

Providing support to young people through groupwork: Delivering personalised learning and development in the group context

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Abstract: *A key outcome of support work with young people, it is hoped, is increased self awareness and autonomy on the part of the recipient. Engagement in one-to-one interventions with youth support workers can enable this process to take place. However, a valuable alternative approach to the work exists, which focuses on helping young people to enhance their personal learning and development (PLD) in a group interaction.*

This chapter will explore how youth support professionals can facilitate PLD effectively in a group context. It focuses on the following:

- *Identifying what 'personal learning and development' means*
- *Examining how groupwork can enable young people to learn about themselves, develop greater self awareness and make decisions about their lives*
- *Evaluating ways in which being part of a group can lead to positive outcomes for individuals*
- *Analysing the role of the youth support worker in facilitating PLD in the group context*

In addition, the chapter offers a model to inform the planning, preparation and delivery of PLD groupwork with young people.

Key words: *Personal Learning and Development (PLD); FAAST model; focus; aim; activities; structure; techniques; groupwork*

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Introduction

The established view of the role of youth support work focuses primarily on 'helping interventions' with young people. Youth support workers in the UK are employed in a range of settings and contexts, for example as learning mentors, teaching assistants, youth workers, personal advisers and careers advisers in schools, colleges, youth centres, and pupil referral units (Westergaard, 2009). When asked, most would state that their work involves engaging *one-to-one* in order to offer advice, guidance and support, with the aim of reducing barriers and helping young people to achieve their aspirations, and there is a wealth of literature which supports this important element of their practice (Rogers, 1983; Egan, 2006; Reid & Fielding, 2007.) This much we know. What, perhaps, is less well known, and little documented, is, as Smith argues, (Smith, 2008) that *groupwork* can also provide youth support professionals with an effective tool for delivering guidance and support to young people.

Youth support workers who *do* undertake groupwork with young people, often find that the group setting offers a safe and supportive environment, where participants are able to focus on shared issues and explore their experiences with each other. Brown suggests that groupwork provides a 'context in which *individuals help each other*,' (Brown, 1992, p.8). This exploration involves young people in working together to identify options for change whilst at the same time reflecting individually on their own position in relation to the issues discussed. Moon (2004) argues that it is through drawing from, reflecting on and sharing experiences with others that learning can be optimised. Schon (1987) supports this view, emphasising the reflective nature of learning in which the group is likely to engage. Payne (2005) asserts that it is the experience of working together that offers the unique 'group learning' element that will enhance the *individual* experience for each group member.

In my own experience as an educator of youth support workers in the UK, the reluctance of students to undertake groupwork with young people is often palpable. A lack of clarity appears to exist about exactly what groupwork in the youth support context sets out to achieve, how it is different from other forms of group activity (teaching, therapeutic groupwork and informal education, for example) and a tendency for those involved in delivering it to identify themselves as 'sub-

teachers' (Higgins and Westergaard, 2001). Therefore, as the Integrated Youth Support Service in England is developed, a Common Core of key skills and knowledge is identified (DCSF, 2008) and the numbers of youth support workers in schools and other contexts are increasing, the time is right to engage in a debate about what groupwork in the youth support context is, what it sets out to achieve and to establish models to support those who are planning, preparing and facilitating group learning with young people.

The purpose of this paper is not to provide a full and detailed analysis of learning theory (Rogers, 1969; Kolb, 1984; Gardner, 1999; Honey & Mumford, 2006), or group processes and skills (Geldard & Geldard, 2001; Jaques & Salmon, 2007; Westergaard, 2009) as these apply to youth support work. These areas are covered elsewhere in the literature. Rather the paper focuses specifically on clarifying the features of personal learning and development groupwork in which youth support workers engage and offers a model to support them in their work. The paper begins by considering a definition of PLD groupwork delivered by youth support workers. It goes on to explore a step-by-step approach to planning, preparing and delivering PLD group sessions with young people, based on the FFAST model (Westergaard, 2009). This emphasises the importance of setting an appropriate Focus for the session, agreeing an Aim and objectives and devising relevant Activities, ensuring that the session is Structured and reflecting on Techniques and skills needed to facilitate personal learning.

What is personal learning and development?

Although this paper does not set out to provide a critique of recent education policy in the U.K. (Collarbone et al, 2005; Sebba et al, 2007), there are two distinct but related developments within the education system in the UK which provide a helpful context for defining PLD groupwork and are worthy of note here. The first recognises the significance of 'personalised learning' and the second is the introduction of a 'personal development curriculum' for each young person aged 11 – 16 in education (DfES, 2004a). Briefly, the concept of personalised learning focuses on the need to recognise the diverse abilities, cultural and social backgrounds and learning styles of individual young people.

It demonstrates an understanding that each and every young person is unique, and that the way in which learning is approached should reflect this.

‘There is a clear moral and educational case for pursuing this approach. A system that responds to individual pupils, by creating an education path that takes account of their needs, interests and aspirations, will not only generate excellence, it will also make a strong contribution to equity and social justice’ (DfES, 2004b, p.7).

Schools and subject teachers are being encouraged to find new and innovative ways to educate young people in all subject areas across the curriculum, recognising that every young person brings with them their own needs, skills, abilities, values, beliefs and behaviours which will have an impact on their capacity to learn. Of course, as the quote above implies, the imperative to increase the knowledge, skills and functioning of young people is not solely concerned with their personal fulfilment, but is also informed by economic and social imperatives. The emphasis on all young people to play a full and effective part in society, to achieve and to contribute to economic stability cannot be ignored.

Secondly, the personal development curriculum recognises the need for all 11-16 year olds to be equipped with specific skills and knowledge, which will enable them to fulfil their potential and function effectively in society. These include:

- working with others in a team
- decision making
- planning, monitoring and reviewing
- investigation and research
- self-awareness and self-presentation
- evaluation.

These areas are addressed in all aspects of the curriculum, but offer a particular focus within Careers Education, and Personal Health and Social Education where there could be a clear role for youth support workers to be involved in the delivery of PLD sessions.

In response to the lack of literature on groupwork in the field of career education and guidance which focuses on developing self awareness, opportunity awareness, decision making and transition skills (Law, 2001), Higgins and Westergaard (2001) set out to define

the key characteristics of what they termed 'guidance groupwork'. They identified three underpinning principles which can be applied equally to PLD group sessions:

1. The topic addressed in the session should focus on the personal needs of the individuals in the group. The facilitator takes responsibility for identifying a focus for the session that will be relevant and useful to the group members. Consideration is given to a number of points. First, where the participants are 'at' in terms of their development (Harper, 1993; Coleman & Hendry, 1999). What are the key issues for them at this point in their lives? Is there a specific need (developmental, educational, emotional or behavioural) shared by a group of young people that could be addressed through groupwork? The youth support worker, in discussions with other professionals where appropriate, should make an assessment of the needs of the group prior to the session, in order to select a topic that will be relevant and useful to address in a PLD session. The skill required by the youth support worker at this early stage in the planning process should not be underestimated and will be examined later in this paper.
2. The session should include an opportunity for each individual to reflect on their own position in relation to the topic. Boud et al (1985) emphasise the importance of planned reflection in learning. This suggests that although the topic has been identified as being helpful and relevant to the group, each young person's response to it could be quite different. For example, a youth support worker prepares a PLD session on 'Options at 16' for young people who are reaching the end of their compulsory schooling. Each young person in the group is provided with the opportunity to reflect on what the post-schooling options are and, importantly, helped to consider which option might suit them best. Not every young person will select the same option, as each group member's needs and responses will be different.
3. The PLD session should also consider the specific action that each individual needs to take concerning the topic. It is not enough that the topic is discussed, underlying issues are explored and the session ends with a greater understanding for individuals within the group. Positive though this is, PLD groupwork goes further in

that group members are helped to think about how they would like 'things to be different', to set goals and to identify specific actions that they can take as a result of the session to effect some change. To return to our session on 'Options at 16', each group member will have the opportunity to think about what they need to do next in relation to the options that suit them best. Action steps identified in the session might include further research, accessing prospectuses, visiting training providers, or talking to parents.

Planning, preparing and delivering PLD groupwork

Having established the key principles of PLD groupwork, it is interesting to note that there is very little in the current literature that provides further insight into what defines PLD groupwork and how sessions should be planned, prepared, structured and delivered. As a response to this perceived lack of support in preparing and delivering PLD groupwork, the FFAST model (Westergaard, 2009), aims to provide a useful starting point to inform the planning of PLD sessions. The FFAST model offers a framework that was developed initially in response to the needs of youth support workers in training, who experienced difficulties in accessing literature about PLD groupwork rather than other forms of group activity (for example teaching, informal education, task-focused groupwork and therapeutic groupwork). The FFAST model is set out below:

- F - Focus. Identifying an appropriate focus or topic for the session based on an assessment of needs
- A - Aim. Setting a specific aim and related objectives
- A - Activities. Identifying appropriate activities
- S - Structure. Structuring the session in such a way that learning is maximised
- T - Techniques. Developing a range of effective facilitation techniques and skills.

Focus

The first step in the process of planning a PLD session is to select an

appropriate focus or 'topic' for the session. It is the responsibility of the youth support worker to undertake an assessment of the needs of the group with whom they are working, to ensure that a relevant topic is selected. This is no simple task; rather it requires the youth support worker to draw on a range of skills and knowledge in relation to assessing needs. This assessment should be informed by the following three factors:

- Make-up of the group
- Input from others
- Current issues

First, the practitioner will be aware of the age of the participants, their gender and their level of learning and education. Are they, for example, about to make a transition from full time education? If so, there are likely to be key issues around decision making and option choices that it would be useful to explore. Are participants planning to move away from home to study in higher education? If they are, there may be concerns around budgeting and living alone that would provide a relevant focus.

Second, the worker will seek feedback from other professionals who have knowledge of these young people. For instance are there issues around bullying in a particular class that could be explored through PLD groupwork? Is there a small group of young people who have become involved in drinking, drug experimentation or anti-social behaviour? If so, the motivation for this behaviour and its consequences can provide a helpful focus for PLD sessions.

Third, the group may have specific issues which continue to provide a barrier to progression. Are there, for example, concerns around job search and interview techniques for a group who may have been unemployed for some time? If so, the youth support professional can plan a PLD session which helps to develop these skills. The common link between all these topics is that the focus is on the *individual* and their *personal learning and development*. The practitioner should be confident that the focus of the session will be relevant to all group members – whether reinforcing understanding, developing new perspectives or being introduced to ideas for the first time.

That said, there may be inherent difficulties for youth support

workers in accessing information about group participants prior to working with them. Detailed data about young people may be difficult to come by, other professionals may provide subjective and inaccurate opinions concerning the needs of the group and, as a result, shared issues are not identified accurately. Where this happens, the young people in the group are unlikely to relate to the topic or understand the session's relevance as it does not appear to meet their needs. Ultimately, engagement in the PLD session is at risk.

Aim

Once the needs of the group have been assessed and a focus for the session has been identified, the youth support worker can begin to plan the groupwork in detail. The second stage in the planning process involves establishing an aim for the session. An aim or 'goal' determines what the session sets out to achieve, provides direction and clarity about the chosen topic and establishes a clear focus (Malekoff, 2004). Any groupwork that does not have an explicitly stated aim is at risk of lacking purpose and direction. It is important that the practitioner has thought about what it is that the session should aim to achieve, and this should be communicated to group members in order to encourage them to engage with the session and see its relevance to their own situation. Linked to the aim, the session should also identify objectives (Doel, 2006). An 'objective' is a specific task or activity which students will undertake during the session that will lead to a positive outcome following the session. For example:

Aim: Managing moving away from home and independent living

Objectives: Participants in the session have the opportunity to:

- identify the positive aspects of independent living
- list the issues and barriers that they may face in living independently
- describe ways in which these issues can be addressed and the barriers overcome

Outcomes: Students will take appropriate action before they move away from home to manage the transition effectively.

The risk at this stage of the planning process is that the youth support

worker is not always entirely clear about the terminology and the distinction between aims, objectives and outcomes. A result of this lack of clarity could be that aims, objectives and outcomes are not considered in any depth and 'sketched over' rather than thought through, resulting in a session that may lack direction and have limited learning potential.

Once the aim and objectives for the session are established, the youth support worker should detail both on a session plan. This will ensure that the groupwork is purposeful and keeps on track, acting as a clear reminder for what should be achieved. In addition it will also provide a useful tool for evaluation at the end of the session. See figure 1 below for the beginnings of a session plan for the PLD groupwork outlined above.

Fig. 1. Session Plan

Session plan (timing): 1 Hour session

Group: 10 x 17 year olds, mixed ability

Aim: Managing moving away from home and independent living

Objectives:

- Identify the positive aspects of independent living
- List the issues and barriers that they may face in living independently
- Describe the ways in which these issues can be addressed and barriers overcome.

Activities

Once a focus for the session has been decided and the aim and objectives set, then the youth support worker can begin the process of selecting relevant, stimulating and appropriate activities for group members to undertake to optimise personal learning and development outcomes. The activities chosen should correspond directly to the stated aim and objectives. In the example used above where the aim of the session is 'Managing moving away from home and independent living', the activities planned should focus specifically on how moving away from home and living independently is managed. The session objectives provide a strong indication as to what activities the practitioner might use. For example, the first objective in the example above requires participants to *identify the benefits of independent living*. To ensure that

this objective is met, the youth support worker will consider a range of appropriate activities to do just that. These could include a group discussion, a 'thought shower' or use of case studies, all of which would enable participants to *identify what the benefits of living independently* might be.

In addition to attending to the session objectives, the youth support worker should draw on their understanding of learning theory to enable them to choose activities which will provide a positive learning experience. In this regard, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle offers a useful model to analyse appropriate methods of delivery. An understanding that we learn by reflecting on our own experiences and the experiences of others, provides a helpful pointer to the kind of activities from which young people will gain most learning. Similarly Gardner's (1999) identification of multiple intelligences and Honey and Mumford's (2006) recognition of different learning styles (activist, pragmatist, reflector and theorist) can each provide an insight into designing activities which will engage group members and enable learning.

A common pitfall for those who are inexperienced in planning PLD group sessions is to begin their preparations by identifying 'fun' activities that they may have used before or seen others use, and try to make them 'fit' with the session topic, aim and objectives. There is a danger in this. First, although activities should be stimulating and interactive in order to engage participants, being 'fun for fun's sake' does not necessarily have great value (Higgins and Westergaard, 2001). Second, if objectives have not been set, or have been set but are ignored at the expense of the fun activity, it is likely that the session will lack focus and will not enable participants to build on their learning.

Structure

For a PLD session to run smoothly and provide the optimum learning experience for the participants, it should be well structured. In the same way that one-to-one interventions are purposeful and forward moving, PLD groupwork should also have a clear sense of direction, starting in one place and ending in another, where action steps, leading to change, have been planned. A structure that can be applied to PLD sessions draws on a recognised and respected model that informs

one-to-one helping relationships. Egan's (2006) skilled helper model is used to great effect in one-to-one helping interactions in a range of professional contexts and can be adapted easily to provide a structure for PLD sessions. Similarly Reid and Fielding's (2007) Single Interaction Model develops Egan's work but applies it to 'one-off' interactions that youth support workers may undertake with young people. Both models focus on the following three stages:

- Stage 1:* Where I am now and what are the issues I want to focus on?
- Stage 2:* Where do I want to be and what are my options for getting there?
- Stage 3:* How am I going to get to where I want to be? What action steps do I need to take?

In groupwork this means starting the session by introducing the topic and enabling individuals in the group to see its relevance, encouraging them to reflect on the issues raised, and to consider the significance of these at this moment in their lives. It means taking time to establish what the PLD session aims to achieve and encouraging the group to engage with it in a purposeful way.

Once the group members have reflected on the focus of the session and its relevance, the session can move forward to consider options for change. This provides an opportunity for group members to reflect on how they want their lives to be different. This 'consideration of options' could include ideas relating to future transitions, specific behaviours, or practical aspects of the young person's life. When each group member has had the opportunity to explore the advantages and disadvantages of each option, they can begin to make decisions about which option best meets their needs. This is where the personal learning and development really takes place, as each group member makes *their own* decisions about options. As the session nears its end, group members are encouraged to consider the specific action steps they must take, thus continuing the process of learning and development outside the session.

There are, of course, dangers in applying the model inflexibly. There may be times when more attention needs to be paid to stage one, (where the group is meeting for the first time, for example) and the youth support worker should develop confidence in their judgement as they reflect in-action (Schon, 1987) to re-structure the session if necessary.

This confidence takes time, practice and experience to develop and may not be achieved in the early days of facilitating PLD sessions. However, better, on balance, perhaps, to have a clear, if rather rigid structure in place, than a series of disconnected activities which do not develop and build into meaningful learning and risk disengaging the participants.

Techniques

All the planning in the world will not in itself ensure the effective delivery of PLD group sessions (although it will certainly help). In addition, the facilitator should ensure that they have developed appropriate techniques and skills to use when face-to-face with a group of young people (Geldard and Geldard, 2001). The key skills which are utilised in group interventions include:

- active listening
- helpful questioning
- summarising
- challenging
- information sharing.

Many youth support workers have been trained in the use of these skills in their one-to-one practice. They should feel confident in their ability to demonstrate empathy through active listening, to help young people to explore by asking open and probing questions, to show understanding through summarising, to be congruent and encourage realism by challenging and to enable informed decision making by sharing information as appropriate. These techniques and skills can be applied equally to PLD groupwork, but there may be differences in the way in which they are used with groups. For example, active listening requires the ability to listen to each individual group member and to 'the group' as a whole. What, for example does the group, as well as the individual, express through the verbal and non-verbal signals it communicates, and how can the facilitator demonstrate that they are listening to both? The same applies to helpful questions. In PLD sessions, the facilitator will be asking questions of individuals and of the group, in order to encourage participation and learning. This requires attending to and managing group members who have much to say, and

those who have little. It means phrasing questions that are relevant to, and understood by all group members, and dealing sensitively with responses. It is important that the youth support worker has knowledge of theories and concepts underpinning group dynamics (Bion, 1961; Tuckman and Jensen, 1977; Belbin, 1993; Vernelle, 1994; Slavin, 1997) and is able to apply this knowledge in PLD groupwork. This means taking account of the verbal and non-verbal responses of the *group*, as well as the *individuals* within it.

The skill of summarising is as valuable in groupwork as it is in one-to-one interventions. It is the role of the facilitator to draw threads and themes together, summarising discussions in order that learning points are clearly expressed. This requires the youth support worker to be able to 'hold on' to key points made throughout the session and to refer to them later as appropriate. Likewise, the skill of challenging remains one of the most helpful aids to learning, whether it is used in one-to-one or groupwork. When challenging in the group context, the facilitator will enable group members to engage with the learning dynamic. It is by challenging discrepancies, consequences, and the need for realism that a greater understanding of the subject, and an individual response to it, will emerge. Finally, as in one-to-one work, the skill of information sharing is central to PLD group sessions. But here, the youth support worker has an additional information resource in the group itself. This is a resource which should be accessed and utilised – what the group members learn from each other will have as much impact (if not more) than what they discover from the facilitator.

By using the FFAST model outlined above, as a starting point in planning, preparing and delivering their PLD sessions, ensuring that the Focus, the Aims and Activities, the Structure and the Techniques have all been attended to, youth support workers should feel more confident to experiment with groupwork as an effective tool for delivering PLD. This is not to suggest that the model is flawless, indeed a number of constraints have been identified above. Neither is it to suggest that the model 'stands alone' and provides a full and comprehensive guide to PLD groupwork. As explained above, youth support workers should draw on and develop their knowledge of a range of group-related concepts including learning theory, group dynamics, and reflective practice in order to develop fully their understanding of this aspect of their work.

Conclusion

This article began by suggesting that my own experience of youth support practice, for the most part, is limited to working in one-to-one relationships with young people. This is not, in itself, a 'bad' thing. However it is important that groupwork should not be seen as something less than, or more limited in what it can achieve than one-to-one work. PLD group sessions offer something unique. There is much to be gained by encouraging groups of young people to work together to share experiences, to explore feelings, to support each other, to use information and to design strategies to enable them to manage their lives.

Youth support workers often seem unaware of their own particular professional expertise in delivering what they do so well, but with groups as well as individuals. This may be because there is little published literature which supports and informs this aspect of their practice, and for many, the context in which they work may provide few obvious opportunities for working with groups. It may be because groupwork is an area that is touched on in initial training, but not explored in depth. Whatever the reason, by neglecting this area of practice, those offering support to young people are in danger of ignoring an alternative method for doing so. Groupwork provides a forum for young people to develop and learn more about themselves by sharing experiences with others who have similar issues and concerns, thereby enabling them to make informed and positive choices in their lives.

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