

Debate: Flash groups

In response to Mark Doel's article and Oded Manor's response, I thought I would attempt to insert some of my own thoughts on the subject of flash groups.

Firstly, an observation. It appears to me that both Mark and Oded are utilising different conceptions of what one means by groups and groupwork. Mark appears to be saying that there is a great deal of groupwork occurring which we do not recognise as groupwork. While, Oded appears to be looking at the issue more from a purist perspective, and arguing the case that just because one asserts that one is conducting a group does not necessarily mean one is carrying out groupwork. This polar opposite perspective indicates to me how varied and complex the issue of groupwork is. That we really do not have any firm conditions or hard and fast rules of exactly what we mean by groupwork.

In spite of the aforementioned there is a wealth of groupwork literature: some of this addresses different types of groups; the multiple settings in which groups occur; the stages that groups go through; and the benefits of groupwork. Indeed I think we should as a profession be very proud of the amount of literature and diversity of groupwork. However, I also think we are at something of a cross roads and need to think more creatively about what we mean by groupwork and how we get individuals to embrace and utilise this modality.

I make this assertion for the following reasons. Recently, in one of my classes, two students were discussing what course they should take as one of their social work electives. 'Why don't you take the groupwork course I suggested?' I was somewhat taken aback when I was met with the following response: 'That class is a waste of time, it's all theory and how could I possibly use that in my practice.' However, this comment did make me think and reflect on the following. Over the past several years, our department has attempted to offer a groupwork elective, and

each semester because of low enrolment this class has always been cancelled.

So this to my mind begs the following two questions. First, how has groupwork come to be seen in such negative terms; and secondly, what could I do to encourage greater interest and active participation in the subject? (and how could the student feel confident to make a judgement on a course that hadn't run for several years??)

Regarding the first question, I think the profession itself needs to take some responsibility for this. Groupwork has somehow come to be viewed as a luxury, an add-on item. If one uses the metaphor of the airline industry, it used to be that snacks, meals on the plane, the movie, headsets and the checking in of baggage were the norm. Now, all these come with a fee. No longer are they seen as essential but a luxury item or at very least an extra. I think the same can be said of groupwork. One only conducts a group, when all of one's other work has been completed. The agency is more concerned with individual work for which it can receive financial reimbursement. Many social workers are employed in host agencies where social work is not the driving force. In other words we need to conform to the demands and expectations of other professions.

This leads me to my second question of what can we do, those of us who believe in groupwork? This is where I begin with Mark's interpretation of groups and groupwork. I think we need to make more of the opportunities that arise to point out that even though students are not consciously aware of the notion, they are involved in groupwork. The following I believe is a good example of what I am attempting to convey.

Each summer, at University of Southern Maine we offer numerous classes that are taught in a seven week block rather than over the usual fifteen weeks. This means that students are meeting twice a week for a three hour class. As an educational and learning paradigm this is not ideal. However, I have noted over the past several years (and the class I taught this past summer really exemplified this) that a number of groupwork skills and concepts emerged.

First, there is the concept of everybody being in the same boat. This results, I have observed, in a great deal of collaboration on the part of the students. Students are genuinely interested in one another's progress, and go out of their way to assist one another. Secondly, a number of

sub-groups form. For example, this summer there were three men in the group that I nick-named 'Freeman, Hardy and Willis', after the English shoe store. They would always come into class together, they all sat together, they went out socially, and they were the most talkative in the class. Thirdly, there was the coffee/smoking group that when we had our mid-point break would always go off together. They would always come back a few minutes later than the other members of the class, talking and laughing. Fourthly, there was the serious work-oriented group in the class. This comprised of about four of the women, who whenever I would walk into class I would find talking about the next assignment or the material we were going to cover that evening. Always, one of them would assert: 'A few of us have questions for you.'

In addition to this, one could also observe a number of general group processes occurring. There was the beginning phase of the group, the first two meetings of the class, where only a few students would say anything, there was the middle phase, where more members took the risk of participating verbally in the class, by asking questions not only of me as the instructor, but of other students too. There was the endings stage; in the last three sessions each student gives a presentation of the work they had undertaken as part of their service learning component of the class. This resulted in each member of the class receiving a round of applause and being congratulated on the work they had completed. There is also a sense of loss that the class is ending; for seven weeks everyone has been working really hard and then, abruptly, it feels, the class ends.

While all this is occurring, I deliberately pointed out that the class has taken on the form and life of a group; they are working together, they are all important to the group, and if someone is absent from class, that person is missed. They all sit in the same seats for each session and have developed group roles: they know who is going to talk, who the quiet members are, who is going to volunteer, and who is going to question or challenge me. In other words, this is no longer just a class but a group and one that is using groupwork skills.

By undertaking the following and by injecting groupwork skills and terminology into the class, my hope is that groupwork gets deliberately incorporated into my teaching and that at some point over the course of their education the students will recall this class and remember some of the groupwork processes and skills they were exposed to. Perhaps this

will encourage them to take a formal course in groupwork; perhaps it will help them make use of some of these concepts and skills in their practice. Most importantly, however, this decision will be initiated by them and, therefore, their learning is more likely to have meaning and purpose.

Paul Johnson

Associate Professor
School of Social Work
University of Southern Maine
96 Falmouth Street, PO Box 9300
Portland, ME 04104
pjohnson@usm.maine.edu