

## Small-group learning and its value to Social Work education

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### Introduction

This paper examines theory and practice around small-group learning, with a focus on the higher education context and professional or practice learning in the workplace. Implications for social work education are discussed in the spirit of the drive to restore critical reflection and the potential for social change to practice, reversing what has been termed in the current political climate as the transformation of social workers into ‘little more than organisational functionaries..’ (Parton 2004; 31)

‘Small-group learning’ needs to be defined for the purposes of this paper. Griffiths (1999) observes that this has been a problem in higher education, where small-group learning has been viewed as something that takes place either *within* a larger setting, such as a lecture breaking into smaller groups to discuss a particular issue, or the small-group serves as an *adjunct* to a larger group, sometimes called a ‘discussion group’. With respect to groups that appear as part of the curriculum, Griffiths notes also that the terms ‘seminar’ and ‘tutorial’ have often used ‘interchangeably and carelessly’ in discussions around small-groups.

In the interests of exploring small-group learning, teaching and supervision, in all its manifestations, the broad definition suggested by Griffiths (1999; 96) is used, i.e. ‘any learning and teaching occasion which brings together between 2 and 20 participants’. With regard to professional learning, whether this takes place in a practice teaching context, with social work students, or in the context of group supervision in a team environment, the small-group has a minimum of two participants and a maximum of less than ten. In practice teaching, Arkin et al. (1999: 50) defines group supervision as consisting of ‘periodic group meetings of supervisees under the guidance of a supervisor and with the intention of advancing supervisees’ understanding regarding themselves as professionals, the clients whom they serve and the services they render to clients’. With respect to group supervision in a team setting, Brown and Bourne (1996: 144) note it is ‘discrete and different from the other commonly found group or team structures: business meetings, support meetings, planning meetings, training meetings and case reviews...group supervision can be defined most

straightforwardly as the use of the group setting to implement part or all of the responsibilities of supervision.'

## **Benefits of small groups**

Small groups are seen to be beneficial to participants in both education and work settings in similar ways. In education, small-group work is seen to promote metacognition, (Blakey and Spence 1990) help students take on challenging course content in a 'deeper' way (Boud et al. 1997), help students to personally own learning (Jacques 2003) and develop their critical faculties (Gokhale 1995). In social work learning and supervision, small-groups are seen to promote aspects of 'metalearning' relevant to social work, such as the process of verbalising concepts in a group, resulting in improved intervention skills with clients. (Arkin et al. 1999). Small-groups also help students find alternative solutions to challenging practice situations (Walter and Young 1999), and are said to promote altruism in practice (O'Dee 1995), which is for social workers akin to the essential process of 'emotionally owning' learning in other disciplines. In both social work and higher education, group work is seen as an aid to critical reflection. (O'Dee 1995, Colbeck et al. 2000) Small-groups are also seen as important tools for preparing university students for professional life, giving them the ability to work in team settings (Trytten, date not specified) and to develop career skills generally (Colbeck et al. 2000).

The growing emphasis on occupational learning and the importance of teams and groups in the workplace has prompted higher education to move away from more traditional methods, driven by employability agenda in HE policy since the 1990s. There has also been an increased interest in group work given the resource shortages in universities coupled with higher student- lecturer ratios (Watkins, date not specified) in the context of widening participation.

At the same time, various developments have occurred in the use of small groups in higher education, such as collaborative and cooperative learning, problem-based learning and learning communities. Each of these areas highlights different content and process elements of small-group learning in higher education.

## **Forms of small-group learning**

### *Collaborative learning*

Collaborative learning can be defined as 'the grouping of students for the purpose of achieving an academic goal' (Gokhale 1995: 22). Colbeck et al. (2000) describe collaborative learning as an umbrella term referring to a variety of instructional practices that encourage students to work together as they apply course material to answer questions, solve problems or create a product' (2000; 61). For Garfield (1993) it is akin to cooperative learning, which involves 'the instructional use of

students working together to maximise their own and others' learning' (ibid.: 1). It seems that there are many different definitions that exist for collaborative learning. What is emphasised throughout the literature is the existence of the group as a separate entity, and the notion of the group members relating to each other in order to achieve the goal of the group. It appears that students learn through this type of interaction by having the opportunity to teach each other. Garfield (1993) cites the research from peer teaching among students that suggests that this is an effective way to bolster learning.

Garfield also cites Johnson et al. (1991) who point out this approach is not simply about students working alongside each other on individual assignments. It appears that for the group to succeed in terms of process, the group must develop interdependence, where all group members believe that everyone in the group has a key role to ensure the success of the task (Colbeck et al. 2000). Interdependence not only ensures that the group works effectively, it also results in a 'higher level of learning' (Garfield 1993: 3) where students have access to the range of information and understanding that others bring to the task. More questions are also asked in smaller groups than in larger forums. Garfield (1993) also describes the effect of increased motivation in small-group learning, where learners develop positive regard for each other and 'emotional bonding' occurs.

#### *Group dynamics*

Some of the problems that can occur in small-groups when they work together on tasks are well documented in the sociological and psychological literature, and this has influenced educators in how they stipulate groups should be managed. Silverlock and Silverlock (1995: 221) note that the disadvantages of using groups in higher education centre on issues such as 'control, authority, classroom organisation and the possibility that group members may collude to avoid challenge and confrontation, possibly reinforcing the status quo, rather than creating the kind of thresholds the teacher and the learning process require'. Baron, Kerr and Miller (1992) document the losses to effectiveness that groups can experience, due to, for example, 'social loafing' where individual motivation declines with increased members of a group. 'Free riding' can also occur when some members of the group avoid participation.

There has been much research done on the small-group as an entity and groups can be analysed through a number of different theoretical 'lens', such as functional, temporal, conflict/status/power, symbolic/interpretive, social identity, social evolutionary, social network and feminist (Poole et al. 2004). The research done on small-groups is as fragmented as the myriad of different disciplines that utilise the small-group. How one evaluates and critically examines the small-group depends on which theoretical lens the group is viewed through. For example, a feminist analysis of the effectiveness of a small-group will examine how power is distributed and shared in the group along the lines of gender. The success or otherwise of the group

in terms of learning would be examined in terms of the different outcomes for men and women and how those outcomes were arrived at. It appears in the higher education literature that small-group analysis is based on a predominately functionalist perspective, which assumes that grouping students together will automatically create emotional bonding and mutual support. This approach is naïve to the effects of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability on the functioning of the group and its learning value for students.

### *Problem-based learning*

Problem-based learning as defined by Greening (1993: 2) is 'a subset of problem centred learning methods easily identifiable by the use of typically ill structured problems which precede and motivate learning and act as a vehicle for encouraging student ownership of the learning environment'. It seeks to utilise group members' powers of negotiation, proposition and explanation to enhance learning, and is also said to enhance the capacity for reflection in students. If the problem is ill defined there will also be many possible solutions that the group can come up with, which is said to enhance the possibilities for creative thinking. Problem-based learning is used in the context of collaborative and co-operative learning groups. An example of this type of group is an 'Action Learning set'. Brockbank and Mc Gill (1998) define it as a small group of people who meet together periodically under the guidance of a facilitator to work on the learning problems that each group member in turn brings to the group. Reflective learning is encouraged as the presenter considers the input of the other group members throughout the lifespan of the group and how this input shapes action. Greening (1993: 4) notes that some of the concerns about the effectiveness of problem based learning occur when assessment is tailored to individual performance; problem-based learning methods are very difficult for students to participate in when their previous experience of education has been individualistic and competitive.

Indeed it would appear that the success of small-group approaches to learning are very dependent on the existence of a skilled and committed facilitator to help counter some of the negative aspects of group working, such as social loafing, uneven participation and misuse of power within the group. Small-groups are often discussed in the higher education literature as if they consist of individuals who are all equally able to participate, who are at complementary levels of educational achievement and who possess the internal conceptual and emotional skills to participate in collective, shared, non competitive learning. While there is some discussion about the emotional and psychological resources required of students to meaningfully participate in a group (e.g. Brockbank and Mc Gill; 1998), this element is minimised to a more tokenistic discussion about not letting learning groups become therapy groups. The real and compelling connections between emotions and learning are not often explored. If we envision learning as a constructive and interactive process, then more robust investigations into the powerful emotions that come to the fore in groups will need to be undertaken.

### *Learning communities*

Learning communities may exist in different forms in educational settings. Lenning and Ebberts, cited in Zhao and Kuh (2004), describe four main types of communities that divide students into

- groups based on their enrolment in the same courses, even if they are studying different disciplines;
- classroom based groups, where the classroom is treated as a focus for community building based on the use of cooperative learning techniques;
- residential learning communities, and
- communities that group students together based on their needs or interests, such as students who need to learn essay writing skills.

Learning communities are said to be beneficial for students as they promote social interaction and encourage values in students such as tolerance, mutual respect and appreciation of diversity. 'Personal development' and greater enjoyment of university life are also potential outcomes. From examining the evidence for the effectiveness of learning communities, Zhao and Kuh (2004:117) found that participation by students in learning communities is linked to positive effects for academic performance, student engagement and learning outcomes, although how these effects are achieved is not known.

### **Implications for Social Work education**

In social work education, Gardiner (1989) describes a shift from individualised learning that mirrored the social casework approach to working with clients, to interactive learning that emphasised the influence of the environment as a crucial factor. There is concern, however, that preserving creativity and innovation in education is under threat by the prevailing economic climate and the 'ascendancy of a business culture' that is also felt in the practice field (O'Dee, 1995; 166) as in other areas of higher education – so that didactic, individualist pedagogy tends to dominate social work education. In their education, social workers are encouraged to construct their own meanings in their acquisition of knowledge. But if small groups are one of the key expressions of a constructivist pedagogy in higher education, social work has not embraced this potential fully. Group facilitation not being uniformly taught to social workers as an essential skill, and groups are also not comprehensively used as a mode of teaching (Preston-Shoot 2004).

Groups and group work are, of course, seen as beneficial to education and practice. Lindsay (2005) cites Bramford and Mc Vicker (1999) who have researched methods in social work education and concluded that group work is a much lauded though under exploited technique. There are examples of effective use of small groups in social work education. Lindsay (2005) describes the use of problem-based learning in Brighton University's social work degree, where an approach has been developed

entitled 'Enquiry and Action Learning' involving working in groups. This is seen to equip students with skills related to working interdependently, and the group also acts as role modelling for students 'working collectively for change in practice'.

Learning Communities could be employed to great effect in social work education. It is has been the author's experience that groups may be offered in university settings and in organisational settings based on diverse areas of students/ employees identity, such as groups for black workers, or groups for gay or lesbian workers, to use two examples. The concept of pairing or grouping people from different disciplines to study some common material together would benefit social work education enormously, particularly as social workers are increasingly working in multi-disciplinary environments. Social workers would also benefit greatly in their education through having access to some of the theories and practice strategies of other professions, such as teaching, nursing and psychology.

Social work education in the UK has a strong component of practice learning where the learner is exposed to the pedagogic possibility of small-groups in the context of supervision and groups within the professional environment. Lindsay (2005:65) writes: 'practice teaching has obvious parallels with the supervision of qualified social workers and, of course, there are many similarities between group supervision of staff and group practice learning for students'. Supervision is a key site for the development of professional learning for social workers; it is where everyday practice situations are thought about under the guidance of a supervisor, facilitating the creative and critical development of further knowledge. Group supervision is said to encourage reflection as it adds to a 'collaborative environment' in the workplace that provides the 'bolstering' for reflection that is needed, as well as the learner being able to access the direct support of colleagues for their reflection (Bulpitt and Martin, 2005; 208).

Effective supervision is a crucial element in the establishment of a learning environment at work, as it is the site of so much learning for the worker. There is not an assurance of quality in supervision for workers, however; for while the potential for learning is enormous, social workers can not always expect effective and competent supervision. For social work students on placement, there is the expectation that their supervision contains explicit learning activities; potential social work practice teachers are in fact assessed on the basis of their ability to provide teaching in their supervision. By contrast, in supervision for qualified workers, learning is not seen as an explicit part of supervision, supervisors may instead be preoccupied with their managerial role and supervision sessions become a tick box exercise where the supervisor checks that tasks have been completed. Instruction occurs when the supervisor suggests or directs a course of action; this is learning in the didactic, reproductive sense that has a place in supervision, but it should not be the only sort of learning that takes place.

Supervision groups are seen as having many benefits similar to those described for small-group learning in the higher education context. Some group work methods have been employed for social work students on placement (Lindsay 2005; Atherton and Keating 2005), but this is not established in the field. Hawkins and Shoheit (2000) also note that group supervision may constitute a wise use of resources when there are many people needing supervision and a shortage of good supervisors. Members of a supervision group ideally support each other through the anxieties and challenges of practice and are able to challenge each other, thus enabling critical reflection to take place. Many commentators have argued that social work needs to develop and harness the capacity of workers to reflect critically on their own practice and the policies and practices of their organisations, otherwise social workers will never be able to empower clients to achieve the social change which is what the profession claims to aim for (Ruch; 2002; Preston Shoot; 2000). An environment that promotes critical reflection in its workers needs the 'scaffolding' of constructivist pedagogy such as that provided by the existence of small-groups, in social work settings as well as higher education settings. An example of this could be the use of Action Learning Sets in the workplace where colleagues could meet to work on the problems raised by individual workers in their practice. Dempsey et al. (2001) refer to this 'scaffolding' process as the provision of small-scale collective opportunities for learners to get together to allow for reflection on practice situations.

Small-group supervision may also effectively challenge the competence based approach to social work learning which has been widely criticised (Skinner and White 2004) as stifling the capacity of workers to use judgement, discretion and creativity in their practice. In a supervision group there is the potential for many solutions to be found to practice problems, which somewhat ameliorates the linear, 'one right way' ethos of competence based approaches.

## **Conclusion**

In higher education generally and social work education, constructivist pedagogy is reflected in small-group methods of learning. These groups are beneficial in that meta-learning is encouraged, a wider range of solutions to problems is made available, and desirable values and attitudes in learners are promoted such as altruism. In both social work and higher education, group work is also seen as an aid to critical reflection. In the occupational context, supervision is an important site for professional learning in social work. Group supervision is seen as a valuable process, however it is not as common as individual meetings. Learning is seen as an obvious part of the workplace experience for social work students on placement; however for qualified social workers, supervision tends to be dominated by instructive and didactic pedagogy, if learning is seen as being incorporated at all. In social work we need to bring the concept of learning more explicitly into professional supervision, both in groups and in one on one meetings. Hawkins and Shoheit (2000: 179) argue:

‘...If we are to create learning professions that constantly renew their cultures, then supervision needs to become the learning lungs that assist the professional body in its learning, development and cultural evolution...’

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### **Biographical note**

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