work, tape review, questions, phone calls, and thinking. Agencies may or may not leave structured time for you to do this. Many of the agencies that do leave time don't leave all that you will really need, knowing that all clients will not show for appointments and expecting you to use free time effectively. But, no matter how much or how little time you are allotted, it is still your responsibility to complete all the administrative tasks required of you.

2. Do your work.

- a. Be reliable – your word is all you have. If you make a promise, keep it. If you can't do something, don't promise to do it. Rather, negotiate with the person making the request and work out a suitable contract that's agreeable to both of you. There is always a tendency to say "yes" to all requests so that you feel that you are maximizing your training experience. However, ask any supervisor and they will tell you that one of the developmental tasks of trainees is to learn when to say "no."
- b. Ask for what you need – if you see a problem coming, don't wait. As an example, if your child has a major soccer game at school in a month that you really want to watch but you have client hours scheduled, talk with your supervisor well in advance and see if the agency can be flexible. Don't ask the day before when it means canceling a scheduled client at the last minute. Also, if you know something that might help you, discuss it with your supervisor and attempt to work it out.

3. Remember, people do you a big favor by supervising you.

- a. You are your supervisor's liability – This is one of those unspoken things about our profession. Those that supervise are legally and ultimately responsible for what happens to your clients. They are adding to their own risk of being involved in litigation just by agreeing to be a supervisor. Don't take this gift for granted. As practicum students don't perform well, supervisor migraines increase proportionately.
- b. Supervision is fun, but it is a lot of work and it's easier just to see a few more clients than to supervise. This is also an unspoken. Yes, supervising provides more variety and different challenges, but, if the challenges get too great, it's just easier to see more clients to fill up our schedules. Remember, if no one wants to supervise, you can't progress through your program. The people who came before left a legacy and you will leave one as well for those who come after.
- c. Supervisors have the right and the obligation to give you feedback – positive or negative – and that's what you're there for. It is a requirement of supervisors to give feedback to and guide the professional growth of those they supervise. From their perspective, they are looking at and evaluating potential future colleagues. Seems obvious, right? Perhaps you might be surprised to know how many times supervisees resent the feedback they get from supervisors. Please remember that just because you are a good student academically doesn't mean that will translate directly into demonstrating good counseling skills. Being an academic and being a therapist are two different things. Take any and all feedback your supervisor gives you. If you want to go above and beyond taking the feedback they give you, consider it, use it, and be grateful for it.

3. Dress appropriately for the agency.

- a. Most agencies understand that your wardrobe may not be as sophisticated as the rest of the staff, but you should be aware of the lower limits of acceptability. Remember, the agency is trying to project a particular image to the community it serves. If you go to an upscale private practice, expect to wear more than jeans and a nice shirt. If you don't have clothes, consider a hospital ER – they might provide scrubs or a lab coat.
- b. Also be aware of any special dress codes – casual days, etc. It will help you feel like you are fitting in to come dressed in jeans the day everyone else does.

4. Remember, you are a visitor.

- a. Ultimately, you will probably be a very short term employee of the agency. As they say in backpacking, only pack in what you plan to pack out. Leave the agency as good as or better than you found it by the work you do and the relationships you form with staff. This will prove both you and the agency with the best possible experience. It will also help your department maintain good relationships with practicum sites.
- b. And just when you thought you couldn't care less about these people because your practicum is over...you will remember that these are the people who will provide you with recommendations for your internship or other practica. Other sites where you will want to practice will want to hear from those who have supervised your work previously. Letters from professors in your department are all well and good, but if they haven't actually supervised you one-on-one with clients in an agency, they really can't speak directly to your counseling skills. Letters of recommendation from direct supervisors of your clinical work may carry more weight. Plan accordingly.

Good luck to you as you head off to your placements! Have a great experience. Learn as much as you can. Let your supervisor and the agency help you to become the best therapist you can be.