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Online Task Groups and Social Work Education: Lessons Learned

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Abstract: *This paper focuses the use of an online task group for social work students to solve problems and produce recommendations. An online site provides students the opportunity to edit documents produced by the group's work. Online task groups provide an alternative to face-to-face task group meetings in social service agencies with a number of distant service delivery locations. Additionally, online task groups provide a cost effective way to accomplish the business of social service agencies by eliminating the time and cost of travel to attend meetings. This paper offers a stage model of online group development and a discussion of lessons learned from an online task group used in a graduate Clinical Supervision class.*

Keywords: *online task groups, developing an online group document, group work, collaboration*

With the growing use of the World Wide Web in social work practice, students will benefit from learning the effective use of online technology applied to various social work tasks. For those students who will work as practitioners in rural areas, the online staff meeting may become a part of their social work practice. In order to work effectively in the developing online setting, social work students may be trained using the current technology, and prepared to use the technology when they become practitioners.

Online communication between co-workers, agency supervisors, and other social service personnel may enhance rural-based social work practice. Task groups of social workers effectively use technology to solve problems without traveling distances, experiencing inclement weather, or encountering problems with road conditions (Maheu, Pulier, Wilhelm, McMenamin, & Brown-Connolly, 2005). Travel time over long distances may be better spent meeting and working on pressing issues, and may be a hindrance to the effective provision of service delivery. The use of task group meetings in combination with other online tools efficiently allows for the transaction of important agency business.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss pitfalls related to designing and implementing student guided task groups as an online teaching tool, and to present a model for online task group construction. The paper will provide a literature review, discuss online task groups including online group stages, present a proposed online task group, and provide an overview of the implications for social work practice.

Literature Review

This literature review will discuss selected stage theories of face-to-face (f2f) group development, and will review online task group scholarship. There appears to be parallels

between f2f group development and online task group development stages, particularly with regard to the gender make-up of the groups.

Face-to-Face Groups

In order to discuss online groups, it is helpful to understand f2f groups and stages of group development. Using a feminist perspective, Schiller (1995) posited group development stages based on her experience in working with women only (WO) groups (see Table 1). Rather than vying for power and control as seen in men only (MO) or mixed (MX) groups (Garland, Jones, & Kolodney, 1978; Northen, 1988), Schiller (1995) noted that WO groups are more focused on establishing a relational base engendering respect among members. Respect is experienced as mutuality and interpersonal empathy as the group moves into stage two where the members begin to approach the work of the group. Instead of differentiation or separation experiences in MO or MX groups (Garland et al., 1978; Northen, 1988), Schiller (1995) observed that members challenge each other to change in WO groups. The ability to challenge others in WO groups and have others be receptive to feedback derives from establishing relationships, sharing mutually with one another, and expressing interpersonal empathy. Finally, groups experience termination (Garland et al., 1978; Schiller, 1995), or separation (Northen, 1988). Closure is part of termination and a common stage in most groups.

Table 1

Stage Theories of F2F Group Development

Stage	Garland et al.(1978)	Northen (1988)	Schiller (1995)
1	Pre-affiliation	Orientation-Inclusion	Pre-affiliation
2	Power & Control	Dissatisfaction, Power, & Conflict	Establish a Relational Base
3	Intimacy	Mutuality & Work	Mutuality & Interpersonal Empathy
4	Differentiation	Separation, Termination, & Transition	Challenge & Change
5	Termination		Termination

Individuals participate in numerous types of groups including task groups. Task groups are formed to complete a desired work product dictating the life span and membership characteristics of the group. Task groups are often time limited and terminated upon completion of the assigned task. F2f groups allow members to see each other's facial cues and voice tones which are absent in the online environment of a chat room. While there are advantages for both f2f and online task groups, agencies' shrinking budgets hinder staff travel to attend meetings. Reduced travel time and costs increase the allure and cost-effectiveness of online task groups given the current level of technology.

Online Task Groups

The online environment offers a different opportunity for individuals to relate with each other as they engage in task accomplishment. The initial stage of online task group work is to develop a level of rapport among group members. In the development of online task groups, the primary issue of developing rapport concerns building trust among group members (de Laat, 2005). De Laat (2005) asserts that virtual strangers have demonstrated trust in online communities and this phenomenon can be explained by “social cues, reputation, reliance on third parties, and participation in (quasi-) institutions” (p. 167). Task group members expect other members to trust the group in order to accomplish the group’s goals (de Laat, 2005).

Malcolm (n.d.), using a business curriculum, recognized four stages of development: (a) online netiquette, (b) working with opinions, (c) working in online task groups, and (d) collaborating online. Offering a unit about appropriate use of netiquette during the beginning stages of group development may reduce unproductive activities engaged in by group members and limit untoward behavior online. The initial stage of group work sets the tone for the group members as they work toward goal attainment during the semester.

Savicki, Kelley, and Ligenfelter (1996) studied online task groups based on gender composition which included women only (WO), men only (MO), and mixed (MX). WO groups used more words per message, reported higher satisfaction with the group process, and acknowledged higher levels of group development. This finding concurs with Schiller’s (1995) research in reference to f2f groups. Further, Savicki et al. (1996) reported MO and MX groups used fewer words per message, were less satisfied with group process, and reported lower levels of group development than the WO groups. Researchers did not address the gender makeup of the MX groups although the number of men or women in the study group could have affected outcomes. Men tended to be more acrimonious where women sought to reduce conflict. WO groups used more “I” statements than the MO groups (Savicki et al., 1996). Herring (1994) reported men’s styles in groups included: “put-downs, strong often contentious assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self-promotion, and sarcasm” (pp. 3-4). On the other hand, Herring (1994) observed that WO style is composed of two aspects: “supportiveness and attenuation” (pp. 3-4). Herring’s findings concur with Kanter’s (1977) work that demonstrated the effect of gender was proportional to the group’s gender composition. Savicki et al. (1996) reported that groups with a higher percentage of women were more self-disclosing and sought prevention of discord and a reduction in tension.

Savicki and Kelley (2000) conducted a study by sending online etiquette instructions via email to online group participants. The instructions encouraged members to engage in “high self-disclosure, high opinion, high coalitions with others in the group, and low flaming” (p.822). The WO group demonstrated “higher levels of the . . . language and higher levels of group development” following receipt of the instructions (Savicki & Kelley, 2000, p. 823). The MX group demonstrated lower levels of group development and elevated flaming. The MO group demonstrated no difference in language choice or group development. This study found that the gender of online groups is a significant factor with regard to the successful outcome of the group (Savicki & Kelley, 2000).

Savicki, Kelley, and Ammon (2002) stressed the importance of communication training for participants in online task groups observing that the training influenced participation. Santhiveeran (2005) discussed guidelines for maximizing the incorporation of online communication in higher education. Based on the necessity that virtual groups be productive, Savicki et al. (2002) asserts that communication training is a prerequisite for successful online task group success. In concurrence with Savicki et al. (2002), Johnson and Johnson (1996) found that untrained virtual groups fail in their efforts or suffer the problems encountered by f2f groups. Savicki, Ligenfelter, and Kelley (1996) observed that men outnumbered women in online discussion groups in 1996; however, online group characteristics have changed significantly since that time.

Lessons Learned

The virtual environment of online task groups requires students to be actively involved in the educational process. Unlike many f2f classroom settings, courses taught online require students to interact with the course material for each class assignment. It is difficult for students to opt out of reading the assigned material since this material forms the basis for a weekly posting and group interaction online. One of the authors developed an online graduate Clinical Supervision course presented as a virtual mental health center. The majority of members in each of the MX groups were women. The six-week online task group, an assignment of the course, required that groups of five or six students discussed and made recommendations each week about a supervision problem that they might encounter in their work. Upon approval of the recommendations the group developed, each group posted their work on the Discussion Posting link in the online course.

Students were provided with instructions outlining how to maneuver through the online environment, protocols for student behavior, and the course outline and syllabi the first time they accessed the course. Five chat rooms were established during course construction. Only the students assigned to these rooms by the course's instructor were able to access these rooms. Therefore, each group was offered privacy to choose, design, and develop their task group project. In order to facilitate manageable virtual groups, five or six students were selected by the instructor to form a group. During the initial group meetings, the instructor did not provide guidelines or directions in order to observe how the groups formed. One of the key lessons learned was that providing structure and direction early in group development may facilitate a more rapid movement by the group to the working stage. Icebreaker and introductory activities set a warm atmosphere from which to build working relationships. Providing a unit teaching online netiquette prior to the first group meeting may have been helpful.

The students in the Clinical Supervision course held a weekly online staff meeting. Each week the groups were to discuss a problem posted by the instructor and recommend a solution. In the Discussion Posting area, a separate weekly discussion was listed for posting the recommendation of each task group. After each group meeting, the students were directed to have the group recorder post the group's recommendations in the appropriate discussion posting for the week. Each group posted their recommendations, allowing the students to review ideas other groups used to arrive at the solution to the problem. While not part of the assignments discussed here, it is possible to have the students post responses to the recommendations from the various groups to further work on the task between groups meetings. In reviewing the work

of the groups over the course of the semester, a few stages of online group development emerged.

Stages of Online Task Group Development

The online task group appears to follow a progression of stages leading to the final product and closure. Jacinto and Turnage (2003) postulated five stages of online task group development. Reflecting on the five stages and a review of literature about online task groups has led the authors to a revision of the initial stage model of online task groups. The initial stage model will be presented first and then the revised stage model of online task groups will be offered with a discussion of lessons learned from the initial five stage model.

Initial Stage Model of Online Task Groups

Online task groups appear to follow stages characterized by a particular theme as the members work through the assigned task (Jacinto & Turnage, 2003). The stages of online task group development for the Clinical Supervision course included: chaos, clustering, collaborating, consensing, and closing.

Chaos. Students experienced a sense of chaos upon first logging in to the chat room. This first stage appeared to be present only during the first group sessions and was the place where individuals learned how to communicate within an unfamiliar technology. The instructor purposely did not structure the beginning phase of the group in order to understand how students would negotiate the territory. In addition to recognizing the need to provide structure, other lessons learned include awareness that assigning weekly group leaders and recorders saved time and afforded the group the opportunity to begin working on the assigned task more quickly.

Clustering. After the initial sense of ambivalence and chaos, the group members appeared to cluster. Out of the chaos, students adapted and became increasingly comfortable with the environment. The leader's task at this stage was important since the leader began the session by welcoming each member as they logged into the chat room. As the leader established the agenda for each session, his or her presence provided a sense of continuity, consistency, and assurance that the group will accomplish its task. The online task group discussion found group members clustering to address the assigned task. During this stage, a recorder was selected to document the group discussions and recommendations. This was the beginning of the task group's work.

Collaborating. The third stage in the task group process ensued when the leader asked for members of the group to brainstorm ideas to address the topic. One of the leader's goals during the meetings was to keep members on task. In the online environment, it was easy for the discussion to drift from the business at hand. Therefore, the leader must return the group back to the focus of the meeting each time a shift took place. During this phase, many alternatives toward goal attainment were presented, and as a result, it was imperative that the leader controlled the flow of information.

Consensing. The fourth stage of consensus seeking consisted of two major activities. First, the recorder recapped the key ideas generated by the group. After each idea was presented, the leader led the group through discussion seeking a consensus. The most effective leaders attempted to get each member's perception of the item under discussion. In most cases, a consensus was reached. When it was not possible for a group's members to agree on an item, a majority and a minority recommendation was posted.

Closing. When it is time to close the group, the leader asked the recorder to summarize the entire session. If no further comments were offered, the leader directed the recorder to post the recommendation to the appropriate Discussion Posting.

Revised Model of Online Task Group Development

Reflecting on the lessons learned from the first online task group, a unit on netiquette and increased structure for the group members influenced the stages of group development. The chaos stage in the initial stage model (Jacinto & Turnage, 2003) should more likely be labeled coalescing in the experience of the proposed group (see Table 2). In the coalescing stage, members share information through a planned ice breaker exercise using netiquette as they introduce themselves. In this way, they experience coalescence more quickly than in the earlier chaos stage. The experience of chaos is a confusing set of initial interactions as members of the group get to know each other and establish working relationships. More than one group in the Clinical Supervision class spent more than one session getting to know each other and determining who was going to be leading the group each week. Therefore, the coalescing stage replaces the chaos stage and becomes Stage 2 in the revised model.

Table 2

Initial and Revised Stage Models of Online Task Group Development

Stage	Initial Stage Model (Jacinto & Turnage, 2003)	Stage	Revised Stage Model (Jacinto & Hong, 2010)
1	Chaos	1	Coordinating
2	Clustering	2	Coalescing
3	Collaborating	3	Clustering
4	Consensing	4	Collaborating
5	Closing	5	Consensing
		6	Closing

Stage 1, characterized as the coordinating stage, introduces group members to the netiquette unit and assigned group leaders and recorders for each session. An email detailing the duties of the leader is sent to the leader of the first group session. The recorders also receive an email outlining the tasks of the recorder. The coordinating stage is similar to the Pre-affiliation (Garland et al., 1978; Schiller, 1995) and Orientation-Inclusion (Northen, 1988) phases of the

f2f group development theories (see Table 1). It is during the coordinating stage that the instructor informs the groups that they will be using Google Documents to work on the final draft of their recommendation. The recorder first summarizes the group's work and uploads a draft of the document. The other members of the group are encouraged to edit the document and make changes between group meetings. Over a few weeks, the group works on the document coming to a consensus about the final product. The recorder of the last group copies and pastes the final document in the Discussion Posting board within the Blackboard shell for the course allowing other groups to read the group's recommendations. The clustering, collaborating, consensing, and closing stages are projected to function in the same way as described in the initial stage model derived from the Clinical Supervision course.

Implications for Practice

The use of online task groups was well received by the students in the Clinical Supervision course. Students remarked that they enjoyed meeting at a convenient time each week, the group process, and the efficient use of their time to problem solve. Several students suggested that the online setting eliminated classroom distractions such as noise and periodic side conversations that are distracting and do not contribute to the class discussion.

When considering learning styles, students identifying themselves as visual and kinesthetic learners were more likely to favor this approach. However, students categorizing themselves as auditory learners identified some difficulty with this mode of education. For the auditory learners, the absence of the spoken word may impede their ability to immediately grasp the subject matter.

The positive feedback from the students identifies several reasons to incorporate this technique into social work courses. First, all students are able to participate in the learning environment due to the flexible scheduling of group work. During the initial session, group members are able to select future meeting dates and times that do not require transportation to a particular site. Therefore, students who must work, those with children, and/or those whose class schedules conflict can still participate in the learning process. The use of online task groups allows each student to take responsibility for his or her personal learning, thereby enhancing the probability that the student will become an active learner. The course was designed to encourage active learning through the assignments required for the course.

Students who become familiar with online technology while in the classroom environment acquire skills that can enhance performance in practice settings. For the students who will practice in rural areas or become care coordinators in rural or urban areas, online task groups may help them provide quality services to their clientele, and use their time and resources better.

Preparing students to conduct online task groups requires teaching students how to conduct effective meetings. Through these online meetings, students were provided opportunities to learn team-building skills as they mastered important subject matter. The online task groups provided a venue for students to learn how to work toward consensus, deliver respectful interpersonal communication, collaborate with new individuals, and

understand reciprocal exchanges. These skills can be taught in f2f classroom sessions, however, students in the online setting were able to respond constructively to critical feedback, take responsibility for their actions and inactions, and learn from the frustrations of limited visual contact with other group members.

In addition, the online task groups facilitated students' work on their intuitive skills. To fully grasp their fellow group member's messages, students had to look for the meaning not just within the written words. That is, to fully understand each transmitted message, each student had to consider their own feelings and the feelings of the sender, the possible intent of the message, and the appropriateness of the message to the overall process. This lesson is an important one for students who will provide direct client services. As with their fellow group members, not all clients will be able to verbally express themselves completely through written or spoken communication. To become a successful direct practitioner, students must learn to interpret client interactions without becoming emotionally involved. Building intuitive skills online can enhance f2f interactions with supervisors, colleagues, and clients.

New insights arose through interactions with group members as the students learned to use their intuitive skills to understand the communication processes. Ideas were shared between group members that fostered interpersonal and intrapersonal growth. The interactions with the group's members provided each student an opportunity to expand the definition of self and to move toward fuller understanding of their interactional styles.

Finally, it appeared that the use of the online task groups engendered ideas among the students that made its use both efficient and creative in approaching problems. After the students became comfortable with interacting through this medium, they were able to utilize it to expand their ideas. Meeting online allowed the students to immediately share the material they had produced or found via the Internet. This material could be incorporated into their assignment or altered to meet the group's specifications in addressing their weekly supervisory problem.

Proposed Online Task Group

The authors propose a six-week online task group as part of an assignment for the graduate Clinical Practice with Groups class members. The following is a six-week brief of the course.

Session/Week 1

Students will complete a unit on online netiquette and complete a Discussion Posting addressing questions about appropriate use of online netiquette. The instructor will assign the group leader and recorder for week two and provide directions for conducting the group session.

Session/Week 2

Students will introduce themselves using an ice breaker supplied by the instructor to get to know the members of the group. The group leader and recorder will be selected for each of

the following three weeks. Upon completion of the ice breaker, the leader will introduce the group to the task on the document, which they will be working on for the next three sessions. Session/Week 2 is developed around activities that lead to members coalescing as a group. This will prepare them for the working stages of the group that will follow.

Session/Week 3

The group leader will facilitate group members in a discussion of the task to be accomplished. A task that will be used during this session will be brainstorming. Brainstorming naturally leads to the clustering of ideas that will form the foundation of the group's final recommendations. The recorder during this session will construct a narrative document at the end of the group and place it on the group's space in Google Documents. Members will be asked to review the document before the next group meeting and make additions or editorial changes.

Session/Week 4

The group leader will facilitate a discussion of the Google document with members offering additional comments and insights. This session will require collaboration of group members as they agree and/or disagree about the final recommendations the group will be completing. The group is encouraged to respond a second time to the document revisions that the recorder adds after the completion of the Session/Week 4 group meeting.

Session/Week 5

The group leader will review the document with the group and seek a consensus of the group about the final form of the document. Members will agree to the document as written. If a consensus is not possible, a minority opinion will be written by those disagreeing with the recommendation and the minority opinion will also be posted with the document. The minority opinion may only be posted with the support of the majority of the group members. This session will also result in group closure. The leader will facilitate the closure of the group.

Session/Week 6

Individual members of the class will read the Discussion Postings of the groups and will write a Discussion Posting about the solution they most favor and the solution they least favor explaining their reasons for each choice.

The role of the leader is most important for the success of the group. For example, the leader should develop an orderly agenda prior to holding the meeting. This agenda directs the flow of the meeting, informs attendees of the focus, direction, and pacing of the meeting, and serves as an official record. The beginning and ending time should be noted on the meeting's agenda to ensure group members schedule enough time to effectively participate in the meeting's activities. Attendees should receive a copy of this agenda, at a minimum, one-week before the meeting is scheduled. Along with this agenda notification, the leader should send a

copy of the minutes from the last meeting. The recorder of the weekly group should complete the meeting minutes and send them to the assigned leader for the next week's group. The first business item on the agenda is the acceptance of the previous meeting minutes. Providing this material early ensures attendees will have an opportunity to read the minutes prior to the meeting and be ready to discuss any concerns they may have.

On the day of the meeting, the leader should review the agenda items before the meeting to ensure all of the required supportive material has been gathered. Another group member may be responsible for gathering a portion of the supportive material. It is the leader's responsibility to contact this person to confirm that this material has been obtained and will be available to all members at the meeting. The leader must be cognizant of the pace and progress of the meeting. Reminding members of the group's task should discourage side conversations that obstruct the flow of the agenda. Students must also be taught that thanking the group members for contributing their time and effort to the task validates each member's commitment. With an understanding of how to run an effective group, students are ready to practice their new skills through the use of meetings established in a structured online setting.

Recommendations & Conclusion

Three of the most important aspects of online task groups are preparation for group participation, the group's charge (purpose), and leadership. Prior to expecting students to lead a task group, they should be taught how to lead effective groups. This information will be included in a group leader handout that will be given to each group member. With this information, students in the Clinical Practice with Groups online task groups can find an efficient way to tackle their course assignments. This paper focused the use of an online task group for social work students to solve problems and produce recommendations and offered a revised stage model of online group development and a discussion of lessons learned from an online task group used in a graduate Clinical Supervision class. The use of the Internet to transact social welfare agency staff interactions and services will continue to grow and challenge practitioners to create effective human services in the virtual environment.

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