

Promoting Student Development Through Psychoeducational Groups: A Perspective on the Goals and Process Matrix

By: [Deborah J. Taub](#)

[Taub, D. J.](#) (1998). Promoting student development through psychoeducational groups: A perspective on the goals and process matrix. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 23, 196-201.

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The original publication is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01933929808411392>

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Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to provide a reaction to the Waldo and Bauman (1998 [this issue]) goals and process (GAP) matrix for groups article in terms of its usefulness to student development educators leading psychoeducational groups. To do so, the context within which student development educators do psychoeducational group work will be briefly described. Then, a perspective on applying the proposed matrix and problems with the proposed matrix will be provided.

Article:

THE STUDENT DEVELOPMENT EDUCATOR

Student affairs professionals work on college and university campuses providing programs and services designed to support the academic mission of the institution by assisting students in reaching their educational, personal, and career goals (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 1992; as cited in Keim & Graham, 1994). Student &airs professionals work in a variety of campus settings, including residence halls, dean of students offices, student unions, career centers, services for students with disabilities, services for returning adult students, services for minority students, community service/service learning programs, and judicial affairs (Komives & Gast, 1996).

From the beginning of the profession, student affairs has taken as its goal “educating the whole student” (Nuss, 1996). This focus was formally articulated in the 1937 *Student Personnel Point of View*, published by the American Council on Education, and reaffirmed in both the 1949 *Student Personnel Point of View* and in the 1987 *Perspective on Student Affairs*, developed in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the original statement (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 1989). From this focus flows the student affairs mission to promote students’ development in areas including psychosocial, cognitive, ethical, and identity development.

When student affairs professionals work intentionally to promote student development in any of these (or other) dimensions, they are acting in the role of “student development educators” (Brown, 1989). Student development educators intentionally promote student development in a number of ways. Involvement in cocurricular activities such as student clubs and organizations can promote development of leadership and interpersonal skills (Brown, 1989). Residence hall programs can be designed to promote wellness, tolerance for diversity, and interpersonal relationships (Johnson & Cavins, 1996). Involvement in service learning can promote the development of values (Delve, Mintz, & Stewart, 1990). Individual academic advising can promote students’ cognitive and psychosocial development as well as their career development (Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1982). All of these are examples of the kinds of experiences that typically are implemented by student affairs professionals interested in promoting students’ development.

Student affairs professionals also promote student development through group work. Winston, Bonney, Miller, and Dagley (1988) presented a number of reasons for using group work to promote student development. Among those reasons are that groups are economical (to make the most of limited resources), that groups can provide an intensity of focus on the developmental area in question, that group work is a natural mode for many of the strategies in student development, and that groups can be particularly powerful for college students because of the importance of the peer group to the traditional college-age population. (There are, of course, student affairs professionals whose training base is in counseling who lead counseling groups with college students in higher education settings. However, the group work performed by these student affairs professionals lies outside the scope of this article.)

APPLYING THE GOALS AND PROCESS MATRIX

Using Waldo and Bauman's (1998) matrix to examine the group work performed by student development educators, it seems clear that these groups' goals would be classified as "developmental." They are grounded in a body of theory and research about how students grow and change in complexity during the college years along a variety of dimensions (see, e.g., Evans, 1996; McEwen, 1996, and they address normal functioning and transitions (Winston et al., 1988). This is consistent with Waldo and Bauman's description of the developmental category of goals as encompassing enhancement, development, and prevention, because "all three are directed toward growth rather than repair" (p. 169) and because the label "connotes forward motion and expansion" (p. 169). However, this does not seem very different from the description of the goals of psychoeducational groups provided in the current Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 1991) classification system.

For the process dimension, Waldo and Bauman (1998) retain the ASGW labels of guidance (or psychoeducational), counseling, and therapy. The ASGW standards describe the process of psychoeducational groups as being one of teaching. This description fits well the group work of student development educators. Again, however, in this context, using the GAP matrix appears to add little.

PROBLEMS WITH THE GAP MATRIX

From my perspective, there exist a number of problems with the GAP matrix. Although the matrix appears to provide a good fit for describing psychoeducational groups in higher education settings, it adds little to our understanding of such groups than is provided by the current ASGW (1991) classification system. It may be that the matrix is more helpful for those doing counseling and therapy groups, where, according to Gladding (1996), overlap exists.

Waldo and Bauman (1998) make the point that other important dimensions of groups are subsumed in the two dimensions of goals and process. The dimension of goals, they say, encompasses members and settings, whereas the dimension of process encompasses leadership and the theory base on which the group rests. This is largely true for those student affairs professionals promoting student development through psychoeducational groups in higher education settings. However, subsuming the dimension of members in the dimension of goals may not be appropriate and can lead to confusion. For example, it appears from their discussion that Waldo and Bauman may be confusing an overall goal for clients (remediation of violent behavior, to use one of their examples) with the goals of group (teaching anger management, to continue with their example). In this example, it seems to me that the goal of the group would be categorized as developmental, not remedial. The complexity inherent in Waldo and Bauman's example rests neither in the goals nor the processes but rather in group membership. Therefore, group members may be a dimension that should be considered separately in any revised classification.

From a program development perspective (Barr, Keating, & Associates, 1985; Lewis, Lewis, & Souflee, 1991), if the goals and objectives of the group are clearly and concretely stated, the most appropriate process should be apparent. That is, processes should flow logically from goals and objectives. For example, continuing with the example above, a psychoeducational group for college students might have as a goal helping group members control anger. An objective for such a group might be the following: after completion of the group, members will be able to identify three physiological signs of anger that they can feel. This objective, and the other

objectives that comprise the goal, suggests the kinds of activities and the processes that should be undertaken in the group.

Waldo and Bauman (1998) articulate a number of concerns that they believe are created by the current classification system and that they further believe are solved by their proposed matrix. This, they assert, is the reason to adopt this new classification system. However, I do not find their reasons compelling. It may be that the GAP matrix provides a more ready, detailed description of groups, and it would be hard to argue against providing adequate information to gain informed consent. However, there is no real evidence that group workers are currently having difficulty describing their groups adequately. For example, Winston et al. (1988) explained that, during the process of member screening, the group leader should explain both the goals of the group and the activities and techniques to be employed (i.e., process). Similarly, there is no real evidence that researchers are incapable currently of investigating and describing both group process and group goals. The concern about third-party payments is simply not particularly relevant in the student development educator context.

As for training issues—the fourth area of concern identified by Waldo and Bauman (1998)—it is my perspective that adopting this matrix has the potential to complicate training. Beginning trainees may be best served by being taught the simplest classification system—along with the caveat that the classification systems are, by their very nature, reductionistic, whereas the real world is complex. More complex classification systems probably are appropriate only for more advanced students who have mastered the basics and who are capable of comprehending and making use of a more complex system.

I have concerns that the GAP matrix might open the door to group workers employing process modalities for which they have not been adequately trained and that lie outside the limits of their expertise or competence. Although new training standards certainly would attempt to address such a concern if this new classification system were adopted, there seems to me to be the appearance of the invitation for facilitators of groups whose goals are educational to adopt what have generally been seen as therapeutic techniques. This is not problematic when those facilitators are therapists, and there certainly are many highly trained therapists on many college and university campuses. However, although student development educators often have counseling-based training, that is not always the case; furthermore, many of those whose training has a counseling base would not consider themselves to be therapists.

Finally, although the GAP matrix is an attempt to reflect the complexity of group work, it does not reflect the real-world situation that a group may employ more than one process modality. For example, as noted by Gladding (1997), “Some groups that are instructive are also simultaneously or consequentially therapeutic” (p. 175). The implication of the GAP matrix, however, is that a single process is being employed in the group.

CONCLUSION

Waldo and Bauman (1998) have raised some interesting issues through the development of the GAP matrix. Most important, they have focused our attention on the discrepancy between the reductionistic nature of any classification system and the complexity of the real world. From the perspective of student development education, however, there lacks a compelling reason to adopt this new system, and there exist some problems with Waldo and Bauman’s conceptualization.

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