

Group Work Training for Social Workers

We have been invited to put forward a proposal for the training of social workers in groupwork practice. In this proposal, learning, action, and research are seen as three complementary aspects of improving the skills and practice of group work for social workers. *Learning* involves both a theoretical knowledge of group processes, and also an experiential development of individual skills of leadership and members. *Action* involves the ability to take this theoretical and experiential knowledge and apply it in a variety of group work situations; and also to the ability to continue learning through this application. *Research* refers to a style of learning and action, in which both evolve from a systematic, guided exploration of present practice, an identification of desired directions for change. In this way the training may be grounded in the reality of present practice and relevant to the problems and opportunities of that practice.

Thus we are seeking not simply to improve the ways individual social workers *understand* groups, but also for ways in which they may *apply* that understanding systematically to their groupwork practice through a process of personal research and action planning. In this way we should contribute to an improvement in groupwork practice, and also more generally to our ability to understand such practice and how it may be developed.

In broad outline we are proposing a series of workshops in the theory and practice of groupwork, interspersed with periods during which the theory and experience gained in the workshops will be applied in a planned manner to groupwork practice. We plan to heavily stress the two-way relationship between the workshops and the application periods, so that participants are actively taking plans from the workshops to apply to their groupwork practice, and problems and issues from their practice to explore in the workshop sessions.

Elements

The programme will be composed of a number of elements organised into five phases. The elements include:

Theory and concepts of groups: group process, leadership and authority, communication, norms and values, conflict, the birth, development, and death of a group, etc. While there is of course a core of essential concepts about groups, our selection of theoretical inputs must depend also on the issues raised by the participants.

Experience of Self in a group: the programme will be heavily experiential,

since we believe that it is not possible to apply theory to practice without developing the capacity to be aware of one's own experience, the behaviour of self and others, to be able to reflect on these as a participant observer, and to act appropriately on the basis of these observations and reflections.

Application of learning to groupwork practice: as mentioned above, the theory and experiences of the workshops will provide a basis from which participants may look afresh at their groupwork practice, gather new information about the nature of that practice, and of the problems and opportunities they face. In this way, the programme becomes truly a personal research programme, and becomes tailored to the individual needs of the participants.

Support systems: the transfer of learning from training situations to "real life" is often problematic, since the social pressures and personal habits tend to force people to revert to old patterns of behaviour. Research has pointed to the importance of developing and actively using relationships of support, understanding, and encouragement; it is otherwise a lonely task to take new ideas and apply them for the first time. Thus we intend to focus on developing the group of participants as a support system, and on helping each participant develop other relations of support with boss, colleagues, spouse, friends, clients, etc. in their "real life" situation. This way, participants will be assisted in carrying out their plans to improve their groupwork practice through the knowledge, emotional support, and at time practical help of significant other people.

It is therefore essential that the group of participants is drawn from a common locality, and that they attend with the approval and encouragement of their boss and colleagues.

Action plans: participants will be helped to review their learning from the theoretical and experiential parts of the programme, and to develop specific action plans to improve their groupwork practice; they will be helped to practice these plans through experiential methods such as psychodrama and fantasy. There will be an opportunity to put these plans into practice with the help of the support systems, and later to review success and failure. Finally, there will be time for consolidation of learning from all parts of the programme.

Phases

These elements of the programme will be arranged in six phases of workshop and application activity, with each phase building from the former and leading into the later phases. These five phases are intended to lead the participant from a reflection on the present state of her groupwork activity, through a learning from theory and experience about groups and an active review of her present practice, to the development of a project for the development of this practice. This will be followed by an opportunity to carry out the project, and finally to a review and consolidation.

- Phase 1** *(Two hour introductory workshop)*
The purpose of this brief session will be to introduce staff and participants to each other, to provide a brief overview of the whole programme, and to begin to identify the kinds of learning needs the participants bring to the programme.
- Phase 2** *(Three day intensive workshop)*
 Day one - *Aspects of group interaction*
 - *motives for interaction*
 - *task/group/self oriented behaviour*
 - *leadership and group functions*
 - *clear and muddled communication process*
 - *unstructured session for review and planning*
 Day two - *Psychodramatic exploration of present practice, exploring observation, diagnosis, and action skills*
 Day three - *Skill practice, application plans, development of support relationships.*
- Phase 3** *(Application period - several weeks)*
Application of learning from Phase 2 to present practice
Data gathering about present practice
Development of a back-home support group
- Phase 4** *(Two day workshop)*
Review data and experience from Phase 3
Develop action plans
Practice application plans through experiential methods
- Phase 5** *(Application period - several weeks)*
Carry out action plans
- Phase 6** *(One day workshop)*
Review, consolidation, and further development as appropriate.

Research

The programme outlined in this proposal has been described above as being based in a research style, in that the participants will be helped to learn about and improve their groupwork practice through a personal action-research project.

This programme is, however, research in another way, since in addition to the personal learning of the participants, we should be able to learn more generally about the development of groupwork practice from the information uncovered by the participants. We therefore intend to use tape recorders and other methods of more formal data-collection to capture this information, which will form one of a number of similar studies about how individuals and groups may be helped to manage effectively their social role.
