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Practical Interventions for Groupwork Leader Training in Master's Counseling Programs

Abstract

Groupwork in counseling has been utilized to promote client wellness, but little attention has been paid to the development and standardization of group leadership skills training in counselor education. This paper highlights this gap and offers practical, evidence-based solutions to help counselor educators train effective group leaders at the master's level. The authors developed skill-building solutions using the core competencies for group leadership training in the Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers (2000) by the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW).

Keywords

groupwork education, groupwork leader training, groupwork standards

Author's Notes

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Groupwork in the helping professions is defined as a professional practice in which professional helpers apply knowledge and skill to support group members in reaching mutual intrapersonal, interpersonal, or work-related goals (Association for Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 2000, 2021). Groupwork scholars and leaders cite groupwork as an effective modality to assist clients with diverse needs in all specialty areas of the counseling profession (e.g., clinical mental health counseling, school counseling, rehabilitation counseling, career counseling, etc.; ASGW 2000, 2012; Bjornestad et al., 2016; Gladding, 2020; Guth et al., 2018; Wisner & Norton, 2013). Leaders in the counseling profession have outlined key considerations and guidelines for the ethical practice of groupwork leadership (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2014; ASGW, 2000, 2012, 2021; Atieno Okech & Kline, 2005; Conyne et al., 1993; Gladding, 2020; Stockton et al., 2004; Thomas & Pender, 2008) as well as competencies for group leaders to develop prior to engaging in the practice of facilitating groups (ASGW, 2000, 2021; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs, [CACREP], 2015; Gladding, 2020; Stockton et al., 2004). Further, ASGW, the premier organization for the practice of groupwork in the counseling profession, advocates for the inclusion of groupwork training in all counselor training programs to ensure students receive a foundation for the ethical practice of groupwork (ASGW, 2021). However, no groupwork leadership experience is required of master's students per CACREP's groupwork education standards (CACREP, Section II.F.6, 2015). Additionally, minimal peer-reviewed guidance is provided by professional counseling organizations or scholars to assist instructors in developing effective coursework and classroom interventions which promote effective groupwork leadership skills. Therefore, we focus this discussion on reviewing best practices in training groupworkers in the counseling profession and provide practical classroom interventions which align with ASGW's *Professional Standards for the Training of*

Group Workers (2000), specifically the section regarding core competencies for training in groupwork.

Groupwork Leadership Training in Professional Counseling

Professional counselors are eligible to practice counseling with a master's degree, and counselor educators are tasked with providing coursework and training opportunities to develop trainees into competent and ethical professional counselors (ACA, 2014; CACREP, 2015). Groupwork is considered an appropriate modality for clients in a variety of counseling settings and is effective for supporting clients in enhancing their functioning in “work, education, personal development, personal and interpersonal problem solving, or remediation of mental and emotional disorders,” (ASGW, 2000, pp. 329-330). Groupwork scholars have discussed the role of group leadership in impacting client outcomes (Gladding, 2020; Riva & Korinek, 2004). ASGW (2000, 2012; Guth et al., 2019) and CACREP (2015) provide specific knowledge and skills to guide group leaders in successfully facilitating groupwork, thus promoting positive outcomes among group members. Because of the effectiveness of groupwork in supporting client goals and the important role group leaders play in facilitating these outcomes, it is imperative that professional counselors receive effective training in groupwork leadership.

Instructors in master's-level counseling programs are given the critical task of facilitating the development of competent professional counselors (ACA, 2014; Rust et al., 2013), which includes training students in the practice of groupwork (CACREP, 2015). However, minimal discussion has been focused on specific classroom interventions which instructors may use to teach counseling students the knowledge and skills needed to lead groups. CACREP (2015) is the flagship accrediting organization of counselor education programs, and 26 state licensure boards require professional counselor licensees to have obtained their master's degrees from CACREP-

accredited programs or equivalent programs (ACA, 2016). These programs deliver groupwork training and group membership experience to master's students during students' matriculation through their programs (CACREP, 2015). Groupwork scholars discuss the need for counseling students to practice group leadership skills prior to engaging in professional practice (Midgett et al., 2016; Ohrt et al., 2014). However, CACREP's 2016 standards do not include requirements for group leadership experience during master's students' coursework in group counseling. Further, St. Pierre (2014) surveyed post-graduate counseling students and found that only 53.3% of graduates had experience as a group facilitator during their group member requirement and/or groupwork course. Although CACREP-accredited programs require students to engage in groupwork leadership during their professional practice experiences (i.e., practicum and internship; CACREP, 2015), we believe more attention of groupwork leadership training is warranted in master's-level counselor education programs.

Through a thorough review of counseling-specific literature, we have determined ASGW's 2000 publication of specific training standards for groupworkers (*Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers*) to be the most relevant and useful framework for discussing how to support counselor educators in facilitating effective mastery of groupwork leadership skills among master's-level counselor education students. We considered utilizing ASGW's *Guiding Principles for Group Work* (2021) due to its more recent publication and the authors' goal to incorporate earlier versions of the organization's foundational documents while including updates. Authors of the 2021 document note that "foundational training for group workers includes the knowledge, skills, and experiences deemed necessary for general competency for all master's degree prepared counselors," (ASGW, 2021, p. 4). They also contend that didactic instruction should include content regarding "group theory, ethics, and facilitation skills; multicultural and social justice

considerations for group work; observation of groups in practice, practice in group facilitation, ethical group practice, and participation as a group member,” (2021, p. 4). However, no guidelines are provided within the document which provide specific direction to counselor educators regarding group facilitation skills or practice. Thus, we chose to utilize the 2000 *Professional Standards* because of its specific focus on training groupwork leaders and its explicit outline of core knowledge and skill competencies.

The interventions we have developed are active and collaborative in nature, in order to promote learning outcomes through higher order cognitive processes and to provide opportunities for students to receive formative feedback and apply knowledge (Groccia & Buskist, 2011; Michaelsen & Sweet, 2011). They also incorporate groupwork process knowledge. We have based our recommendations in peer-reviewed literature from counseling and other related professions to align with an evidence-based teaching approach, and we encourage all counselor educators to utilize these while keeping in mind other best practices in teaching, including creating effective learning environments, structuring intentional learning experiences, and assessing student learning (Malott et al., 2014). Following the discussion of practical interventions which align with ASGW’s (2000) *Professional Standards*, we provide a brief review of evaluation methods instructors may use to assess their instruction and thus student learning.

ASGW’s Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers

Leaders of ASGW (2000) state that “core training in group work can be provided through a single, basic course in group theory and process” (p. 13), and encourage counselor education programs to use the ASGW (2000) *Professional Standards* document in constructing curricula (p. 2). Counselor educators’ use of the ASGW (2000) *Professional Standards* guidelines may complement CACREP’s group coursework standards (I.e., Section 2.F.6.b, d, e, g) by providing a

framework for counselor educators to structure entry-level groupwork classes in a way that focuses on groupwork leadership. Further, ASGW's *Professional Standards* complement CACREP's standards by providing a definition for core training: "Core training in group work includes knowledge, skills, and experiences deemed necessary for general competency for all master's degree prepared counselors, [and] is considered a necessary prerequisite for advanced practice in group work" (ASGW, 2000, p. 3). The ASGW *Professional Standards* (2000) also outline guidelines for specialization training in groupwork, which ASGW considers advanced practice (p. 3). ASGW's (2000) specialization training standards include knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for counselors to practice groupwork independently (p. 3). However, for the purpose of this discussion, which is focused on master's-level training of professional counselors in CACREP-aligned programs, we focus specifically on the core training standards, as these complement the entry-level education standards for groupwork outlined by CACREP (2015).

The "core training standards" section of ASGW's (2000) *Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers* state that graduate training should include at least one course in groupwork which addresses scope of groupwork practice, types of groupwork, development of groups, group processes and dynamics, and group leadership (Coursework Requirements, p. 4). This aligns with CACREP's (2015) standards for Group Counseling and Group Work (Section II.F.6). The "core training standards" also suggest that programs require students to engage in at least 10 hours of groupwork observation and participation in a group experience, either as a group member or group leader (Experiential Requirements, ASGW, 2000, p. 5). This requirement partially aligns with CACREP's (2015) groupwork education standard for entry-level programs to require "direct experiences in which students participate as group members in a small group activity, approved by the program, for a minimum of 10 clock hours over the course of one

academic term,” (Section I2F.6.h). However, because of CACREP’s lack of requirement for students to engage in groupwork observation and group leadership outside of fieldwork experiences (i.e., Section 3), which is suggested by ASGW (2000) for competent groupwork leadership training, we refer to the Core Training Standards of ASGW’s (2000) *Professional Standards* (pp. 4-8), specifically the seven Skill Objectives found within the section outlining Knowledge and Skill Objectives (i.e., section two, pp. 5-8) to provide practical suggestions for counselor educators to infuse more groupwork leadership training in their courses. The following section provides one to two in-class activities which counselor educators of groupwork courses in CACREP-aligned master’s programs may use to train future counselors in competent group leadership.

ASGW’s Knowledge and Skill Objectives for Core Training of Groupworkers: Group Leadership Training Interventions

A. Nature and Scope of Practice

Group leaders will demonstrate skill in: preparing a professional disclosure statement for practice in a chosen area of specialization and applying theoretical concepts and scientific findings to the design of a group and the interpretation of personal experiences in a group.

The purpose of Standard A is to assure that group leaders know the information required for a professional disclosure statement and understand theoretical and empirically supported concepts related to group design. Assisting master’s students in creating a professional disclosure statement and group design can help facilitate their transition into their counseling career.

1. Create a professional disclosure statement that discusses a chosen area of specialization.

The statement should also include the student’s theoretical orientation, experience, training qualifications, limitations to practice as a pre-licensed counselor, services offered, how to

handle emergencies after hours, confidentiality and exceptions, client rights/responsibilities, the professional ethics the student ascribes to, and how to file a complaint/grievance.

2. Create a 4–6-page literature review on a group topic of interest (e.g., grief and loss, trauma, veterans support group, substance use treatment). This literature should include what theoretical concepts and findings have been examined in the group topic, as well as any information about the participants' experiences in these groups. The literature review should also review empirical findings related to proposed theoretical approaches within an area of specialization. For example, a literature review on substance use treatment groups should discuss what theoretical concepts are evidence-based when working with this population and outcomes for the participants.

B. Assessment of Group Members and the Social Systems in which they Live and Work

Group leaders will demonstrate skill in: observing and identifying group process; observing the personal characteristics of individual members in a group; developing hypotheses about the behavior of group members; employing contextual factors (e.g., family of origin, neighborhood of residence, organizational membership, cultural membership) in interpretation of individual and group data.

Standard B (ASGW, 2000, p. 5) requires that students gain experience observing and identifying group process, characteristics of group members, contextual factors, and develop hypotheses about members' behaviors accordingly. This enhances learning outcomes by facilitating students' critical evaluation of group process and incorporating authentic reflections of what they observed (Wiewiora & Kowalkiewicz, 2019).

1. Students may keep a journal of their group membership experience with entries that reflect on the group process, characteristics of group members, group behaviors, and contextual factors. Specific requirements include reflection of the characteristics which students identify in group members; the behaviors and content expressed by members; social and cultural elements which impact the group process; and which therapeutic factors students observed within the group.
2. Students are required to observe two separate groups (one group should be primarily process oriented). For each group, students complete a form about the group observation that discusses the group process. The form may reflect elements from Bales Interaction Process Analysis (IPA; Bales, 1950), which focuses students on distinguishing task-oriented and relational elements of group. This is done by examining the behaviors and nonverbal action in groups. Interaction Process Analysis consists of four general categories that are broken into specific categories. Positive socio-emotional interactions are behaviors that show solidarity/seems friendly, shows tension release/dramatizes, or agrees. Negative socio-emotional interactions are behaviors that show antagonism/seem unfriendly, show tension, or disagrees. An active task includes giving suggestions, opinions, or orientation. Meanwhile, a passive task asks for suggestions, opinions, or orientation (Bales, 1950). A student observing a group would reference group members' behaviors based on these categories. Students may then be required to write a reflection about the group observations. This learning activity ensures that students get a purely objective experience observing a group and may be used even if students are completing their membership experience in class to further enhance this skill.

C. Planning Group Interventions

Group leaders will demonstrate skill in: collaborative consultation with targeted populations to enhance ecological validity of planned group interventions; planning for a group work activity including such aspects as developing overarching purpose, establishing goals and objectives, detailing methods to be used in achieving goals and objectives, determining methods for outcome assessment, and verifying ecological validity of plan.

Standard C focuses on group planning, development, and assessment of groups for specific populations. To meet this requirement, students should demonstrate the ability to create a group for a specific population, develop group ideas and interventions, and implement appropriate assessment of group effectiveness. The following suggestions require students to demonstrate skill in creating groups and interventions for specific populations with attention to social and cultural aspects of the group, as well as evaluating the goals and objectives of the group.

1. Create a proposal for a closed, specialized group, which includes target population, theoretical orientation used for the group, intervention and group topic ideas, screening, ethical concerns, proposed outcomes of the group, and methods of assessing group outcomes and the impact of group leaders' facilitation skills. Within the proposal, students should specifically identify the social and cultural factors impacting potential group members and their experience in the group as well as the implications of participation in the group on members' respective communities. For example, a counseling group for university students struggling with their transition to college should incorporate discussion of family of origin values to promote cohesion among members. This group should also include processing of the impact of group members' attending college on their families of origin and their relationships with family members.

2. If students are obtaining group membership experience in a small process group during class time, students can create a plan for one personal growth group which they will facilitate during the semester. The group plan should cover orientation-specific theory, interventions and/or activities, cultural factors, and ethical issues.

3. Groupwork instructors may also include a timed partner assignment, in which students are paired in class and assigned a specific client population and presenting concern. The pairs are then tasked with designing a group they may run as co-leaders. The goal is to facilitate students' experience in applying group formation knowledge while also practicing working effectively with a co-leader.

D. Implementation of Group Interventions

Group leaders will demonstrate skill in: encouraging participation of group members; attending to, describing, acknowledging, confronting, understanding, and responding empathically to group member behavior; attending to, acknowledging, clarifying, summarizing, confronting, and responding empathically to group member statements; attending to, acknowledging, clarifying, summarizing, confronting, and responding empathically to group themes; eliciting information from and imparting information to group members; providing appropriate self-disclosure; maintaining group focus; keeping a group on task; and giving and receiving feedback in a group setting.

The skills in Standard D require that students gain experience in group interventions, which essentially recommends that students demonstrate specific skills in relation to groupwork leadership and receive feedback regarding their mastery of the skills. The following classroom intervention methods allow students to gain experience as a group facilitator while in their group course, under the supervision of their instructor. Additionally, these methods ensure that group

leaders are assessed on their group skills and abilities by evaluation from the group members. These suggestions align directly with Standard D in that they guide instructors in providing opportunities for students to apply group leadership skills, to receive formative and summative feedback regarding their group leadership style, and to formally evaluate group processes.

1. Students engage in mini-group experiences during at least 40 minutes of class, with each student gaining practice in facilitating groups. Group topics differ depending on if the group is a personal growth group, a psychoeducational group, or process group. Group members can fill out rubrics created by Mobley and Crowell (2014) to assess how the group leader began, facilitated, and ended the group. Mobley and Crowell (2014) created three separate rubrics to evaluate these portions of group and examine if the group leader offers encouragement, uses nonverbal postures, has assignments, discusses the purpose of the group, helps connect members, and more.

2. We recommend the inclusion of an intensive assignment which requires students to meet multiple times during a semester with a practicing groupwork leader to receive mentorship and coaching regarding specific activities and interventions the groupworker uses in their own groups. This assignment would also require students to write reflection pieces on their leadership experience as well as their experience of the group's processes. This activity would provide students the opportunity to receive coaching from professionals regarding specific leadership skills and interventions while also increasing their understanding of themselves as leaders. This is a method which has been found to be supportive of leadership development in other helping professions (e.g., nursing) (Cable & Graham, 2018) and may translate to the counseling profession.

3. Instructors may also incorporate the Leadership Behavior Questionnaire (Lieberman et al., 1973), which rates the group leader in categories including stimulating, management, meaning attribution, support, and use of self. This could be used when conducting role-play activities in the classroom. To maximize effectiveness, it would be most beneficial to have everyone, including group leader(s) complete this questionnaire after such activities. This would allow a rich source of direct feedback to the leader regarding performance of specific group leadership skills.

E. Leadership and Co-Leadership

Group leaders will demonstrate skill in: engaging in reflective evaluation of one's personal leadership style and approach; working cooperatively with a co-leader and/or group members; and engaging in collaborative group processing.

Groupwork scholars and researchers in other human service professions have emphasized the importance of self-reflection and self-evaluation in groupwork leadership (Cable & Graham, 2018; Gladding, 2020; Ohrt et al., 2014; Riva & Korinek, 2004; Wiewiora & Kowalikiewicz, 2019). Additionally, the topic of group co-leadership has been studied as an integral part of the experience of individuals who lead groups (Fall & Wejnert, 2005; Yalcin, 2021). Thus, the following classroom intervention methods call on the expertise of the group course instructor to model appropriate group leader behaviors while incorporating opportunities in the class for students to practice engaging in self-reflection among each other and developing relationships with group co-leaders.

1. Groupwork curriculum should integrate assignments in which students meet in breakout groups outside of normal classroom hours to discuss their development as future group leaders. Self-reflection of group leadership development process would be reinforced with

written reflection pieces, which may also help the instructor provide additional opportunities for skill development as well as remediation. Other benefits of this assignment include helping the student practice engaging in a group environment in a safe setting, reinforcing classroom instruction through repetitive functions, and helping the students synthesize learning experiences through written reflections.

2. Instructors may choose to model self-reflection of group leadership by leading a mock group in class and providing a self-reflection on how they experienced the process. This enhances students' understanding of the importance of self-reflection and self-evaluation while also providing students an opportunity to observe effective group leader behaviors.

3. We recommend including co-leader role-play activities, in which students are paired as co-leaders. During class time, co-leader pairs lead a small group during and are assigned a group counseling theory and associated intervention (e.g., the narrative therapy technique of externalizing the problem [Gladding, 2016]). While the co-leaders lead the group, they must demonstrate their skills in leading group members through the intervention without any prior consultation of how to do so. This in-the-moment co-construction of the intervention allows students to demonstrate skills in applying group theory while simultaneously improvising in real-time with a co-leader. Further, this classroom intervention provides opportunities for students to practice creating synergy within co-leader relationships.

F. Evaluation

Group leaders will demonstrate skill in: contributing to evaluation activities during group participation, and engaging in self-evaluation of personally selected goals.

Standard F promotes the importance of group leader process and self-reflection as well as strategies for evaluating group effectiveness during group sessions. The following suggestions guide instructors in using concepts from prior research by Stiles et al. (1996) and Stockton et al. (2004), who developed strategies for counselors to evaluate their effectiveness in applying skills they planned to use, such as setting limits, providing support, and maintaining focus on client goals (Stiles et al., 1996), and directing the group, gathering information and assessing members, challenging members, attending to and validating members' experiences, directing self, and promoting connections and interactions among group members (Stockton et al., 2004). These interventions promote active discussion among group leaders, members, and the course instructor in assessing the leader's role in the group process.

1. Students review intentionality scales such as the Therapist Session Intentions Form (TSI; Stiles et al., 1996) and the intention categories defined by Stockton et al. (2004) at the beginning of the semester. Students are asked to rate themselves and fellow classmates following all role-play activities throughout the semester as well as discuss results among each other. Students write reflective papers throughout the semester describing their strengths and challenges as they relate to intentionality to further stimulate reflexivity and ability to self-evaluate.
2. Instructors set individualized meetings via office hours to discuss how the student sees their development in terms of the previously mentioned scales and helps the student devise action plans for continued growth in categories of need in a collaborative manner.

G. Ethical Practice, Best Practice, Diversity-Competent Practice

Group leaders will demonstrate skill in: evidencing ethical practice (as well as best practice and diversity-competent practice) in planning, observing, and participating in group activities.

Leaders must maintain awareness of their ethical foundation per the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) and best practices for infusing multicultural and social justice competence in groupwork (ASGW, 2012; Guth et al., 2018). Thus, to satisfy Standard G, the following suggestions incorporate a variety of tools to train groupworkers in applying ethical and diversity-sensitive leadership practices.

1. Ponterotto (1994) discussed the efficacy of the Cross-Cultural Counseling Inventory-Revised (CCCI-R), the Multicultural Counseling Awareness Scale – Form B (MCAS:B), the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI), and the Multicultural Awareness-Knowledge-and Skills Survey (MAKSS) finding each to have merit in assessing multicultural counseling competence amongst counseling trainees. We suggest that instructors incorporate these assessments into role-play activities where possible. Additionally, we suggest instructors utilize the Leadership Behavior Questionnaire (LBQ; Lieberman et al., 1973) to assess group leaders' skills in ethical group leadership. Again, the inclusion of surveys into classroom activities allows students opportunities to measure growth across the semester and focus on lagging areas as needed.
2. In a review of common violations amongst ACA ethical codes, NBCC ethical codes, and state licensing boards' ethical codes, Mascari and Webber (2006) recommended that counselor educators incorporate case studies highlighting ethical dilemmas into course lesson plans. Mascari and Webber (2006) also call to light that jargon is commonly used in ethical codes that may lead to confusion amongst students about their full meaning. In addition to recommending regular case study implementation with class discussion, we recommend that teachers include an assignment requiring students to read the ACA's most current ethics code and take note of any parts that cause personal confusion. Students will

use these notes to engage in class-time specifically devoted to covering these questions as a class-sized group. Essentially, the class will work together to build up an ethics vocab-list to truly understand the intentionality of the code with the help of the course instructor.

Recommendations for Evaluation

We have previously discussed the importance of utilizing evidence-based teaching methods in counselor education, which includes assessment of student learning (Malott et al., 2014). Counselor educators who train future groupwork leaders may utilize formative and summative assessment of student learning during groupwork coursework in order to provide students the opportunity to grow their skills throughout the duration of the course. Further, educators may encourage site supervisors of students who are engaging in fieldwork to provide specific feedback related to students' groupwork leadership skills (i.e., Group Counseling Skills Scale [GCSS], Schneider-Corey et al., 2018). Instructors may also use the GCSS throughout class to assess students' group leadership development, or they may choose to use the Group Leader Self-Efficacy Instrument (GLSI, Page et al., 2001), to support students' understanding of selves as group leaders. Finally, counselor educators may consider evaluating the use of groupwork leadership skills and implementation of groups among graduates of their programs. This data may be useful in programs' adaptation of their groupwork training curricula toward more practical, real-world application.

Conclusion

Effective group leadership training in master's counseling programs is a key element in developing professional counselors with a strong foundation upon which to become specialized practitioners of groupwork. Leaders of professional organizations such as CACREP and ASGW assert the importance of groupwork training by publishing standards of education as well as

training guidelines for this area of counseling, and it is important for counselor educators to understand the complex dynamics which make up groupwork leadership so they may train future group leaders to facilitate effective groups. ASGW's *Professional Standards for the Training of Group Workers* (2000) serve as a useful tool for counselor educators to structure classroom interventions regarding this topic. This article covered each of the skill objectives listed in the core training standards section of ASGW's (2000) *Professional Standards* to provide practical and evidence-based suggestions for teaching group leadership skills in master's counseling courses.

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