

# Applying Groupwork Skills to Training

## Aims:

To introduce some groupwork concepts and approaches

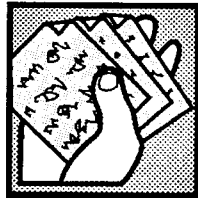
To consider the application of groupwork skills to training

## Resources required:

Training room and small group spaces; flipchart, OHP and pens

- 3.1 'Assumptions of experiential groupwork approaches' OHP transparency
  - 3.2 'Stages of group development' OHP transparency
  - 4.1 'Keyword' exercise worksheets
  - 4.2 'Groupwork Techniques' exercise worksheets
- 'Learning log' sheets

## 1 Background notes



In approaching the skills which groupwork approaches can bring to training it is useful to have an understanding of

both the universality of groups and their power. We all belong to groups. We were, most of us, born into family groups which provide much of our socialisation experiences during our early years. Many professionals from a number of disciplines will attest to the influence (both positive and negative) which early family group experiences can have on us as adults.

If we think of how we spend our everyday lives, almost all of it revolves around groups to which we belong in both the formal and informal sense. Work groups, leisure groups, friendship groups, study groups, trades union groups; all these groups have their own aims, rules, procedures and rituals even if they are not written down or recognised as such. Groups are truly universal – we all have experience of a great number of them.

Groups can be very powerful in terms of what they achieve and in the influence they exert on their members. We tend to seek out groups at times of transition or crisis, e.g. at adolescence or following a bereavement. Many youth social workers, for example, will use groupwork as a preferred method of intervention with adolescents precisely because adolescents are so peer-group oriented.

Well facilitated groups are a classic example of *synergy* – the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. It is this synergy or wholeness which the groupwork-oriented trainer is intent to help create. A group which can harness the skills of individuals in collaborative fashion and provide for their personal needs can perform complex tasks or analyses which are well beyond the skills of the individual group members. Many groups never reach this stage, but it is our belief that it is perfectly possible, even

in short-term groups, given skilled facilitation and *adequate preparation*.

There is no doubt that a training approach which draws on experiential groupwork methods can be applied with considerable impact in the areas of skills training and personal development. We have heard of many participants who have claimed to have had their lives changed or 'opened up' by an experiential learning training course. Of course the trainer would say that these participants had used the opportunities offered to them by the event to *change their lives themselves*. More than anything else, groupwork is about individual and corporate empowerment. We will address this after looking at some assumptions which underpin experiential groupwork approaches. These are taken from Bryce Taylor's excellent 'Experiential Learning – a framework for group skills' and are shown in 3.1.

- people learn most effectively when they 'own' their own learning and are involved as fully as possible in all that happens;
- knowledge is in people, in the sense that people learn most when they seek out their own responses to what happens and discover for themselves, especially in the realm of behaviour;
- commitment to learning is related to the opportunity participants have to opt-in; to share their own learning goals and pursue them within a clear framework.

These assumptions inevitably lead to a trainer or facilitator role which is all about 'drawing participants out' and encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning. The processes of personal and group empowerment which this involves will be unfamiliar and probably uncomfortable initially for participants used to more formal teaching methods or who generally operate within highly structured groups. Later Chapters will illustrate approaches to resolve these and other 'group process' issues. These issues (to do with the maintenance of relationships within the group) are distinct from the group's tasks, or learning objectives in training terms, but can thwart them if not attended to.

Training groups then, like any other, have tremendous potential for empowering people. Unfortunately, the skills involved, if lacking or if applied for the wrong ends, can cause misery or at worst psychological damage to participants. At best, groups can achieve the seemingly impossible. Fascinating evidence is now becoming available about the positive physical changes induced by participants in self-help therapeutic groups, e.g. those set up to assist cancer or AIDS sufferers.

In alternative and psychic health settings concepts of 'the healer within' or 'the pharmacy of the body' are prevalent. These suggest that the 'healer's' task is to 'unblock' the person and enable them to heal themselves. Incredible as it may seem we now have evidence that individuals

## CHAPTER 6:

working together in 'therapeutic' or psychic settings can induce physical healing processes which cannot be explained by orthodox means and appear to result from the power of thought, of compassion and of love.

The facilitation of group processes is a skilled and responsible job and many who practise it would argue that you must have your own personal and professional house in order before attempting it. Co-working approaches, discussed in Chapter 16, are one of the best ways of developing skills in groupwork and training. In both contexts the key trainer/groupworker role can be described as *preparing the group to perform*. By this we mean working with the group through its natural stages of development until it is ready to absorb, test out and evaluate the concepts and learning points the trainer has prepared.

Tuckman and others have published work on the stages of group development. These are invaluable in offering insights into the processes which occur as a group develops. However, no matter which particular model of group development you look at you'll find that the stages are not clearly differentiated and usually merge into each other. As a result the only certain thing which can be said about stages is that all groups have a beginning, a middle and an end.

Commonly accepted stages are:

**FORMING – NORMING – STORMING –  
PERFORMING – MOURNING**

It is important to recognise that groups go through most of these stages every time they meet *as well as* over the course of their lifetime. Conceptually, the stages of group development are quite similar to the cycle of experiential learning (see Chapter 2) as they both describe a cyclical process which can be used at both micro and macro levels.

Details about these stages can be found in several of the introductory groupwork texts listed in the resource materials appendix. We hope that this manual itself demonstrates cognisance of these stages in the way we have selected, ordered and presented our training structures.

Using groupwork skills in training centres on the ability to work with *processes issues* as well as with the training content. This involves close attention to group processes as they change and develop and the selection of techniques and exercises which are appropriate to the stage the group has reached.

Some of the issues and processes which arise in most groups are:

|                           |                      |                  |                 |
|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| joining                   | inclusion            | group member     | control         |
| power                     | fight                | flight           | dependence      |
| depression                | absorption           | loss             | sharing         |
| independence              | leadership           | non-threatening  | confrontation   |
| support                   | trust                | cohesion         | intimacy        |
| group culture             | norms                | sanctions        | limits          |
| personal relationships    | attractions          | stability        | scapegoat       |
| participation             | investment           | decisions        | implementation  |
| individual responsibility | group responsibility | watershed        | risk-taking     |
| real world                | self-sufficient      | problem-solving  | achieving aims  |
| enabling structure        | high cohesion        | high trust       | autonomous      |
| sadness                   | ending               | evaluation       | failure         |
| feedback                  | unfinished business  | consolidation    | achievement     |
| support systems           | links                | ritual           | role-transition |
| boundaries                | relief               | group atmosphere | disengagement   |
| anger                     | frustration          | disappointment   | membership      |
| progress                  |                      |                  |                 |

These are shown in worksheet 4.1 and provide a useful basis for discussion on the nature of each stage of group development. Worksheet 4.2 leads on from this and asks participants to list training techniques appropriate to the various stages.

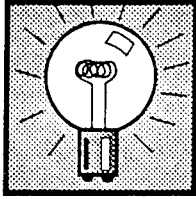
The following closing quote from Bryce Taylor outlines the nub of experiential learning and techniques:

*"Experiential learning is about generating ideas, making generalisations derived from experiences, establishing ways to test these out appropriately and evaluate the results through self*

*and peer feedback and assessment.*

*Experiential techniques provide a context in which an individual may, if he chooses, learn something which becomes part of his living reality rather than something to be remembered and applied. This means it should aim to involve more of the individual than traditional education has been used to, and take place not only at an intellectual, i.e. cognitive level, but involve emotions. Where possible it should use 'real' experiences rather than simulated ones, or generate them within the group. It should be attentive to where people are and, above all, it should be personal".*

## 2 Suggestions for using these materials



### ••• Notes

- 1 Introduce the session and its aims.
- 2 Introductory input/discussion on 'Applying groupwork skills' using the background notes (2) and OHP slides 3.1 and 3.2.
- 3 Depending on participants' existing knowledge of groupwork approaches, either:
  - run a brainstorming session to elicit their perceptions of issues and processes which arise in groups, and/or,
  - distribute copies of the 'Keywords' worksheet 4.1 for completion in pairs.

In either case, allow plenty of time for discussion in small group sessions with the aim of both flagging group processes which trainers need to be particularly attentive to, and getting a sense of the processes and 'group culture' emerging in each small group.
- 4 In plenary session, elicit and summarise learning points about the use of a groupwork perspective in training.
- 5 Short input on the application of groupwork skills drawing on the background notes (2) and OHP transparencies 9.3.1 and 2.3.2.
- 6 Distribute copies of the 'Groupwork Techniques' worksheet 4.2 for completion.
- 7 Debrief this exercise in plenary session and lead a general discussion on the use of groupwork skills and techniques.
- 8 Distribute 'Learning log'.
- 9 Close the session by reviewing its aims and making reference to future sessions if appropriate.

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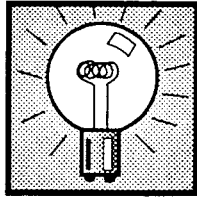
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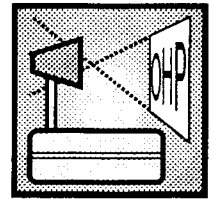
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## 3.1 OHP Transparency

# Assumptions of experiential groupwork approaches



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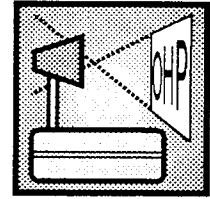
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from 'Experiential Learning - a framework for group skills' by Bryce Taylor (Oasis Publications)

**3.2 OHP Transparency**

# **Stages of group development**



**FORMING**

**STORMING**

**NORMING**

**PERFORMING**

**MOURNING**