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Lesson Proper for Week 11

Writing in Human Service Settings

Writing is a central component of virtually all human service organizations. Although you have become accustomed to the writing demands of being a student, the internship may be your first exposure to the writing demands of the profession. Professional writing often involves new styles and formats of writing and can be particularly challenging due to the very limited time available in which to produce a finished product. This challenge may be compounded by a preference to spend the limited time you have available in your internship on tasks that you value more, such as time with staff, clients, or assigned projects. All of these factors conspire to put writing low on the priority list for many students as well as for many professionals. Like many students, human service professionals often consider the paperwork demands to be too time-consuming, and they sometimes become resentful of these responsibilities and resistant to carrying them out. In many organizations, documentation can become an ongoing issue. Demands for accountability are ever-increasing while staff time for the task has become less available due to budgetary cutbacks and resulting increased workloads (Kagle, 2008). As a result, lack of attention to record keeping can become a serious problem in human service settings.

Despite the many factors that might distract you from your writing responsibilities within your internship, do not allow yourself to develop bad habits now. Not only is writing an integral part of virtually any human service position, it is also a skill that you can learn to perform more efficiently and effectively with practice. Even if writing is not required of you by your agency, consider writing mock reports and asking for your supervisor's feedback on them in order to develop your skills. Also, as you go about your work, take the time to read, analyze, and evaluate the written work of others, such as client records, agency reports, strategic plans, policy statements, and other documents. Learn what you can by carefully examining writing samples that strike you as particularly well written and incorporate what you learn into your own writing skills.

Written Reports Related to direct Services to clients

Writing about services to clients is probably the most frequent type of writing within most human service agencies. Documenting information about clients and the work that is conducted with them and on their behalf is an essential part of a human service worker's professional role. Knowing the purposes of documentation, general guidelines for doing such writing well, and some of the most common types of writing regarding services to clients will better equip you to meet the challenges of these writing demands.

Purposes of Documentation

If you see your writing responsibilities as just a useless bureaucratic requirement, you will naturally be reluctant to complete your written work. Far from being merely bureaucratic red tape, written documentation is an important component in the delivery of quality services to clients and serves to protect your clients, your agency, and yourself. With this understanding, you will probably have greater motivation to do your written reporting and do it well. Following are some of the most important purposes of written reports and records regarding services to clients:

- ***Written documents are necessary to provide continuity of services and care (Kagle & Kopels, 2008).*** Clients sometimes need services when their usual worker is not available. A worker may be ill, at a professional meeting, or on vacation, or may have left the agency for another position. A clear, thorough record provides the information necessary for a different worker to provide services for the client efficiently and knowledgeably. In residential care facilities, the transition between workers occurs several times a day as workers report for various shifts. Smooth transitions rely upon workers leaving clear, thorough, and accurate information for one another.
- ***Written records can enhance the quality of services as they help to ensure that workers have developed systematic plans and interventions for their clients' care (Kagle & Kopels, 2008).*** Writing a client care or treatment plan in which the client's history is summarized, current problems are identified, goals are set, and action plans are developed can be a time-consuming task. The great benefit of developing such a plan is that the worker must compile and organize relevant data, interpret it, and make decisions about how to proceed. Otherwise, overworked professionals might be tempted to rush from one client to the next without giving sufficient thought to planning services and interventions.
- ***Written records provide legal documentation of worker activity (Kagle & Kopels, 2008; Mitchell, 2007).*** Human service agencies and workers are held accountable for the services they provide. If a client should challenge the quality of care he or she received, the case record is considered legal evidence of professional activity. By the same token, actions that are taken by the worker but not documented are generally assumed not to have occurred at all. Therefore, it is extremely important to document any tasks that you agreed to do on behalf of a client, all interventions you make on behalf of a client, and any tasks or assignments the client agreed to complete.
- ***Written records provide legal documentation of client needs, activities, and decisions (Kagle & Kopels, 2008; Mitchell, 2007).*** Just as it is essential to document your own activity, it is equally important to document client behaviors, concerns, needs, decisions, and requests. Workers and agencies are sometimes put in the difficult

position of defending why they did or did not take certain actions on behalf of a client. A record showing that worker activity was based on observations of client behavior and/or on concerns that the client reported offers a clear, credible rationale for the worker's decisions and actions.

- ***Agency funding may be based upon the documented services delivered (Kagle & Kopels, 2008).*** When agencies seek funding, whether from private grants or public revenues, they must submit statistics regarding the services delivered within the agency. Any service provided but not documented cannot be legitimately reported.
- ***Written documents are used as a method to monitor the quality of the services delivered within an organization (Kagle & Kopels, 2008).*** Agencies often use peer review committees to examine client records for information about the quality of the agency's work. Records might be reviewed to gather such information as whether services were delivered promptly, the number of worker contacts required to resolve client difficulties, the effectiveness of interventions being used by workers, and so on. Supervisors may also use records in similar ways to monitor the work of the staff members for whom they are responsible.

Confidentiality and Technology in Written Communication and Reports

Confidentiality is an issue that must always be considered when handling client information. Computer technology can potentially impact the confidentiality of client information. As discussed by Woodside and McClam (2013), three issues need to be addressed when computer technology is used in this way: the security of the data, policies on the use of e-mail and social media for communication, and the security of the communication work site.

When agencies use databases that are connected to larger systems through the Internet, they must ensure that the data is secure through the use of such methods as encryption programs to scramble data en route and firewalls to prevent invasion of the data by unauthorized outside users. Recent advances in storing records off-site in "thecloud" eases the sharing of information among agencies, but potentially raises new concerns about the security of that information.

In the use of e-mail and social media, professionals and clients should be mindful that these are not secure systems of communication. Messages can sometimes be sent to the wrong address inadvertently, and other people besides the client may have access to the client's accounts. Many organizations have developed policies about the use of e-mail and social media in service delivery, often prohibiting their use. Nevertheless, many clients want the convenience of communicating with their human service workers electronically. When agency policy permits this, whether to assume this level of risk should be the client's decision. When clients wish to communicate in these ways, human service professionals should secure signed informed consent documents from them, granting formal permission for these activities. The documents should clearly specify the risks to confidentiality that are inherent in these communications. Ideally, clients should also make the choice as to whether it is acceptable for professionals to communicate with one another about them by e-mail and give written consent if they so choose since these communications too are at risk in terms of security and privacy.

Technology has changed work practices significantly in that professionals can now work from home or other remote sites far more easily than in the past. Each time a professional chooses to work outside the office, special care must be taken to secure documents and notes used in the process. Home computers are generally shared with

family members and even visitors to the home. Human service professionals who work from home must ensure that members and visitors within the household do not have access to information regarding clients on the handwritten notes that might have been used in the course of their work or through access to computer files (Woodside & McClam, 2013). Similarly, communication that is carried out from home or other sites must also be secured. Working online in unsecured or minimally secured public hotspots on any projects that involve confidential information is not advised. As this discussion makes clear, technology has streamlined many writing and communications tasks for human service professionals and has great potential to facilitate a variety of communications with clients and colleagues. With these conveniences, however, come special challenges and responsibilities to safeguard client confidentiality. The rapid advances in technology have often left human service organizations ill-prepared to address the many challenges and questions that they raise. In your internship, this dimension of agency practice is a timely and significant issue for you to research and observe.

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