

Group Experience Reflection:

A Journey to Becoming a More Effective Group Facilitator

Susie Routes

Oregon State University

Group Counseling Procedures

Dr. Tara M. Gray

August 13, 2016

Introduction

Taking this class has been a meaningful experience to me. As outlined below, this course brought my attention to the fact that I still have a lot to learn. A central theme is the importance of paying attention. Attention needs to be paid to the group process, to my reactions, to my background, to group member backgrounds, ethical issues, and to group dynamics. Below is a more in-depth discussion of what I have learned.

Group Processes

This course made me consider the subtleties of the group process. I really appreciated how both texts retained a focus on the group process, as this is where group work truly happens. As I reflect on my group facilitation skills prior to this course, I notice that I was more focused on structuring the group and this this amount of structure prevented a lot of effective work to take place. I particularly noticed this as I watched the tape of me facilitating a group, during the first in-person session in Salem.

Focus on the Here and Now

As I reflect on the group norms we learned about this term, one particular norm stands out to me in particular: the group focus on the here and now. To me, this norm places the ultimate focus on the group process. With the implementation of this norm, group facilitators and group members are constantly reflecting on the group process by tending to their reactions to others, group interactions, and how these factors reflect their day-to-day lives. The focus on the here and now provides group members the opportunity to practice soliciting, receiving, and giving feedback. They can practice new approaches for dealing with interpersonal issues in a setting where they will receive immediate feedback and have the opportunity to tend to their own

reactions to these new practices. In addition, this norm places an emphasis on mindfulness, a skill that is important in my counseling approach. All in all, maintaining a focus on the here and now allows for a focus on the group process and affords facilitators the opportunity to utilize interactional factors to promote group member movement and reflection.

Group Cohesion and Trust

Another group process that I find to be very important is group cohesion. I believe that a core purpose of group counseling is to facilitate a sense of connection among students. Groups provide ample opportunity for a counselor to facilitate connection through team building exercises and exploration of trust. Once group cohesion is established, group members are able to learn from one another. Members gain a sense of belonging and acceptance when they are supported in this way. They may also gain the self-efficacy of having the opportunity to support one another and to be leaders in one another's healing and growth.

Group Experiences and Therapeutic Factors

Before taking this course, I had facilitated several groups in the school setting. In my mind, these groups were successfully facilitated. However, I did not know how much I did not know. The group experiences were so impactful, because they were very concrete examples of what we were learning in our texts. These activities connected the academics behind the course with the real-life applicability of the material.

Facilitating

I facilitated my group during the first in-person session in Salem, before we had embarked on most of our learning. The experience of facilitating, in front of the entire class, was very intense for me. This intensity, combined with the fact that I still had a lot to learn, resulted in

some mistakes on my end. I think that my primary mistake was that I did not attend to the here and now enough with group members. I was very focused on facilitating and providing structure to the group, so that it could run smoothly. What I missed was the fact that groups do not have to run smoothly. In fact, much of the learning occurs when issues are brought up for members. I had some opportunities to draw participants to consider their internal processes and to begin practicing the skills they were acquiring in group, however, I was very focused on avoiding conflict. My facilitating experience was a simulation of the first meeting of a group. So, in some ways, it was appropriate to avoid conflict, because I would want to focus on building cohesion in trust. However, I think that I stifled the group members trust in me by minimizing their feelings. I could have delicately addressed the issues, without allowing the group to be fully submerged in a conflict. On the other hand, I did utilize a variety of group facilitator skills in my facilitation and I was pleased to see that I have many of the needed skills. I now feel so much better prepared to run groups at work.

Observing

It was also very enlightening to observe my peer facilitating groups. Without the intensity of running the group myself, I was able to be more mindful of the group process. I enjoyed considering what I would do if I was facilitating the group and gauging the effectiveness of the facilitators approaches.

One important lesson I learned as I was observing was the forgiveness of groups. When I was the facilitator, I remember being nervous about making any mistakes and the impact those mistakes might have on the group process. However, as I observed others and heard their reflections, I noticed that many of them were also worried that they had made mistakes, however

the group moved on just fine. This was particularly evident in Kelly's group. She thought that one group member had written something unkind about another member. In front of the group, she talked to the suspected member and it turns out she had misunderstood what she had written. At first, it seemed that the group member felt singled out and embarrassed. However, Kelly owned her mistake and apologized. Not only was the group able to move on from this, I believe that this was a turning point. Kelly was effectively modeling ownership for the group members. I believe that if this happened in a real group, members would trust the facilitator more after this experience.

I also learned about the importance of flexibility when facilitating group, or the freedom to experiment. This was particularly relevant when Moria ran her group. Her group activity was musical chairs, to facilitate member sharing of their group take-aways. The activity itself was unclear for both Moria and the group members and it provoked anxiety. Many members expressed that they did not want to do the activity. They tried it and still did not like it. Moria demonstrated get flexibility when she and the group members collaborated on an alternative activity. Similarly, when Georgine was facilitating a trust fall activity, many members were skeptical and nervous about the activity. Georgine allowed for plenty of processing, until members were willing to take the risk. Then, she allowed participants to approach the activity as they felt comfortable. This flexibility and attention to group members concerns and perceptions eventually led to group members feeling comfortable in the activity.

Participating

I also learned a lot from being a participant in the closing group activity, led by Alese. In this activity, we were asked to share our take-aways from the course and then we went around in

a circle, giving one another compliments. This activity really highlighted a level of trust in our cohort, a trust that can be cultivated similarly in counseling groups with enough attention. I also noticed a lot of universality in our group— many of us shared similar take-aways, concerns, and thoughts about each other. Being a participant demonstrated the connection, support, and trust that can be cultivated in a group. I hope that I can help the students I work with feel this level of connection with one another.

Challenging Group Member Behaviors

As I read the texts and participated in the group activities, I began to reflect upon the group member behaviors that I felt prepared to deal with and the behaviors I felt unprepared to deal with. One thing that I have known about myself for a while but that really became apparent when I was facilitating a group is that I am uncomfortable with conflict, particularly conflict that is initiated by a group member invalidating another group member's experience or feelings. For example, when I was facilitating friendship bingo, one of the group members asked if she could count herself as having a dog, even though the dog died. I said that she could and another member objected, saying that it should not have counted. To me, this felt unkind (although this group member may not have meant it in this way). I hardly acknowledged this group member's concern and simply said that I was sticking to my decision. I think that I missed an learning opportunity in this moment, because of my discomfort with conflict.

Of course, my discomfort comes from good intentions. My core values include peace and connectedness. I think that my discomfort with conflict, however, interferes with my ability to utilize challenging situations as learning opportunities that could deepen connection between students. In the future, when issues like these come up, I plan to pay close attention to my own

reactions and to remain present and intentional. I would like to ask group members their reactions to conflict as well. I will ask members what their impulses are when conflict arises. I will draw attention to the experience of any group members who are hurt, including the person who I believe perpetrated the conflict. Throughout this process, I will continue to remain present, calm, and intentional.

Ethical Awareness

As a group practitioner, I have a lot of power and responsibility. Thus, it is important that I am paying close attention to ethical issues. I need to make sure that I am competent and adequately trained to conduct groups in a meaningful way. I can seek professional development and supervision when I need additional training and support. I also need to ensure that I am respecting the rights of group members. I need to be sure that both students and their caregivers understand the purpose behind group, what to expect in group, and the limits of confidentiality. In addition, I need to ensure that caregivers have an understanding of my level of training, experience and expertise. Participants and their caregivers need to understand that I cannot guarantee confidentiality, because group members may discuss group experiences outside of group. Finally, I have an ethical responsibility to myself. I need to practice adequate self care and self compassion. These practices will prevent against burn-out and enable me to meet the needs of my students in a meaningful way.

Diversity Issues

Related to ethical awareness are diversity issues that may come up in a group. I really appreciated the attention Corey, Corey, and Corey (2014) consistently paid to diversity issues.

This attention allowed me to reflect upon my blind spots and what to pay attention to as a group facilitator.

An important step in this process is recognizing my background. I am a white woman in my late 20's who grew up in an upper middle class family. I come from a lot of privilege and I need to constantly remember the opportunities that I have had because of my privilege. I also need to remember the values that I grew up with. My family values individuality, social justice, logic, and compassion. Whether I recognize it or not, I bring these values and privileges with me everywhere I go. In addition, I have experienced oppression as a woman and a religious minority. I also bring these experiences with me.

Tending to my background assists me in relating to others and recognizing that my assumptions are not universal. For example, if I am working with an individual who comes from a culture that values interdependence and conformity, I can remember that I grew up with different values. I can be intentional in meeting this person where he or she is and not unwittingly pushing my values on him or her. I can also remember my privilege and utilize it to advocate for those less privileged than me. Similarly, I can reflect upon my experiences of oppression to relate to group members experiences.

When working with a culturally diverse group, I will emphasize common humanity. I will bring attention to group member's similarities. I will also allow group members to express and explore the different experiences, backgrounds, and values that they may hold. Through this work, group members will see that people are more similar than they are different. Group members can learn how to relate to those who are different from them. They can learn to reflect

on their own cultural backgrounds and experiences and how they influence their perceptions and ways of relating. Through this work, I can increase tolerance in my students.

Conclusion

This course was a learning experience for me. I have learned the importance of presence, attention, and intentionality. I have also learned about myself in this experience. This self reflection is important as I learn to become a more effective group facilitator. I am looking forward to practicing my newly acquired skills as a group facilitator this coming school year.

References

Corey, M.S., Corey, G., & Corey, C. (2014). *Groups: Process and Practice*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.

Shaker, M. (2010). *On Becoming a Group Member: Personal Growth and Effectiveness in Group Counseling*. New York, NY: Rutledge Taylor and Francis Group.