

Not just for romance: Applications of 'speed dating' in social work education

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Abstract: *In this article we address how a contemporary adaptation of the 'speed dating' model was used for educational purposes with two cohorts of social work students. We outline the dimensions of 'speed dating' as a contemporary social phenomenon, then address how this model relates specifically to groupwork process, and can be used to facilitate social work student learning. The curriculum for two classroom group activities using the 'speed dating' model are outlined, the first to develop university level study skills, the second for debriefing field placement learning experiences. Finally we examine why the 'speed dating' metaphor was successful in provoking a playful yet constructively creative space for students to engage in groupwork process.*

Keywords: *speed dating; groupwork; social work education; metaphor*

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Introduction

Groupwork literature has long suggested that if participants are to actively engage in a group, there should be at least five and fewer than 10 participants to ensure both a diverse range of viewpoints and sufficient opportunities for all members of the group to participate in discussion (for example, Preston-Shoot, 2007; Zastrow, 1989). However, the reality for many professionals is that they find themselves working with much larger groups, and need to uncover ways for enabling meaningful participation by all members.

We know that people participate in groups for a range of reasons including obtaining and exchanging information, increasing one's social networks and mutual support and self-help and having a safe context in which to explore issues (O'Connor, Wilson and Setterlund, 2003). In difficult, stressful or even just new circumstances, the opportunity to meet others in a similar situation and share stories can be most beneficial (Drumm, 2006). For some individuals having the opportunity to connect with others in a similar situation can generate a sense of unity and friendship, while addressing feelings of isolation (Weber, Davis and McPhie, 2006). The process of just meeting together can enable people to find a sense of levity by 'being able to laugh about it all with others' (Weber et al., 2006, p.399). As such,

Working with people in groups contrasts with the dominant individualist approach of professional social work practice. Group work provides the potential for all group members to become helpers and thereby to rise above the position of dependent recipient of other people's acts of kindness. (Clark, 2006, p.360)

For some people, being in a group in which they discover others in a similar situation, may feel like a safe place to disclose things which they would otherwise find difficult to talk about. But it might still be difficult to begin talking about an issue when one has long felt unable to do so (Black, 2003).

One emerging technique which would seem to enable many of the benefits of groupwork to be achieved, and which can be used with large groups, involves an adaptation of speed dating.

Speed dating

Speed dating is a new social phenomenon which has emerged over the past decade. While there have always been social mechanisms, such as dances, dinner parties, or social events held by religious or sporting organisations, which have acted as a forum for people to meet potential partners, many of those attending such functions would be there for purposes other than seeking a partner. By contrast, all of those who sign up to attend a 'speed dating' event have signalled a desire to meet potential partners. Explicit intentions are a key aspect of speed dating.

A typical 'speed dating' session involves equal numbers of male and female participants. Over the period of a couple of hours, each person participates in a series of 'speed dates' which are brief conversations of 3-8 minutes, and over the course of the session meets all of the pool of potential partners. At the end of the session participants indicate to the organisers which, if any, of those they talked to, they would like to meet again. When there is a match, contact details are released and the individuals concerned have the option of organising further meetings (Allerton, 2001; Lepkowska, 2005).

Adaptations of 'speed dating' for educational purposes have emerged across a diverse range of disciplines within both secondary and tertiary settings (Bibi, 2007; Elliott, 2005; Murphy, 2005; Zehr, 2004). In the context of a large class, 'speed dating' requires all students to participate in discussions, and can be particularly effective in classes when trying to get students to articulate their own opinions on an issue or share their reflections. As with any method of group discussion, exchanging ideas has the potential either to encourage participants to change their views or to help them become more confident about expressing their own ideas. This may be particularly helpful for students who are shy or lack confidence to participate in large group discussions (Murphy, 2005).

Importantly, it's not just weaker or less confident students who may benefit from the use of 'speed dating' techniques. In five minute blocks, Elliott (2005) requires school students in her class to read a paragraph of their essay to another student, about which their pair is expected to make one positive point and provide one piece of constructive criticism. At the end of the session, students will have received feedback from

a number of others, with the expectation that the session will have helped to

... diffuse good writing technique around the class, as weaker pupils can see examples of more advanced essay skills. It gets the stronger ones actively thinking about dissecting their own writing in order to improve. (Elliott, 2005, p.5)

Despite the many potential applications of 'speed dating' techniques in social work and groupwork practice, database searches only revealed literature about 'speed dating' techniques in education and professional development literature. Hence, the aim of this paper is to report on two experiences of using 'speed dating' in social work education and to suggest some applications where this technique might be used in other areas of social work and groupwork practice.

Engagement

Our first experiment with 'speed dating' in the classroom, occurred with a group of students commencing a four year undergraduate degree in social work. In the first few weeks of undergraduate studies, some of the key tasks of educators are to engage the class group around the subject matter they will be studying over the following four years and also to form the set of individuals, previously unknown to each other into a class group. We were aware that 'speed dating' had been used to good effect as a 'getting to know you' type exercise, with a few suggested conversation starters provided to students:

The sense of urgency (created by the format) seems to encourage quicker engagement, and also appears to allay the fears of students who can find social interactions intimidating. This activity fills the classroom with a buzz of conversation and creates a friendly, interactive atmosphere that still exists next time the groups meet. (Murphy, 2005, p.1)

During the second week of classes, 'speed dating' was used with two workshop groups, each comprising 20-24 students, to open up discussion about study skills. From past experience, some students do

not necessarily respond well to a lecturer giving them advice on this topic, and it was thought that the group might be much more open to discussing study issues with their peers. This approach allowed us to build upon the students' study skills strengths and strategic planning abilities, rather than have students leaving the room feeling like they had been 'lectured at' about potential study skill deficits.

We had a large classroom with a long table, with students sitting across from each other in pairs. After each conversation, one line of students moved to the next chair, with the student at the end moving to the first position. It was always the same line of students who moved at the end of each conversation, and in this case as we had one student in a wheelchair, she was positioned in the stationary row.

In this adaptation of 'speed dating', conversations were around two minutes each. Rather than having the same introductory conversation with each new person, all conversations had a particular question that needed to be addressed. The twelve conversations which took place over a 50 minute period covered three main themes including time management, university classes and library resource/referencing. Sample questions from the exercise are listed below:

1. What hints do you have about time management to get you through this semester?
2. Why come to classes?
3. Do I need to take notes when I read or come to class? If so, some advice?
4. Why is using the library resources such a big deal? Can't I just use Google?
5. What is Harvard referencing and how do I go about finding out about this? Is it the same as APA? What about footnoting?
6. What is plagiarism?

After each set of questions, a brief plenary discussion no longer than five minutes, was facilitated by teaching staff with the whole class in which students had the opportunity to share salient thoughts and ask questions. This process also enabled teaching staff to check that the students were identifying the main points which would have been made in a formal lecture on the topic, and provide brief input if required.

Although the primary aim had been to engage students around a

particular set of curriculum-related issues, a further advantage of the 'speed dating' technique was that it got students talking to a diverse range of other class members. Although this was just the second week of classes, students who were taking a number of classes in common, had already got to know a group of others, and had begun to form cliques who tended to sit together and be part of the same small groups when the class divided up for discussion. In this exercise, while those who were friendly typically arrived in class and sat down next to each other, the conversations were designed to be with those on the opposite side of the table, ie individuals whom they may not have yet met. This was also beneficial for students who were struggling to meet others in the class and who found it difficult to participate in larger group conversations with strangers. As with any groupwork activity:

At the most basic level, students will get to know fellow students who may have similar interests. These bonds may eventually extend beyond the classroom, across semesters, and possibly throughout the students' lives. On another level, group work fosters students' abilities to socialize with others and does so in a generally safe environment. (Monk-Turner and Payne, 2005, p.168)

The brevity of each conversation, left students no time for discussion of extraneous issues. Each conversation was highly task focused, with the result being a room in which the sense of energy and purpose was palpable. While students found themselves having to speak for much more of the class than would occur in other group activities, feedback at the end of the exercise was that the use of 'speed dating' had been an enjoyable way of engaging with each other and with the session's content.

Debriefing

Third year students on their first placement in a human service agency returned for a day long workshop to the university after a four week period. Debriefing their experiences encountered on placement is one of the primary tasks we addressed during this workshop. However, feedback from previous cohorts of students indicated that the semi-

structured small group activities used to facilitate these discussions in the past did not provide adequate time or scope for connecting with others to discuss field learning in depth. As facilitators we too had been dissatisfied with the process, suspecting that more time had been spent in these sessions engaged in casual conversation rather than addressing specific learning outcomes. The structured group discussions made possible using the 'speed dating' model appeared to address the students desire to have more time to talk together about placement, while ensuring conversations remained focused on the objectives of debriefing.

The objectives of this group session were to provide a forum for students to debrief about the culture of the agency in which they were having their field placement, their experiences of professional supervision on placement, their expected and unexpected learning events in the field to date, and the impact of attending placement on personal life outside of the practicum. A set of three questions per topic were presented for 2.5 minute discussions. A sample of these included:

1. What are some of the 'unwritten' rules you have observed in your placement agency?
2. What differences do you and your field educator have in relation to the way you approach the work?
3. What have you learned about yourself so far on this placement?
4. How is being on placement impacting upon relationships you have with friends and family?

This exercise was undertaken with a group of 30 students aged between 20 to mid-50s, made up predominately of female students. Approximately one third of the students had been practising in the field before undertaking the Bachelor of Social Work, and four students were undertaking work-based placements in agencies where they were employed. Discussion during the exercise was loud and animated, students changed seating positions quickly when the time for each question was up, and the atmosphere in the room remained very buoyant and cheerful throughout.

As with the Study Skills 'speed dating' exercise discussed above, a short plenary was facilitated between each set of three questions to draw out themes and contradictions uncovered during the individual discussions.

Links were made during each plenary between student feedback and pedagogical dimensions commonly associated with field practicum learning. These included making reference to the notion of tacit knowledge held by field educators to inform practice (Eraut, 2004); understanding how 'noticing' and reflection are integral to learning in action (Schon, 1983); reinforcing the notion that positive learning outcomes can arise from making mistakes (Berman, 2006) and highlighting the ways in which the agency context and culture will influence the teaching and learning transaction (Boud and Walker, 1998).

Teaching about groupwork

On completion of the debriefing exercise, we facilitated a whole group discussion with the participants using the whiteboard to identify the groupwork principles and processes used in our 'speed dating' experiment. The groupwork theory and principles embedded in the speed dating exercise and identified by the class during the analysis are discussed below.

Practice and principles

A number of principles were identified by the students. Firstly, the *function and objectives* for the group were established at the outset, that being to provide an educational and supportive forum for debriefing placement learning. Secondly, *ground rules* were set at the beginning of the exercise in relation to adhering to *ethical standards* ensuring confidentiality in matters discussed or overheard. Given that the 'speed dating' conversations were all occurring within the same room and in close proximity this was an important consideration. Thirdly, *group leadership* was required to facilitate the exercise in terms of undertaking the preparation, timing the duration of each conversation, facilitating the plenary discussions and handing over responsibility to the students to conduct the groupwork analysis on completion of the 'speed dating' experiment. As the noise level in the classroom grew the facilitator needed to ensure a level of order prevailed. Using a bell to signal the time to change seats and questions during the 'speed dating' exercise helped this process.

Process issues

Reflecting on the 'speed dating' exercise also enabled students to recognise the need for planning effective groupwork activities (Kurland, 2005). In particular, they identified how *planning* was needed to ensure room layout and seating was set up for the exercise and a set of relevant questions were prepared in readiness for the exercise. Each question posed was presented on powerpoint, in order that students could easily refresh their memory about the question during conversations. The students also noted that an explanation of the exercise was provided and the 'rules of engagement' were outlined before the conversations began.

Reflection on the 'speed dating' exercise also provided an opportunity for discussion about the phases through which groups move in becoming an effective working group. In terms of *engagement and first working phase*, 'speed dating' was the first exercise undertaken by students on returning to the university from placement. The process of drawing the group together once again after the month long classroom absence was noted favourably. The conversations that occurred during the exercise enabled students to *normalize* feelings about the practicum, while providing a forum to practise micro skills such as *attentive listening, reflection and reframing*.

McMaster (in press) has proposed that the *second working phase* of the group process is characterised by collaborative problem solving, an increase in pace and focus in the group, with individuals taking on more responsibility for group monitoring. During the groupwork reflection, class members noted that the group moved from the first working phase to the second very quickly, which was evidenced during the first plenary discussion where conversation themes from the initial three questions were drawn out and linked with theoretical constructs related to situated learning. During this plenary students proactively made the connections between field placement experiences and practicum learning constructs examined prior to the placement beginning.

The whiteboard analysis of the groupwork process which concluded the 'speed dating' exercise reflected the *maturation phase* of the student group working together. During this phase the students took responsibility for deconstructing the 'speed dating' exercise from a groupwork perspective, keeping the focus of this session on track in

order that the momentum of the experiment was not lost. At one point students recognised that while they had returned to the classroom as individuals, they were once again working together as a 'team'. The *closure* of the group exercise was facilitated through a general feedback session about how the students had experienced their 'speed dating'. Responses were largely favourable with students commenting on the fun factor generated through the exercise, the quick engagement by the whole class with the task at hand and the amount of material that was able to be covered in a short space of time.

Using metaphor

The very positive reception of both groups of students to using adaptations of 'speed dating', lead us to ponder why this group exercise was so readily accepted, with good humour and enthusiasm. One possibility is the 'speed dating' metaphor in and of itself generated a level of energy before we had even begun the actual session. This led us to consider the use of metaphor in practice more generally.

While there are numerous philosophical interpretations and linguistic forms of the metaphor (Leezenberg, 2001), there does appear to be general agreement with the definition provided by Lakoff and Johnson that the essence of metaphor is understanding one kind of thing in terms of another (1980). In our case, we had perhaps presented the classroom task, often assumed to be in the realm of 'work' as being something more akin to 'romance'.

It is somewhat surprising, given that social workers spend much time assisting individuals to reframe or reconsider their experiences in a new light, that we have only been able to locate one article (Duffy, 2005), which explicitly discussed the use of metaphor in social work practice. Duffy argued that:

The metaphor is one of the most basic mechanisms for understanding our experiences. When we construct metaphors, we use both sides of the brain, the intuitive and the rational, with the potential of generating new understanding, new realities, and new behaviors. (Duffy, 2005, p.247)

In contrast to social work, there is a substantial literature about the

application of metaphor in psychotherapy (Siegelman, 1990; Close, 1995). Not surprisingly, metaphorical expression enables clients to easily articulate aspects of their being in graphic, powerful ways, summing up how they feel on the whole in brief expressions such as 'I'm sitting here stewing' or 'My life is one long battle'. As such, the metaphor provides a vehicle to confer new insight about a person's situation beyond the scope of simple description. In the meantime these images enable the worker to pick up the metaphor and respond using the same or a comparable figure of speech to progress the session. Metaphors commonly used in counselling include the notion of the journey; comparing a relationship with war; or likening a workplace to a machine and its apparatus (Lankton and Lankton, 1989).

As we have already indicated, the 'speed dating' metaphor captured the imagination of our students as we had hoped it might. What was less expected was the way in which it captured our own imaginations as facilitators. Like our students, we too found ourselves responding to the playfulness and humour of the 'speed dating' metaphor.

Perceiving improbable combinations of disparate words or images may be necessary in order to appreciate the humour or comedy in a situation (Pollio, 1996). The improbable components in this instance were linking the notions of 'speed dating' with study skills and practicum learning; using a 'speed dating' format in a rather conservative university setting; and drawing upon the image of an activity preserved for private personal business (such as dating), to inform an educational activity in a public forum. Each of these contradictions involved a juxtaposition of ideas that made both us and the students smile, sparking the imagination, and generating a sense of creativity and fun not usually associated with study skills learning or practicum debriefing. In this way the 'speed dating' metaphor helped us all to engage more energetically and enthusiastically with subject material that is often 'hard going' in the classroom. From our experience we agree whole heartedly with the suggestion that used prudently metaphors can help us to:

1. discover dimensions of reality and meaning not previously considered;
2. operate on several often contradictory levels, with multiple responses;

3. by-pass resistant postures;
4. create a verbal play space;
5. highlight the moment;
6. promote interaction around a shared image;
7. allow explorations that are culturally meaningful;
8. link the imaginative and the cognitive; and
9. create, sustain and transform basic assumptions about systems.
(Gans, 1991 cited in Duffy, 2005, p.254)

Reflection and conclusion

This paper emerged out of our unanticipated success with using speed dating in the classroom. As such, this contribution to the literature does not constitute a formal evaluation of the technique in which data from participants was deliberately sought. We believe our observations may provide an opening for further investigation about possible uses of speed dating both in the classroom and beyond.

As with any new way of working, 'speed dating' will only be effective if it enables the aims of a group session to be realised. While it has been suggested that 'speed dating' can be used for a range of purposes over several sessions of the same group (Murphy, 2005), we suspect that the novelty of the metaphor, which in part seemed to captivate our students, would wear off if we used it repeatedly in the classroom. Furthermore, 'speed dating' may not be appropriate in contexts in which the speed of conversations cannot be maintained, for example in groups in which the majority of participants cannot easily and quickly move from one seat to another, or in multilingual groups which require interpreters to facilitate conversations.

Nevertheless, these group experiments using the 'speed dating' metaphor have enabled us to ponder more upon the artistic and creative genres available to us in our teaching and client groupwork. In an era in which there are often concerns about the limited input of groupwork in the curriculum of social work students (Drumm, 2006), these exercises provided an opportunity for students to both experience and critically deconstruct a particular form of group functioning. In this way we were able to capitalise upon the popularity of 'speed dating' as a phenomenon, to discuss and convey a range of serious messages in the classroom.

Our experiments with 'speed dating' also prompted us as facilitators to examine our own motives and interests about working with groups of students in the classroom. As such we read the following with interest:

As a groupwork facilitator, we put much store by observing and analysing the dynamics of the group, but unless we are vigilant, we may put much less store on observing and analysing ourselves. How we experience the participants in our groups, and how we find ourselves in turn responding to that experience gives us rich information about not only the participant/s, but ourselves. Within that dynamic, discerning what belongs to us, to them and the connection formed between others and ourselves (and in group work that means many 'others') is an ongoing process. (Bunston, Pavlidis, and Leyden, 2003, p.43)

Undoubtedly, 'speed dating' has taught us a lot about ourselves, our teaching and the capacity to be imaginative in the classroom. In future, we intend to look more broadly within the creative arts for differing genres that may enliven and enrich our work with students, and ourselves as educators and practitioners. In the meantime, readers, particularly from other contexts, may want to attempt their own experiments with 'speed dating' and share their findings with the broader professional community.

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