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Using Student Task Groups to Teach Group Process and Development

MARCIA B. COHEN

University of New England School of Social Work, Portland, Maine, USA

This article discusses an experiential assignment used in a group work course. Student groups meet throughout the semester with the task of developing a major group presentation. The assignment has the dual purpose of increasing student knowledge of diverse group approaches and providing opportunities to experience, identify, and apply group work concepts to their small-group experiences. The article uses excerpts from students' discussions about their group experiences to demonstrate the effectiveness of the assignment. Three primary themes are explored: (1) group development and emerging norms and roles, (2) issues of leadership, and (3) the role of conflict in the groups.

KEYWORDS *group work education, experiential learning, applying group theory to practice, group development, norms, roles, group leadership, group conflict, teaching group work*

INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant and disturbing body of literature pointing to the serious decline in group work education in social work, in academic and field curricula (Birnbaum & Auerbach; 1994; Clements, 2008; Parry, 1991; Steinberg, 1993). This has resulted in social work practitioners being inadequately prepared to facilitate groups and social work supervisors being inadequately prepared to supervise the group work of student practitioners. This trend has occurred concurrent with an increase in the provision of group services in many social agencies, often for reasons of

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Address correspondence to Marcia B. Cohen, PhD, University of New England, School of Social Work, 716 Stevens Avenue, Portland, ME 04103. E-mail: mcohen@une.edu

cost-effectiveness rather than an appreciation of the effectiveness of group work. The paucity of supervised group work assignments for students in the field and the lack of group work preparation of many field supervisors poses a considerable challenge for group work educators, even in programs with required group work courses.

A variety of experiential teaching methods have been utilized in the classroom to provide students with group experiences as part of their course work. The use of the class as a group and the use of student group projects has been described in the literature (Birnbaum, M. L., 1984; Clements, 2008; Cohen, 1996; Denison, 2005; Knight, 2000) with both approaches emphasizing students' experience and identification of group dynamics and development. This article examines the second type of educational experience, a semester-long task group assignment used in a required, advanced-year group work course in a graduate social work program. The goal of the assignment is to provide students with an *in vivo* group experience that promotes the integration of group theory and practice.

THE COURSE AND THE TASK GROUP ASSIGNMENT

The School has a master's program in social work and is located in a private university in Maine. The advanced-year curriculum is organized around two concentrations: clinical practice and organizational and community practice. The required Social Work Practice with Groups course is part of the curriculum for both concentrations. The course provides students with learning about group work across the practice continuum, from therapy groups to task groups.

I used the task group assignment in conjunction with didactic and other experiential teaching methods, primarily role-plays and vignettes. Students formed their own groups based on common interests, within the broad rubric of different group approaches (e.g., therapy, mutual aid, and activity and task groups). Student groups were typically composed of four or five members who met weekly throughout the semester. Each group had the task of developing a major group presentation for the purpose of educating themselves and their classmates about a particular approach to group work practice. Students simultaneously kept a log of their observations and assessments of their group process as it unfolded in their presentation task groups. Students were provided with one hour of class time during each class session to work in their groups. The use of class time for group meetings was critical to the success of the assignment. This validated the importance of the group meetings as an important part of the students' education and also acknowledged that meeting outside of class was very difficult for students who have families, multiple jobs, field placements, and other course work.

METHOD

Students kept a weekly log in which they recorded their observations of group dynamics and responded to guiding questions that I provided. These questions helped structure students' writing and focused their attention on group norms, roles, and stages of development along with other aspects of the group experience. These questions also promoted integration of the task group experience with content from course readings, class lectures, and discussions. In addition, students were asked to formulate and address their own questions about their experiences in their task groups. Students who were working with groups in the field were also asked to integrate their learning from their practice experiences. Students consistently expressed their view that this assignment was very valuable in helping them to learn to identify and apply group work concepts to a real-life group experience while they integrated theory and practice in their learning. This was particularly important for students who did not have group assignments in the field. The student logs were subjected to a content analysis for the purpose of this article. Their discussions reflected their experiences and growing understanding of group work concepts.

The Students' Logs

A content analysis of the logs from students who took this course in 2009 revealed a number of interesting themes. I focus on three of these: (1) group development and emerging norms and roles, (2) issues of leadership, and (3) the role of conflict in the groups.

GROUP DEVELOPMENT, NORMS, AND ROLES

Students began learning about group development, norms and roles during the first few class sessions. In their third set of log entries they responded to the following guiding questions:

- Can you apply the readings and discussion on group development to your task group? What stage do you think your group is in at present?
- What group norms, if any, have you observed beginning to emerge in your group?
- Can you identify any group roles?"

Andrea, a member of the student task group presenting on therapy groups, responded to the questions about group development as follows:

Our group is very rational, and there does not seem to be a sense of power and control like the literature suggests. Our group feels like we are focused on establishing common ground and connection through

similarities and differences. It feels like our group is comfortable with each other, there is already a sense of connection.

Elinor, in the same group as Andrea, viewed their group's development differently. She wrote,

In our group meeting today, I would say we began in the power and control stage of group development (beginnings) and then happily moved into the intimacy stage (middles) by the end of the meeting. I felt an energy charge in our group. I was aware of a real sense of competition in the group at the beginning of the meeting. It felt like we were being very competitive with each other, who had done the most work since our last meeting, whose ideas were the best. But, as the meeting went on, we became more bonded and the competitiveness was directed outward, to the rest of the class. We wanted to be the best, to have the best presentation. Some of us did not want the other groups to know our strategy for developing our presentation; we talked about keeping our plans secret from the others.

Andrea reflected at length on the emerging norms she was observing in the Therapy Presentation Group:

I think many group norms are emerging, having to do with participation, decision making, and mutual aid. Some group members are more verbal than others, however everyone is participating . . . Decision making norms are interesting . . . For the most part consensus about the direction of the project has come easily. I think that decision making comes easily to us due to our norm that everyone discusses what their interests and needs are, leading to mutual aid. So mutual aid norms interact with decision making norms. One example of mutual aid in our group was when the group split up the suggested readings on the syllabus. One group member was overwhelmed with the amount of reading she needed to complete for multiple courses and another group member, who had less to read, offered to read some of her articles for the group.

Lenora, who participated in the Activity Presentation Task Group, commented on the roles that she observed in her group:

Monica seems to be the Clarifier and also the Summarizer . . . It is always Monica who says "OK, time out, we need to make sure that everything is clear for everyone." I see Lorraine as an information seeker, she asks a lot of questions, always wanting to learn and understand things better.

The students found that applying group concepts to their presentation group experiences helped them to better understand the concepts and the

experiences and most were able to integrate the course material with what they observed in their groups.

THE THEME OF LEADERSHIP

In providing questions for students to respond to in their logs, I sometimes try to act like a puppeteer, pulling the strings and determining what will happen in the groups. This is not always successful. For example, I asked questions about group leadership at several different junctures during the semester. My intent was to prompt group members to discuss various options for group leadership and make conscious decisions about what kind of leadership model they wanted to adopt. Regardless of how often I tried to direct this kind of discussion, in my log questions and in my guidance to individual students, when they handed in their logs for feedback, I found little evidence of such discussions.

After the first group meeting, I posed the following questions:

- In your group's first meeting, did you consider the implications of not having a formal leader?
- If not, is this something you might want to raise the next time you meet? Note that you might want to discuss whether to make a deliberate decision to be leaderless, alternate the leader or facilitator role, or develop a model of shared leadership.

The students all responded that the implications of not having a formal leader did not occur to them and that there was no discussion of leadership in their first meeting, but that it seemed like a good thing to bring up at the next meeting. But, the topic of leadership was never brought up in any of the groups.

I asked a follow-up question about leadership after their fourth group meeting:

- How has your task group handled the issue of formal and/or informal leadership?

The following two excerpts are typical of most of the responses to this question. Belinda, in the Task Presentation Group responded, "Because our group seems to mesh so well together, we all appear to be on the same page and know what needs to be done in order to provide a successful outcome. The topic of leadership has not come up, it just flows." Lenora, in the Activity Presentation Group wrote, "There was nothing that was really addressed regarding formal and/or informal leadership. I think us all being in the situation we are in, and have worked in groups before; we know it is best to just work together as a group, without a leader."

Even in the few log entries that identified an observable group leader, and in the log of the one student who observed a struggle for leadership,

the issue was never openly discussed. Ariel, in the Mutual Aid Presentation Group, for example, responded to my question about leadership as follows:

It is hard to say how our group handled our informal leadership roles. It seemed that Lucinda just slid into the role with ease. No one ever said anything about it. It just seemed natural for Lucinda to obtain this role since she is known for needing outlines and notes in order for her to feel productive. Everyone seemed comfortable with this.

Lucinda, herself, saw the situation somewhat differently:

Our group is made up of all leaders so we are continually . . . assessing and re-assessing how to handle a given task without creating an issue. I am noticing a little bit of unconscious vying for formal leadership in order to organize things. We are probably all recognizing our individual “power” but also trying to be conscientious about not taking over.

Interestingly, the only student who described any sort of conflict over leadership was Carl, the only male in the class. Carl, who was a member of the same group as Ariel and Lucinda, responded as follows to my question about leadership:

I had to laugh out loud when I read this question. There are two members of the group who appear to need and crave formal leadership and then there are two other group members who seem to prefer the informal leadership because it allows for creativity, flow, and a more organic process. At this point, our group is struggling with formal versus informal leadership.

Miranda, who was a member of the same group as Arielle, Lucinda, and Carl, did not perceive the leadership struggle that Carl described. She stated, “Our task group has been pretty informal. We have not appointed any formal leadership and have not needed to discuss this. We have all taken initiative at different times.” Christina, the fifth member of this group, simply omitted the entire question about leadership from her log.

It is a plausible hypothesis that, given Carl’s description of the leadership difficulties in the Mutual Aid Presentation Group, this group was not ready to address or hardly acknowledge the presence of conflict regarding group leadership. There was virtually no discussion of conflict in any of the groups. There appeared to be a class-wide norm of avoiding open discussion of conflict. This brings us to the final theme to be discussed.

THE THEME OF CONFLICT

An analysis of the student logs suggested that there was little overt conflict in any of the groups. This did not appear to be a function of a placid group dynamic so much as a prevailing norm of avoidance of conflict and negative expressions about the group process when conflict threatened. Comments in the student logs seemed to confirm this hypothesis.

Kerri, a member of the Task Presentation Group, expressed her ambivalence about the role of conflict in group work and her own discomfort with expressions of conflict:

My group has had some minor problems, but I feel they have been worked through one meeting at a time. In the very last meeting, I spoke up and disagreed with something that had been said. It felt very hard but I was able to get support from other members of the group. After thinking about my past group experiences with conflict and speaking up, I feel as though I should be more straight forward. But, this takes its toll on personal relationships.

Lucinda, in the Mutual Aid Presentation Group, also described avoiding conflict because of its potential threat to relationships:

We learned in class and from our readings that conflict can be an incredibly useful tool for group growth. But I think that it can also be a source of unwelcome stress. I tend to avoid conflict in our group . . . I don't want to put my relationships with my peers at risk by offending or confronting them as I will be in school with them for another year. If this were a group of strangers . . . it would be different. I could try to facilitate an interesting discussion about group dynamics without too much risk involved.

Ariel, who was a member in the Mutual Aid Presentation Group, expressed similar discomfort with group conflict. After the seventh group session, I posed the following questions:

- Is your task group able to talk openly about its own process?
- If not, what can you do to influence group communication norms and promote more open discussion?

Ariel responded as follows:

We do talk openly; however, we tend to cushion what we want so we do not offend anyone else. We were originally planning to have a very organic group session for our presentation and now we are having outlines on how to do so. I disagree with this however, I did not assert my

opinion. . . . I did not voice that I thought it would be less than free flowing if we followed a script. I was very annoyed since in the beginning no one wanted to have scripts but now the group wants this. I kept my feelings to myself.

Carl, in the Mutual Aid Task Group, responded to the same question:

We use what we call "truth in humor" as our means of communicating. When one of the group members begins to lose focus and concentration, we use humor to reel them back in. . . . I think we all recognize that this probably is not the most authentic way of being and functioning, but for the sake of our working relationship, productivity and knowing that it will be over soon, it does not make sense to have a confrontational meeting.

Conflict and the Broader Culture

This particular class did not display any greater discomfort with overt expressions of conflict than other classes that I have taught. I teach this course twice every year and have observed the same avoidance of disagreement and discord in student logs whenever I taught the course. It is partly for this reason that I provide the class with readings and discussions of the positive value of conflict in a group (Schiller, 2003; Steinberg, 2004). Students appear to understand the positive role of conflict conceptually, yet their fear that conflict will be destructive to the group's work and relationships appears to constrain their acknowledging and working through disagreements within the classroom groups. One possible explanation is that the avoidance of overt conflict in the classroom groups may reflect similar norms in the broader culture of Northern New England. As a born and bred New Yorker living in Maine for more than 20 years, I have often been struck by the differences between Yankee culture and New York City culture. People in Maine tend to be very polite, very nice, and very reticent about expressing feelings that might be considered negative. The old adage "if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all" typifies what I have observed in the culture of Northern New England.

Now, I don't know what kind of log reflections I would get if I used this same assignment with a class of students in New York City, but I suspect they would be feistier and more ready to engage in a clash of wills than my students in Maine were. The ethnic differences between the two regions are considerable. The predominant ethnic group in Maine is White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), in contrast to the considerable ethnic diversity of New York. It seems that overt expressions of conflict are not sanctioned in Yankee culture. I think that this broader, ingrained cultural norm of always trying to be nice and avoiding conflict is, not surprisingly, carried over into

these small student groups. It would be fascinating if someone from New York City, or another more diverse region, were to use a similar assignment and analyze the role of conflict in student groups. It would be interesting to see how the role of conflict would play out—similarly or differently—as compared to the present groups. A similar assignment may be already in use someplace with a very different regional culture than that of Northern New England. It would be useful to examine the impact of different regional and other cultural and ethnic norms on the many facets of experiential groups in social work education.

What They Learned

It is important to gauge the effectiveness of this experiential assignment in teaching students about group process. Based on their work in the course, it appeared that the students learned a great deal. I gave them the opportunity, in their final log entry, to write about what they learned. Students indicated that the opportunity to experience the dynamics in their groups and to apply their didactic learning to their group experiences aided them in their learning of core course concepts. Suzanne's comments about her learning in the course were typical of her classmates:

I absolutely learned more from participating in a task group than I would have learned had I just read about it or watched others role play it. I am a "hands-on" learner. I learn from doing. I internalize concept and theories when I have a frame of reference for their meaning. I "get it" better when I've "done it." I have actually experienced and thus have a much better sense of the stages of group development than I did before I took this course, as well as a much better understanding of group norms and roles. I learned that there are aspects of group formation, development, and implementation that are common to all groups.

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of this assignment, and similar ones used by other group work instructors, is affirming. The concepts of group development and norms and roles came alive for the students as a result of their participation in the assignment. In view of the current crisis in group work education it is particularly important for students who are lacking group work experiences in the field to have the opportunity to experience the dynamics of group work. There are limits to this assignment, however. One major piece of learning that this assignment did not address is the development of group facilitation skills. I used in-class group role-plays to help the students develop these skills, but these fell short of providing a

sustained experience in group facilitation. Although I do not believe that in vivo, in-class group experiences can ever take the place of working with groups in the field, I believe that they do provide a real-life learning laboratory where students can experience and apply core group work concepts.

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