

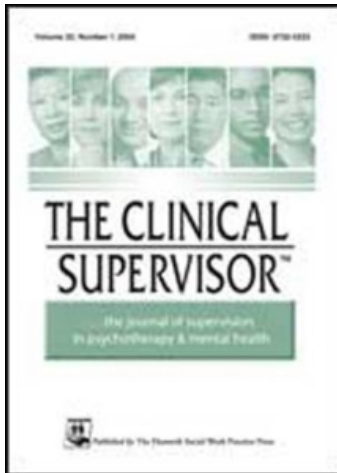
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### Does Practice Make Perfect?

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# Does Practice Make Perfect? Practicing Professional Skills and Outcomes in Social Work Field Education

Anne E. Fortune  
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**ABSTRACT.** We tested an underlying assumption of social work field education, that more frequent practice of professional skills is associated with better student outcomes. One hundred eighty-eight students from four social work programs rated their skills and satisfaction and answered questions about frequency of practicing professional skills in field practicum. In addition, we had performance evaluations by their field instructors for 120 students. More frequent practice of nearly all 38 skills was associated with greater satisfaction with field education and greater self-evaluation of performance. Frequency of practicing about one-third of

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the skills was also associated with field instructors' evaluations of students. The results support the usefulness of repeatedly practicing skills in field education. doi:10.1300/J001v26n01\_15 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Social work field education, student outcome

One must learn by doing the thing; though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try.

–Sophocles

Practice is the best of all instructors.

–Publilius Syrus (Roman author, 1st century BC)

Social work includes both conceptual understanding and professional skills such as empathic listening, assessing client situations, and implementing intervention. Field practicum allows students to learn such professional skills through practicing them in real settings, that is, through experience. Presumably, if students practice skills more often, they will learn the skills better. This simplistic logic underlies the hands-on, experiential nature of the social work practicum, which relies on students doing professional assignments and then receiving feedback and reflecting on their performance. However, this simple assumption that more practice leads to greater mastery has not been tested directly. Does practice make perfect? Do students who practice professional skills more often have better outcomes than those who practice less often? This study examined the association between students' practice of 38 generic professional skills and three indicators of outcome: the students' self-evaluations of skill, their satisfaction with field practicum, and their field instructors' evaluations of the students' skills.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Field practicum includes experiential learning that helps students master professional skills and integrate knowledge and skills from the classroom.

The idea that students learn from and through experience is centuries old. Contemporary notions derive from John Dewey, an early 20th century philosopher whose ideas included: (1) education engages and enlarges experience; (2) interaction with the environment shapes learning (leading to both problem-based learning and socialization to democratic norms), and (3) reflecting on experience is a key part of learning (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Smith, 2001). Kolb (1984) elaborated these principles into a circular learning cycle that includes concrete experience, observation and reflection about that experience, forming abstract concepts about the experience, and testing in new situations. Shön (1983, 1987) posited education through reflection on experience, separating reflection-on-action (taking place after experience) from reflection in action (during the experience); both types of reflection articulate tacit professional knowledge or build new understandings.

Many social work teaching strategies are based on aspects of Kolb's and Shön's work. For example, Bogo and Vayda (1991) developed the continuous Integration of Theory and Practice (ITP) Loop based on Kolb's learning cycle, and some teaching strategies build on Shön's reflection, including reflection in action during supervisory sessions (Fox, 2004), reflection on observations (Hughes & Heycox, 2005), and writing assignments to stimulate reflection (Biggerstaff, 2005; Nesoff, 2004). In short, experience (action) is well-established as a principle of social work education.

In addition, biological and educational research has suggested that repetition of activities is important to learning, both simple rote repetition to learn material and application in new and broader contexts that lead to integration of learning (Cuasay, 1992; Ellis, 2005; Jensen, 1998). Repetition helps make skills automatic, and many skills must be automatic to be useful (Davis et al., 2000), for example, responding empathically, listening for underlying emotion, or recognizing cultural differences. Further, repetition of skills with variations or in new situations generalizes them to multiple situations. Evidence from social work, psychology, and psychiatry has suggested that practicing professional helping skills does help master them (Karasu et al., 1978; Petrovich, 2004; Ware et al., 1984; Wise & Trunnell, 2001). Indeed, recent neurological research has confirmed that simple repetition by itself builds connections between brain nerve cells and produces both direct and associative learning (Johnson, 2006).

In social work, more attention has been paid to reflection than to repetition in the learning cycle. In this study, we step back and look at the value of repeating experience by itself. Do students who practice

professional skills more often have better performance than those who practice less often? If we know that practicing skills is associated with performance, then assignments can be planned carefully to maximize to student performance (Rogers & McDonald, 1995). In this study, we examined professional skills that experienced social workers considered essential for beginning social workers (McCarthy & Abramson, 1992). Although the skills were developed for one program, they are similar to other professional skill-sets in both content and the intent to capture underlying, generic social work skills (see Holden, 1996; Naito, 2004).

### ***HYPOTHESES***

Based on experiential theories of learning and on the little previous research, we expected that practicing professional skills more often would be associated with better student outcomes in field education. Our first hypothesis was that practicing skills more often during field practicum is associated with better self-evaluation of skills in the same area. For example, students who practice communication skills such as empathic listening or discussing nonverbal communication more often will evaluate themselves better in the overall category of Communication Skills. The second hypothesis was that practicing skills more often is associated with broader outcomes including students' overall self-evaluation of performance, satisfaction with field practicum, and field instructors' evaluation of student competency. For example, students who practice empathic listening more often will rate their average skills higher, be more satisfied with field practicum, and be rated more competent by their field instructors.

### ***METHODOLOGY***

#### ***Sampling and Procedure***

The sample included students from four social work programs: the University at Albany MSW program, Marywood University MSW program, the University at Albany BSW program, and the University of Texas, Pan American BSW program. Students were recruited at the beginning of their required field practica through announcements in classes and flyers in their mailboxes. Students were told that the study would

look at their initial impressions of their field site, their experiences during field practicum, their satisfaction, their performance, and their field instructors' evaluations of them. Students completed several questionnaires throughout the practicum (Fortune et al., 2005a, 2005b; Lee, 2006). The data for this study are from the field instructors' final evaluations of the students and from a questionnaire that students completed near the end of their practica. At the University at Albany and Marywood University, the questionnaire was handed out 3-6 weeks before the ending of a two-semester concurrent practicum. At University of Texas-Pan American, it was given out two weeks before the ending of a one-semester block practicum. At all sites, the timing was intended to capture peak activity, when students were engaged in a range of activities before "winding down" toward the end of the practicum, yet when their skill levels should be at their highest. To increase immediacy and focus on this time period, most questions specified that students should consider the past two weeks at their practica.

We handed out the questionnaires in class and placed them in student mailboxes. Students completed them on their own time and returned them to the mailbox of the respective faculty member. Data were collected in Spring 2001 except for one cohort at Albany, which was collected in Spring 2000.

In addition, at University at Albany and University of Texas-Pan American, students gave permission for access to their field instructors' evaluations of their performance. (At Marywood, changes in personnel precluded collecting the field instructors' evaluations.) A research assistant recorded the field instructors' ratings of student skills from Field Evaluation Instruments in the student files. As soon as data from the final field evaluations were recorded, the link between the student and his or her code number was destroyed. The Institutional Review Boards of all three universities approved the procedures for protection of human subjects.

### ***Participants***

One hundred eighty-eight students completed the questionnaire towards the end of their practicum. They were from four accredited social work programs: the University at Albany MSW program ( $n = 112$ ), Marywood University MSW program ( $n = 42$ ), the University at Albany BSW program ( $n = 6$ ), and the University of Texas-Pan American BSW program ( $n = 28$ ). The participants were 16% of the approximately 1,170 students enrolled in the programs (Lennon, 2001).

The majority of participants were female (84%), white (71%), and full-time students (65%). Ages ranged from 21 to 56 years with an average of 31.5 years ( $SD = 8.9$ ). The participants were similar on these characteristics to students enrolled in accredited programs nationally (Lennon, 2001).

## MEASUREMENT

### *Practicing Professional Skills*

The professional skills on the student questionnaire were taken from the University at Albany Field Evaluation Instrument (FEI). The FEI lists over 100 professional skills students were expected to attain at various points through the practicum. The skills were generated by focus groups of experienced field instructors who were asked what skills were essential to social workers in generalist practice (McCarthy & Abramson, 1992). Content validity was established through review by other groups of field instructors.

Rather than use all the FEI items for the student questionnaire, we selected the 38 skills we believed were most representative of each category in the FEI. For each skill, we asked the students "during the past two weeks, how often did you? . . ." Responses were on 5 point scales from 1 = [did] *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*. In a previous study, the skills had good internal consistency (Fortune & Kaye, 2002).

The professional skills, like the FEI itself, were grouped in six categories: student as learner; development of professional attitudes, values and ethics; knowledge and skills for agency-based work; communications skills; assessment skills; and intervention skills (see Table 2 for items and categories). We created a score for each category by taking the average of how often the student practiced the skills in that category. The internal consistency for these scales was adequate to good. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .73 (Professional Attitudes, Values, and Ethics) to .82 (Assessment Skills).

### *Outcome Measures*

*Student self-evaluation of performance.* Student self-evaluation of performance used the same six broad categories included in the FEI and the professional skills questions: student as learner; development of professional attitudes, values and ethics; knowledge and skills for agency-based

work; community skills; assessment skills; and intervention skills. Students rated themselves once for each category with scale points defined as 1 = *unacceptable*, 2 = *needs improvement*, 3 = *satisfactory*, 4 = *very good*, and 5 = *outstanding*. We used the six category ratings separately in the first analysis. We also averaged the six ratings and used them as average self-evaluation in later analyses ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

*Satisfaction with Field Practicum.* Satisfaction with Field Practicum was the average of three items. Students were asked to consider in the previous two weeks how satisfied they were with their field agency, field instructor, and field learning. Responses were each rated on 5 point scales from 1 = *completely dissatisfied* to 5 = *completely satisfied* ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

*Field instructor evaluation.* Field instructor evaluations were available for students at University at Albany and University of Texas-Pan American. Field instructors rated their students on professional competencies using the programs' regular field evaluation instruments. Because of personnel changes, Marywood University did not participate in this portion of the study. The University at Albany evaluation form was the same FEI from which the professional skills on the student questionnaires were derived. The FEI for the first-year MSW students included 112 skills in the six areas (student as learner; development of professional attitudes, values and ethics; knowledge and skills for agency-based work; communications skills; assessment skills; and intervention skills), while that for the second-year MSW students included 123 skills in the same areas (McCarthy & Abramson, 1992). The undergraduate evaluations at Albany and University of Texas-Pan American contained 17 items. All evaluation instruments used a 5-point scale with 5 as the most positive rating. The anchor descriptors varied, with 1 = *unacceptable performance, no understanding, or no ability to understand a skill* and 5 = *outstanding, high degree of understanding, or high ability to understand* ( $\alpha = .97$ ). Despite the differences in evaluation instruments at the three programs, we averaged each student's ratings and used a single score as the student's performance rating.

## DATA ANALYSIS

To test the first hypothesis about practice being associated with professional skills, we used Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient to correlate frequency of practicing each professional skill with students' self-evaluated performance in the same skill area. For example, we correlated frequency of each skill in the category "Student as



learner”—process recording, using practice theory to determine what to do, discussing strengths and weaknesses, etc.—with students’ self-evaluation of the category “Student as learner.” Second, to test the second hypothesis about frequency of practicing skills and broader measures of outcome, we used two data analysis strategies. We first examined the relation between each individual professional skill and the outcomes, again using Pearson’s  $r$ . For example, we correlated frequency of using theory with global self-evaluation, satisfaction with field, and field instructors’ evaluations. Then, we averaged the frequency of practicing skills within each category and correlated the average frequency with outcomes. For example, we correlated the average frequency of all skills in the category “Development of professional attitudes” with students’ average self-evaluation, satisfaction with field education, and field instructors’ evaluation. In all data analyses, we used one-tailed tests with a criterion level of .05.

## FINDINGS

### *Levels of Professional Skills and Outcomes*

Students practiced most professional skills at a moderate level—means between 3.0 and 4.0 (5 = *a great deal*). They most often helped clients discuss problems and expand on feelings (4.5), used empathic listening and clear communication (4.5), and identified clients’ support systems (4.3; see Table 2). They least often looked at social policies or regulations that affect their agency or work (2.5). Congruently, average frequencies for the six skill categories were highest for communication skills (4.1) and assessment skills (3.7), and lowest for skills for agency-based work (3.1; see Table 1).

For outcomes, students rated their own performances as “very good” (average of 3.9 with 4 = *very good* and 5 = *outstanding*; see Table 1). They believed that they were best on professional attitudes (4.2), communication skills (4.1), and student as learner (4.0), and weakest in intervention skills (3.7; see Table 2). Students rated their field practicum as moderately satisfying (4.0). Field instructors evaluated students’ performance as quite competent (4.4). The field instructors rated the students significantly higher than did the students themselves (paired  $t$ -test,  $t = 6.93$ ,  $df = 119$ ,  $p < .00$ ).

TABLE 1. Frequency of Practicing Professional Skills, Self-Evaluation of Performance, Satisfaction with Practicum, and Field Instructor Evaluation: Means and Standard Deviations (n = 188)

	Mean	Standard Deviation
<b>Average frequency of practicing professional skills in:<sup>a</sup></b>		
Student as learner	3.34	.94
Development of professional attitudes	3.38	.79
Skills for agency-based work	3.13	.88
Communication skills	4.06	.78
Assessment skills	3.71	.90
Intervention skills	3.35	.77
Average Frequency of All Skills	3.50	.63
<b>Self-evaluation of performance of skills in:<sup>b</sup></b>		
Student as learner	4.04	.64
Development of professional attitudes	4.16	.68
Skills for agency-based work	3.84	.79
Communication skills	4.06	.79
Assessment skills	3.80	.82
Intervention skills	3.65	.86
Average self-evaluation of skill performance	3.93	.58
<b>Satisfaction with field practicum<sup>c</sup></b>	4.02	1.01
<b>Field instructor evaluation<sup>d</sup></b>	4.37	.46

<sup>a</sup>Average frequency of specific professional skills within each category. Each separate items was anchored 1 = "not at all," 5 = "a great deal."

<sup>b</sup>Student self-evaluation of performance in category. Responses were anchored 1 = "unacceptable," 5 = "outstanding."

<sup>c</sup>Average of 3 items (satisfaction with field agency, field instructor, and field learning), anchored 1 = "completely dissatisfied," 5 = "completely satisfied."

<sup>d</sup>Evaluation of student performance by field instructor. Average of 17-112 skills anchored 1 = "unacceptable," 5 = "outstanding."

### *Practicing Specific Professional Skills and Self-Evaluation of Performance*

Do students who practice the skills in a category more often evaluate themselves better in that category (hypothesis 1)? The correlations indicated modest and significant relationships between students practicing professional skills and their self-evaluations of performance in that same category (see Table 2).

In the category Student as learner, all skills were modestly but significantly correlated with self-evaluation of performance ( $r$ s between .21 and .30). Students who reported completing process recordings, getting feedback on process recordings, using practice theory, or discussing

TABLE 2. Average Frequency of Practicing Professional Skills and Correlation with Self-Evaluation of Performance in the Same Category (n = 188)

Professional Skill by Category <sup>a</sup>	Mean	SD	Correlation with Self-Evaluation Skill Category <sup>b</sup>
<b>Student as Learner</b>			<b>Student as Learner</b>
Complete process recordings or other tools to critique your practice.	3.11	1.34	.298*
Get feedback on process recordings or other tools.	3.05	1.42	.303*
Use practice theory to determine what to do in a specific situation.	3.44	1.08	.209*
Discuss with your field instructor your strengths and weaknesses in knowledge, skills, accomplishments and learning needs.	3.77	1.20	.290*
Average Opportunity for Student as Learner	3.34	.94	.377*
<b>Development of Professional Attitudes, Values and Ethics</b>			<b>Professional Attitudes</b>
Implement what you learned in supervisory sessions in your work with clients, agency, and community.	3.88	1.07	.328*
Do something that demonstrates your commitment to a multicultural perspective.	3.41	1.20	.219*
Work with someone whose values or culture are different from your own values or culture.	3.86	1.11	.066
Discuss with staff or colleagues how your personal values about such things as race, religion, sexual orientation or handicap affect your work with a client or colleague.	2.84	1.32	.209*
Discuss with staff or colleagues ethical situations in practice, for example, how to get client consent or protect confidentiality.	3.47	1.22	.210*
Actively promote social or economic justice through advocacy, education, lobbying or other means.	2.81	1.30	.133*
Average Opportunity for Development of Professional Attitudes	3.38	.79	.296**
<b>Knowledge and Skills for Agency-Based Work</b>			<b>Skills for Agency-Based Work</b>
Participate in staff meetings, team meetings, or other formal meetings to discuss work at the agency.	3.72	1.30	.202*
Discuss your agency's role in serving specific populations and how it relates to other services in the community.	3.23	1.20	.258*
Seek out relevant agency policies and procedures.	3.14	1.23	.228*

<b>Professional Skill by Category<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Correlation with Self-Evaluation Skill Category<sup>b</sup></b>
Discuss gaps in agency service or policies.	3.07	1.30	.137*
Look at state or federal social policies or regulations that affect your agency or impact your work with clients.	2.49	1.29	.251*
Average Opportunity for Knowledge and Skills for Agency-Based Work	3.13	.88	.309*
<b>Communication Skills</b>			<b>Communication Skills</b>
Discuss the effect of your nonverbal communication on a client or a client system.	3.09	1.25	.268*
Practice empathic listening and clear communication with a client.	4.49	.840	.177*
Help a client to discuss problems and expand on feelings.	4.53	.82	.191*
Explore emotionally charged issues with a client.	4.17	1.07	.205*
Summarize session content with a client or a client system.	4.05	1.07	.149*
Average Opportunity for Communication Skills	4.06	.78	.266*
<b>Assessment Skills</b>			<b>Assessment Skills</b>
Take into account a client's cultural values when doing an assessment.	3.67	1.301	.288*
Gather information related to a client's presenting problem from the client or from outside sources.	3.92	1.21	.200*
Identify sources of strengths and stresses in a client and his/her support system.	4.25	1.00	.269*
Discuss social issues (racism, sexism, ageism, etc.) relevant to a client's problem.	3.13	1.31	.284*
Write a formal assessment of a client or a client system.	3.30	1.53	.299*
Take time to try to separate your own feelings and attitudes from facts.	3.97	1.00	.195*
Average Opportunity for Assessment Skills	3.71	.90	.353*
<b>Intervention Skills</b>			<b>Intervention Skills</b>
Discuss how to break larger problems into manageable parts.	3.75	1.00	.234*
Work with a client who is resistant or fearful of help.	3.53	1.35	.253*
Involve a client or a group in developing a contract and clarifying expectations and goals.	3.41	1.33	.340*
Implement planned interventions with a client or client system.	3.68	1.19	.330*

TABLE 2 (continued)

Professional Skill by Category <sup>a</sup>	Mean	SD	Correlation with Self-Evaluation Skill Category <sup>b</sup>
Advocate for client with relevant agencies to obtain needed services.	3.12	1.41	.233*
Work with individual clients.	4.41	1.06	.207*
Work with clients as a family	2.77	1.64	.293*
Work with clients in a group	3.21	1.58	.093
Carry out a "macro" level project such as staff training, community organizing, or preparing a plan for the Board.	2.50	1.53	-.008
Work on behalf of clients with professionals from other disciplines, for example, in interdisciplinary teams.	3.14	1.48	.153*
With a client or group, evaluate how well goals were achieved.	3.35	1.35	.309*
Address your own or client's reactions to termination.	3.31	1.53	.233*
Average Opportunity for Intervention Skills	3.35	.77	.387*

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (one-tailed).

<sup>a</sup>Each profession skill was anchored 1 = "not at all", 5 = "a great deal."

<sup>b</sup>Student self-evaluation of performance in category. Responses were anchored 1 = "unacceptable," 5 = "outstanding."

strengths and weaknesses more often evaluated their performance as learner better than those who practiced these skills less often.

For Development of professional attitudes, 5 of 6 skills were related to self-evaluation ( $r$ s between .13 and .33). Students who implemented what they learned in supervisory sessions, demonstrated commitment to a multicultural perspective, promoted social and economic justice, discussed how personal values affect their work, and discussed ethical situations more often evaluated themselves as better in Development of professional attitudes. Working with someone from a different culture was not associated with self-evaluation of Professional attitudes.

For Knowledge and skills for agency-based work, all five items were significant ( $r$ s between .14 and .26). Students who participated in formal meetings, discussed the agency's service role, found agency policies, discussed service gaps, and looked at government policies that affect clients more often evaluated themselves better in agency-based work than those who practiced these skills less often.

For Communication skills, all skills were significantly correlated with self-evaluation of communication ( $r$ s between .15 and .27). Students who discussed effects of nonverbal communication, explored emotionally charged issues, helped a client discuss problems, practiced empathic listening, or summarized session content more often evaluated their communication skills better than those who practiced less often.

For Assessment skills, all skills were significant ( $r$ s between .20 and .30). Students who took into account a client's cultural values, gathered information, identified a client's sources of strengths and stresses, discussed social issues, wrote a formal assessment, and took time to separate their feelings from facts more often evaluated their assessment skills better than those who practiced these skills less often.

For Intervention skills, 10 of 12 skills were associated with self-evaluation of intervention skills ( $r$ s between .15 and .31). Students who partialized problems, worked with resistant clients, developed contracts, implemented planned interventions, advocated for clients, worked with individuals, worked with families, worked with professionals from other disciplines, evaluated goal achievement, and dealt with termination reactions more often rated their intervention skills better than those who practice these skills less often. Not related to self-evaluation of Intervention skills were working with groups and completing macro-level projects.

In sum, for almost all professional skills, the more often students practiced the skill, the higher they evaluated their performance in that category. The exceptions were some skills for work with larger organizations—group work and “macro projects”—which were not related to self-evaluation. The correlations with self-evaluation were modest, explaining from less than 2 percent of variance to 12 percent ( $r^2$ ).

Next we averaged the frequency of practicing skills in each category and correlated the average with student self-evaluation of performance in that same category (see Table 2). All correlations were statistically significant. The weakest correlations with self-evaluation were communication skills ( $r = .27$ ) and development of professional attitudes ( $r = .30$ ), while the strongest were student as learner (.38) and intervention skills ( $r = .39$ ).

### ***Practicing Skills and Global Outcomes***

The previous analysis suggests that practicing skills more often is associated with better self-evaluation of performance in the area being practiced. For the analysis of the second hypothesis, we looked at whether practicing skills more often was related to broader outcomes: average

self-evaluation of performance, satisfaction with field practicum, and field instructor evaluation.

*Self-evaluation of performance.* For student self-evaluation, practicing almost all specific professional skills more often was associated with average self-evaluation ( $r$ s between .12 and .44; see Table 3). Skills most strongly associated with average self-evaluation were implementing what was learned in supervisory sessions ( $r = .44$ ), demonstrating commitment to a multicultural perspective (.40), using practice theory to determine what to do (.38; all skills under professional attitudes), identifying client strengths and stresses (.40; an assessment skill), and developing contracts (.39) and implementing interventions (.39; intervention skills). The significant skills explained between 15 and 20 percent of variance in self-evaluation. The only skills that were not associated with average self-evaluation were again organizational skills: group work and completing a macro project.

The average frequencies of skills within each category were also associated with average self-evaluation. Practicing Intervention skills had the strongest correlation with average self-evaluation of skills ( $r = .46$ ), while practicing skills for Agency-based work had the lowest (still significant) correlation ( $r = .27$ ; (variance explained, 7-21 percent).

*Satisfaction with Field Practicum.* Practicing most professional skills more often was also associated with greater student satisfaction with Field Practicum. Most highly correlated with satisfaction were frequency of implementing what one learned in supervisory sessions (.58) and discussing strengths and weaknesses with the field instructor (.51). Skills that were not associated with satisfaction were some macro-level skills (discuss gaps in agency service and promote social justice) and some self-awareness and clinical skills (working with someone with different values, separating one's own feelings from facts, empathic listening, and helping a client discuss problems).

Higher average frequencies of each category were also significantly associated with greater satisfaction with practicum. Especially strong were practicing the skills in the categories Student as learner (.44), Development of professional attitudes (.39), Intervention skills (.39), and Skills for agency-based work (.38).

*Field instructor evaluation.* Only 11 of the 38 professional skills were significantly correlated with field instructors' evaluation of the student at the end of the practicum, all with  $r$ s below .30. Students were rated higher by the field instructor if they more often completed process recordings and received feedback on them ( $r$ s = .20 and .25, both from the category Student as learner), implemented what was learned in

TABLE 3. Correlation between Frequency of Practicing Professional Skills and Global Outcomes

<b>Professional Skills by Category<sup>a</sup></b>	Self-Evaluation of Performance <sup>b</sup> (n = 188)	Satisfaction with Field Practicum <sup>c</sup> (n = 188)	Field Instructor Evaluation <sup>d</sup> (n = 120)
<b>Student as Learner</b>			
Complete process recordings or other tools to critique your practice.	.278*	.184*	.195*
Get feedback on process recordings or other tools.	.301*	.384*	.252*
Use practice theory to determine what to do in a specific situation.	.376*	.271*	.134
Discuss with your field instructor your strengths and weaknesses in knowledge, skills, accomplishments and learning needs.	.336*	.505*	.101
Average Opportunity for Student as Learner	.431*	.444*	.235*
<b>Development of Professional Attitudes, Values and Ethics</b>			
Implement what you learned in supervisory sessions in your work with clients, agency, and community.	.436*	.583*	.232*
Do something that demonstrates your commitment to a multicultural perspective.	.401*	.269*	.250*
Work with someone whose values or culture are different from your own values or culture.	.162*	.044	.081
Discuss with staff or colleagues how your personal values about such things as race, religion, sexual orientation or handicap affect your work with a client or colleague.	.270*	.287*	-.080
Discuss with staff or colleagues ethical situations in practice, for example, how to get client consent or protect confidentiality.	.290*	.278*	.059
Actively promote social or economic justice through advocacy, education, lobbying or other means.	.159*	.111	.079
Average Opportunity for Development of Professional Attitudes	.432*	.393*	.147
<b>Knowledge and Skills for Agency-Based Work</b>			
Participate in staff meetings, team meetings, or other formal meetings to discuss work at the agency.	.160*	.200*	.101
Discuss your agency's role in serving specific populations and how it relates to other services in the community.	.207*	.356*	.120



TABLE 3 (continued)

<b>Professional Skills by Category<sup>a</sup></b>	Self-Evaluation of Performance <sup>b</sup> (n = 188)	Satisfaction with Field Practicum <sup>c</sup> (n = 188)	Field Instructor Evaluation <sup>d</sup> (n = 120)
Seek out relevant agency policies and procedures.	.221*	.355*	.171*
Discuss gaps in agency service or policies.	.122*	.116	.099
Look at state or federal social policies or regulations that affect your agency or impact your work with clients.	.217*	.302*	.077
Average Opportunity for Knowledge and Skills for Agency-Based Work	.266*	.380*	.160*
<b>Communication Skills</b>			
Discuss the effect of your nonverbal communication on a client or a client system.	.347*	.395*	.106
Practice empathic listening and clear communication with a client.	.221*	.086	.088
Help a client to discuss problems and expand on feelings.	.272*	.114	-.006
Explore emotionally charged issues with a client.	.309*	.175*	.117
Summarize session content with a client or a client system.	.285*	.159*	.043
Average Opportunity for Communication Skills	.384*	.257*	.105
<b>Assessment Skills</b>			
Take into account a client's cultural values when doing an assessment.	.334*	.219*	-.001
Gather information related to a client's presenting problem from the client or from outside sources.	.266*	.164*	.036
Identify sources of strengths and stresses in a client and his/her support system.	.404*	.180*	.243*
Discuss social issues (racism, sexism, ageism, etc.) relevant to a client's problem.	.297*	.181*	.125
Write a formal assessment of a client or a client system.	.304*	.324*	.086
Take time to try to separate your own feelings and attitudes from facts.	.224*	.086	.075
Average Opportunity for Assessment Skills	.414*	.274*	.130
<b>Intervention Skills</b>			
Discuss how to break larger problems into manageable parts.	.310*	.197*	.264*
Work with a client who is resistant or fearful of help.	.323*	.207*	.145

<b>Professional Skills by Category<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Self-Evaluation of Performance<sup>b</sup> (n = 188)</b>	<b>Satisfaction with Field Practicum<sup>c</sup> n = 188)</b>	<b>Field Instructor Evaluation<sup>d</sup> n = 120)</b>
Involve a client or a group in developing a contract and clarifying expectations and goals.	.391*	.299*	.112
Implement planned interventions with a client or client system.	.388*	.263*	.182*
Advocate for client with relevant agencies to obtain needed services.	.286*	.193*	.004
Work with individual clients.	.328*	.251*	.083
Work with clients as a family	.321*	.252*	.045
Work with clients in a group	.120	.169*	.175*
Carry out a "macro" level project such as staff training, community organizing, or preparing a plan for the Board.	-.008	.037	-.140
Work on behalf of clients with professionals from other disciplines, for example, in interdisciplinary teams.	.187*	.203*	.283*
With a client or group, evaluate how well goals were achieved.	.324*	.362*	.163*
Address your own or client's reactions to termination.	.244*	.205*	.097
Average Opportunity for Intervention Skills	.461*	.387*	.205*

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (one-tailed).

<sup>a</sup>Average frequency of specific professional skills within each category. Each separate items was anchored 1 = "not at all," 5 = "a great deal."

<sup>b</sup>Student self-evaluation of performance in category. Responses were anchored 1 = "unacceptable," 5 = "outstanding."

<sup>c</sup>Average of 3 items (satisfaction with field agency, field instructor, and field learning), anchored 1 = "completely dissatisfied," 5 = "completely satisfied."

<sup>d</sup>Evaluation of student performance by field instructor. Average of 17 to 112 skills anchored 1 = "unacceptable," 5 = "outstanding."

supervisory sessions, demonstrated commitment to a multicultural perspective (.23 and .25, both Development of professional attitudes), sought agency policy (.17, an Agency-based skill), identified client strengths and stresses (.24, Assessment), partialized problems, implemented interventions, worked with groups, worked with other disciplines, and evaluated goals (.26, .18, .18, .28, .16, all Intervention skills; explaining 3 to 7 percent of variance in field instructors' evaluations).

Three of the category average frequencies were significant: Students who practiced more often in the categories Student as learner ( $r = .24$ ), Intervention skills (.21), and Knowledge for agency-based work (.16) were rated higher by their field instructors than those who practiced the skills in those categories less often (3-6 percent of variance explained).

TABLE 4. Correlations between Average Frequency of Practicing Professional Skills and Global Outcomes

	Self-Evaluation of Performance <sup>b</sup>	Satisfaction with Field Practicum <sup>c</sup>	Field Instructor Evaluation <sup>d</sup>
<b>Average Frequency of Practicing Professional Skills in:<sup>a</sup></b>			
Student as learner	.431*	.444*	.235*
Professional attitudes	.432*	.393*	.147
Skills for agency-based work	.266*	.380*	.160*
Communication skills	.384*	.257*	.105
Assessment skills	.414*	.274*	.130
Intervention skills	.461*	.387*	.205*

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (one-tailed).

<sup>a</sup>Average frequency of specific professional skills within each category. Each separate items was anchored 1 = "not at all," 5 = "a great deal."

<sup>b</sup>Student self-evaluation of performance in category. Responses were anchored 1 = "unacceptable," 5 = "outstanding."

<sup>c</sup>Average of 3 items (satisfaction with field agency, field instructor, and field learning), anchored 1 = "completely dissatisfied," 5 = "completely satisfied."

<sup>d</sup>Evaluation of student performance by field instructor. Average of 17 to 112 skills anchored 1 = "unacceptable," 5 = "outstanding."

In sum, for the global outcomes, practicing most professional skills more often was associated with better average self-evaluation of skills and greater satisfaction with field practicum. Frequencies of one-third of skills were associated with better field instructor evaluations of students, especially skills in Student as learner and Intervention skills.

## DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, students who practiced professional skills more often during their field practicum reported themselves more competent in the areas they were practicing. They also had better global outcomes: students who practiced skills more often reported their average performance as better, were more satisfied with field practicum, and were rated as more skillful by their field instructors. In short, greater practice may not make perfect but certainly is associated with performance and satisfaction.

These findings support a basic premise of social work field education: that experiential learning contributes to performance. Education through experience began in the 1890s with social work's first training programs and was fully institutionalized in 1970 when the Council on Social Work Education included field education as an accreditation requirement (Schiller, 1972). Despite this honored tradition, few within social work

have investigated whether experiential learning is indeed beneficial. Although we did not compare our participants to students without a practicum, our results suggest that once students are involved in the practicum, more repetition of professional skills is associated with better affective and performance outcomes.

In addition to a blanket statement of “more is better,” the findings also suggest strategies for selecting professional skills for students to practice during field practicum. First, if students are weak in a particular area, they can practice the skills most highly correlated with that area. For example, students who are weak as learners (Student as learner) may especially benefit from getting feedback on process recordings while those weak in intervention skills may benefit most from working with clients to develop contracts, clarify expectations, implement interventions, and evaluate goal achievement. The importance of these skills to outcome is reinforced by an earlier study, where the same skills were also strongly associated with self-evaluation (Fortune & Kaye, 2002).

A second strategy for students with poor overall outcomes is to practice professional skills that are related both to a particular area in which they are weak and to global outcomes. Such skills include implementing what was learned in supervisory sessions, receiving feedback on process recordings, discussing effects of nonverbal communication, and implementing planned interventions. Most of the skills that were highly correlated with both category and global outcomes involve reflection and meta-analysis of the student’s practice. Although our study was designed to test the effects of repetition, not the reflection step of Kolb’s (1984) or Schön’s (1987) learning models, our findings suggest that reflexive activities are a critical part of professional performance and, indeed, bear repeating. They also suggest that contextualization and critical thinking should be part of what students practice, not just rote repetition of concrete skills like empathic responses.

Similarly, there was a strong relation between outcomes and practicing skills that require interaction with the field instructor, for example, assessing students’ strengths and weaknesses, generalizing from supervisory sessions to work with clients, and feedback on process recordings. These results support the centrality of the field instructor. Repeated input and guidance from the field instructor appear as important to student performance as practicing skills related to clients or management tasks (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Fortune et al., 1985; Giddings et al., 2003; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 2001).

There were some interesting patterns of which professional skills were associated with the global outcomes. Most highly correlated with

self-evaluated performance and satisfaction with field practicum were the categories Student as learner, Development of professional attitudes, and Intervention skills. Student as learner and Intervention skills were also most highly correlated with field instructors' evaluations of the student. Student as learner and Development of professional attitudes are the most basic skills a social work student needs; they include skills that enable students to learn other skills, as well as skills that demonstrate social work values. Holloway and Neufeldt (1995), after reviewing literature on supervision, concluded that more effective students are better at similar learning and professional development skills—which they call conceptualization—and at intervention skills. Further, students who encounter difficulties in practicum are likely to be challenged in these areas of attitudes toward learning and professional values (Bogo et al., 2004; Lafrance et al., 2004). Thus, these learning and professional attitude skills might be considered necessary but not sufficient to be a competent social worker. By contrast, the intervention skills that are related to student outcomes are the most advanced, complex skills, and many students do not practice them until later in practicum (Lee, 2006). Holloway and Neufeldt (1995) also found that more effective student-therapists were better at intervention skills. However, they and others emphasize the importance of relationship skills and caution that relationship skills are reduced by too much practice of technical intervention skills (Deal & BritzenhofeSzoc, 2004).

Which professional skills are most strongly associated with outcome? We looked at the 10 skills with the strongest correlations for each of the global outcomes. There was substantial overlap among the skills most strongly related to different outcomes. Implementing what was learned in supervisory sessions was in the top 10 for all three outcomes. Eleven skills were top for two outcomes, and only 11 appeared once. Field instructor evaluations were related mainly to more practice of skills in process recordings and in assessment and intervention with clients. Student self-evaluation was related to more practice of a mix of assessment and intervention skills and self-analytic skills. Satisfaction was related to more practice of skills in discussion with the field instructor around issues such as personal strengths, nonverbal communication, and process recordings, but also included three skills from agency-based work related to finding out specifics about how policies relate to client services. Such pragmatic details about the contextual influences on service are appropriate for field practica, as field education emphasizes agency procedures more than does classroom education (Savaya et al., 2003; Sherer & Peleg-Oren, 2005).

Is more repetition always better? Our data do not address the issue of how much is enough. Too much repetition may bore students or limit their creativity—repetition has been accused of “dumbing down” learners (Ellis, 2005). Most writers have emphasized the need for a variety of experiences to generalize skills as much as repetition of skills (Cuasay, 1992; Jensen, 1998). In social work, students were more satisfied if they had greater variety of activities, assignments, or practice approaches (Alperin, 1998; Fortune et al., 1985; Raskin, 1982; Showers, 1990), as well as “novel and varied work tasks” (Giddings et al., 1996). Our results suggest that more repetition is fruitful, and the point at which repetition is counterproductive was not reached in this sample. However, educators should use care to balance repetition of skills with variation and creativity.

The study has limitations in measurement, design, and sampling. First, the reports of how often they practice professional skills rely on students’ memories, which may be faulty. Nevertheless, Sherer (2005) noted that students are more likely to know what is going in practice than field instructors or classroom instructors. The study also relies on students’ own assessments of skills, which may be inaccurate. However, these assessments are balanced by field instructor ratings. Although field instructor ratings may be biased—for example, they may be based on the relationship with the student rather than on the students’ skills (Holloway & Neufeldt, 1995; Miller et al., 2005)—they are presumably anchored in knowledge of professional expectations and norms. An ideal measure such as observation of students working with clients would enhance the study and increase confidence that practice is related to actual performance. Such observation was not feasible both because of cost and because of the breadth of the practice skills to be measured. However, one study found close match between experts’ ratings of student skills based on audiotapes of student-client interaction and field instructors’ evaluations of the same students (Reid et al., 1996).

Another issue with field instructor evaluations was that we averaged skill ratings on different evaluation instruments from three programs. This procedure raises issues of comparability: instructors were rating different skills, different persons were rating each student, and the description of anchors for the scales differed. Nevertheless, all evaluation instruments assessed the same construct—the program’s definition of performance in field practicum. All used a 5-point ordinal scale with comparative rather than absolute or highly specified anchor points. Thus, we assumed for the study that students’ field evaluation ratings could be compared. This assumption—that scores on the same metric but from

different sources and measuring different skills are comparable measures—is widespread in educational research, where course grades or GPA is a common outcome measure (see Dunlap et al., 1998; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Pelech et al., 1999).

A second set of issues relates to design and causality. Because student reports about frequency of practicing skills, student outcomes, and field instructors' evaluations were gathered at the same time—at the end of practicum—we cannot determine which came first and was likely to influence the other. We have interpreted the correlations to mean that practicing professional skills more often enhances performance and satisfaction. However, it is equally possible that the direction is the other way: that students practice more often because they enjoy feeling satisfied or skillful.

Thirdly, the sample does not represent all social work students. Participants were volunteers from four social work programs, not a nationally representative sample. We were not able to compare these volunteers to all students enrolled in field practicum at each school. However, participants were similar to students at accredited social work programs nationally on race and gender (Lennon, 2001).

In sum, based on theories about the importance of experience to student learning, the study assesses whether practicing professional skills more often is associated with better outcomes among social work students. Practicing nearly all 38 generic social work skills more often was associated with greater satisfaction with field education, better self-evaluation of performance in the skill area, and better average self-evaluation of skills. Practicing about one-third of the skills more often was also associated with field instructors' evaluations of students. The results suggest that repeating skills enhances student education. Further, while practicing specific skills such as exploring emotionally charged issues with a client or working with a resistant client are important, patterns of association reinforce the importance of self-reflexive practice and the role of the field instructor in guiding learning from practice.

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