

Taking the Wheel: Put Yourself in the Driver's Seat of Your Field Placement Experience

Contributed by Lyndal Greenslade, BA, BSocWk, MAASW, and Amanda Vos, BSocWk, MAASW (Acc)

Editor's Note: To give you a flavor of the writers' own voices, we left this article in an Australian "accent," using words such as uni and prac.

As social work students, most of us approach our field placements with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Where do I want to go? What setting will be a good fit for me? What style of supervision will I respond to best? How on Earth will I balance the demands of placement, uni, work, and family life? {mosgoogle right}

These questions floated around Lyndal's mind as she approached her final year field placement. After her first placement and a challenging year at university, Lyndal was left questioning whether she and social work were meant to be. It was "do or die," and Lyndal knew she needed to be really purposeful about planning out her final placement. Motivated by an intense desire to "get it right," she decided to take a proactive role in determining what she needed.

To do this, Lyndal thought long and hard about what she wanted to learn and experience on placement. She came up with a bunch of skills, techniques, client experiences, and opportunities that she thought would be valuable. Lyndal also had an equally long list of what she didn't want to experience. The process of using this list to help decide what agency she wanted to work in involved looking behind her answers to discover the underlying theme. By taking this approach, she began to gain some clarity.

Lyndal: What I wanted more than anything, was to experience the positivity and possibility in social work. I spent four years listening to the stories of how hard the work is and how small the gains are. Instead, I wanted a placement that focused on what is possible. This discovery allowed me to see that what I needed was a supervisor who approached the work with a positive "can do" attitude. I remembered having heard one such social worker speak at a few events and decided to make contact with her to see if she was interested in supervising. It helped that I was interested in the organization she worked for, but I stayed focused on my realisation that this time around, the relationship with my supervisor was primary.

Luckily, Amanda was available and interested. They met several times prior to the placement, and Lyndal decided to be really honest and upfront, explaining her previous experience on placement, what she wanted this time around, and also a little bit about who she was and what she believed in. Lyndal felt very strongly that Amanda should have a sense of who she was before embarking on this journey. Usually, pre-placement interviews are very focused on the supervisor deciding whether the student is appropriate for the placement, but Lyndal felt that this was an opportunity to discover whether the supervisor was appropriate for her!

Lyndal: When I approached Amanda, I knew she worked for the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), but I wasn't aware of exactly what sort of work she was doing. During our meetings prior to field placement, I was able to learn about the Association's new project that Amanda was developing--Horizon Career Centre. The Centre is a 24/7 national employment Web site coupled with Monday to Friday customer support and career guidance for the entire human services. When Amanda explained Horizon Career Centre to me, I will admit to a moment of hesitation. Isn't that just an employment service? Wouldn't that be mostly admin work? Is that even social work? Amanda and I met a few times, and despite my hesitations, I knew that she was the right person to supervise me, and I decided that regardless of what the work was, I needed to be around her positive energy and passion for the profession. It turned out to be a smart decision, as it didn't take long for me to realise that being placed with Horizon afforded me the opportunity to have daily contact with a really diverse range of social workers nationally and internationally. This experience has given me a "snapshot" of social work and social workers that has enabled me to connect with just how wonderful, passionate, and engaged the community is.

Initially, though, I had no idea that this would be the case. I listened instead to my own connection to the way that Amanda worked and made the decision to pursue the placement based on my need to be around "good people." As Amanda and I talked, I learnt that a placement at Horizon Career Centre would mean being based from my home, and as Amanda works from her home, a couple of hours north of where I live, contact between the two of us would be largely done through Internet and phone communication. Additionally, we would meet up in person every 10 days or so. I actually expected some resistance from the university field education unit, as not only was I organising my own placement, but it would also be based at home, which I think may be a first. But they were supportive of the idea, and whatever the reason, I'm glad they did allow it to unfold, because it's been exactly what I needed.

The placement was definitely "out of the box," and looking back now, we can both see that our commitment to it going ahead was very strong. We wanted to explore some of the thinking behind "boldly going where no placement has gone before," so we spent some time instant messaging (IM):

Lyndal: What made you think that doing a placement with you based a couple of hours away from me, and me based at home, was even possible?

Amanda: I was open to exploring it, because I figured, if I worked from home, then why couldn't a student do her placement from home? We live in a time when new technologies mean new possibilities. Staying connected is made much easier with the assistance of the Internet. If you make a decision to be open to exploring a "new" way, you soon realise there are solutions to what others might seem as a block.

Lyndal: I think many people would not have even considered offering a placement to a student based at home. Didn't you have trust issues? I was thinking how a lot of students experience supervision as "surveillance" and really don't enjoy that part of the process. They feel "watched over" a lot, and I know in my own experience, this made me more nervous and unsure of myself.

Amanda: Yeah, that's a really good point. Perhaps it was because this was my first time as a field educator, so I didn't have any pre-conceived ideas or limitations about how it would work. My only experience of field education was being a student. From my experiences in that role, I knew the importance of having a placement that was supportive and safe, as well as challenging within the context of learning. The fact that you sought me out as a field educator probably also played a role, because we met three times in person before prac started, as well as phoned and e-mailed. By asking questions, and getting to know you not just as a student, but as a person, it made it very easy for me to trust you. I think it was because we're pretty similar in our working style. It didn't even enter my head that you could potentially abuse working from home!

Lyndal: I think you're right about how important meeting up before prac was. By the time prac started, I already knew more about you and the way you work than most students would have the opportunity to do prior to placement. I think meeting a number of times prior to starting prac lays a really good foundation.

Amanda: Absolutely. Preparation proved to be really key in this situation (as it usually does in life in general!). I would really encourage students and potential field educators to meet more than once if possible. We built a strong foundation for your placement by being guided by what YOU needed rather than what I/Horizon Career Centre could offer you. It was fortunate that the timing worked out to be that you would start placement the day the AASW launched Horizon Career Centre, because I was in a very creative space when you first approached me about a possible placement. Everything was new; everything was possible. Our process of my asking you a series of questions like what are you passionate about?, what do you want to learn?, what are your strengths?, what do you value? helped me understand where you were. And from there we could explore the possibility of a prac, rather than the traditional approach that is usually "we have this student placement opportunity--do you want it?"

Lyndal: I really enjoyed the process of trying to pinpoint the actual experience I wanted, as well. I found those questions you asked prior to starting prac really helpful. I think many students just take what's on offer and don't even think about options that might be a little "out of the box." I remember being very careful who I told that I would be based at home, because I really worried that the uni wouldn't allow it! I think most field educators, field ed uni staff, and students themselves would be concerned that a placement at home, and away from their supervisor physically, would mean a lack of support. What I've really found though, is the exact opposite. As we set up a phone call each morning, and through e-mail and now IM, I feel MORE connected to you than I did with either of my third-year supervisors.

Amanda: The reality has been we've actually had more contact than usual because everything we do is very intentional. It's the quality of the contact that makes the difference. Having face-to-face supervision every week or 10 days makes a big difference. Supervision is the cornerstone of field placement (in my opinion)...it can make or break a field placement. That's something I learnt as a student, so I've been mindful ever since, that when I decided to have a student, I had to be ready to supervise. A wise colleague reminded me the other day that students may not remember their lecturers, but they sure do remember their field educators. It's so true...the student placement experience is the foundation of the social work degree.

Now that Lyndal's 18-week field placement is finished, she's had time to reflect on the process. The whole experience was such a positive one. Lyndal went in feeling that social work was in dire straits, and wondered whether she personally was up to the task. But she has come out with the realisation that she has definitely chosen the right profession and that no matter how challenging the professional path may be, it is ultimately do-able!

Lyndal: I think spending time thinking about what I really wanted, well before my placement started, made a world of difference. We don't need to wait until we graduate to begin making connections with people and discovering what our place in the profession may be. I wouldn't have met Amanda if I hadn't attended a few social work events that she spoke at, and I wouldn't have had the courage to approach her if I wasn't really clear on why I wanted her to supervise me. My message to other students is to start now. Reach out and connect with the social work community while you are a student. E-mail people of interest, just to say hello and share why you like what they do. Seek out the areas of social work that are meaningful to you, even if they're non-traditional and you know nothing about them. If I'd allowed myself to be put off by my own limitations about what I thought social work was, I may never have pursued a placement with the AASW Horizon Career Centre, simply because it didn't look or sound like what I believed social work to be. Maybe there's a social worker who's a politician, or artist, or

film maker or in some other non-traditional field that can be considered as a potential supervisor. Maybe as a student you would love to make documentaries? Or run for political office? Or write a book? Whatever and however you connect passionately to the work, I would highly recommend seeking out social workers who will afford you the opportunity to stretch your understanding of what social work is.

Field placement is an excellent opportunity to begin your journey of connecting with the social work community. By reaching out and being proactive about your field placement, you can take the driver's seat and begin to steer your social work experiences along a path of your choice.

Lyndal Greenslade, BA, BSocWk, GradDipProfessionalCounselling, MAASW, completed her final placement at the AASW Horizon Career Centre in 2007, enabling her to put into practice her strong belief in the power of advocating for the profession of social work. During her time at university and throughout her working life, Lyndal has fed her passion for connecting with people in an effort to work alongside them to fulfill their personal potential. Lyndal graduated at the end of 2007 and is now employed at Horizon Career Centre.

Amanda Vos, BSocWk, MAASW (Acc), is Manager of the Australian Association of Social Workers Horizon Career Centre. Since graduating in 2001, Amanda has explored and celebrated the diverse pathways a social work career can offer, including casework, curriculum development, teaching, service development, and management. Her passion for helping social workers fulfill their potential has driven Amanda to present, write, and develop film and photography projects exploring professional well-being, thriving in social work, and career enhancement throughout Australia, North America, and South East Asia. This year, Amanda is mentoring young social workers on assignment in Vietnam and Sri Lanka as part of the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development Program.