



**TEACHING SOCIAL WORK WITH GROUPS: MAKING THE COVERT  
OVERT**

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## **Teaching Social Work with Groups – Making the Covert Overt**

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Teaching Social Work Practice with Groups is a challenging endeavor. This session will explore the relevant literature for various models and methods of teaching group work practice. It will give a detailed description of one successful model for doing so and will place this model within the context of the literature.

### **Prevalence and Quality of Group Work Education:**

The literature shows that while education about groups and emphasis on group work practice in the social work curriculum is declining, the expectation of social workers to conduct groups in practice is actually increasing (Birnbaum & Wayne, 2000; Clements, 2008; Knight, 1999 in Dennison, 2005; Lazar, 2007). Further, the focus on generalist practice has involved less specific teaching in group work practice, resulting in graduates being expected to facilitate groups without the necessary course work to prepare them (Birnbaum & Wayne, 2000; Lazar, 2007). Studies are also showing that while students often don't feel prepared enough with their group work education (Clements, 2008; Goodman, Knight & Khudododov, 2012), what education they do receive makes a difference in their knowledge of group work standards and confidence in their ability to practice according to these standards (Macgowan & Vakharia, 2012; Shera, Muskat, Delay, Quinn & Tufford, 2013). Confidence and knowledge in group work is further correlated with intent to do group work practice in the future (Clements, 2008).

### **Methods of Teaching Social Work with Groups:**

There are many different ways to approach teaching social work with groups. Berger (1996) outlines four basic methods of teaching group work skills, involving didactic, observational, experiential participation and experiential group leadership opportunities. Berger advocates taking into account various factors related to class size, phase in educational development of the student, teaching philosophy, and learning style of the student to combine these methods in a way that is effective for students.

### **Didactic Tools and Techniques**

Knight (2014) summarizes several techniques used by instructors to teach group work theory and skills, including use of case examples; reflections on the group as a client and making connections to the class itself as a group; learning about group type and implications through identifying particular populations and discussing type and characteristics of group that would best suit; exploration of the role of activities to reach a deeper purpose than being an end in themselves; factors related to group formation and composition; as well as modeling practice skills through the instructor's interaction with the class, and using role plays to demonstrate skills. Assignments included such things as development of a proposal for a group and an in depth analysis of a group session the student has led or co-led.

### **Experiential Methods**

Several authors indicate that experiential learning seems to be most helpful for student growth in knowledge and skill (Macgowan & Vakharia, 2012; Shera et al., 2013). Birnbaum in 1984 highlighted three particular models of experiential teaching of group work skills. The first involved student participation in a self-awareness or personal growth group to develop skills as a group member. The second required leadership by the student of an experiential group of fellow students with evaluative feedback from peers, video-tape and faculty supervision. The third method that was explored in more depth involved a combination of experiential group participation within the classroom in a way that

integrated didactic and experiential learning. Students participated in an experiential personal growth group in the first half of the class. In the second half of the class the instructor was able to help students integrate their experiences in the group with the concepts and theory being taught (Birnbaum, 1984).

### **Combining Didactic and Experiential Learning**

Dennison, (2005) uses the approach of combining didactic and experiential learning. She suggests using five steps to sequence learning - incorporating didactic learning, experiential group participation, the use of group interventions from a therapeutic plan, taking the role of an experiential group leader, and use of integrative learning discussions. She provides students with a course packet that includes expectations and resources necessary for students to participate and take turns leading a support group with their classmates. Each week the class begins with some didactic teaching, and then the students in small groups participate in role-playing the beginning or termination phase of a different type of group with information provided to assist them in conducting a relationship or task focused technique. The class then joins back for a discussion connecting earlier didactic content and theory with their practice experience. Each student has the opportunity to lead the group about 2 or 3 times. While the small group membership remains the same throughout the course, there is a different weekly assignment for the groups with a different population and skill at the focus. Because of this the students do not fully experience the stages of group development and other group process elements.

Shera et al., (2013) also incorporate structured role-played group activities alongside other didactic and experiential exercises. Their format involves student co-facilitation of short 10-15 minute group role plays with a provided scenario and roles, a second set of co-facilitation and finally a 10-15 minute debriefing session where observers, facilitators and participants can reflect on the experience.

Macgowan and Vakharia (2012) involve 4 different assignments in their groups course – leading role

plays, participating in role plays, observing role plays and completing a paper – these were linked to particular microskills connected with the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups' standards of practice. They found that actually leading the role plays contributed most heavily to building knowledge and skill in group work.

Lazar (2007) identifies a framework for teaching social work with groups that involves first dealing with the fear that students have related to leading groups – developing group cohesion and decreasing stress to encourage students to take risks, incorporating planning as a necessary component for successful groups, and recognizing and facilitating mutual aid among students – recognizing that students bring knowledge and experience with them and that they can learn from each other. The course is then structured in 3 phases to create opportunities for students to experience the process of groups, not just complete tasks related to learning. Week 1 involves 3 half-days intended to provide students with an opportunity to build relationships with each other, learn about themselves, gain some knowledge about group work through didactic learning, and parallel the engagement phase of group work with relationship building and setting of group norms. Week 2, the middle phase parallels the working stage of group with 3 more half-days that involve mini-lectures, role plays and learning about the stages of group development as well as preparation for separation and termination. Week 3 occurs after 1 month apart giving students the opportunity to plan and facilitate a mutual aid group and role play a 45 minute group session with each member taking on a character with time at the end for discussion and feedback.

### **Role Play Vs Authentic Experience**

Some programs rather than relying on structured role-play scenarios for group work, incorporate ways for students to experience personal growth through group membership. Similar to Birnbaum (1984), Humphrey (2014) wanted students to have the opportunity to “conduct authentic

groups, learn about the group process by experiencing the group, and gain experience as group leaders” (p. 63). To this end as students in her group course were also taking a field practicum, she created a practicum support group focused on stress reduction and burnout prevention. The first session was led by the instructor, but each subsequent week a student would take a turn facilitating, after meeting with the instructor ahead of time to receive feedback on the agenda and goals for the session. Through use of a scale created by Clements (2008), she found that students’ perceived knowledge of group work practice had improved, and through student reflections found that the experiential learning of leading and participating in a group were key. Gutman and Shennar-Golan (2012) built on Berger’s (1996) work emphasizing multidimensional learning, and incorporated an experiential aspect to group work by having a 3 week section in the beginning of the course that saw the class become a support group to each other with the instructor acting as an observer. The second phase of the course had the instructor returning to a more didactic approach with the ability to point to the experiences of the in-class support group to flesh out the concepts being taught. Gutman and Shennar-Golan (2012) speak of the “complex dance” between the four dimensions of the roles of educator and facilitator, and the classroom versus the group setting (p. 144). They also push further to make a connection with the community by having students explore group programs available in the community, presenting those to their peers and exploring the gaps in group work services.

Humphrey (2014) also incorporated a support group within the class, and noted the importance of ensuring the ground rules of confidentiality and the role of the group as support and education, not for exploration of deeper emotional issues. Clements & Minnick in a 2012 study incorporated a stress management group for rural BSW students to reduce stress, teach self-care and develop core group work skills. Students were required to take part in a stress management group run by the university but not led by their SW with Groups teacher. This afforded them the opportunity to observe group

leadership skills, while minimizing dual relationships and the concern about therapeutic content being evaluated or shared with the instructor.

### **Parallel Process – The Class as a Group**

Birnbaum in 1984 identified the use of the class as a group, describing the instructor as a leader whose role is to help members with engagement and the development of group norms. Clemans (2011) also explored experiential group membership through use of a “check-in” in the classroom setting where students were able to discuss their field work experiences, and the concept of parallel process with the connection between the roles as they emerge in the classroom and how these are translated into practice. Clemans draws on the work of Shulman (1987) where he highlights the classroom as a mutual aid group. The class itself shows evidence of mutual aid group work through elements such as the offering of emotional support, seeing each other as sources of information, working through conflict together, as well as factors like mutual demand for work, and rehearsal. Shulman notes the parallels with the class in terms of phases of group development, and the necessity to balance content and process within the class/group to allow the class to develop well as a group – tailoring particular learning activities to coincide with appropriate stages of group development and encouraging reflection about the group processes that students see in the class and how these connect with their experiences leading groups in the field setting. As Humphrey (2014) does, Shulman also marks that line between educator and therapist, noting the need to keep to the educational contract with students. “They could feel safer risking in class, with the knowledge that I would not allow the class to turn into a therapeutic experience by probing into their personal lives, even if they appeared to be asking me to do just that” (Shulman, 1987, p.9). Birnbaum (1984) also noted the importance of treating the class itself as a group, with the instructor as leader who facilitates member engagement and development of group norms with the students in the class.

These models and methods for doing group work can also be separated into three categories that end up being used in combination with each other. The first involves more traditional didactic teaching incorporating lectures, guest speakers, videos, discussions, activities and role plays designed to solidify particular skills. This approach lends itself to the models of Dennison (2005), Macgowan and Vakharia (2012), Shera et al. (2013), and Lazar (2007). The second method includes many of the didactic teaching methods of the first model, but also incorporates experiential learning that creates opportunities for students to participate in a group as a member, or as a combination of member and leader. Some of these courses expect students to participate as themselves in an existing personal growth group that is separate from the course (Clements & Minnick, 2012), while others incorporate a personal growth group or support group within the class (Clemans, 2011; Birnbaum, 1984; Humphrey, 2014). Some classes in addition to expecting students to observe and reflect on group process as a member also expect students to take a turn at facilitating or co-facilitating the group. A final category for learning involves reflecting on the class as a group experience, planning and interacting with students as one would in a group while maintaining the educational focus, and lifting out and naming elements of group dynamics and process as they occur in the class setting. Shulman (1987) and Birnbaum (1984) in particular refers to this, and Lazar (2007) emphasizes group process in the classroom in planning the framework for a groups course. Knight (2014) also mentions this method in her review of classroom techniques.

### **My Model:**

In developing a model for teaching social work with groups, Booth University College has worked hard to create opportunities for experiential skill development alongside development of knowledge and critical thinking. Our model balances all three aspects of didactic learning, experiential learning as a member as well as a leader, and reflective learning related to the parallel process of observing the class as a group.

Each class session is created with these goals in mind, and the arc of the course reflects the development of the class as it moves through phases of group development, with the instructor modeling and embodying the facilitation skills to assist the class with this growth.

**Structure:**

Our course is structured with one 3 hour class session every week for 13 weeks. From weeks 4-12 (depending on class size) students are required to be part of a Group Facilitation Lab – a weekly one hour session where students participate in and take turns leading a role-played treatment group. The 45 minute group sessions and 15 minute debriefings are recorded and a DVD of the session along with the facilitator’s self-critique is submitted to the instructor for feedback and grading. In the week prior to the facilitation, that week’s facilitator submits an agenda to the instructor for feedback. Depending on class size there are 2 or 3 facilitation groups created by the instructor with attention paid to factors like diversity, practicum experience, gender, leadership skills. As this is a fourth year course most students have completed or are in their first field placement. We use the Toseland and Rivas (2012) text, *An Introduction to Group Work Practice 7th Ed.*, because it gives a good solid knowledge base for both treatment and task groups. Student assignments include: Participation; Facilitation Group Leadership and Self-Critique; Task Group project – creation of a proposal for an 8 week treatment group (group mark) with curriculum (each student is responsible to develop and is individually graded on 2 session plans); Analysis of functioning of Task Group.

**Making the Covert Overt:**

Each class session involves a combination of didactic methods like lecture, video, small and large group discussion, project work, role plays and activities. Activities are used in many different ways. Ice-breaker activities in earlier classes help the class to get to know each other and feel comfortable with each other (ie. take something from your purse or backpack and explain how it represents you). Other

activities are used as a springboard to introduce a concept and engage the class in relating to the concept. Different kinds of activities are used to assist students with setting goals or reviewing goals, with identifying strengths that a student brings to group work, and to help them celebrate or consolidate learning. When an activity is completed it is debriefed to help students articulate their learning about themselves and the experience, but then a second parallel layer of debriefing is sometimes used to explore the facilitation skills used in the activity and the potential for use in future groups. Students are invited to look “behind the curtain” to explore how and why the instructor has used certain techniques, activities or interventions to guide the learning and the development of the class. In this way the instructor throughout works at making the covert overt. This sense of making the covert overt also happens at various points when certain concepts or principles are evident within the class itself. The instructor at times pauses the conversation and highlights to the class the concept that is being displayed, or reflecting back to past classes to identify examples of the concept, and students are encouraged to ask questions about techniques that the instructor uses in the class.

### **Week1:**

This week the emphasis is on developing the classroom as a group. The instructor uses an icebreaker introduction activity to build relationships between the instructor and students and also between the students themselves. Students are paired up and asked to introduce each other along with one surprising thing about themselves and one thing they want to learn in the class. This serves to build connections between students, increase safety, link to the larger purpose of the course, identification of universality in shared goals, and allows for segue to the syllabus where students can then see where we will address their learning. Course expectations and assignments are reviewed. The remainder of the class involves both process and content elements. A visual reflective activity has students identifying strengths, abilities and experiences that they draw on, and also has the students name an area of

growth that they hope to develop. The activity is then debriefed as one would in a group session.

Content for the class involves didactic work related to the history of group work, types of groups and the advantages of group work. Students are exposed to the concepts of content and process in groups and we explore the various levels of learning that will happen in the class, including stepping back and taking note of the group dynamics as they occur in the classroom as a group and identifying various interventions that are used by the instructor to facilitate both learning and group development.

With a larger class, small groups of 6 students are formed and opportunity is given at the beginning of each class to “check-in” with each other. The purpose is to build relationship and create greater opportunity for students to share with each other, with the intention that comfort in the smaller group will translate to greater willingness to risk in participating in the larger class. They afford the opportunity as well for students to be exposed to various check-in activities that they could later use themselves.

## **Week 2**

This week is also heavily weighted towards process and the class as an example of a group. We begin again in the same check-in groups – again to build relationship and encourage risk-taking. We use this session to create a set of class norms to further guide our interactions beyond the criteria listed in the syllabus. The didactic elements of the class involve the use lecture and group discussion to review concepts of group dynamics and cohesion and stages of group development. We also cover information related to planning a group. At this point students get into their facilitation lab groups and use class time to begin planning for their fictional role-played group, identifying the purpose and membership of the group – ie a group of teens struggling with parents’ divorce meeting with the guidance counsellor at their school. Each student must create a character to role play that would be a member of that group. The group is intentionally fictional to address the challenge that several authors identified regarding

personal therapeutic issues and their appropriateness in classroom (Shulman, 1987; Humphrey, 2014; and Clements & Minnick, 2012). Students are advised to ensure the topic for the group is not something that they are personally struggling with. Having a role-played group allows students to develop further learning with a particular population or issue and anticipatory empathy for clients experiencing that particular issue.

### **Week 3**

This week students begin again with a check-in in their small groups. We explore fears of group leadership alongside fears that group participants might have about joining a group. We look at personal qualities of group leaders and then dive into clarifying some of the steps in leading a first session and becoming more familiar with the beginning phase of group development including building trust and relationship. Video clips from past student groups are used to show examples of concepts related to group beginnings. We review the process for setting an agenda for facilitation lab groups and ensure the first facilitator is ready to lead the group the next week. The first facilitation is done by someone who has had experience with group facilitation in the past.

### **Week 4**

This week facilitation labs begin. These occur at a separate lab slot not during class time. The instructor is present for the first session to observe the 45 minute session and leads the debriefing questions that focus the feedback for the facilitator. This feedback is helpful to the facilitator who then responds to the same areas in their self-reflection paper that is handed in with the recording of the session. In subsequent sessions the instructor is not present and the debriefing is led by the students with prepared questions related to stage of group development, group cohesion, member growth and development, facilitator techniques, structure of the session, and planning for elements that need to be addressed in the next session.

In the regular class session, the small check-in groups become an opportunity for students to share their experiences in their facilitation groups. Themes from these conversations then are raised in the larger class as students begin to make connections between the concepts taught in class and their experiences as group members and leaders. Classroom content in this week relates to transition stage characteristics, and group leadership skills related to working with conflict and difficult or disruptive behaviour. Role plays are used to help students gain experience and explore ways of dealing with difficult behaviours. Videos are also used to give students some examples of how to work through the transition stage.

### **Weeks 5 – 12**

The weekly facilitation group labs continue, as does the format of beginning class with a small group check in and further sharing in the larger group of the themes, concepts and connections students are making in their facilitation groups. Class content in each week focuses on further knowledge related to particular stages of group development and identification and development of skills related to facilitating groups - in particular skills for the working stage, use of theory in groups, and termination and evaluation in groups. In week 5 we discuss task groups to help students prepare for participating in a small task group to complete the major written project in the course – development of a proposal for an 8 week treatment group including session plans. In later sessions we discuss observation and assessment in groups, and spend some time exploring the role of activities in groups. These sessions also provide information that is applied in their reflective analysis of the functioning of their task group and activities that can be incorporated into the curriculum of their group.

### **Final Week**

This week we again ensure that the focus is on the class as a group as we model appropriate termination, celebrating our learning together, offering a chance to share feelings about endings,

identify questions we've answered and questions that remain ensuring that students have knowledge of sources of information and support as they move into professional group work practice. We consolidate learning by reviewing goals that had been set at the beginning of the class and have an activity to demonstrate this learning, and give an opportunity for students to share their appreciation with each other.

## **Conclusion**

This model of teaching social work with groups is a rich learning experience that engages students through didactic, experiential and reflective learning. Students are exposed within the class to the knowledge needed to conduct a group through case examples, lecture, video, small and large group discussion. They develop skills through their experiences as member and leader of an 8 – 10 week role played group. They are able to reflect on their learning through observation of the class as a group, and participation in a task group developing a proposal and curriculum for a group. Feedback through course evaluations concurs with that evidenced by Macgowan & Vakharia, (2012), and Shera, Muskat, Delay, Quinn & Tufford, (2013) consistently showing that the greatest source of learning for students is the facilitation group. Further, in concurrence with Clements (2008) while there are considerable nerves leading up to their leadership of the role played group, students continue to state through their course evaluations that these groups were instrumental in helping them develop their skills and confidence in group work, leading to them feeling prepared to and interested in leading groups in the future.

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