

LEARNING METHODS – HOW TO LEARN SOCIAL WORK?

Focus on group work in the classroom and practice in the field

Attributes of good working groups

Work in groups is useful when they are functional. In social work, you will often have to create groups and work through group processes. Therefore, a good learning outcome also will include an investment in group processes as part of your education.

When you begin group work with other students, you should always start by talking about how to work together. Try to reach agreement about:

- an understanding and acceptance by all group members about the goal and tasks;
- the rules that should be followed;
- how you would like to work together.

Open communication is very important in all group work. Group members should be able to freely express their own opinions and listen to others. You should not fight for your own opinion, but learn from others. Open communication is demanding, especially when you have to deal with conflicts. Good communication will create mutual trust within the group where nobody will “hang out” others and all members can dare to be themselves and not play artificial roles.

Social support is also necessary in a group process. Group members should give support, encourage, understand, recognize, and be aware of each other. All should be gentle with criticizing and stress positive feedback – practice praising. We have a responsibility not only for ourselves, but also for how the entire group functions, so that all members become engaged in the work. The group work should also be a good source of social learning, which is directly relevant to social work.

It can be great to work with students or colleagues similar to yourself. But in the long run, it is better to take advantage of individual differences. It may be beneficial if group members are not too equal. Differences create tensions that provide opportunities for good group processes and of course it is the sum of the group’s total competence that will be used.

Making a group function well does not happen in a moment. The process of achieving good functioning is important. The group will develop until it finds its final form.

Whether or not it will be a well-functioning group depends on all the members. At the first meeting, all members are insecure about their own role and that of the others. After a while, the group will develop a pattern of roles. Eventually, two roles have to be assumed:

- 1) The roles of who contributes to do the work within the time frame are discussed and decisions are concluded with summaries and written documents from all group members.
- 2) The roles of who takes care of the social aspects of the group are often called the maintenance or preservation roles. Emotions have to be given space. The social climate has to be cared for. You have to talk about other things, and this is not “sand” in the machinery – but rather, much needed oil.

Both roles have to be fulfilled!

Good working groups also must have leadership. In all groups, leadership has to be practiced. Goals have to be set, and someone has to ensure that the momentum is good enough. In a good group, diverse members will engage themselves as leaders. Each member's competence could be essential in providing leadership. For example, the leadership could change depending on the problem the group is working on. Flexible leadership is therefore recommended (Busch 2003).

Experiential learning in communication based on group work

Constructive communication is important in social work as well as in group work and education. As a social worker, you should learn some theory about communication and at the same time do some practice. This teaching method can be structured in 4 steps as described below.

1. Lecture about Carl Rogers and his three basic concepts of communication (about one hour)

If the lecturers don't lecture about Rogers, you can also read for yourself:

Carl Ransom Rogers was born in Illinois, USA in 1902 and died in California in 1987. Rogers greatly influenced the humanistic approach to psychology together with Abraham Maslow. His book *Client – Centered therapy*, written in 1951 (Rogers 1965) has become a classical text. One of his perspectives is to avoid the connotation that a person is sick, criminal, alcoholic or other ways of thinking about the person as an object of an experiment. Rogers perceives the client as a person who comes actively and voluntarily to receive help with a problem, but without any notion of surrendering his own responsibility for the situation.

Rogers introduced three basic qualities for successful treatment/guidance. These qualities are basic in all interpersonal relations, and therefore a condition for good communication (Boeree 2006).

- a) *Congruence – genuineness, honesty with the client.* The gap between the real self and the ideal self, the “I am” and the “I should” is called incongruity. The greater the gap, the more incongruity. The more incongruity, the more suffering. Your non-verbal expression should correspond with what you are saying.
- b) *Empathy – the ability to feel what the client feels.* You have to be warm, open, friendly, interested, caring. You will then be able to develop trust with your client. You also should be able to divorce your own feelings from your client’s. Be aware of the difference between a declarative and an emphatic attitude so that you don’t judge the client instead of understanding him/her.
- c) *Respect – acceptance, unconditional positive regard towards the client.* You should be non-judgmental in how you react to your client, even if he/she acts very provocatively. This means that you don’t have to agree with everything your client says or does, but accept the person he/she is.

These ideals are something to work on, and it is important to reflect upon your own feelings to be as congruent, empathetic and respectful as possible. In this way, you will be able to develop abilities to make good relations and communication well with your clients (Johannesen, 2001).

You should then work in groups to understand what these basic qualities really mean. All students have experienced communication in several different settings (for example schools, peer groups, families, someone in official services, hospitals, social services, someone may have worked in kindergartens, volunteer service and so on). There should be a lot of experiences in the group to work with.

2. Individual and group work

The next step is then to try to answer the questions below for yourself (about one quarter to half an hour), and then go to the groups and share your answers, your experiences (the time to be used can be flexible according to the needs of students and teachers).

- a) Have you experienced a situation, or can you imagine one, where you did or did not act congruently?
- b) How will you work with yourself as a social worker to
 - act congruently,
 - show empathy,
 - show positive regard?
- c) Are Roger’s 3 concepts important to you in your communication as a professional social worker? Why?

Our pedagogical view is that we learn from what we already know. Therefore, this task starts with the students’ own experiences. Of course, it can reveal problems the students are dealing with. Hopefully, the lecturer will move from group to group, recognize the problems and adapt them to communication. If this happens, the teacher has to be professional

in doing this, and be a good role model for the students. In the next term, it is the student who will have to communicate with clients about problems. It is then important to know yourself, your own attitudes and reactions. At the very least, it is important to have one available teacher that you can contact if you need help with the group work

3. Case study

In a further teaching perspective, you can write a case for the other students to analyze. Maybe the teacher has given you cases from his/her own experience, from the literature and/or you can develop a narrative. You can also do a role play, a learning method often used in Norwegian education (Kokkersvold, Mjelve 2003). From the theory and practice in group work, you now should be able to discuss if the group members in the case are acting congruently, show empathy and positive regard, and if not, describe how they should act. This should provide training in analyzing the gap between the ideal and reality, and how to work to reach the goal of good communication.

4. Meta perspective

In the meta perspective, you could reflect upon your own communication in the group using Rogers's three concepts for basic qualities of successful communication as a departure point. Questions to be answered could be: what made me act congruently; did I show empathy and positive regard? If not, why? And how can I change my way of acting to come nearer to my "Ideal self"?

At the same time, meta communication is a way to clarify your approach to the case you are working with. You can mark a shift in the level of communication or let it happen naturally in the process. A short communication should then suffice to go back to the case (Lindbæk 2004).

This will also be an example of how to use the group. You have to give feedback to other group members on how you experience the other students' ways of acting, and they will give you some feedback. This will enhance students' awareness of how others experience their attitudes and hopefully strengthen their awareness of others, which is very important in social work.

What to discuss in the group, what to learn about?

There are many possible topics you can discuss in student groups. There will usually be a professional problem to be discussed, a task to be solved within your topic or experiences to understand in a theoretical frame.

If it is not possible to practice in the field, it could be useful to discuss cases, stories and narratives in the groups. Here we will focus on the use of narratives. The importance of narratives appears in the following citation: *Stories have ontological status. We are always enveloped in stories. The narratives for human beings are analogous to the ocean for fishes* (Sarbin 1986 in Murray 2003). So what is a narrative? Literature tells that a narrative is a story, or

a told story. A narrative is created in a context, even if it is told by someone. It will be interpreted by the person who receives it (Kokkersvold 2005). As a social worker, you will often receive stories from your clients. You will interpret them in your own understanding and hopefully cooperate with your client to come to a common understanding of the narrative. It does not matter if the story is “real” or “imaginary” – without losing its usefulness in understanding what we are dealing with (Bruner 1990).

- For our purpose, we will give an example of narrative to be used in a given topic:
- Providing knowledge about the risk of social marginalization to certain groups, such as: substance abusers, unemployed, persons living in poverty, disabled persons, etc.
 - Presenting institutional and legislative possibilities to assist the aforementioned groups.
 - Presenting possibilities of actions in the field of social and vocational activation of socially excluded groups or of the groups at risk of exclusion (spreading the idea of self-help, developing interests, promoting voluntary services, forming active attitudes about the labor market and the place of residence, promoting entrepreneurship, creating social cooperatives, clubs and centers of social inclusion, creating projects and writing grant applications, in particular for financing from the European Social Fund, methods of evaluating one’s own activities, creation of local coalitions for social inclusion, facilitating access to information and counseling, etc.).

Group members are given the following story:

Julia is 5 years old and attends kindergarten. The professionals are worried about her functioning, she seems unhappy, is often very tired, her skin is pale and her clothes often seem not to fit. They know that her father is employed and her mother works in a restaurant in the afternoons. They also know that there are 3 older siblings in the family.

In the last few weeks, her older brother has been coming to take her home, and Julia didn’t seem to appreciate this. One of the professionals heard Julia say that her father is sleeping all the time, and that her mother never wakes up in the mornings. There is so much noise at home, her parents’ friends are coming to visit all hours of the day, and they are drinking, smoking and quarrelling.

The professionals have tried to talk with her parents about this, but their answer is that they have no problems. After a while they decide to go to the social welfare system and ask for help.

Think about yourself as a social worker and that you have been told this story. How will you work it out? Think about this for 15 minutes or so, then go to your group and share your views. Set a goal for your work, choose the methods.

Next take some time for reflection:

- Reflect about the group’s use of theory: What have you learned about the consequences of being unemployed? What would it be like to grow up in a family affected

by addiction? Did you see any possibility for self-help? For creating social cooperatives, clubs or centers for social inclusion?

- Reflect about the group process: how was the leadership? How was the social climate? Is each member satisfied with their role, their activity, did they manage to listen to the other members?

One example of experience-based learning

When you are educated as a social worker, you should be able to do your professional work in conformance with the law, current theory and practice, ethical standards and so on. In the educational system, the teaching will often be distanced from what is happening in practice. The sociologist Arcer writes that:

All education systems during their development undergo an “initial phase”, where education is close to practice, then they enter an “expansion phase” where education gradually becomes autonomous in relation to the practice field. In a third “inflation” phase – the educational system begins more or less “to live a life of its own” with a relatively reduced link to the practice field. (Fauske 2006).

Vocational practice will then strengthen the bond between the University and the practice field. It will also help to integrate theory and practice. We look at vocational practice as an important alternative learning area. In the practice field, there will hopefully be developments that students should be familiar with, and there will also be practice that students will benefit from by working out and trying to do it themselves. In practical training, it is also possible to focus on teaching goals. In vocational practice, students will have the time and opportunity to systematically acquire knowledge through a practice that reflects the current theory, ethics, etc. In daily work, there is often a lack of time to do this type of reflective work and learning process.

It can be difficult for universities to have contact with all the possible places where students may have their practice. There is no time to make contacts, have meetings, collaborate, and there are few, if any, resources to pay an employee to guide the student. In such situations, it is possible for the students to administer their own practice. After all, this process also provides valuable experience to a social worker! The description below is from Vocational Teacher Education, HiAk – Health and Social Studies.

Steps

To administer your own practice means to be orderly and targeted. You have to decide in advance what you want to learn and read as much as possible about the topic (i.e. socially marginalized persons).

Before you start your practice, you should clarify your role with your contacts in the University and the practice site. Several solutions are possible. You can be an ob-

server with a minimum of contact with clients. If allowed, you can be a participant observer. Or you can be a student researcher making interviews, writing observations, reading reports, circulars and theory.

It is also important to be cautious when learning about the workplace's different tasks. This may cause emotional reactions in a positive or negative way among some persons. Therefore, be precise about your goal, and talk to the practice site about your tasks. If you need to adjust your goal, justify it, but write down why you had to change it.

- *Learning goals*

Vocational practice has to be in accordance with the study plan and current study topic. The responsible teacher will of course provide lessons in the topic according to the learning goals and may also ask the students to write about the practice. It can also be useful for the students to set their own learning goals and write a reflection note on this (Hiim, Hippe 2009).

- *To find a practice placement site and have it approved*

The student has to choose a practice placement site. The choice of placement should be related to the learning outcomes of the topic and, if possible, your own wishes. Check the national curriculum for the target area, especially the list of subjects and goals. In the *Psychosocial Support for the Persons Marginalized in Community* project, several marginalized groups are described (elderly people, people with mental health problems, drug addicts). We encourage students to determine their own goals and then try to find a site that can contribute to a learning outcome that fits their needs.

- *The student has to contact the desired practice site and determine whether it is possible for the practice to occur there.*

The University College has prepared a general introduction about the actual education that describes the content, goals, curriculum and so on. This orientation also contains practical information about the purpose of the practice and issues related to confidentiality, assessment, length and intensity of the practice and so on. The student can send this to the practice site in advance or bring it to the first meeting. The student then must have the placement site approved by the University College, and send a completed form to the responsible teacher in the system. The form must contain the placement name, address, phone number, e-mail address and the name of a contact person at the site. The student must also explain why this site was chosen.

- *Implementation*

When you are coming to a practice site, it is easy to be overwhelmed by impressions from clients, professionals, systems and discussions. It is therefore important to have your learning goals in view the entire time. It is easy to become excited by or engaged in activities that are not related to your learning goals. At the same time, a practice site also has social aspects, and it may be necessary to participate in them to understand what is going on. Again, reflection is important to achieve the best possible balance between social sensitivity and paper work.

Reflection

To read about reflection, see the chapter written by Reidun Lappen.

As mentioned, vocational practice can be regarded as an alternative learning area. This means that we have moved from the classroom to the open field in society. The consequences are that the teacher's role changes from lecturing behind a podium, to advising students in groups, individually, orally or in writing. After completing the practice, the student has to reflect upon his/her learning outcome. This can be done in several ways, but we recommend not doing it with the full class of students (many students will stay calm in such a situation), but in small groups to talk together. The students can, for example, start individually with the following task, and reflect in groups on their individual answers. Below is a formula used in the Vocational Teacher Education at HiAk:

Task related to vocational experience

Topic:

Period:

Name:

Class:

1. What was your most important learning outcome from this vocational practice (a goal):
2. Why did you wish to learn about this:
3. How did you implement the practice to achieve your learning goal:
4. What did you learn:
5. Reflect whether the practice you experienced agrees with the theory you read:
6. What would you like to learn more about (new learning goal):

The student's signature:

Vocational practice is a way of learning that corresponds to reality. To reach your learning outcome goal, you have to use all of yourself. To understand the theory and practice, you have to use both your intellect and your feelings. When you are able to integrate this understanding, it will also be easier to start the process of training to do the best possible practice to support marginalized people in society.

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