

# How Group Work Camp Began

Ann M. Bergart<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper describes the origins and evolution of Group Work Camp, an experiential training program sponsored by the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG). The founder's many experiences with camping and experiential learning had convinced her that experiential learning was essential to groupwork education, and that a camp setting was its ideal environment. Group Work Camp evolved out of a pre-symposium institute at the 2009 International Symposium for Social Work with Groups. This institute was held at George Williams College of Aurora University, a beautiful lakeside campus steeped in groupwork history. This one-time event was received so well that participants advocated for its continuation. The Board of Directors of IASWG agreed to offer the institute again as a pilot program. When it was again successful the organization began to sponsor it biennially. The model was adapted and called Group Work Camp. It has been offered three times in its current form. In 2015 the first European Group Work Camp was held in Lithuania, adapted to local needs. It was also very successful, suggesting the flexibility of the model. It is hoped that in the future there will be many adaptations in different parts of the world.

**Keywords:** Group Work Camp; groupwork education; groupwork training; experiential learning; mentoring; camping.

1. Part-time social work academic and practitioner, Member of the Board of Directors of IASWG

**Address for correspondence:** [annbergart@gmail.com](mailto:annbergart@gmail.com)

**Date of first (online) publication:** 29th May 2017

**Acknowledgements:** Heartfelt thanks to all those who helped to develop and continue to support and carry out the Group Work Camp model, including all who contribute scholarships to enable students to attend. You are too many to name, but I would like to give special thanks to the following individuals: Sandra Alcorn, Fred Lickerman, Jen Clements, John Genke, Greg Tully, Steve Kraft, Joanne Sulman, Jorune Vysniauskyste-Rimkiene, Ginette Berteau, Cynthia Martiny, Martin Camire, Hilda Baar, Mark Smith, Mitch Rosenwald, Joyce Webster, Sue Ross, Ruth Frerichs, Ingrun Masanek, Barbara Joslyn, Joan Piowaty, and Bonnie Rhim. I am profoundly grateful to the Editors of Groupwork for devoting this issue to Group Work Camp.

As founder of Group Work Camp, a program sponsored by the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG), I have been asked to relate the story of its origins and evolution. This event has now taken place three times in the United States and once in Europe, and will be held in Canada during the summer of 2017

## **Group Work Camp as experiential learning and nondeliberative practice**

Group Work Camp is a form of experiential education, conceptualized by John Dewey (1910; 1938) as part of the progressive education movement. ‘According to Dewey, empowerment occurs through an experiential approach to learning, or, in the terms for which Dewey is best known, learning by doing.’ (Goldstein, 2001, p. 63). Dewey views personal experience as ‘the catalyst that links theory and practice’ (p. 7).

In terms of its experiential method, Group Work Camp provides participants with an immersion in group membership, followed by reflection and discussion of what has been experienced and what it means. This type of learning helps novice practitioners to understand the *essence* of social work with groups – via their own experience as members. It calls on *in vivo* experience as the first source of knowledge, with reflection and discussion afterwards leading to conceptualization and integration of this internal knowledge. Traditional forms of education in our culture tend to reverse the order of these two processes, offering thinking before doing. Lang (2016) elaborates on the dynamics of experiential learning in her work on ‘nondeliberative’ forms of social work practice, and Group Work Camp can also be viewed as a form of this type of practice (Bergart, 2016).

## **My own personal and professional experiences in camp settings and experiential learning**

In thinking about writing this paper I realized that the idea for Group Work Camp is deeply rooted in some of my own personal and professional experiences in camp settings. Like many other social

workers of my generation, as a child I attended a summer camp sponsored by a social agency. Although I had no idea at the time, I later realized that my camp counselors were being supervised by social group workers. Shy by nature and very homesick at first, I was gently and competently helped to join the community of my peers and made to feel that I was an important member of our cabin group. My strengths were being recognized, and it was life-changing.

The next experience which eventually led to the idea for Group Work Camp came during my second year as a master's student in social work. Although I took a course in group therapy, I recall little or nothing from that class. During that same year two of my classmates and I had our field placement at a mental health center offering group services to clients. We were fortunate to have a field instructor who believed in groupwork and experiential learning. Along with a number of students from other graduate programs, we were assigned to join a peer group led by another staff member who was a very competent groupworker. Although the overall purpose of the assignment was to learn about groupwork, the specific purpose of this group was to support each other through the difficult process of becoming a social worker. This was a very *real* need, not something manufactured or artificial. As we strived to become a group to meet this need, our leader would periodically stop and engage us in reflecting on the process that was taking place. It was during this experience as a member that I *really* learned what social work with groups is all about. I also fell in love with the power and magic of groups, and embarked on a lifetime commitment to practice and teach social work with groups. This is how I first came to believe that experiential learning is the most valuable strategy for educating people to work with groups.

During my years as a practising social worker I had many other experiences in camp settings – including a retreat where I met my husband! All these events solidified my conviction that leaving our day-to-day environment for a few days and living close to nature with people who have similar goals can be restorative and even transformative. Combining a new environment with a large dose of peer support and stimulation can empower people to develop latent capacities and renew commitment to their ideals – both individually and as a collective. We know such processes and outcomes to be essential elements of social work with groups.

I still attend women's retreats, where being away from home and family allows us to bond and explore our spirituality as well as other important aspects of living – in a singularly focused and playful manner, and within a community of our peers. Inevitably we return home feeling connected and restored, sometimes brimming with new ideas and energy. Being away from home and close to nature has a way of opening our minds and hearts to new experiences, ideas, and relationships.

The next step in the evolution of the Group Work Camp concept came during my years on the faculty of the School of Social Work at Aurora University in Aurora, Illinois. Many of my colleagues there had previously taught at George Williams College, a very unusual school with roots in groupwork and John Dewey's philosophy of experiential education (Dewey, 1938). This institution, known in the past as 'the group work school' (Alcorn, 2007), evolved out of the Western Secretarial Institute, a YMCA training school which was established in 1884 in Williams Bay, Wisconsin on Geneva Lake (a.k.a. Lake Geneva). I will go on to relate the story of its beautiful campus in Williams Bay because many of the roots of youth work and groupwork can be traced to this site. Both the spirit and history of groupwork are still palpable in this special place, making it a perfect environment for Group Work Camp.

Summer training institutes for YMCA workers were held at Williams Bay even before the property was purchased by the YMCA in 1886 and continued for many years afterwards, along with conferences on camping, recreation, and groupwork theory (Alcorn, 2007). The YWCA of North America was chartered at this site in 1886, and it was also there, in the 1890s, that James Naismith and Henry Kallenberg invented the game of basketball!

In 1933 the YMCA College was renamed George Williams College (GWC) in honor of Sir George Williams, who founded the YMCA in London in 1844 (Alcorn, 2007). It was housed in Chicago, Illinois and continued to make active use of the Williams Bay site, traditionally known as 'College Camp'. GWC included a program of social work, but all programs were infused with Dewey's progressive and democratic ideas about education (1910; 1938). One of the professors of that period refers to the mission of the school 'to 'practice democracy' in every learning context. 'Practicing democracy' included experiences

in camping, small-group activity and discussion, physical education, and not-for-profit administration' (Arthur Steinhaus, as cited in Alcorn, 2007, p. 155). In terms of its program for social work education, Alcorn adds that '[t]he college never relinquished the progressive education idea of John Dewey that learning happens by doing. While professional human service societies moved in the direction of the 'medical model,' focusing on pathology, labeling, medication, and 'treatment' of specific problems, the college held firmly to a practice model focused on human strengths, possibility, and relationships for holistic development. The college continued to teach the value of community, being part of a whole, in times when it appeared that society had lost sight of its value.' (p. 245).

In 1985 GWC unexpectedly closed for financial reasons. Aurora University in Aurora Illinois agreed to absorb its social work and recreation programs, along with the historic Wisconsin campus (Alcorn, 2007). Today the Williams Bay site, now called George Williams College of Aurora University, is a vibrant, fully-functioning academic campus, an extension of the main Aurora campus, and continues to provide small group experiences through educational and retreat programs. Several of the original buildings still stand. In recent years the actual study from the home of Sir George Williams, who developed the YMCA movement in London in 1844, was relocated to the campus as a museum.

In 1997 I became acquainted with the GWC site when I began teaching at Aurora University. For many years the School of Social Work, located on the Aurora campus, held its two-day orientation for incoming students there. At that time accommodations were still quite basic, but have since been modernized. Students regularly complained about having to go out of town, get child care, sleep at a camp, deal with insects, etc., etc. Few, however, regretted the experience afterwards. In this natural, informal, camp setting – far from their daily routines and responsibilities for several days – they were free to focus on preparing for their social work education. They could take in new information and get to know peers and faculty, while also having fun. In facilitated group activities one of the things they learned was that their worries about how they would do in the program were shared by others. Anxiety about starting classes and fieldwork plummeted. Many students formed natural peer support systems which saw them through their

graduate education. The incoming classes became cohesive in ways I have never witnessed in other social work programs. Through these *in vivo* experiences our students came to understand the power of groups to provide support and foster growth.

It made a deep impression on me to witness how a group of anxious students who were initially strangers to each other left the orientation feeling supported and reassured, as well as informed. Could this have happened in two eight-hour days of orientation on the main campus? I don't think so. As the original faculty and administration who had migrated to Aurora University from GWC retired and moved on, the orientation was moved to the Aurora campus – despite the best efforts of many students and faculty who believed in the original model. From that time forward our incoming students tended to feel as disconnected and unsupported as their peers in other schools.

Programs such as the one just described have evolved from the summer camp models developed early in the history of social work. By 1912 Hull House, a settlement house co-founded in Chicago, Illinois by Jane Addams in 1889, included a summer camp as part of its complex. Camps were part of many social service agencies through most of the twentieth century, and were a wonderful resource for developing strengths in families and children and introducing a sense of community into the lives of many clients who felt isolated and unsupported. In the words of Hedley Dimock, a professor at GWC in 1936,

The summer camp, perhaps better than any other social institution, with the possible exception of the family, can actualize the democratic ideal in practice. It can recognize the supreme worth and the integrity of each person and make everything else subordinate to this value. It can deliberately seek the growth and creative expression of persons in terms of their individual abilities, interest, and aptitudes. It can provide resources for the essential of life for all, according to need. It can give each person an opportunity to participate in the common social life and to have a sense of being an important member of a community (as cited in Alcorn, 2007, pp. 155-156).

Toward the end of my years at Aurora University I wove together the two threads of personal and professional experience which have been

described in this paper, camp and experiential learning, by teaching an advanced groupwork course in which our MSW students were helped to create a weekend camp experience for high school students. The purpose of this program was to use activity and reflection to help students: (1) become more aware of the obstacles to interracial friendship created by racism in our society; and (2) become better able to develop friendships across race. Getting these adolescents out of their home and school environments was an essential aspect of the program that contributed to its success.

Throughout my teaching career I have emphasized the experiential component whenever I teach a groupwork class. Balancing the didactic and experiential elements is a challenge. Every class is different, and individual students have different learning styles. Teaching groupwork feels a lot like practicing groupwork because in large part it is. The flexibility of a groupworker is needed in order to travel this terrain. My journey as a teacher has further strengthened the convictions that led to the development of Group Work Camp.

## **My experiences in IASWG**

Early in my teaching career I learned of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG), which recently changed its name to the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG). I quickly found kindred spirits there, and this organization became my professional home. For some years I have enjoyed serving on its Board of Directors.

During a speech at our annual symposium in 2007 one of our board members asked why, as social workers, we were holding our conferences in expensive hotels which were financially out of reach for many of our members and potential members. She went on to chair the 2008 symposium which was held in a retreat setting in Cologne, Germany, and the event was a great success. With this the mold was broken.

As co-chair of the 2009 symposium, my vision was for the entire symposium to be held by the lake at GWC instead of in Chicago. This proved to be what we call in the U.S. a 'tough sell'. What we were able to do, however, was to hold a pre-symposium institute there. This day and a half event was the precursor of what later became known as

Group Work Camp. Because people from all over the world attended the symposium we were able to have a large international presence at the institute, which we called *Harnessing the Power of Activities in Groups: A multi-faceted, international learning experience*. A grant obtained from a family foundation was used to give scholarships to twenty students who otherwise would not have been able to attend.

The following memo to the organization's board briefly describes the plans for the institute:

In an effort to return to ... [group work's] historic roots, we are pleased to offer a pre-Symposium institute prior to the 2009 International Symposium. . . The goal of the institute is to help us access our roots and creatively weave activity back into our groups. Initially we will experience a variety of activities, led by invited facilitators who work in various parts of the world. Later we will have the opportunity to meet with other participants in small groups to share activities that work in our own groups, in areas of mutual interest. We will also hear tales of group work, and absorb the wisdom of group work mentors as they meet in a Circle of Elders.

## **Planning the institute**

The institute was planned by a group which was separate from the committee that planned the overall symposium, and included several of my colleagues and contacts from Aurora University. Our underlying beliefs about groupwork, based on the George Williams model of education, informed the way the event was conceptualized. Each attendee would be a contributing member of the community. A member of our planning team introduced us to the 'Skill Swap', a group technique used in organizational development. This method has been adapted from 'Open Space Technology' (Owen, 2008), in which an event is focused on a particular task or theme but opens without a formal agenda ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_Space\\_Technology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_Space_Technology)). At the institute we used the Skill Swap idea to create on-the-spot opportunities for participants to facilitate mini-workshops or discussions in which they could share groupwork strategies they had found useful, or lead a discussion about something they struggled with in their groupwork practice. The first step in preparing participants



is to invite ideas for the swap. This can be done at any group-as-a-whole gathering. The organizer of the swap calls for volunteers to offer to facilitate a swap of their choice, and posts a sign-up sheet for each topic suggested. All topics which have enough sign-ups lead to a swap. The Skill Swap has been part of the model for Group Work Camp from the beginning. It remains one of the most empowering aspects of the experience, especially for students. Many develop so much confidence by facilitating a swap that they go on to present at the annual symposium of the organization.

During one of the institute planning meetings my former dean brought up the idea of having a 'circle of elders'. She had been working on a project to start a university in Angola, Africa, and had learned of a very interesting local tradition practised in many churches and schools. At times of life transition or new initiatives a gathering of elders would share their stories to help younger members of the community move ahead with their lives. She suggested that we convene our own circle, in which several groupwork elders would tell stories and answer questions about their pioneering careers in social groupwork. We invited six elders to participate in the 'Circle of Elders' at the 2009 institute. It was a powerful experience, much valued by those who attended, but so far this activity has not been repeated. A film of the 2009 'Circle of Elders' is available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzWa-p5alWE&list=PLqV3HVyEZxF4SStApMpmcjx7N5-f788Bx&index=1>.

Seventy people attended the institute, which was a resounding success. Some amazing things happened, including the development of international partnerships and ongoing mentoring relationships, as well as a campfire where we sang in more than ten languages. Participants later gave us feedback about the impact of the institute. They reported that they became more comfortable working with activities, developed new skills, and were very much affected by the history they absorbed from the Circle of Elders and the site itself. Networks were formed and collaborations initiated. The event generated a great deal of enthusiasm for groupwork as well as a wave of energy to build on the sense of community which had evolved spontaneously among the practitioners, educators, students, and retirees who attended. Many participants later became active in IASWG, and some even assumed leadership positions. Many goals were achieved. We revived interest within the

organization in the purposeful use of activities, created a vehicle for international exchange, and provided a group of social work students with an educational experience that increased their competence and awakened their enthusiasm and commitment to groupwork.

At the closing event of the institute the participants, who were from 13 different countries and represented the entire adult lifespan, made it clear that they wanted to come back to GWC the following year for more of what we had experienced. They saw a need for this type of training in groupwork, and wanted to urge colleagues and students from various professions to attend in the future. One of the Canadian participants, Joanne Sulman (Personal Communication, 2016), reflects on her initial experience at GWC:

After hearing about the unique 2009 Pre-symposium Institute on the power of activities in groups, I was determined to attend. My path to groupwork began in childhood as a member of kids' groups run by social groupworkers who also ran summer camps. After choosing the profession, I was mentored by Norma Lang, whose mainstream model of social groupwork (Lang, 1979; Papell & Rothman, 1980) gave centrality to activities. In Norma's terms, nondeliberative activities that are artful, actional, and analogic promote self-directed experiential learning that can unlock new ways of understanding, communicating, and problem-solving for all populations (Lang, 2016). At GWC I hoped to find kindred spirits with novel approaches that I could take back to my groups. What I found was much more: a rekindled spirit and community of groupwork, transformational in scope and impact. Technically, the 2009 event may have been a pre-symposium institute, but in fact, the inspiration, planning, and sheer genius of the organizers gave birth to the Group Work Camp concept during those two days. From the point I was picked up at the Brat Stop in Kenosha, Wisconsin on Wednesday, to getting off the bus on Friday to attend the symposium in Chicago, the seeds of Group Work Camp, in everyone's hearts and minds, had been sown.

## **Keeping it going**

Though daunted by the prospect of trying to institutionalize such an event, I promised to do my best to make it happen. In November

of 2009 I reported the success of the institute to the organization's Board of Directors, asking them to consider offering the event on an annual basis. Despite some concerns, they recognized the power and potential of what had occurred at the institute, and were prepared to build on something that had clearly worked very well. The Board agreed to sponsor a second training institute in 2010 as a one-time pilot program. Since it would not be feasible to offer it in conjunction with the annual symposium, which changes location each year, it was decided that the institute would continue to be held at GWC as a separate event. If it could succeed without drawing from symposium attendance the board would consider sponsoring it on a regular basis.

Joining me in the process of planning the next institute were two friends and mentors. Both had attended in 2009, and one had been part of the first planning group. All three of us had all been so impressed by how much the international attendance had added to the first institute that we tried very hard to plan another training experience that could bring in participants from many countries. Despite our best efforts it became apparent that organization members coming to the yearly symposium from abroad would not be able to afford a second trip to the U.S. during the same year. We searched for ways to help with travel expenses, but could find no adequate funding resources. By the time we reached the conclusion that we would have to abandon the international aspect, it was too late to create a new model in time to hold the event in 2010.

Sometime after we passed the initial deadline a new idea emerged – the concept of an educational 'camp' for novice groupworkers and experienced practitioners and educators. Those who were new to groupwork could be inspired by the passion of those who were experienced, and the latter could be re-energized by mentoring the next generation of groupworkers. We believed that potential participants would be drawn by the term 'camp' because it is associated with informality and enjoyment, in contrast with the word 'institute', which connotes formality and seriousness. This reframing of the event would likely attract many students, practitioners, and academics in need of a break from the stresses of school and excessive workloads. It would also provide a wonderful opportunity to engage young people in the organization and cultivate new leaders who hopefully would carry on its mission. With this change in the model

and our goals we began to plan the first Group Work Camp, which took place in 2011.

## **The current model**

The model for Group Work Camp has been presented elsewhere in considerable detail (Rosenwald et al, 2013; Bergart & Clements, 2015; Bergart, 2016). It can be described briefly as follows. Between seventy and one hundred people come to GWC for two and a half days every other summer. At this point at least half are students who have been given scholarships for room, board, and registration. They are responsible for getting to Wisconsin on their own, and are expected to perform a volunteer duty at the event. The rest of the participants are academics and practitioners interested in learning more about how to use activities in their practice and teaching.

The event begins late on a Thursday afternoon. After attendees have settled in and had dinner we all convene for icebreaking exercises and small group discussion. The concept of experiential learning is introduced. Friday begins with team-building exercises, which are experienced and debriefed. Following lunch, where we start to plan the Skill Swap, there are at least two three-hour workshops, one in basic groupwork and one or two at a more advanced level. All workshops are experiential. After some free time and dinner we reconvene as a large group to ‘digest’ the day’s events in small groups which report back to the group-as-a-whole. Sometimes this integrative activity is only with the large group.

On Saturday there are two clusters of ninety-minute experiential workshops in the morning, and Skill Swaps are held in the afternoon, with free time following as well as a workshop about how to prepare a proposal to present a paper or poster at a conference. That evening we have a drama activity which helps participants integrate all they have experienced. This event is followed by a campfire, with singing and stories, accompanied by a traditional camping snack called ‘s’mores’. Sunday morning is a time for feedback, networking, and a closure exercise.

Because of the amount of time and effort that goes into planning the organization’s annual symposium, holding Group Work Camp as a

second yearly event has not so far been feasible for this all-volunteer run organization. Thus the camp is offered every other year. We continue to offer scholarships to students and recent graduates. Donations are solicited from individual practitioners and educators, as well as from schools of social work. Each scholarship recipient is sponsored by one person/organization or a group of donors, and is expected to be in touch with his/her sponsor(s) after the event.

The number of applications for scholarships has increased significantly each year. We have had to turn away many applicants because of the limits of our fundraising, as well as our belief that if attendance gets too large we will lose the intimacy that is so key to the experience. When the event is limited to one hundred participants it is possible for almost everyone to make at least a brief connection with most of their fellow attendees, since they meet in workshops, as well as in large and small group activities and discussions. The connections they make with so many others allow participants to feel part of the overall community.

After the 2011 event I was ready to step back from coordinating Group Work Camp. Two members of the organization's board, Jen Clements and John Genke, now coordinate as a team. My role is to advise and assist. The model continues to evolve in response to new leadership and feedback from participants. To my delight, the idea is spreading. There has now been a *European* Group Work Camp in Lithuania, and in summer of 2017 a Francophone camp will be held in Quebec, Canada. Interest has also been expressed in taking the concept to other parts of the world.

## **A possible future**

My vision for the future may sound grandiose, but I see the possibility of having versions of the Camp model all over the world, with linkages and projects across nations. Why not? The model is flexible, and there are many possibilities. Here are but a few: (1) IASWG could co-sponsor a particular Group Work Camp, perhaps with a local university or a consortium of universities with whom we have mutual goals; (2) we could strive further to have international attendance at some Camps, searching more aggressively for grantors and/or donors who could

help people with the expenses of travel; (3) holding a Camp in a state or country without an IASWG chapter could be a way to draw local groupworkers together and form the nucleus for a new chapter; and (4) we could create Camps for special target groups, like field work instructors or practitioners who practise groupwork in particular fields and have common challenges.

I close with the hope that this issue of Groupwork will encourage groupworkers in many nations, states, and provinces to consider starting Group Work Camp in their own part of the world. The Camp experience creates a community that supports and educates each participant and empowers groupwork as a whole.

## References

- Alcorn, S. (2007) *Strong roots: A group memoir of George Williams College*. Williams Bay, WI: George Williams College Press
- Bergart, A. M. (2016) Group Work Camp as nondeliberative process. *Social Work with Groups*, 39, 02-03
- Bergart, A. M. & Clements, J. A. (2015) Lighting the group work fire in a new generation. *Social Work with Groups*, 38, 1, 21-43
- Dewey, J. (1910) *How we think*. Boston, MA: Heath & Company
- Dewey, J. (1938) *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan
- Goldstein, H. (2001) *Experiential learning: A foundation for social work education and practice*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education
- Lang, N. C. (1979) A comparative examination of therapeutic uses of groups in social work and in the adjacent human service professions: Part II. The literature from 1969-1978. *Social Work with Groups*, 2, 197-220
- Lang, N. C. (2016) Nondeliberative forms of practice in social work: Artful, actional, analogic. *Social Work with Groups*, 39, 02-03
- Owen, H. (2008) *Open space technology: A user's guide* (3rd ed.). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler
- Papell, C. P. & Rothman, B. (1980) Relating the mainstream model of social work with groups to group psychotherapy and the structured group approach, *Social Work with Groups*, 3, 2, 5-23
- Rosenwald, M., Smith, M., Bagnoli, M., Riccelli, D., Ryan, S., Salcedo, L. & Seeland, D. (2013) Relighting the campfire: Rediscovering activity-based group work. *Social Work with Groups* 36, 4, 321-331