Facilitating an experiential group in an educational environment: Managing dual relationships

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Abstract:

The significant benefit of experiential learning in group work presents ethical complexities that must be considered by students, faculty, and programs. This article explores the clinical and ethical intricacies of teaching a group counseling course while facilitating an experiential group as part of the course curriculum. Specifically, the framework presented examines the dual roles of facilitator and instructor as complementary versus adversarial functions while analyzing challenges to both teacher and students. Guidelines for effectively running an experiential group as part of a group counseling course are presented utilizing five ethical principles: fidelity, beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice. Finally, guidelines and practice considerations specifically tailored for the educative role as instructor and the process role as group facilitator are provided.

Keywords: group counseling | counselor education | experiential learning

Article:

Accrediting bodies across various disciplines require graduate programs of helping professions to engage students in education around group counseling as a part of their standards. For instance, the counselor education programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) must provide an instructional environment that is conducive to participation in group counseling. Further, the Masters in Psychology and Counseling Accreditation Council (MPCAC) and the social work education (Council on Social Work Education, 2015; Master's in Psychology and Counseling Accreditation Council, 2017) articulate similar expectations for education and training in group work as part of their standards of accreditation.

In complying with CACREP, 90% of counselor education group courses opt for an in-class experiential component with the most common format being the instructor leading the group (Shumaker, Ortiz, & Brenninkmeyer, 2011). Among social work programs, 61% of schools do not require a group work class and 40% of curricula do not include readings of group work literature (Sweifach, 2014). However, the majority of social work students are exposed to group practice in field experiences (LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011) and find direct experience significantly more helpful (Skolnik, 2019). Skolnik sought to identify the factors that most support professional social workers' efficacy in group work practice. Over 90% of participants reported having a direct experience in facilitating group work and over 40% reported that observing group facilitation was helpful (Skolnik, 2019).

Many counseling program curricula have implemented an experiential group as part of their course, creating a well-established component adjunct to learning about the process of group counseling (Corey, Corey, & Corey, 2014; LaPorte & Sweifach, 2011; Shumaker et al., 2011) and skill development (Anderson & Price, 2001; Kottler, 2004; Luke & Kiweewa, 2010; St. Pierre, 2014; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Barlow (2004) highlighted four components to group work development: (a) academic (i.e., lectures, readings), (b) observation, (c) experiential, and (d) supervision.

There are unique ethical concerns when facilitating an experiential group that must be addressed. Experiential groups are often led either by the course instructor or by an independent, outside facilitator (St. Pierre, 2014). When groups are run by the course instructor, students are placed in a vulnerable position due to the power differential between the student and the professor. For example, a professor within the roles of group facilitator and course instructor is privileged to compromising information the student discloses that may elicit bias in formal evaluation outside of the group (Anderson & Price, 2001; Davenport, 2004; Merta, Wolfgang, & McNeil, 1993). In addition, the implicit pressure for students to disclose vulnerabilities within an experiential component may make them feel uncomfortable about the potential consequence of such disclosure (Anderson & Price, 2001; Davenport, 2004; Hall et al., 1999; Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; St. Pierre, 2014). Further complicating matters is the role that educators across helping professions must play in terms of teaching students to think and perform ethically, while simultaneously holding their own ethical obligation to act and respond ethically (Kitchener, 1992). This obligation extends beyond evaluation of clinical competencies, but to serve as gatekeepers in protection of future clients when competencies or professional standards are not met (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Balancing the roles of instructor, group facilitator, educator, evaluator, and gatekeeper is challenging, and requires clear ethical guidelines.

An experiential group and its potential impact on skill and theory development are seen as a vital component to group leader development (Corey et al., 2014; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) and self-efficacy (Ohrt, Robinson, & Hagedorn, 2012). In order to support an ethical implementation of an experiential group within a group work class, there are ethical considerations to address. In an effort to present guidelines for conducting an experiential group in an educational setting, this article (a) describes the structure of a prototypical group course that includes an experiential group, (b) outlines ethical considerations of such an experiential group, and (c) offers practical considerations for implementing an experiential group within a group course.

AN EXPERIENTIAL GROUP

An experiential group is an emotional and cognitive learning experience (Ohrt, Ener, Porter, & Young, 2014a) where the students are met by the group leader at their growing edge. Growth is seen as a never-ending process (Cohen & Epstein, 1981) that enables a therapeutic impact (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). For the purposes of this article, the term "experiential group" refers to a prototypical experiential component of conducting a group with the student members of the class. In our development of this kind of course, the group component of the course is a blend between a "support group" and a "growth group." The "class" part of the course reflects the didactic, instructional portion of the course. Each segment, an experiential group and the class, are conducted during each class session to facilitate a cyclical framework of learning.

The class meeting is divided into three segments to facilitate each meeting through an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984): (a) an experiential group, (b) a debriefing, and (c) didactic instruction. Each class session begins with an experiential group to initiate the learning cycle with a concrete experience and observation. An experiential group provides a hands-on course experience for the student to engage in the "here-and-now" as group members. A debriefing session follows the experiential group to allow students to ask questions, facilitate discussion, and connect the process of the group to the theoretical tenets of the course. The debriefing segment is a time to reflect and formulate abstract concepts (Kolb, 1984). Finally, the class meeting ends with didactic instruction of new material to be applied to the following class session.

An Experiential Approach

The approach to an experiential group is best guided by a systemic theoretical method (Knowles, 1980) to experiential learning (Feder, 2006). A systemic approach views the class as a system, including the leader, in which the group-as-a-whole is responsible for the experience (Knowles, 1980). The shift in responsibility to the learner transfers ownership of the experience to the group to determine the direction and goal of the group experience. The group is in charge while the leader constructs its path to model group facilitation skills (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2003; Riva & Korinek, 2004). The participants determine the pace and depth of the group through their own risk-taking, self-disclosure, and self-awareness (Corey, 2012). As the students articulate their personal and social experiences, they gain self-efficacy through the confidence that the instructor will abide by their rhythm and that positive results (i.e., learning) will occur (Midgett, Hausheer, & Doumas, 2016; Ohrt et al., 2012). Each class session allots approximately 90 minutes (out of 180 total minutes) for an experiential group to ensure the necessary time for students to engage and foster group dynamics.

Debriefing the Group

Research has demonstrated that experiential group participation enhances self-awareness (Corey, 2012), as well as personal growth and self-efficacy (Ohrt et al., 2012). Didactic methods support the students' learning of group development, processes, and theory through readings, lectures, and observations. An experiential group demonstrates the theoretical tenets through the students' participation as group members (Corey et al., 2014; Riva & Korinek, 2004; Shumaker

et al., 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). The debriefing portion of the class is a unique component to the course where students engage the leader with questions about their leadership, interventions, or specific choices made during the group session. The debriefing connects the theoretical tenets directly to the experiences of the group to offer near-simultaneous observation and experience (Kolb, 1984). The students gain the perspective of the group leader based on their internalized experience of the group.

The facilitator may initiate the debriefing by prompting discussion of the group process based on the identified content in the course to transition into a didactic modality. Common topics for the debriefing include: stages of group development, group facilitation skills, and techniques. However, such role changes (i.e., facilitator to instructor and group member to student) is a complex aspect of the segment. The group leader must manage the discussion in order to maintain the didactic purpose of the debriefing; mismanagement of the debriefing presents the risk of exploiting the student's vulnerability. Throughout both initial segments of the course, an experiential group and the debriefing, the ethical conflict of dual relationships is inevitable.

The dual role of facilitator and instructor within an experiential group does not reduce the ethical responsibility of gatekeeping but requires that the educator simultaneously model and teach ethics (Kitchener, 1992). For example, if a student displayed concerning behavior within the group, would the facilitator be able to address the behavior effectively within the group and without later allowing bias toward the student to unduly influence evaluation of that student? The debriefing segment of the group requires the facilitator to take back control of the educational environment. Can the instructor utilize an experiential group as a model and example without the exploitation of student vulnerability? An experiential group and debriefing offer a rich educational experience; however, the ethical considerations and complexities must be addressed to uphold ethical principles of the helping professions.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN AN EXPERIENTIAL GROUP

The obligation of educators to both teach ethics and perform ethical responsibilities is a unique juxtaposition among helping professional educators (Kitchener, 1992). Implementing an experiential group yields a need for clear demarcation between the academic function and the growth orientation of the class to provide the necessary safeguards of the group. Beauchamp and Childress (1989) developed a model of ethical inquiry that presents a useful way of looking at how ethical issues can make the group safer and better organized. Five ethical principles are clearly identified—fidelity, beneficence, nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice. Examples of the authors' experiences teaching group work within a counselor education program at a southeastern research-intensive university are provided in order to illustrate specific ethical issues.

Fidelity

Establishing a therapeutic environment within an experiential group is unique in that it will resemble a therapeutic environment in group therapy or counseling, but it will be distinct. Establishing and maintaining this distinct difference in a therapeutic environment remains the instructor's responsibility as gatekeeper to the profession. Gatekeeping within the profession

honors fidelity to the welfare of the students and the welfare of future clients (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014; Kitchener, 1992). Clinical competency and psychological fitness are required standards to uphold among helping professional educators (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). This requires educators to ask the following questions: "Does the student's skill set and knowledge meet criteria and professional standards of practice? Is the student able to emotionally regulate to engage empathic connection with the client or group? Are there any concerns that would elicit potential harm to future clients? Further, the emergence of such findings presents an additional challenge to fidelity; in what capacity is the leader to utilize or engage this information considering the responsibility of the instructor?" These issues of fidelity are to be addressed explicitly with the student prior to entering or participating in the group (Corey, 2000).

When working with an experiential group, the welfare of the student takes priority, but the limits are made clear. Confidentiality and subsequent boundaries within the facilitator-group relationship are delineated (Van Hoose, 1986) on the first day in class: threat of harm to self or others, child/elder abuse, or a court order are instances in which confidentiality would be broken. Further, clarification about the dual roles of instructor and group facilitator (Goodrich, 2008) are given to specify that the information shared within the group will remain separate from disciplinary action and academic grades (Association of Specialists in Group Work, 2000). For instance, as a member of the faculty, any personal information that emerged from the group is not provided to other faculty or used against the student. Sharing such information would be unfair to the group participant. One example of this is when a student disclosed a personal diagnosis of bipolar disorder. This information could be of potential concern to the welfare of future clients (e.g., if the student was not managing their mental health well) but the group leader's focus is on the welfare of the student. Thus, this information was kept confidential and not shared during faculty meetings in which student evaluations take place.

The explicit and implicit learning objectives for the course are made very clear in an attempt to mitigate the ambiguity of the dual roles (student as group member, faculty as group leader). One example of addressing this distinction is by using learning contracts or an informed consent as an addition to the course syllabus (Appendix). Learning contracts provide a means for the instructor to be clear about the learning expectations (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). Moreover, an informed consent can establish the group norms of confidentiality in a formal process, in addition to the group's explicit rules created within the group. The students are provided a syllabus for the course and an informed consent for an experiential group which defines the role of the instructor and facilitator, evaluation process, and the potential risks and benefits of the course. The informed consent defines the role of the "facilitator" as nonevaluative but further delineates the obligation of the "instructor" to serve as an evaluator. Furthermore, the informed consent describes the steps that will be taken should concerns of clinical competency and psychological fitness arise. This allows for the student to understand the dual roles and sets an expectation for both the learning and therapeutic environments. Common factors have long substantiated the need for clear understanding on the part of clients in order for a therapeutic alliance to be developed (Lambert & Vermeersch, 2002, p. 711; Wampold, 2015). These learning contracts (i.e., informed consent) build and model a therapeutic alliance by explicitly defining the roles of the student and instructor within an experiential group.

Evaluation of clinical competencies is a consistent responsibility among educators and supervisors within helping professions (Bernard & Goodyear, 2014). Such competencies (including problems with competence) may be observed during an experiential group, thus requiring the group facilitator to act in the role of instructor and/or gatekeeper. One strategy to address this responsibility is including self-evaluation, as described in the informed consent, in order to engage the student in understanding any limitations or lacking areas of competency to take a collaborative approach in evaluation (Birzer, 2004; Knowles et al., 2015). Thomas and Pender (2008) recommend group leaders (and group leaders- in-training) participate in self-assessment of their knowledge, beliefs, and values and how those factors influence the dynamics of the group. Self-evaluation allows the student to co-construct their evaluation of competencies and fitness within the course and begin a self-reflective practice. Further, neither the group nor any reflective assignments on the experience in the group are graded but are co-evaluated by the student and instructor. Evaluation, however, remains only constructed within the didactic segment of the course through testing of course standards, attendance, and clinical competencies.

Beneficence

Beneficence is the responsibility to be proactive in preventing harm and contributing to the overall welfare of the client (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989) or in this context the student. An experiential group should be facilitated by an instructor with adequate experience and a skill set to lead the group in order to prevent undue harm to the student. Employing facilitators who have limited group experience establishes a cycle of limited competency from both the classroom instruction and field experiences (Skolnik, 2019). Moreover, utilizing a leader or instructor to act outside of their competency would be unethical (Davenport, 2004; Kottler, 2001). Therefore, if no faculty instructor is equipped with significant group work experience, an outside facilitator should be considered. When using an outside facilitator or field expert, reporting group member attendance and participation should be made clear to the students prior to participating in the group.

The group leader's goal is to model group facilitation skills and create an atmosphere of safety that is conducive for growth to occur. Although the course may stretch the interpersonal boundaries for some of the students, the expressive nature of the course is important for skill development as a group facilitator to empathize with the role of their future clients (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). An experiential group allows members to learn more about each other and in a different way than in other classes, particularly when implemented in a cohort model program. A cohort model, where the same group of students proceed through courses together, amplifies this experience as the students are likely familiar with each other by the time they enter the group course. However, drawbacks of an experiential group within the cohort model include preexisting cohort dynamics, increased exposure, and the inability to escape the group members after termination of the group (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). This adds to the complexity of disclosure and the potential consequences from both the instructor and their peers. Confidentiality, therefore, is to be outlined and stated explicitly to address the disclosure of group proceedings after the course.

Self-disclosure begets self-disclosure; this includes the leaders who can choose to use disclosure to send imbedded messages that becoming more intimate requires disclosure. In order for the

facilitator to become a part of the group and model group behavior, self-disclosure, while limited, is necessary (Corey et al., 2014, p. 29). The leader models their own disclosure as a way to deepen the group rather than for their own benefit (Riva & Korinek, 2004). One example of such disclosure from the facilitator may occur in the form of one's identification of one's social identities that were not previously known to the students. A foundational element of group leader development is multicultural competency and social justice (Singh et al., 2012). Students must be able to understand their presence in the group and their influence over the dynamics (Singh et al., 2012; Thomas & Pender, 2008). The group supports the students to discover what makes them relate and what factors make them different (i.e., background, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, etc.). The modeling of facilitator disclosure supports the students to observe appropriate disclosure while gaining an understanding of the benefit of the skills as the group member.

Nonmaleficence

Nonmaleficence is the ethical principle that ensures, above all else, to do no harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989). To address nonmaleficence, the informed consent outlines the potential risks of participating in a group. Counselors-in-training may experience mild anxiety, strong emotional feelings (Ohrt et al., 2014a, 2014b), struggle with ambiguity (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008), or recall unpleasant memories. The informed consent explains these risks and benefits while including the steps to obtain additional support from the university counseling center. Nonetheless, a benefit of the group is the potential to address unresolved issues that could eventually interfere when working with clients in the future. Therein lies another challenge of dual relationships; refrain from exposure of inadequate psychological fitness to the course instructor, or risk exposure in order to potentially experience growth among unresolved issues with the group facilitator (and the group).

It is essential that the group member understand that the role of the facilitator within an experiential group is not an evaluative role. The students' disclosures are not held against them outside of the group but are withheld from evaluative processes. One instance of this was when a student within the group reported a history of sexual assault that had resurfaced as fear during current dating experiences. The facilitator will process the experience within the group, but it may be beneficial to educate the student that counselors with personal assault histories report higher rates of vicarious trauma (Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). Psychoeducation and professional development, in this case, were liberated in the debriefing portion of the class after the group session in order to differentiate the role and honor both needs of student and group member.

Nonmaleficence within an experiential group is the sole responsibility of the facilitator and their use of power. One strategy to mitigate the use of power is the incorporation of a cofacilitator such as a doctoral student to share the role (Walsh, Bambacus, & Gibson, 2017). The work of cofacilitation offers role modeling, group management, stimulating group dynamics, and mutual support to the group-as-a-whole to mirror the developmental stages of group dynamics (Jordan & McIntosh, 2011; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Cofacilitation models the level of trust and intimacy needed within the group due to the importance of the relationship between cofacilitators. Neimeyer (2015) notes the work of cofacilitation allows for the division of tasks within the

group such as managing rituals, crisis situations, addressing group silence, scapegoating, or inappropriate rage. Further, the necessity for additional preparation and weekly debriefing between leaders (Cohen & DeLois, 2002) allows the facilitators to share the responsibility of ethical decision making.

Autonomy

Autonomy inside an experiential group includes an individual student's ability to cease emotional exploration and their overall participation within the group. As an example, CACREP (2016) standards within counselor education offer an alternative standard to allow students to participate in a group outside of the classroom for 10 clock hours. However, the group member maintains the autonomy (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989) and discretion for taking the responsibility to cease from participation. The option of an experiential group is a complex decision for students who often feel pressured to participate with their peers. The informed consent (Appendix) outlines the student's role in deciding their participation in an experiential group, alternative options outside of the classroom, and requirements for each experiential option. Furthermore, the informed consent outlines the student's ability to seek additional support through the university counseling center or elsewhere, or cease participation should the need arise.

However, the facilitation of autonomy does not stop with the student's decision to participate in the group but must be maintained throughout the facilitation of the entire group experience. For example, the facilitator should maintain the student's autonomy by asking permission to facilitate an intervention, techniques, or further emotional expression. Common ways to facilitate this include: "Do you want to go further with this?"; "Do you want to do a role-play or the empty chair technique?"; or for an emotionally upset individual, "Do you want to choose someone to be an emotional support for you?" Asking permission to engage in intervention addresses concerns of transferential feelings from either the facilitator or group member while eliciting choice from the group member.

For example, during cofacilitation of an experiential group, the authors were helping a student reckon with the guilt of not being there for a family member. The student was asked if he wanted to explore this issue with the use of the empty chair. He agreed and addressed his parent and then responded as the parent, who gave him permission to pursue his graduate studies. The empty chair was utilized to look at the internal split within him—the part that felt obligated to the family member and the part of him that wanted to remain in school. Through this experience, he felt internally supported to remain in school. In addition, the group gave him external support that they (the group) believed such a loving parent would want him to pursue his career. The leader used their skills to help the student become clearer about the issue that they brought forth, with their permission. Other times, exercising their autonomy, students have declined the exploration or intervention with group leaders respecting that choice, thereby further fostering a safe environment. It is important for the group members to understand their autonomy in the group and their ability to decline disclosure within the group.

Justice

Justice, or fairness, influences many moment-to-moment decisions in the group. It is very important that respect for the rights and the welfare of others is adhered to by all members of the group (Beauchamp & Childress, 1989). Managing group dynamics between group members is a challenging responsibility of a group facilitator (Corey et al., 2014). Students within an experiential group are having the unique experience of learning about the roles of the group members while simultaneously participating within the dynamic (Corey, 2012; Kline, 2003). This complex experience requires the leader to protect against members being scapegoated or pressured to conform to the majority, yet monitor when the dynamics can lead to dealing with important issues. Group dynamics are influenced by multiculturalism and social justice issues (Singh et al., 2012) to which educators are responsible for supporting a foundational development for multicultural competencies (Ibrahim, 2010). Justice within an experiential group applies to the leader's sensitivity and agility in handling issues of diversity and social justice in a manner that addresses the experiences of the group member while teaching competencies to the student. Leaders must be aware of the plethora of cultural differences that exist within each group and be ready and willing to share information about themselves, when appropriate.

IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR AN EXPERIENTIAL GROUP

Group members develop empathy for the position of the client as they begin the exchange of both giving and receiving feedback from the group (Yalom, 2005). This experience becomes particularly relevant when they lead their own groups in their field experiences (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). When considering the use of an experiential group within a group work course, there are several practical implications to consider, including the overall program model, the role of the facilitator, and interventions.

Program Considerations

Considerations regarding the program must be made before implementing an experiential group in a group work course. What are the dual relationships presented prior to participating in an experiential group? Are the students participating in faculty-led organizations or external projects? Is the program designed in a cohort model? Using an experiential group within a cohort presents additional challenges and potential consequences for self-disclosure within the group. Students within a cohort are more familiar with each other when they enter the group and cohort conflicts may emerge (Davenport, 2004), increase discomfort, and present additional consequences of self-disclosure when students remain together after the experiential group has ended (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008).

Programs that have doctoral students have a unique opportunity to utilize advanced doctoral candidates with group competencies as group facilitators or coleaders in order to mitigate dual relationships (Walsh et al., 2017). They can act as conduits for other trainees since they may better relate and understand the experience of being a student. These programs also model how a student can acquire the skills of eventually becoming a leader of a group while the doctoral student becomes more likely to increase his or her knowledge of group processes and engage in group work practices in the future through experiential methods (Clements, 2008). However, using doctoral students to practice outside of their skill sets or beyond their own competencies

would be unethical (Davenport, 2004; Kottler, 2001). Additionally, this presents unique challenges as the doctoral student may experience dual relationships in other classes, participating in student led organizations, or in a supervisory relationship. The doctoral student must be strong and experienced in the skill set to consider their own comfortability with self-disclosure. Doctoral students as coinstructors, regardless of their individual learning objectives with the course, have the same implication considerations as the cofacilitator with a lead instructor.

Facilitator Considerations

The role of the leader is unique in this experience as the students are simultaneously learning the group process as both a student and group member through examining the verbal and nonverbal actions of the leader (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). The facilitator's most powerful tool is the example of their own skill set (Knowles, 1980) as a model for interventions, group work theories, and group stages (Riva & Korinek, 2004). This requires the leader to be clear in intention and theoretical background, as the veil of group process is lifted during the learning process for the student. The professor role itself requires flexibility and disclosure that is not necessarily experienced or required in other instructional settings. The group also requires that the professor feel confident in their own skills and willing to risk exposure. If the group is not going well, it is often viewed as the fault of the leader and not the group (Corey et al., 2014, p. 232).

Furthermore, the facilitator is met with the additional challenge of transitioning between segments of the course, and therefore transitioning between roles (i.e., facilitator to instructor and group member to student). It is recommended that the leader/instructor support the students to transition their mind-set back into the role of the student by taking a break from the class and changing seats from where they were previously sitting as group members. This helps the student shift out of the experience of the group's dynamic and shift into talking about the group from an external perspective. For example, if a student becomes emotional in the discussion, the leader brings the discussion to a meta-level, discussing the emotion as something that clarifies the process of the group, or to suggest that the feeling be brought up in the next group session. The instructor should maintain discussion at a theoretical level as to not use the student as an example or shift back into a therapeutic mind-set when discussing the facilitator's decisions or choice of intervention.

Intervention Considerations

The class experiences how the leader's theoretical orientation influences their way of responding as a counselor. This gives the class a "birds-eye view" of the intervention choices and strategies that the leader enacts in an encounter with someone requesting assistance. Students may experience discomfort as they become aware of their emotions when disclosing personal information, taking risks within the group (St. Pierre, 2014), or search for their belonging within the group (Corey et al., 2014, p. 236). It is important that the group leader does not impede the group from passing through the anxiety-provoking process of not knowing what to say as the search for a structure echoes the existential quandary of finding a level of meaningful disclosure in a classroom environment. However, the facilitator role should continuously monitor the level

of well-being and stress experienced in the group when students are uncomfortable (Anderson & Price, 2001).

It is important that the facilitator employ interventions that maintain the spontaneity of the emotional process of the group with skills that align with their theoretical orientation. While the students are experiencing a "bird's eye view," students from this experience have reported the application of skills provided a "real-life" context to the skills (Smith & Davis-Gage, 2008). An experiential activity can be used to underscore and raise awareness of the group process. For instance, in one group that was very reluctant to share and make psychological contact with each other, the group was asked to walk around the room and not make eye contact with anyone. Or in another session, the group was asked to process their experiences and split into pairs to describe what they wanted from the group and what they could offer the group. These activities are utilized to raise awareness of what is going on in the group and to stimulate new possibilities for interacting.

Silence and discomfort when searching for structure and membership in the group (Corey et al., 2014) provides a manifestation of reckoning with the interpersonal and intrapersonal goals. Therefore, the leader patiently accepts the silence and then helps the group find language for dealing with their experience of the silence: "What is your experience of the silence?" "What do you think the group needs in order to move past the silence?" "What do you think your (or the collective) silence is saying?" These questions reflect the leaders understanding and to assist the group in moving through the impasse. Through this experience, students gain technical skills through observation, increase their empathic understanding, and gain a deeper understanding for group dynamics (Swiller, 2011).

Reflection Journals

Reflection journals are a useful intervention for students to report their learning experiences as well as how their group compares to class readings. The students reflect on their experience of different levels of sharing within the group, challenges from other group members, anxiety, and participation (Ohrt et al., 2014b). The journal is divided into three parts: (a) minimal discussion of what moved them during the session, (b) what they learned, and (c) the linkage of their personal experience with group theory and dynamics. These journals are read by the instructor at the middle and end of the semester. The journals are not an evaluation assignment for the course, but are a tool for both the group member and the facilitator.

The journals are a feedback mechanism (Haber, Carlson, & Braga, 2014) that supports the participants in becoming aware of precontemplative issues that they may want to share in the group and alerts the leader to issues that they may have missed. For instance, one student wrote that she felt like the leaders did not pick up on her desire to talk about her father's suicide. She concluded that her issues were too much for the group to handle which was reminiscent of her inability to share her pain in her childhood. The leader was guided by his subjective feeling to protect her from this revelation and was able to address this through written feedback after reading the journals at the midsemester point. In another case of a suicidal parent, the student initially elected to not deal with this trauma in the group. However, after she wrote about her feelings in her journal, she decided to share her story at the next meeting. The journals provide

an opportunity to give language to feelings and weigh exposing the issue to the group. Other reflection assignments to consider are video blogging or collaging for students to gain self-awareness and provide feedback.

CONCLUSION

An experiential group offers a first-hand opportunity to learn the benefits of group counseling while studying group dynamics. While an experiential group provides direct exposure that is significantly more helpful than didactic instruction alone (Skolnik, 2019), there are ethical complexities of dual relationships that must be addressed explicitly prior to implementing an experiential group. Incorporating an informed consent delineates the roles and responsibilities of both the instructor and facilitator, outlines the potential risks and benefits, and offers additional support or alternative assignments outside of an experiential group. Autonomy of the student's participation extends beyond their agreement to participate in the group but is upheld with each group session by enacting choice for their emotional expression and participation in intervention. Furthermore, implementation considerations of an experiential group must include careful attention to the program, the facilitator, interventions, and the use of reflective assignments in order to carefully uphold and model ethics of both counseling and education. When executed ethically, the benefits of building group facilitation skills and group member experience through an experiential training group have long-lasting potential beyond the classroom and into the field.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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APPENDIX

Experiential Group Informed Consent

As a course requirement, each student is required to engage in a continuous small group experience. The groups are designed and run as training groups where the emphasis is on your experiencing the dynamics, observing modeled facilitation, and gain self-efficacy of group practice. This requirement can be fulfilled through two options:

A. In-class experiential group
B. Faculty approved continuous small group in the community setting.

Option A includes an in-class experiential group led by the course instructor at the beginning of each class meeting with the students enrolled in the course as group members. *Option B* will require faculty approval and an on-site supervisor to report attendance. Weekly reflective journals are a component of each option.

If utilizing *Option B*, please sign below with the site and supervisor information below.

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____
Type of Group/Meeting Schedule: _____
Site Information: _____
On-site Supervisor: _____ Title: _____
Contact Information: _____

If utilizing *Option A*, please read the informed consent carefully and return to the instructor prior to participating in the experiential group.

Role of Group Facilitator/Instructor

The role of the group facilitator will be completed by the course instructor. The role of the facilitator is a non-evaluative role however, as the course instructor, the instructor is required to address any concerns regarding clinical competency and psychological fitness for the helping profession. If such instance should occur, the instructor will address the concern in a meeting outside of the group within the student individually. Evaluation of group skills and competencies will be co-constructed between student and instructor through self-assessment and reflection. Course standards will be evaluated through testing, attendance, and course assignments not related to the experiential group.

Confidentiality

What transpires in these groups is confidential. You may discuss your personal experience in the group with others, but may not discuss what others have said or their experience. However, there are times when in an effort to protect you or others that confidentiality may need to be broken.

Limits of confidentiality include: Wanting to harm yourself or others, child, elder, or dependent adult abuse, subpoena for witness testimony, serious psychological factors that may impair your work as a counselor-in-training.

Further, confidentiality within the group extends to the course instructor. Personal information disclosed within the group will withheld from faculty meetings, evaluations, etc. Only course information regarding grades, academic performance, and measurement of course standards may be disclosed outside of the course.

Risks and Benefits

There is always a possibility of risks and benefits that may occur in experiential counseling training courses. During the experiential group, you may experience mild anxiety, struggle with ambiguity, recall unpleasant personal experiences, and/or may arouse strong emotional feelings. If such experiences exceed mild presentation and you feel that you may benefit from individual or group therapy, please contact the university counseling center.

The benefits of the group include an increased ability to empathize with future clients, an improved ability to relate with others, a clearer understanding of your personal and professional self, values, and goals, and an increased ability to deal with stress and ambiguity.

Expectations and Responsibilities

Taking personal responsibility for your effort in the group training experience will lead to greater personal and professional growth as a group worker; what you gain from this group experience will be directly related to what you are willing to invest of yourself in the process.

Below are some developmental tasks that relate to high participation/high benefit in-group. Please consider these as you think about what you will gain and contribute to the group.

- Be in attendance and “present” at all group sessions; don’t just occupy a seat.
- Be authentic; risk being yourself rather than role-play.
- Be an active and empathic listener to other members.
- Invite other members to give constructive feedback (both positive and negative) on how they experience you in the group.
- Be willing to be a leader and a follower.
- Attend carefully to the “process” dimensions of your group.
- Resolve to deal openly with issues of trust, commitment, leadership, sharing, group cohesion, anger and conflict.
- Reflect weekly on your experience as a group member

Please initial the following statements to confirm understanding of participation in the experiential group:

_____ I understand my role as both a student and group member in the course.
_____ I understand the limits of confidentiality as outlined above.
_____ I understand my role in maintaining confidentiality of what is said by other members of the group.
_____ I understand evaluation and grading will not be dependent upon my “performance” in the group.
_____ I understand the instructor’s responsibility to evaluated skill development through course assignments and any concerns of the instructor will be addressed privately.
_____ If I have any questions about this information or the requirements of this course, I understand that it is my responsibility to ask the instructor.

By signing below, I consent to participation in the in-class experiential group facilitated by the course instructor.

_____ _____
Group Counseling Student Signature Date