

Book groups in social work education: A method for modelling groupwork practice

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Abstract: *The use of book groups as a learning medium in social work education has evolved rapidly over the last few years, with universities and practice settings across the UK and beyond adopting the approach to supplement traditional teaching methods (Taylor, 2014). Where employed, student social workers and practitioners have found book groups to be effective for consolidating understandings that support professional development. Thus far, however their use within modules of learning as a means to demonstrating groupwork practice has not been fully realised. The following account proposes a teaching approach which is twofold in nature. On the one hand it engages students, within their initial social work training, in a group experience and on the other, through the group, makes explicit the knowledge and skills essential to effective groupwork for practice. This paper offers book groups as medium through which students can develop groupwork knowledge and skills; and makes the point that groupwork remains a viable method of intervention in social work practice.*

Keywords: *book groups, groupwork, social work education, teaching, learning, student social workers*

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Introduction

As a student social worker I was intrigued by systems theory and groupwork. Groupwork was not high on the agenda throughout my professional social work training and education. Indeed, whenever I mentioned it I was met with comments such as, 'you don't want to do that', 'it is incredibly hard to do you know', 'it takes a lot of skill', 'it's a dated approach' etc. However, when tasked to write about an 'appropriate' method of intervention for a preparation for practice module, using an approach of our choice, you can guess what came up. I viewed this piece of work as the perfect opportunity to explore groups and groupwork much further and to investigate the dominance of individual work that seemed to saturate my learning experience. Reading my social work Bible of the time Coulshed and Orme's (1998) 'Social Work Practice' led me to think much more about how groups and the groupwork process could form part of my knowledge base for practice. I then came across Benson's (2000) 'Working Creatively with Groups' a text that outlined notions like resourcefulness and the power within the group to effect change. These writers and many more fuelled my curiosity and left me with a desire to put this method of intervention into practice. It just made so much sense for me to think about the way in which a system works, particularly when the system is a human system presenting with what (Benson, 2000) refers to as a common need.

Where my student peers would shy away from the very thought of constructing an intervention using the groupwork methodology I would be seeking these opportunities out. Practice Educators whose job it was to 'manage' my learning would sigh at the mention of yet another group; but thankfully they tolerated the various rationale presented, which of course was always service-user focussed and underpinned by a value-base that sought to promote self-actualisation and self-determination. I am quite proud to report that even though I appreciate the value and the appropriateness of individual work I always had a gravitational pull towards groupwork, where relevant. Few of my student peer group at the time shared my enthusiasm and passion, preferring individual work over groupwork, even when groupwork had the potential to shape service-users' outcomes in a manner that naturally gave them the power and context to effect the change they saw as necessary to their actualisation.

When I became a social work educator I sought ways to use groupwork in my teaching and also offer the opportunity to students to develop groupwork skills and confidence so they in turn might consider groupwork as a social work method. One of the ways in which I have done this is through book groups as a teaching and learning methodology. This is an approach to educating future social work practitioners that uses fiction to reflect on and consolidate knowledge across the capabilities for practice. The success of book group rests mainly within its context - the group.

Book groups in social work education

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The use of book groups as a teaching and learning medium is somewhat new in social work education (Taylor, 2014 cited in Westwood, 2014; Scourfield and Taylor, 2013), yet there are numerous accounts of their significance and successes within the popularist context (Hartley, 2002). Whether in education or for leisure the reading of fiction affords readers with an opportunity to engage with the fictive realities of the other (Taylor, 2015 cited in Brewer and Hogarth, 2015). Through fiction readers can gain insights into the lives of characters and the array of circumstances they find themselves within; insights that are not always directly available through curriculum content. Thus fiction as a medium can facilitate a breadth of understanding impossible to achieve within the scope of initial social work training. Indeed, it is unrealistic to expect that professional socialisation could ever capture the infinite range of human experiences that practitioners may encounter once qualified. Therefore, using fiction in social work education is worthy of consideration given that more often than not the stories read are uniquely different to one's own. In addition to the benefits of reading fiction are the advantages of doing so within a group, where the sharing of realisations and understandings prompts analysis and promotes reflection. The learning potential available within the group increases the more readers reveal. Integral to a group discussion

are what students and practitioners describe as intra and inter-personal exchanges. Group discussions can evoke internal dialogue that is additional to the interpersonal dialogue being had with the other group members. Not only do readers engage with the fictive realities of the characters they also interact with their own realities and those of the other group members. In total, through the book group experience, knowledge is revisited, actively applied and made available through being shared by group members within the group discussion.

The following excerpts are taken from a range of video blogs recorded to capture the essence of book group from the student perspective:

It [book group] gives you the time and space to practice applying theories', 'I was thinking through different lenses', 'It helped me to see how theory relates to real life situations', 'I was able to hear how other students think and learned so much from the way they looked at the book, like it was a real case', 'I couldn't believe that I could learn so much through reading and discussing fiction. (Taylor, 2015, n.p)

The student accounts above highlight the range of learning available within this group learning activity. Consistent with these accounts are the accounts of practitioners whose reflections mirror those of the students in terms of learning potential:

These conversations are really powerful in helping us to reflect.
I can step back a bit more and be more honest.
One sentence can be interpreted in so many different ways – it [book group] brings in so many perspective.
It [book group] gives me time to stop and think.
The book made me realise how desensitised I have become.
(Triggs, 2015; Child, 2015).

Implicit within these rich descriptions is evidence of the impact of applying core concepts, in a group context, from across the social work curriculum to fictive realities. Evidence points to how book groups can create learning environments where we can become familiar with the unfamiliar, comfortable with the uncomfortable and realistic about that which is often perceived as unrealistic (Howard, 2009). Thus, using the group discussion as a learning device is highly compatible with

the creation of learning spaces that stimulate knowledge acquisition through experiential analysis. As acknowledged by Froggett, et al (2014)

this kind of training, [experiential], provides a psychosocial support to practitioners who must develop emotional literacy and resilience along with an ability to appraise and critique institutional and political structures. Its aim, in short, is to help ... [students] think the 'psycho' and the 'social' together. (p. 14)

Even though there is clear indication of professional development and evidence of the potential available within a book group to generate learning and reflection, direct reference to the notion of group or group process is rarely considered; as can be seen in the student and practitioner feedback above. This is slightly surprising when one thinks about Shulman's (1987) description of the classroom as 'a powerful force for effective learning' (p.3), but then perhaps unsurprising when reflecting upon the work of Clements (2008) which acknowledges a steady 'decline' (p.330) in the teaching of groupwork practice in social work education and training. It does however, resonate with what Fleming and Ward (2013) discuss as the 'evaporation' (p.61) of groupwork in practice more broadly; highlighting how groupwork has almost gone out of fashion or off the agenda in favour of individual work.

Despite the fact that student and practitioner feedback reflects a level of consciousness regarding the learning that is occurring and an awareness that this learning is occurring within group, the group as a living organism to a larger extent requires acknowledgement. In addition it can provide further evidence of the appropriateness of taking advantage of book groups as a means to illuminating and modelling groupwork for social work practice. Such modelling also would demonstrate the knowledge, values and skills necessary to facilitate a group and also the principles and understandings required to replicate book groups as a practice intervention. It is within this article that a rationale for the modelling and the tenets of book groups in social work are presented.

Popularist Reading groups: A template for learning?

Book groups, or reading groups as they are sometimes referred to, as a collective leisure activity, continue to generate interest and create cause for comment (Hall, 2003; Higgins, 2005; Knoch Farr and Harker, 2009); implying an appeal, a durability and a widespread membership. They were popularised by the American celebrity Oprah Winfrey in the mid-nineties when she incorporated a book group into her television show (Rooney, 2005). Irrespective of this exposure, book groups have existed in many guises throughout human history and can be understood as operating in any context where a group of people have agreed to assemble and discuss their thoughts about a previously agreed, normally fictional, text (Long, 2003).

A survey by academics Hartley and Turvey (2013) who were interested in finding out about reading groups in non-academic settings, sought to collate information about the construct, usage, duration and content of such groups (Hartley, 2002 p.viii). To their surprise they found approximately '50,000' book groups in the UK and cite a knowledge of approximately '500,000' in the USA (p.vii). In addition, the volume of groups that existed at the time their findings also contained an incredible degree of complexity in what at first glance might appear to be an unexceptional or commonplace activity. It is this point that is significant with regards to social work education in terms of the construct of groupings and their frequency.

Hartley and Turvey (2013) heard from men's reading groups, children's reading groups, groups led by politicians in residential homes for older adults, rural reading groups, psychotherapeutic reading groups, lesbian and gay reading groups, neighbourhood reading groups, reading groups in prisons and groups for those who have a visual impairment, coexisting mother and children groups. Interestingly, and notable is the diversity that they found across the groups, diversity synonymous with the groupings familiar to social work practice, where commonality of need (Benson, 2000) meets with service provision,. One of the main outcomes of their work was the development of the reading groups in prisons initiative, the success of which is substantiated by the volume of groups that remain in place (Hartley and Turvey, 2013).

Thinking about the content and context of these groupings contemporaneous to how fiction was being used in social work

education, led me to explore the potential of book groups in training for social work practice. I was interested to consider how learning in this context could assist students to consider the power within a group to address common need (Benson, 2000) and to reflect on the applicability of the process across a range of service user groups.

Book groups: Learning about groupwork experientially

In this paper I build upon the original book group idea (Scourfield and Taylor, 2014) mentioned earlier in this work, considering how book groups function as a group and how this functioning could be made explicit to the students as they experience it within a module-based learning event. It became evident whilst facilitating book groups that students could be helped to not only understand groupwork skills and principles but to also consider themselves as future groupwork practitioners. In light of this I suggest the following as module aims:

- to outline book group as a method of intervention, taught through an experiential group within which the student is an active participant.
- to demonstrate group facilitation, making reference to groupwork skills throughout.
- to appraise readiness for practice as a groupwork practitioner through the assessment of a reflective narrative.

Given the types of learning that can be accessed within a book group, modules pertaining to readiness to practice might be the most suitable context for educators considering this approach.

Central to this type of book group experience are phases, replicating those more generally accepted or known as the 'groupwork process'. The initial planning stages through to the ending, as outlined in the table below, should be made clear to the student group from the outset. When discussing the facilitation of groupwork in practice Lindsay and Orton (2014) refer to 'principle tasks' which they summarise as 'planning the group, intervening in the group, monitoring the group, maintaining the group' (p.19). These are useful points of reference for educators when

drafting lesson plans for this teaching method, alongside constructing the necessary links for the students to groupwork theory and practice throughout the duration of the group.

Acknowledging and making known the type, purpose, duration and possible dynamics that exist as a group first convenes is the starting point for the facilitation of a learning space that aims to explain and demonstrate groupwork as a practice approach. A productive learning environment is developed through the skillful use of group facilitation via the educator. Educators should explicitly contextualise learners as a 'group,' a whole which is more than the sum of its parts and creates an energy of its own. Indeed, Lewin (1951) acknowledges this in his definition of a 'group' stating, 'conceiving a group as a dynamic whole should include a definition of group that is based on interdependence of the members (or better, the subparts of the group)' (p.146). Making explicit that which is implicit and stating the unstated will give the group a sense of connectivity and illuminate the distinctiveness of each individual group member and their role and impact within the whole. It will also be necessary to confirm the group's common goals and define ground rules, in essence an exercise that equates to group 'contracting' (Preston-Shoot, 1990 p.48).

Throughout the life of the group it will be essential for the educator to identify happenings that form opportunities to reflect back to group members the dynamics occurring within the group; setting these experiences within the theoretical groupwork context and making reference to application in practice. The table below outlines the groupwork process from a teaching perspective; making it clear how the learning will be facilitated and how the tenets highlighted are comparable to that of the groupwork practice approach.

Groupwork (theoretical context)	Book group (Education context)
Planning, preparation, group programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator chooses a fictional text (module / subject specific) • Educator outlines the book group programme in the module handbook (week, portion of the text, overall learning objectives) • Educator identifies knowledge, values, skills as a structure for engaging with the text • Educator engages in preparatory annotation of the text - highlighting portions most relevant to the module aims
Leadership, facilitation & skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator facilitates the teaching space for the duration of the group • Educator employs a range of teaching and learning strategies, which includes attention to diversity in the student group, learning styles, aims and objectives • Educator demonstrates communication skills appropriate to groupwork as a practice approach • Educator explicitly employs group management techniques
Contracting, group process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educator begins by agreeing group rules (returns to these each session) • Educator highlights the group process and elements of the same (dynamics, group roles, skills) – it is useful to return to the elements of the group process as appropriate to the learning until embedded
Beginning, middle, end (groupwork sessions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beginnings – outline in each session where the group is at in terms of objectives and timeframe; also allow time for group member ‘check-in’ • Middle – outline work phase (weekly and as a whole) • Ending – closure (weekly and finally at the last session) ‘check-out’
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-going and on completion

Book Group: A teaching and learning template

The success of this teaching method depends on whether each student, as a group member, experiences the group, in a relational sense, through a collaborative process where objectives are achieved both at an individual and at group level. Doel and Kelly (2014) emphasise the benefits of using 'learning groups' to demonstrate groupwork in practice; noting that they have the potential to be 'experiential' in nature (p.80). It however will be the educators' handling of the interpersonal interactions and realities, as they present, that will form the experiences necessary for students to truly understand and embrace groupwork as a dynamic, interactive and effective practice approach.

Book groups: An approach for practice?

Students who have been exposed to a book group within a learning context, where groupwork as a method of intervention has been made explicit, should subsequently be equipped with understandings that enable them to deploy the book group approach as groupwork practice.

In terms of book group as a method for practice, the principles employed to identify a group for whom a book group is appropriate are dependent upon the problem defined by potential group members, and whether or not the problem is common in terms of the need to explore, accept or resolve. Initially, however, this commonality should be evident from within the broad reach of a service provision. For example a social worker working with people experiencing addictions might find a group of service users interested in coming together to explore common problems, through exploring literature pertaining to their common issues relating to addiction. I have found *Recovery Stories: Journeys through Adversity, Hope and Awakening* (Jopling, 2014) to be a relevant book for such a group. A text like *Still Alice* could be appropriate for those practitioners whose role it is to support carers of parents with dementia, as within this text a range of emotions are experienced and problems navigated (Genova, 2014). In relation to children who have or are experiencing the care system, who are struggling to think about life after care *The Brightness of Stars* (Cherry, 2013) might offer a context for hope, as this book contains verbatim stories of survival and life

after care. *Disappearing Home* (Morgan, 2013) is an excellent book for discussion with groups of service-users whose common challenge is domestic violence, its impact on family systems and children's well-being and development. Similarly, the semi-autobiography *Why be Happy when you can be Normal* (Winterson, 2012) provides the ideal context for groups addressing the journey experienced by children who have been adopted. There are many more.

The next phase of the groupwork process will be the individual assessments of potential group members to ascertain readiness to partake in such a group activity. Group planning involves the choice of an appropriate text, annotated in preparation by the group facilitator, a room and a decision as to how many sessions will be required to enable group members to read and discuss the book. Alongside the group discussion, the groupwork practitioner should make note of the themes arising and use these to help guide the discussion. Facilitation should also be taken into consideration: the need to work with the group and individual members towards exploration, acceptance or resolution of the core shared problem or experience. The groupwork intervention should be followed up with the appropriate recording of that which reflects what has occurred for each group member and the group as a whole.

Conclusion

What a book group, as a groupwork approach, offers is an interconnected environment fused together by the reading of a text with a narrative that resonates with that of the group members / service-users' own experience, an experience or experiences that are familiar to each person within the group. What is significant to this approach is that the commonality is set within a fictional discourse, a place that can provide primary safety for the reading, contemplating and discussing of the content and can deflect away from the self until one is able to think, feel or own the problem or issue for oneself. As illustrated, fiction can be utilised to explore a number of issues or problem areas common to groups of service-users, However identification of an appropriate text that considers the common issue is key to its success.

The reading habits and confidence of future groupwork facilitators will have a bearing on their motivations to engage with this type of

practice approach. This should be acknowledged through an on-going appraisal of the developing professional self, given that, at some point, groupwork might be the only feasible solution to a practice dilemma. How open the practitioner will be to this possibility requires reflective honesty and openness to innovative ways of engaging in practice contexts. As explained by this quote:

The creative possibilities within social work practice for Book Groups are infinite; employing this groupwork process across the broad spectrum of service-user groups, across the life course and in all areas of delivery could be revolutionary in many respects. It is a resourceful, innovative and original way of working that has the potential to engage individuals, groups and communities in a dynamic and effective manner in an attempt to facilitate change. (Taylor, 2014 cited in Westwood, 2014, p.43)

In addition, Taylor and Hemmington (2014) when discussing diversity in mental health practice recognise that ‘professional consciousness’ and ‘authentic understanding’ (p.105) set the scene for creative and reflexive practice; positions that should be of equal importance to the discerning practitioner. It is consciousness in action that can lead to authenticity in approach. It is this that book groups offer to social work education and the subsequent practitioner approach; a resourceful method of intervention that affords group members the power to contemplate and forge change.

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