Experiential Approaches to Group Work

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Background and Rationale

Supporting students and other clients in group environments rather than through individual counselling is about more than a strategy to manage large caseloads, although this is certainly one benefit. In group settings, participants can often learn from one another, reinforce skills, and gain deeper insights. Clients needing support with self-regulation, self-esteem, and communication, problem solving and relationship skills may be especially well-served though group work. However, many therapists have inadequate training and experience in how to work with groups, and have a narrow range of tools to use. We often rely on pre-packaged programs or other resources that are based on completing sheets and then discussing them, or on role plays. While there are many excellent resources of this type out there, and they certainly have their place, there are some drawbacks:

- Students and other clients may understand and be able to discuss the ideas, but have difficulty applying them in real-life situations (e.g. when they're actually *feeling* angry with someone else)
- They may not be tailored/responsive to the individuals who are in front of us and to situations that arise within group dynamics
- They may feel like seatwork, which is especially hard if your target group is clients who have difficulty with this and need to be more active and hands-on
- They're often not very stimulating or engaging

Experiential approaches to counselling, on the other hand, try to come closer to the often complex social and emotional situations that we face in our everyday lives. Group challenges (often called initiative tasks), games, and other activities are used and participants work through these together. Processing occurs both during the activities and after to help bring meaning and connection with "real life" to the tasks. Admittedly, these challenges are still artificial, but the emotions and problems are real. This allows for direct experience, and therefore, hopefully, for greater transference to people's lives outside the group. Here are some reasons this often works:

- Participants face actual challenges together in a safe environment, and have to problem solve, communicate, manage conflicts, and work through feeling uncertain, frustrated, etc.
- They also get to experience together the positive feelings that come from achieving a goal, mutual support, not giving up, shared socio-emotional connections and other aspects of the challenge
- The facilitator is able to observe what is happening and intervene and/or adapt the challenges as necessary right in the moment. It is important to note, though, that the momentum comes almost entirely from the group members themselves - it is not a therapist-centred approach
- The facilitator helps group members work through what happened and "connect the dots" in ways that will benefit the participants

Some guiding principles
- An icebreaker activity should still generally happen before a giving an initiative task, to get the group focused, energized, and, in some cases, beginning to think along the lines of the challenge that will follow
- As much as possible, do not help them with the tasks (unless they seem to be too difficult, and then adapt the tasks as necessary or briefly steer them in the right direction). We need to stay out of their way, to make their challenge as truly experiential as possible.
  - Adaptations could include reducing/increasing a time limit, modifying a rule/ limitation (e.g. "You can talk to each other instead of using only gestures"), making a boundary smaller or larger (with or without participants noticing), or other changes that will make for a "just right" challenge level
- When you notice someone start to get frustrated, etc., get them to name the feeling and say why. Then, help them problem solve and get back to the task as quickly as possible. If feelings were hurt, etc. do your best to briefly resolve this before moving on.
- In some cases, you may need to stop the activity and then resume it if/when ready after an issue has been addressed
- As needed, ask them if they notice what other group members are doing or feeling (e.g. someone feeling left out or quietly helping another)
- If they didn't succeed, reassure them and get them to calmly think about why. You may be able to revisit the task another time or use insights to help them with the next challenge.
- You can use the same initiative task for different purposes, depending on the needs of the group. For example, a structure-building challenge can be used to help participants manage anxiety & fear of failure, or to develop negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Your explanation, focus, and processing questions will change, but the challenge remains more or less the same.

Processing questions
Processing questions are an essential part of meaning-making in experiential education. They take an activity past just "a fun challenge", paving the path to deeper understanding and, hopefully, transference of insights gained
Follow the general framework of

  What? Look at what happened during the activity itself
  So What? Why do these things matter/what can we learn from them?
  Now What? How can we use these insights in the future?

Some sample processing questions (do not use all of these- choose two to five, depending on the age, readiness level for discussion, and goal(s) of the session):
What?
- What happened during this challenge?
- How did you feel about this activity?
- What was hard for you and why?
- What was easy and why?

So What?
- Were you most comfortable leading or following? What does this say about your personality?
- What did you yourself need to do to succeed in the task?
- How did you handle it when
  - someone else got upset?
  - you were finding it hard?
  - you made a mistake? etc.

- o What did you notice others doing that helped you succeed? What did the group need to do?
- o Tell another person something that you liked about what they did

Now What?
- o Make a suggestion that would help the group be more successful the next time/with other challenges.
- o If you were doing this task or a similar one again, what advice would you give yourself/your group?
- o What other times remind you of what happened during this activity?
- o How could you use what you did today to help you with a different problem?

Using "Direct Teaching" content

Concrete teaching of topics like basic principles of relationships, communication skills, strategies to manage anxiety or anger certainly have their place within an experiential framework. This may include role plays, worksheets focusing on these topics, group discussions, art, puppet shows, etc. Benefits may include:

- Skill development that may help equip clients to better handle situations that arise during experiential activities.
    - e.g. "We just drew pictures of some ways for people to be friendly. Try to use one of the ways when you build your tower together."
- Increased insight when they are used as post-activity teaching.
    - e.g. "Remember when Linneah dropped the ball and then someone got mad at her? That was like that Anger Monster we just talked about getting in the way of us having fun together, wasn't it? How can we keep the Monster out of our next challenge?"

                                                      or

      "You drew a shield that had things on it to protect you if you were feeling vulnerable. What elements from your shield did you use/could you have used when you all thought you were not going to be able to make it to the other side of the "river"?
- Sheets, etc. can be put together into a folder, along with a summary of activities/content from the group sessions. These can be shared with parents/guardians if appropriate, and kept to help reinforce what has been learned.

Resources

Ashby, J., Kottman, T., DeGraaf, D. (2008). *Active Interventions for Kids and Teens: Adding Adventure and Fun to Counselling!*. Alexandria, Virginia: American Counseling Association.

Learning for Life. (2013) *Problem Solving Initiative Games.*
    http://www.learningforlife.org/exploring-resources/99-720/x09.pdf

Neill, J. (2013) *Wilderdom.* http://www.wilderdom.com

Rohnke, C. (2010). *Silver Bullets: A Guide to Initiative Problems, Adventure Games, and Trust Activities.* Project Adventure.

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Two Sample Group Challenges

Bounce Pass

Group Size: 5-10   **Age:** Any 5+   **Equipment:**   Large playground-type ball
This game is played in a large circle. The object is for the group to make as many successful bounce passes as they can without fumbling the ball. The leader keeps count and the group tries to beat their own record. This task encourages working together, supportive peer behaviour, self-control, handling frustration and tenacity. It can be a good challenge early in the group; it can then be revisited later as progress is made.

Group Juggle

Group Size: 5-10   **Age:** Any 7+
Equipment: Approx. 6 small, easy to catch balls/small stuffed animals
Group members stand in a large circle. The leader tosses one ball to another person, saying, "Here you go, 'Jonathan'". 'Jonathan' says, "Thank you, Lara", and then passes it to a different person, keeping the communication going. (This matters later, when it will get more confusing). The ball keeps travelling across the circle until it finally comes back to the leader. Then, the same sequence is followed again, to make sure that people remember the passing order. Once (and if) group members can complete the passes smoothly, the leader adds in another ball, so that two are being thrown simultaneously. If and when they can manage this with little fumbling, other balls can be added one at a time (it is possible to have one ball in play for each group member, but this rarely happens). If there is a lot of fumbling, frustration, inattentiveness, etc., you may need to reduce the number of balls and see if you can then build it back up again.

Ideas for Paired Peer Skills group

These activities can be used to help pairs of students build peer relationship skills, communication and problem solving skills. Carefully chosen same-age peers can be selected (where a child needs same-age relationships and is ready for them), or an older-younger pairing (where the younger child might "steamroll" a same-age peer, and/or the older one needs the developmental buffer of a younger student). The younger student learns to work/play with someone else, and the older learns patience, empathy and problem solving. **Note:** Most of the challenges below can also be used with a larger group (usually up to eight participants).

1. Build a tower together that measures a certain height (e.g. top of table)
2. Blind Tag- one is blindfolded and has to find the other slowly moving partner by listening and carefully walking
3. Listen to and record details about what the other person likes, then make a "gift" craft for them based on what has been shared
4. Throw a ball back and forth as many times as possible without dropping it (try to better their score on successive attempts)
5. Build a scene/city, building together out of blocks/Lego
6. Make something together (plasticene, paint, etc.) where they must use the same surface (e.g. large piece of paper)
7. Take turns teaching each other how to do something simple
8. Make something together using imagination (e.g. a playground for an ant)
9. Have them make shapes together with their bodies (you tell them what to make)
10. Have them untie a knotted rope together. Tie it again (or have another rope ready with the same knots), and get them to see if they can improve their time.