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Advanced Training in Using Group Techniques

Jeri L. Crowell and Robert K. Conyne

Effective group leadership requires the proper use of group techniques. The necessary training for such expertise comes from a variety of resources, including experience and practice. It is not sufficient to have a theoretical knowledge of group dynamics, counseling interventions, or even the best practices of group work. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) asserted that understanding group process is challenging for leaders because it requires keen observation skills and perceptual awareness of all methods of communication, including verbal and nonverbal. Determining the appropriateness or effectiveness of a potential technique for intervention also requires keen understanding of group dynamics. Furthermore, the group's purpose drives the necessary preparation and planning for group leaders to be competent practitioners. Intentional service delivery begins with a conceptual framework from which group work design should be realized.

The Purposeful Group Techniques Model (PGTM)

Numerous variables affect a group's ability to work well and sustain itself over time, which includes the effectiveness of the group's leadership, the size, type, and level of diversity of the group, the environment in which the group is held, and even the motivation

and commitment level of the group's members. To address the many elements of effective group functioning, the Purposeful Group Techniques Model (PGTM) has been presented as a flexible conceptual model that can be adapted for use in a variety of contexts (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, 2008). In utilizing the model, group leaders consider and choose group techniques based on the type of group, the group's developmental stage, and applicable best practice guidelines, highlighting diversity and multicultural elements of the group's purpose and the group's members.

Based on ecological counseling theory, the PGTM encourages the group leader to view the group as a system of interconnections, in which members need to be supported and challenged appropriately. Six ecological concepts are utilized in the model to assist group leaders in understanding group events and guiding their choice of techniques. The concepts are: context, interconnection, collaboration, social system maintenance, meaning making, and sustainability. How these concepts enable group leaders to assess the group's functioning is developed through the PGTM's focus on understanding multiple layers of awareness, including the leader's self-awareness. In fact, through regular use of the model, group leaders can experience an increase in their understanding of self and their interactions with diverse elements of their groups' functioning. Application of the six ecological concepts that are important for group leaders to keep in mind enables the choice of group techniques to be consistent with the evolving context of the group, and enables purposeful choices that include strategies that will enhance the therapeutic conditions of the group. Focusing on the multicultural aspects of the group, in particular, is consistent with the use of the ecological model in order to find the best fit of techniques.

Anderson (2007) states that "multicultural group work represents a powerful tool for helping and healing in the context of human diversity" (p. 224). His proposed definition of multicultural group work includes what culturally sensitive group workers practice through the application of the Association for Specialists in Group

Work's *Principles for Diversity-Competent Workers* (1999), which emphasizes the leaders' commitment to understanding the unique context of members' interactions with their environments. Merchant and Butler (2002) also call for the "use of strategies and skills that have relevance to the [group member's] cultural heritage and background" (p. 314). The ecological foundation of the PGTM undergirds these critical aspects of groups as complex systems.

The fact is that "all group work is multicultural" (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, 2008, p. 49), by the very nature of its unique collection of individuals, all of whom bring differing meanings and experiences to each group's culture, or social system. The Purposeful Group Techniques Model includes five steps in which the group leader goes through a series of analyses to determine the best-fit technique which will afford the group a successful course of action. These are: (1) identify the group type and purpose, the relevant best practice area, and the developmental stage of the group at the time; (2) analyze the presenting group event by applying ecological concepts of context, interconnection, collaboration, social system, meaning making, and sustainability; (3) review possible group techniques, considering focus and level; (4) select a best-fit technique for that event that holds promise for success; and (5) implement the chosen technique and evaluate how well the technique worked.

Step 1: Identify

Beginning with the identification of basic information about the group, the leader's first step is to determine the type of group and its purpose, such as a task group with production goals, or a psychoeducation group about substance abuse in a high school. Ethical guidelines also are a significant part of group work practice, such as when the leader considers the best practice areas, identified as planning, performing and processing (Association for Specialists in Group Work, 1998). The best practice guidelines include references to ecological assessment and practice, meaning making from the group experience, and diversity competencies needed for appropriate and ethical impact upon the practice of group work.

Group leaders and those training to become group workers need to develop skills that increase their awareness and knowledge, as well as their skill levels, related to facilitating diverse groups.

Similarly, the leader needs to know the group's developmental stage to determine what level of technique intensity may be appropriate. Stage models can be complex and there are many to choose from, but for this training, three stages are identified: beginning, middle and end. In the beginning stage group members are getting established as an entity. Rules for group participation are discussed. Behavioral norms are established, with group members fitting into various roles of participation. Initially, many of the members may rely on the group leader for structure, but as the members influence the group with their individual responses, the members transition into a more productive stage. The middle stage typically lasts the longest, with an emphasis on connecting and producing. Members tend to seek connection to the group and garner more control over the process with time. The producing aspect of this stage comes through collaboration among group members and the leader, including greater interdependence among members. Trust develops when the group's environment is safe enough for members to exchange self-disclosure and feedback, which is the potent therapeutic nature of group counseling. From the working middle stage, group members consolidate their learning and experiences in the end stage. As the group comes to closure, group members and the leader forecast how the future will be changed beyond the group's experience. Facilitating such closure offers group leaders the opportunity to encourage members to demonstrate their strengths in diverse ways, such as sharing a cultural tradition or ritual.

Step 2: Analyze

The Purposeful Group Techniques Model's second step involves analyzing the immediate situation by applying six ecological concepts: context, interconnection, collaboration, social system maintenance, meaning making and sustainability. There are strategies connected with each concept. For example, for the concept of collaboration, the strategy is for leaders to choose techniques that

"Do with, rather than do to" the group's members. Another example is for context, leaders strategize what to do by "conceptualizing that context is everything". This means that a group technique is chosen because the choice is consistent with the evolving context of the group. Perhaps an intentional seating arrangement is set to define the communication patterns for group members. Such an exemplary technique to address this ecological concept comes from the authors' book's appendix (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, 2008), which is organized to address these analyses, as well as the ones to follow.

Step 3: Review

Choosing a group technique must also be guided by the dimensions of focus and level, as presented in the PGTM. The third step guides group leaders to review possible group techniques with these dimensions in mind. Within the focus dimension, techniques are organized as cognitive, affective, behavioral and structural. Examples include helping group members to explore their feelings about a situation (affective focus), or helping members by changing the group's course of interplay (structural focus). The level dimension is organized as individual, interpersonal or group. Examples of choosing a group technique at the interpersonal level is asking one member to directly address another member, or a technique at the group level might be to address the entire group with a question based upon the functioning of the whole group (*"How do you all interpret the silence that we are experiencing today?"*) Even after all of this information has been considered by the group leader, the choice of a best-fit technique remains a challenging task. Now that many of the decision-making tasks have been completed, the leader has to use professional judgment along with five evaluative criteria to make that choice. These are: appropriateness, adequacy, effectiveness, efficiency and side effects.

Step 4: Select

The five evaluative criteria in the fourth step are presented to challenge group leaders to think about sensitive elements of the groups with which they work. Weighing the many possible group

techniques from which to choose, the PGTM's thorough and comprehensive steps guide a group leader to gain familiarity and expertise in theoretical applications. Though the model itself is ecologically founded, techniques have been developed from all areas of theoretical orientation, which is why the evaluative criteria of appropriateness, for example, is so critical. Another example includes evaluating the effectiveness of the technique to consider which technique could most fully achieve the goal at the time. Again, the emphasis on training group leaders to be culturally alert enhances the model's use in training new group counselors.

Step 5: Implement & Evaluate

The last step in the model guides the group leader to embrace the practice of reflection upon technique implementation, which reinforces valuable aspects of supervision. Once a group leader chooses and implements a group technique, the opportunity exists to learn from what happens. Leaders must evaluate the group process on an ongoing basis, reflecting upon what worked, what was acceptable to the group members, if the technique fell short, and what might be needed in the future to increase the benefits? Such questions offer significant growth points for leadership development. Additionally, reflection points are provided throughout the presenters' book to provide individual group leaders with the opportunities to check their understanding of both the use of the PGTM and themselves. These points enhance classroom delivery, as well, as the model is used to teach new group leaders about the dynamic processes within group work.

The use of the Purposeful Group Techniques Model is intended to assist counselor educators in training new counselors in group work. The ecological concepts provide a sensitive foundation for understanding the multicultural elements of group work, and the use of critical incidents provides an interactive component in training to enhance students' understanding of selecting group techniques. Through use of the PGTM with the book, *Group Techniques: How to Use Them More Purposefully,* (Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, 2008) and in interactive workshops, group leaders are provided with

a pragmatic approach to responding to group events. The use of critical incidents, as adapted from Cohen and Smith (1976), provides group leaders real world examples in which they are able to examine counseling, psychoeducation, psychotherapy, and/or task groups in a way that is ecological and ethical. The PGTM framework also includes all three areas of best practices in group leadership: planning, performing and processing. By weighing the advantages and disadvantages of various group techniques, group leaders are practicing critical thinking and decision-making skills related to a sound conceptual model.
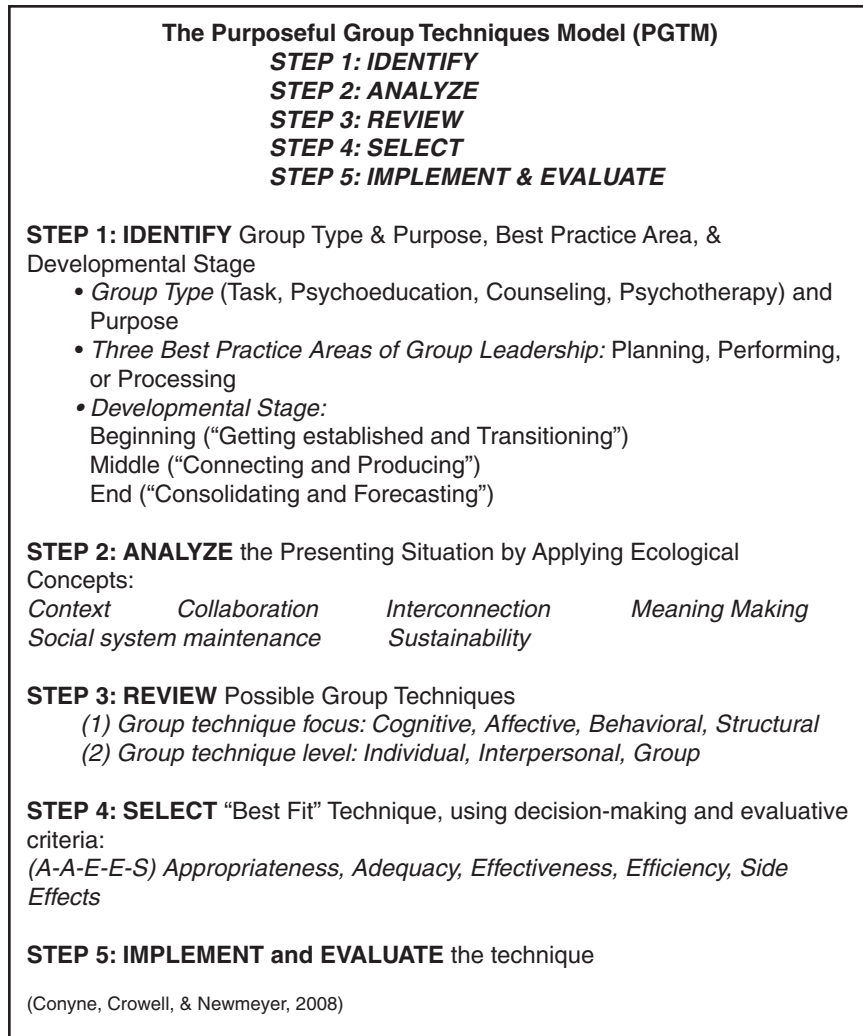
A toolbox is provided in the authors' book, which introduced the model (Conyne, Crowell & Newmeyer, 2008), supporting group leaders with ideas for various techniques that can supplement their own knowledge of options in responding to group incidents. The concept of a toolbox to organize possible group techniques offers group leaders a utilitarian collection of known interventions. As leaders develop their expertise in facilitation, however, the use of such a toolbox may not be necessary as often, or at all. Less experienced group leaders benefit from using such a toolbox, however, with concrete examples in the use of critical incidents, while developing their awareness of multiple layers of decision-making skills needed to truly be an effective group leader.

Conclusion

In summary, group leaders need to develop a positive social system within their groups, while helping members to derive meaning from their experience. In doing so, group leaders learn about themselves and experience personal insight as they intentionally apply well-honed skills developed through ongoing shaping within a decision-making practice, such as the Purposeful Group Techniques Model. Through real world critical incidents group leaders are guided through a theoretically sound process of choosing group interventions. As group work includes increasingly more diversity, the multicultural sensitivity of the ecological counseling framework

enhances the therapeutic potential of this model to guide and train group leaders in the interconnected nature and value of working in groups.

Figure 1: The Purposeful Group Techniques Model

The Purposeful Group Techniques Model (PGTM)
STEP 1: IDENTIFY
STEP 2: ANALYZE
STEP 3: REVIEW
STEP 4: SELECT
STEP 5: IMPLEMENT & EVALUATE

STEP 1: IDENTIFY Group Type & Purpose, Best Practice Area, & Developmental Stage
- *Group Type* (Task, Psychoeducation, Counseling, Psychotherapy) and Purpose
- *Three Best Practice Areas of Group Leadership:* Planning, Performing, or Processing
- *Developmental Stage:*
  Beginning ("Getting established and Transitioning")
  Middle ("Connecting and Producing")
  End ("Consolidating and Forecasting")

STEP 2: ANALYZE the Presenting Situation by Applying Ecological Concepts:
Context   Collaboration   Interconnection   Meaning Making
Social system maintenance   Sustainability

STEP 3: REVIEW Possible Group Techniques
  (1) Group technique focus: Cognitive, Affective, Behavioral, Structural
  (2) Group technique level: Individual, Interpersonal, Group

STEP 4: SELECT "Best Fit" Technique, using decision-making and evaluative criteria:
(A-A-E-E-S) Appropriateness, Adequacy, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Side Effects

STEP 5: IMPLEMENT and EVALUATE the technique

(Conyne, Crowell, & Newmeyer, 2008)

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