

Groupwork: When social work students meet head on

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Introduction

This essay provides a review of my learning during an on-campus tertiary groupwork subject (course) which took place at James Cook University in October 2013. The subject aimed to provide students with knowledge and skills relating to groupwork, groupwork processes, and the application of effective groupwork in social welfare settings. To successfully complete the subject, students were required to pass three pieces of assessment. This essay was submitted as the final piece and is a reflection on the groupwork processes that arose during the completion of the second assessment task in the groupwork subject. The second assessment required participation in a student group which had to design a social welfare support group programme, whilst also paying attention to the 'group processes' that evolved during the completion of the task. At a set time, each group presented an overview of their support group plan as well as providing a description and analysis of their group experience.

The on-campus workshop for the groupwork subject was made up of students who had enrolled and completed much of the subject via distance education before coming to the campus. All had submitted the first assessment piece and were required to complete the second assessment within the five day on-campus period. Many students had travelled from regional locations to complete the subject, and did not

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have access to the support that they normally would experience. They were also feeling anxious about needing to complete and present the groupwork task in a short period of time. This essay summarises and then critically evaluates the groupwork task which I participated in during the on-campus workshop. I will draw upon groupwork theory and processes to make sense of my experience, and also include an assessment of my personal strengths and limitations within the context of groupwork.

My reflective process:

The model of critical reflection which will be used to analyse the groupwork experience is 'What? So What? Now What?' which was delineated in the work of Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper (2001). This framework is simple, yet useful as it prompts students to question themselves along the levels of; simple description (What?), theory and knowledge building (So What?), and action orientated reflexivity (Now What?). This model shall now be applied, commencing with the descriptive level, 'What?'

What?

During the five day on-campus workshop, I was placed in a group of seven students and we were tasked to complete the second assessment which was required to successfully complete the groupwork subject. In the group, there was one student whom I had met previously. This particular student and I were both undergraduate Bachelor of Social Work students, whilst the other five students were completing their Masters of Social Work. My companion reported that she was '*just a disability support worker*' highlighting feelings of powerlessness given that she and I were the only two undergraduate students in the group.

After introductions, the group democratically chose the group task from a list of topics provided. The topic chosen was a Diabetic Support Group for Indigenous People. After choosing the topic, the group found an initial leader. However within several hours, this leadership was challenged and conflict emerged. Conflict was manifested by heated debate over the group's task, and it was heightened due to the emergent

leader's use of power. The leader attempted to overtly influence and control the group and its decisions, which resulted in various people splitting from the main group, to remove themselves from the leader's presence. Consequently the group split into two subgroups, one focused on completing the Diabetic Support Group task, and the other focused on the analysis of our group process. My role was within the subgroup which was not attached to the leader, and I took a 'task' orientation. I concentrated on developing the program for the Diabetic Support Group, and also undertook supporting research which included compiling references for the Diabetic Support Group program. Later, I co-wrote and then individually edited a one-page summary required for the assessment. In my effort to avoid the authoritarian use of power directed at myself from the leader, I chose to place details which were dictated to me, into the footnotes of the one-page summary rather than in the body of the text. I found it particularly interesting, that no comments were later made in regard to this obvious disregard of the leader's directions.

So What?

Group process was summarised by Corey, Corey and Corey (2010, p.5),

Group process consists of all the elements basic to the unfolding of a group from the time it begins to its termination. This includes dynamics such as the norms that govern a group, the level of cohesion in the group, how trust is generated, how resistance is manifested, how conflict emerges and is dealt with, forces that bring about healing, inter-member reactions, and the various stages in a group's development. In essence, group process relates to "how things are happening in the group". It is not so much the spoken communication but the underlying message that is being conveyed with respect to how members are in relation to one another.

The group initially entered the 'forming' stage of Tuckman's model (McDermott, 2002; Tyson, 1998). This was characterised by an initial politeness and a resistance to discussing personal goals and aspirations. After leadership was established, the group entered the 'storming' phase of group development. Lindsay and Orton (2011, p.77) noted that storming is often typified by *'jostling for positions of power in the group'*

and uncertainty at the task level. Whilst 'storming' I observed that the leader of my group could become demanding, and at times disrespectful of others. This was evidenced by the leader becoming argumentative concerning their own views and values, and also demanding that the content of the task reflected their own assertions.

Other group members also sensed the leader's dominance, and this resulted in group conflict, and an unstated challenge of the leadership role. Conflict commenced during the first day of the workshop, and was later discussed during the morning of the second day when group maintenance tasks were employed to resolve the conflict. During the group meeting on day two, the entire group reflected on a 'charter of conduct' which was created when the group initially came together. Members acknowledged that they had strayed from some of the content of this charter, such as maintaining respect for others' opinions. Most group members agreed at this time, that they were feeling uneasy about the previous day's conflict, and plans were put in place to manage the group's cohesion. These plans included the delegation of tasks to specific group members; something which provided ownership of tasks to members who thus far felt that they had little control over the group's direction.

Figure 1.2 in Tyson (1998, p.5) illustrated a model of groupwork which is underpinned by two co-existing processes. These are the 'task realm' and the 'maintenance realm'. From this framework, it is noted that group relationships, roles and structure, are as important and influential as the task itself. From this perspective, the group utilised maintenance processes, in order to achieve the group's aim of successfully completing the assessment task. Further to this, it is evident from the group processes during day two, that the group had reverted back to the 'forming' stage of Tuckman's model.

Reflecting on my own experience of the group process, I initially felt anxious in regard to the groupwork exercise as I often lack assertiveness in such situations. Whilst there was a power differential in regard to student status, I found that I was able to participate in group decision-making although not to the extent that I would have chosen. Other members also took a passive approach to group participation, asserting themselves in actions rather than words. One example of this is the subgroup membership which allowed members to work independently of the leader. Further to this, I acknowledge that I was a solo worker

at times as I took home tasks, and I did not become overtly involved in the analysis of the group process. However, by focusing on tasks, I was able to reconcile my weakness in regard to the power differential inherent to the group itself.

When the group split into two subgroups, the group in which I was included was specifically tasked to complete the Diabetic Support Group program. The other group chose to analyse our own group process. The analysis group discussed how the group had moved through Tuckman's model, and appeared to consider that the group had moved into the performing phase. This occurred during day two of our group's formation, and I felt that it was not possible to analyse a process that was incomplete. I felt that the group was still in the forming and norming phases; as evidenced in the recent split between group members. Given that the other subgroup was 'watching' my sector, I also questioned group cohesion, and any real quality in the analysis, given that only my subgroup appeared to be the focus of the analysis. Given these reflections, I found comfort in my focus on the task, and strength in my ability to research relevant literature for the Diabetic Support Group.

Now what?

Analysis of the group process indicates that the group did not enter the norming or performing stages of Tuckman's model until after the group presentation to the rest of the class took place. I noticed that after my group presented to the class, cohesion finally became apparent, as evidenced in group members critiquing our group against others. It is noted in the literature that group cohesion is indicative of the norming and performing stages of Tuckman's model. Given this reflection, I question the discussion of group process at the workshop, as the process at this time, was incomplete.

The challenges which faced my group included value discrepancies, and also cultural and gender differences. For example, one member advised that the Diabetic Support Group should seek to change the values of its participants, as some people are 'lazy'. Myself and others, found that this statement was offensive, and not within the ethos of the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics which upholds the principles of respect, dignity and the self-determination of service

users. Further to this issue, one group member identified as belonging to another culture to the rest of the group, and this member was also alone in regard to their gender. Other members later questioned this person's participation in the group, however it is my analysis that it may have been challenging for this person of 'difference' to feel accepted by the group, and therefore this may have affected their ability to participate. Corey, Corey and Corey (2010, p.11) asserted that,

We must expand our awareness of issues pertaining to gender, sexual orientation, degree of physical and emotional ability, spirituality, and socioeconomic status ... the multicultural approach emphasizes the social and cultural context of human behaviour and deals with the self-in relation'

Given this statement, it is clear that the whole group may not have effectively dealt with the issue of 'difference' during the group process. This ineffective dealing with such a sensitive issue requires further thought and consideration, in regard to improvement of future practice. Further discussion of personal experience and cultural differences during the group process, may have averted the 'otherness' which unintentionally was applied to one group member. Further to this issue, Grumpert and Black (2006, p.63) highlighted ethical quandaries apparent within groupwork, as inclusive of; honesty and integrity, confidentiality, and self-determination. Whilst the group generally discussed confidentiality, it was unclear as to how this would be applied in the group presentation and personal reflective statements which were required to be submitted to our lecturer at a later date, as our third piece of assessment for the subject. In addition, self-determination was not adequately addressed in the group exercise, as many members were not able to sufficiently contribute to group decision-making due to the power differentials within the group. Such issues must be addressed appropriately within social welfare practice, as a disregard of self-determination may have deleterious effects on social welfare clients.

My personal strengths and limitations:

The skills which I utilised during the group task and process included; a sound theoretical understanding of group and social work theory, a strengths approach to groupwork, an ability to negotiate in task

allocation and group roles, and an ability to focus on the task. Areas in which I need to develop, include being able to reflect on process models 'in-situation', and also improving skills in conflict resolution and assertiveness. As my focus is on 'doing' social work, I found it challenging to focus on the 'process' itself, rather than on service user outcomes.

My overall learning:

Groupwork is often used in social welfare settings, to assist participants to achieve goals, find new meanings, and create positive change. Prior to commencing the groupwork subject, my understanding of group processes, key considerations in group design, and also 'thinking group' was limited. Since then, I have learnt that the building blocks to an effective group include; a clear and unambiguous group purpose, a sound theoretical perspective, knowledge and skills key to the specific group type, and also an effective leader or facilitator who is focused on group processes and maintenance, in addition to group program and content (McDermott, 2002; Lindsay & Orton, 2011). Konopka (2006, p.26) advised,

social group work cannot be thought of as a routine technique that can be used under all circumstances in the same way and can be taught through a "cookbook" mechanical approach. It demands a practitioner who has learned to assess people and their situation, knows his or her philosophy, and has the capacity to elicit self-help forces within the individuals and groups. Then, according to their needs and capacities, he or she will develop with the group members various approaches to achieve their goals.

There are many types of groups which are used in social welfare settings, these include; task groups, psychoeducation groups, counselling groups, psychotherapy groups and brief groups (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2010). Knowledge of group processes will assist the group facilitator to navigate and steer the group process and aid in participant interactions. Lindsay and Orton (2011) provided several perspectives to understanding group process. This included Whitaker's (2001) model of competing forces to explain group conflict, and also Tuckman's (1965) linear model which highlighted the stages of forming,

storming, norming and performing. In context, as a counselling group facilitator, I may contemplate the group's stage as related to Tuckman's model, when proposing discussion topics. It may not be appropriate to discuss deeply personal issues at the forming stage, as members have not yet built rapport or developed group norms. Without this knowledge of group processes, I may become overwhelmed as a facilitator or I may not have the resources to respond to group conflict.

Further to processes, I have learned that as a group facilitator, it is paramount to be able to 'think group' in terms of the six action strategies recognised by McDermott (2002, p.92). These strategies included: participating and observing, listening, remembering, thinking, speaking, and contextualising. McDermott (2002, p.93) emphasised,

To be able to participate and observe is very important, both in order to know what is going on in the group and in order to be a witness to what is happening. By witnessing an event, we are giving recognition and ascribing meaning and validation to the importance of what is happening ... the significance of speaking or confessing or expressing emotions and feelings in the presence of two or more people is a highly charged event.

The above quotation highlights the importance of the facilitator to 'think group' as this process supports participants in their journey to positive change. 'Thinking group' is an essential skill which must be applied during groupwork in welfare settings. Other practice approaches which may be used in the groupwork context include strengths approaches and cognitive behaviour interventions (Corcoran, 2009). Using the example of a counselling group, the facilitator may use strengths based questions to highlight the resources which a person already has, but may not be aware of. This may aid self-discovery, as group members find their own solutions to problems. Further, I have also learned that as a group facilitator, I must have an awareness of how my *'behaviour, personality, cultural background, status, and position of privilege might either enhance or hinder'* (Corey, Corey & Corey, 2010, p.10) my leadership and the group's outcomes. Without this awareness, I may unintentionally become ineffective in assisting participants to achieve group aims.

Concluding thoughts

During my study of groupwork, I have developed an understanding of the underpinning structures and approaches to social welfare groups, in addition to group-work theory and processes. My experience of the on-campus workshop and the groupwork process was a learning curve, which taught me the importance of group processes and models, which are used to explain, interpret, and navigate the group process itself. Without reflection on the group process, one could become disheartened by conflict inherent to the storming phase of group development. Rather, I have learned that this is a normal process of group development which can be resolved by group maintenance processes. The outcome of this learning is that I now feel more confident to approach groupwork within a social welfare context.

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