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Student Goal Statements for the Experiential Learning Group

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Abstract

This study delineates teaching strategies for helping counseling students to develop appropriate goal statements designed to facilitate participation in the group work experiential group process. Students reviewed literature on professional counselor development, emotional and social intelligence, and group leader characteristics. This literature delineated personal and professional attributes conducive to effective group leadership and was utilized to stimulate reflection on personal group goals. 21 students in a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited Community Counseling program completed the 10- week group experience. At the end of group, students reflected, reevaluated and reformulated their original group goals. A qualitative analysis yielded 14 student-constructed goal statements. These post-group goal student goal statements may prove helpful to future group facilitators of the group work learning experience.

Keywords

Group work training, group goal training

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Group Work is one of the core content areas of the counseling profession (National Board for Certified Counselors and Affiliates Inc., 2011). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) delineates standards for the content area of Group Work (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2011). In addition, CACREP specifies that all students participate in an experiential group that spans ten hours of training. However, the group content and focus of this learning experience are not specified. We observed that counseling students who participate in the experiential group often display primary tension over the purpose and expectations of the group experience. Apprehension and vagueness about group goals seems to be a universal experience (Corey, 2004). Our experience leading and participating in the group also indicated that student participants experience primary tension. The purpose of this study is to delineate teaching strategies for helping students to develop appropriate goal statements designed to facilitate greater personal development and involvement in the experiential group process. This paper also provides a representative list of student-constructed goal statements for the experiential training group.

Counselors Development

Counselor educators have emphasized the importance of group participation for counselors-in-training. Coyne, Ward and Wilson (1997) accented the significance of “personhood and the ability of the group leader to maintain a purposeful connection with group members” (p.43). They also identified self-awareness as the means toward interpersonal

competency comprised of the ability to appropriately self-disclose, take risks, and give feedback. The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) provides standards for diversity-competent group workers and lists awareness of self as a governing principle (Association for Specialists in Group Work, 1998). In regard to counselor education, Corey and Herlihy (1996) conveyed that “training programs are based on the assumption that the counselors’ personal qualities make a significant difference in the outcomes of the therapeutic relationship” (p. 276). Other researchers on the development of a reflective practitioner have challenged counselor educators to cultivate reflective learning habits within students (Tobin, Willow, Bastow, & Ratkowski, 2009). They reported that the experiential group was structured around the idea that reflectivity is an essential component of effective group counseling. Reflective learning was deemed an essential strategy in counselor development. Therefore, students need to be provided with opportunities for self-exploration of personal issues related to their ongoing counselor development.

Group Leader Characteristics

Literature on counselor professional and personal development provides a basis for counseling students to formulate the goal statements for their experiential group. The primary textbook on group work served as a resource for educating and training students on group goals. For instance, Gladding (2008) identifies personal qualities of an effective group leader: “poise, judgment, empathy, ego strength, freedom from excessive anxiety, a desire to help people, tolerance of frustration, imagination, intuition, perceptiveness, and an ability to avoid self-preoccupation” (p.81). Corey and Corey (2006) also illuminate desirable qualities for group leaders such as courage, openness, self-awareness, and humor. All of these traits are considered essential to effective group leadership and attainment of positive group outcomes.

Others have specified personal characteristics of effective group leaders. Capuzzi, Gross, and Stauffer (2006) reviewed the group work literature and consolidated a list of characteristics and behaviors conducive to effective group leadership that included personal traits such as presence, personal power, courage, and self-awareness. They concluded that “emotionally present group leaders who are in touch with their own life experiences and associated emotions are better able to communicate empathy and understanding because they can relate to similar circumstances or emotions” (p.22). Leaders with personal power influence the group with their self-confidence. Courageous leaders are able to take risks, share life experiences and serve as role models. Furthermore, counselor self-awareness is considered essential to prevent the counselor’s unresolved issues from impeding the counselor role and detracting from the overall group experience (Capuzzi et al., 2006).

For the purpose of our course the literature on emotional intelligence (EI) and social intelligence (SI) was also reviewed. Emotional intelligence was defined as having the ability to motivate oneself and endure in times of frustration; to manage impulsivity and postpone satisfaction; to control one’s moods and keep distress from affecting the ability to think; and to be empathic and optimistic (Goleman, 1995). Goleman expanded emotional intelligence into five constructs: self-awareness of emotions; managing feelings and reactions; self-motivation; empathy; and social competence in relationships. EI connotes a sense of emotional attunement, internal control, and empathic understanding.

Social intelligence (SI) placed emphasis on the capacity and quality of social interactions, primarily social awareness and social facility (Goleman, 2006). *Social awareness* referred to the

ability to “instantly sense another’s inner state and understanding his or her feelings and thoughts as well as understanding complicated situations” (p.84). *Social facility* “builds on social awareness to allow smooth, effective interactions” (p.84). Social awareness relies on traits such as accurate empathy and listening with full receptivity. Social facility calls upon an effective self-presentation and the ability to influence social interactions. As evidenced, the literature on EI and SI seems consistent with the literature on desirable traits for effective group leadership.

Group Goal Statements

The group experience typically begins with a well-developed group proposal, followed by an overall group goal with proposed general objectives for group participation (Gladding, 2012). Accordingly, group members are asked to formulate and verbalize personal goals prior to participation in the group experience. Gladding contended that a written contract facilitated changes related to goal attainment. Specific individual goals should be stated in a positive and measureable manner. According to Erford (2011), while “guiding members in developing positive specific and measureable goals, the leader establishes a group environment that engenders growth and development in individual members and the group as a whole” (p.91). Several researchers have developed general goals for group members. For example, Carroll and Wiggins (1990) comprised a list of general goals deemed potentially helpful to group members:

Become a better listener; develop sensitivity and acceptance of others; increase self-awareness and develop a sense of identity; feel a sense of belongingness and overcome feelings of isolation; learn to trust others as well as self; recognize and state areas of belief and values without fear of repression; transfer what is learned in the group to the outside; and accept responsibility for solving one’s own problems (p.25).

Furthermore, Carroll and Wiggins proposed process goals designed to encourage group participation, such as: “help members stay in the here and now, prevent storytelling related to the there and then, help members to confront others with care and respect, learn to give non-evaluative feedback, learn to risk by speaking from the first person” (p.290). They concluded that these types of goal statements are pertinent to group facilitation and the formulation of an overall positive group experience.

In addition to the primary text on group work, several researchers have emphasized the importance of formulating and articulating appropriate group goals for counselors-in-training. One group of researchers supported the contention that group members who were taught to establish appropriate here-and-now group goals would engage in a positive manner, both inside and outside of group (Kivlighan, Jauquet, Hardie, Francis, & Hershberger, 1993). They researched undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a master’s program in counseling psychology. Their results suggested that here-and-now agendas contributed to increased group member productivity and desirable outcomes. Another group of researchers emphasized the importance of providing structure for the group learning experience for graduate students in a psychology program (McGuire, Taylor, Broome, Blau, & Abbott, 1986). They contended that structure improved levels of interpersonal communication and self-disclosure among group members. The implications of these studies for group leaders affirm the importance of developing appropriate group goals.

Group workers have also commented on group goals when designing, planning, and processing group activities. Furr (2000) recommended guidelines for establishing group goals. She stated that goals should be reasonable and challenging for the participants as well as achievable. They should be written in a measurable manner that allows participants to self-evaluate individual goal attainment. Clearly defined individual goals also prompted members to attain a level of congruency with the overall goals of the structured group. Stockton, Morran, and Nitza (2000) provided a conceptual map for processing group events. They instructed group leaders to process group incidents in order to enable members to relate their group experience to their group goals. Goodrich and Luke (2012) also updated the literature on the requisite experiential group and counselors-in-training. They emphasized the obligations of counselor educators to deal with problematic behavior when it occurred in group work. They contended that “counselor educators should set boundaries around counselors-in-training disclosure and remind trainees of this often” (p. 341). Establishing appropriate group goals and preparing and emphasizing here-and-now agendas may modulate self-disclosure and facilitate group involvement for counseling students.

Group Dynamics

The counseling students in our Group Dynamics course were required to review literature on professional counselor development, emotional and social intelligence, and group leader characteristics. This literature delineated personal and professional attributes conducive to effective group leadership. We observed that this literature helped students to identify areas of desired personal and professional development. Counseling students were instructed to read this literature in order to stimulate self-reflection on personal goal attainment. This literature delineated personal and professional traits conducive to effective group leadership; and helped orient them to the experiential group.

The purpose of the experiential group was to provide a training experience that enhanced interpersonal competency and self-awareness. The experiential group also provided the students with the opportunity to observe group formation, group leadership skills, participate in group dynamics and group process, and to encounter therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). In line with these objectives students were asked to specify developmental goals of a more personal nature. In order to facilitate this process, students were asked to reflect on their professional and personal development. They were asked to develop a personal narrative that delineated areas of personal attributes as well as areas of desired improvement. They then synthesized the narrative to construct three goal statements relevant to the anticipated group experience.

Student Goal Statements

The group dynamics class consisted of 21 students in a CACREP-accredited Community Counseling program. They all participated in a one and a half hours experiential group that spanned 10 weeks. The pre-group assignment was to develop a professional statement that identified qualities of an effective professional counselor, and to delineate personal strengths and areas of development. In order to help students develop their personal statement, they were asked to reread counseling texts on helping relationships by Gerig (2007) and counseling skills by Young (2009). The students were also provided with a mini-lecture and handouts on emotional and social intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Goleman, 2006). Prior to group participation, students

formulated three personal group goal statements. Students stated their goals in the first group session and referred to these throughout the group process. At the end of their group experience, students were asked by the course instructor to assess their progress in meeting their goals.

After the termination of the group, the students were asked to reflect on their group experience, and to reevaluate and reformulate their group goals. Students were assigned to task groups of three to five members. The task groups were instructed to form a list of twelve goal statements that were relevant to the learning process of the group experience. Two students served as research assistants and combined all of the lists into one master list of 60 goal statements. They edited the master list for redundancy. Goals were collapsed, coded, and categorized based on emergent themes. They engaged in reflexivity, a practice used to reach consensus in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

This qualitative analysis yielded a final list of 14 goal statements. Goal statements were formulated into positive self-statements (i.e. I will be more receptive of accepting feedback; I will engage in group activities and group discussions). The goal statements were then coded into emergent themes: involvement; awareness; emotions; and skill building. Involvement is defined as a willingness to engage in group activities. Awareness is defined as a striving towards self-knowledge and understanding of others. Emotion is defined as the development of EI. Skill building is defined as the acquisition of counseling skills (see Appendix).

Discussion

Group dynamics and the experiential student group are core components of counselor education and counselor preparation. The purpose of this study was to delineate teaching strategies for helping students to develop goal statements designed to facilitate greater personal development and involvement in the experiential group process. The results of this study yields a list of student goal statements constructed from the experience of group members. At the completion of this course students were asked to reflect on their group experience and to reevaluate and reformulate their group goals. This qualitative inquiry yielded 14 goal statements that were coded into emergent themes: involvement, awareness, emotions and skill building. These student constructed themes were reflective of their group experience and seemed consistent with the goal and purpose of the experiential training group.

Group facilitators typically request participants to develop goal statements prior to beginning or at the start of the group experience (Gladding, 2012). Student feedback solicited in this course revealed primary resistance to development of personal goals prior to group engagement. Our impressions suggest that the development of student group goals helps to facilitate the formation of group and encourages participation. Goal statements added a sense of structure and purpose to being involved in an experiential group process. We also noticed a change in the quality of student goal statements. The pre-group goal statements were more subjective and personal. The post-group goal statements were indicative of the benefit that can be derived from group participation. The focus of our group was experiential and developmental, and emphasized working in the here and now. Therefore, the final group statements tended to reflect this type of process-oriented group. Since they were constructed from the actual experience of group members, we considered them valid and representative examples of appropriate goal statements. The post-group goal statements developed by students who participated in a group may prove helpful to future group facilitators of the CACREP-required group experience.

These types of goals also suggest a greater understanding of self-disclosure. In addition to primary tension over group goals our experience reveals that the group members experience anxiety over expectations for self-disclosure. According to Corey (2004), self-disclosure “does not mean revealing one’s inner most secrets and digging into one’s past” (p.114). Ideally appropriate self-disclosure involves sharing reactions to critical incidences or here and now activation that occurs in group. Self-disclosure may also reveal emotionality as a result of unresolved personal issues, conflicted goals, or transference. Appropriate self-disclosure also refrains from storytelling and “not letting group pressure dictate the limits of one’s privacy” (Baldwin & Pierce, 1990, p.152). It is inconceivable that all past references be eliminated from group. Some sharing of past experiences helps to establish individual identities and exposes participants to appropriate risk taking. Past issues that emerge in group illuminate unresolved areas of concern that may impede counselor development. According to Baldwin and Pierce (1990), “attempting to restrict all potentially revealing information would run counter to known principles of group development and process” (p.151). Group leaders should attempt to maximize interpersonal and intrapersonal learning, and at the same time assure for a safe learning environment.

We recommend group leaders to explicate expectations for appropriate self-disclosure, especially in the experiential learning group. Group leaders should consider modeling and setting explicit group norms for appropriate self-disclosure. The here and now focus that emphasizes active participation in group process rather than self-revelation may also contribute to a safe learning environment. Furthermore, applying group goals and appropriate self-disclosure may also abate ethical concerns around the experiential group.

Counselor educators have commented upon the potential ethical dilemma for a dual relationship when the experiential group is part of a classroom requirement (Merta & Sisson, 1991). Shumaker, Ortiz and Brenninkmeyer (2011) surveyed experiential group training in master’s level counselor education programs. They recommended the following critical safeguard elements for promoting a positive experiential group experience: instructor’s self-reflection, informed consent of students, and self-disclosure training. The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics also cautioned counselor educators in instances when program requirements call for self-disclosure and self-growth experiences (F.7.b.; American Counseling Association, 2005). This seems to be an ongoing area of exploration and discussion among counselor educators responsible for the group training experience.

In summary, we found that students were able to construct goal statements conducive to personal and professional development as well as group participation. The review of the literature on professional counselor development, emotional and social intelligence, and group goals helped students facilitate their personal group goal statements. These goal statements also provided a sense of structure and purpose for the experiential group. We postulate that the development of goal statements may help manage the ambiguity and primary tension over the purpose and expectations of the group experience. Further inquiry into this area is warranted. We recommend that counselor educators and group facilitators systematically address the formation of student goal statements in order to facilitate participation and positive group outcomes.

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Appendix

Goal Statements for Counselors in Training

Theme	Student Goals
Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I will focus on the here and now.• I will acknowledge and adhere to group norms.• I will engage in group activities and group discussions.• I will communicate and provide appropriate feedback to other members.
Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I will become aware and be comfortable addressing multicultural diversity.• I will become aware of the occurrence of group dynamics and group process.• I will strive to be aware of transference and countertransference.• I will engage in interpersonal and intrapersonal self-awareness.
Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I will improve my emotional intelligence.• I will increase empathy towards others.
Skill Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• I will strengthen my observational and listening skills.• I will be more receptive of accepting feedback.• I will be comfortable with group confrontation and conflict.

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