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Creative Arts and the Group Process

Instilling Cohesion

Judith A DeTrude

Abstract

This article describes the usage of creative arts during the group process and the advantages and disadvantages of using these exercises and activities. It explains the decision-making process involved in using creative arts, provides several samples created by graduate students in a group class, and suggests the timing of such activities. The purpose of this article is to encourage the usage of the creative arts in groups, in particular when attempting to establish greater levels of cohesion.

One of the challenges of leading a group or overseeing the group process is when to recognize that an intervention is necessary in order to foster a sense of cohesion or community in the group. Group leaders have had multiple therapeutic tools at their disposal for such interventions such as the series of Creative Therapy: 52 Exercises for Groups (Dossick and Shea, 1988) which focus on ice-breakers and exercises to energize groups. This article addresses interventions in the group process with specific reference to the creative arts and provides several samples of how the creative arts were utilized with groups of counselor education graduate students and the perceived changes in one academic semester.

Gladding (Forester-Miller & Kottler, 1993) suggests using creative arts in a group setting and explains how they can be used as therapeutic tools to access the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic senses to energize and inspire members. When utilizing creative arts in groups, the outcome is unknown, and group leaders may have to deal with unknown consequences, but Kottler (1986) suggests the creative arts can produce “mental jolts” and encourage thinking on multiple levels. Lyons (1999) also encourages creative arts in groups, because the achievement/failure of the anticipated goal leads to an opportunity for assessment and discussion of what worked or did not work and what might be changed.

Traditionally, the use of creative arts has been approached in individual or family therapy. Prescriptive metaphors are used in therapy to denote a likeness between the client or situation and the metaphoric object to provoke a perceptual change, which can facilitate problem resolution (Bubenzer et al., 1991).

These same authors (1991) support the usefulness of metaphors when therapy has slowed down and both the therapist and the clients(s) can benefit from a new perspective and varied approach.

Family therapy is also credited with the inclusion of the genogram as a means of visually portraying transgenerational information and dynamics. Creativity with genograms has been expanded to examine spiritual/religious/intimacy aspects to enable clients to connect these past influences with their current situations (Frame, 1999; Sherman, 1999). Another creative usage of the genogram is to encourage supervisees to examine their own genograms along with those of their clients and supervisors to better understand the multi-level influences upon the clinical and supervisory relationships.

Family therapy has also contributed letter writing, relabeling, and reframing as methods to help clients get “unstuck” in the therapeutic process (Brock & Barnard, 1999). These techniques are used to facilitate different means of conceptualizing problems within family systems.

There are advantages to applying similar creative arts in the group process. One is to energize the movement of the group and encourage the transition from one stage to the next until closure when members can experience a sense of accomplishment for completing the process. For counseling education students this means having a clearer understanding of what they will be asking members of groups to do when they are in the leadership role. Gladding (Forester-Miller and Kottler, 1997) sees another advantage of their usage as encouraging playfulness because the creative arts are nonthreatening.

There may also be disadvantages in using the creative arts and an example would be to implement them inappropriately without consideration for the therapeutic value in the group, but this caveat also applies when interventions are used in any kind of therapy and are ill-timed or not matched to the clients and their problems. In the ASGW's Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards Group Counselors (1992), group counselors are to be aware of the necessity to modify their techniques to fit the unique needs of various cultural and ethnic groups, and group counselors are able to provide a rationale for the interventions they use.

Gladding (1999) addresses the importance of diverse experiences being offered to group leaders in training. Demonstrating how to effectively implement new techniques such as the creative arts can encourage counselor education trainees in adapting similar techniques when they are in the leadership role.

This article addresses specific experiences when the creative arts were used in a group counseling course within a counselor education program. This graduate class in group counseling is comprised of a combination lecture/experiential format. In the first half of each class meeting, the professor lectures, creates demonstrations of group skills, introduces segments of videos, etc. The second half of the class consists of students participating in actual groups in which they experience the group process. The leaders of these groups are usually students at the end of the degree program or graduates of the counseling program who are working on licensure hours. It is the professor's responsibility to screen group members and leaders to ensure that dual relationships will not be created with this particular configuration.

At the conclusion of each group meeting, the students write a reaction paper that is divided into three parts. They describe their role in the group meeting, their observations of what the leader(s) did during that meeting, and the third part is their description of the group process observed during that meeting. These reaction papers are e-mailed to the professor or dropped off in time for feedback comments before the next group meeting. Guidelines for these reactions are carefully explained and include eliminating any referrals to a specific group member or to the content of the group meeting.

During one particular semester, the common theme of the reaction papers focused on members feeling stuck in the group process, doubting that cohesion could be established. It was at this time that a decision was made to implement the usage of creative arts to build cohesion in these groups or at least to encourage the members in believing that cohesion was a possibility.

In place of the individual weekly reaction papers, an assignment given to the groups was to either create an entirely new song or change the wording to an established song that described where the group members thought they were in the group process. The song was to be completed and audiotaped during the experiential component of the class and members had to work together to select the song and then decide how to organize themselves for the taping. The class members asked for more specifics on this assignment, but instructions were purposely omitted in order to permit the members to work as team in finding a solution for their finished product. The moans and groans from the class were clearly audible when the assignment was given. Students complained that they could not sing, had no musical ability, etc. These songs were audiotaped for the instructor to review before the next class in the same manner as a reaction paper. The songs

created were mostly comical, but each group made the decision independently of the other groups on how to proceed with this assignment. There was nothing on the tapes that would breach confidentiality, so the members gave permission during the next class for the songs to be played for the entire class. The students joked about their musical creations and were excited to hear what their peers had done in the other groups.

The success of this assignment for these groups far exceeded any original expectations. One creative exercise developed a foundation for these groups that helped them get “unstuck” and also facilitated the understanding that the members could reach a productive level of group work. An unexpected ancillary effect was the cohesion that developed in the class as a whole. Listening to all the songs broke a barrier for this class and helped the students relax in the lecture/didactic portion also.

The songs created by these groups follow:

Song One

First Verse

We'll be forming around the mountain when we come

We'll be forming around the mountain when we come

We are forming till we're storming

And hopefully we will be norming

We are forming around the mountain when we come.

Second Verse

We'll be building our cohesion when we come

We'll be building our cohesion when we come

We are forming till we're storming

And hopefully we will be norming

We'll be building our cohesion when we come.

Third Verse

We are promoting drawing out when we come

We are promoting drawing out when we come

We are forming till we're storming

And hopefully we will be norming

We are promoting drawing out when we come.

Fourth Verse

We are linking things in common when we come

We are linking things in common when we come

We are forming till we're storming

And hopefully we will be norming

We are linking things in common when we come.

Fifth Verse

We are forming till we're storming

And hopefully we will be norming

And termination will come when it comes

And I'm not talking about "Arnold Schwarzenegger."

Song Two

First Verse

We'd like to say our names

Yes, we would

We'd like to say our names

Yes, we would

We'd like to say our names

Yes, we would

But we can't

Because of "confidentiality."

Second Verse

We've got some good cohesion

Yes, we do.

We've got some good cohesion

Yes, we do.

We've got some good cohesion

Yes, we do

We really like each other a lot.

Song Three

Twinkle twinkle little group how we're learning what we are

Up above the second floor we'll be bonding more and more.

Twinkle twinkle little group what will be our next week's scoop?

Song Four

First Verse

Here's a story of six women who are working very hard to reach a goal

Four of them are married and two are single

And they are not old.

Second Verse

And then one day they were given an assignment to tell where they were in group process

Although they differed in some stuff, like jobs and babies

They knew they all had stress.

This song is from the group in the forming stage and we are becoming an empowered group.

This same assignment was given to the students in the group class during the next semester and was not nearly as successful which tends to emphasize the rules of when and how to use techniques. The creative exercises have to match the experiences of the individual groups and cannot be imposed upon groups that are not experiencing issues for which these exercises might help. This experience does help to convince the author that using the creative arts in group work can be valuable, but the creative arts experience may not generalize to all groups.

A second creative exercise used with these same groups was asking each member to individually write a poem for the weekly reaction paper which was to reflect how the member was integrating his/her role in the group process. This was an intervention with the same

semester group class that successfully utilized songs to increase cohesion. At first members were hesitant about their poetry skills, but their finished products indicated a level of commitment in trying to express themselves in a different medium.

Several samples of these poems follow:

Riding the Storm

Struggling and storming and feeling our way

our group gropes for common ground each day.

As awkwardness begins to melt into the past

we see ourselves transcend to the next stage at last.

Tension, tension! Oh, when will it end

so we can begin work that will help us mend?

We've dealt with anxiety, reviewed contracts and goals,

discussed confidentiality, and identified our roles.

Opening, structuring, joining, and linking

are just a few tasks that have challenged our thinking.

Now we are ready to move on to new junctures

And tackle the demons that threaten our lives.

Resisting prevents meeting our goals

and keeps us away from exploring our souls.

Avoiding discussions, questioning control,

focusing on others helps keep our group on hold.

Monopolizing the conversation

With issues facing our nation

Oh, why can we not all see

this hinders growth for you and me.

Intellectualizing and abstracting takes the focus off us

and prevents the group from moving onto issues of trust.

Giving advice and rushing to one's aide

keep members helpless and causes cohesion to fade.

Neutral-third parties can observe and suggest

what we can do to resolve conflicts best.

But dealing with and acknowledging the hostility that exists

allows us to be realistic and puts our goals to the test.

Gaining new perspectives, learning to trust,

taking responsibility for our group is a must.

Making it through the period of storming

will create stability and surely, lead us to norming.

Group

In the beginning

I am me, you are you, and there is no we.

I turn to you and open my heart, mind,

and my soul, as you open yours.

I share, I discover, I cry, I laugh, and

I listen to you.

Soon, you and I are more than each alone,

and when each parts from one another,

I take some of you with me and you take

some of me with you,

And each is forever changed.

Yet, together we have created something apart

from you and I, and though changed forever,

No matter large or small, I still have me

and you still have you.

We can take with us that which we like and

kiss the rest goodbye.

We will remember that once, we were part of

something bigger, something more...group.

Sana Sana

Sana, sana

colita de rana,

Si no hanas hoy

sanaras manana.

Sana, sana

frog tail is in sorrow.

If I rub today

you'll be healed tomorrow.

***This is a Hispanic healing rhyme that we sing that is legend to have magic healing power. You sing this rhyme while rubbing in a circular motion the place that hurts and recite the rhyme several times. The injured person will soon feel better. I always feel better and good about myself when I leave our sessions, which is a similar feeling that is supposed to occur when this rhyme is sung.*

The Dance

We share,

we speak,

we listen.

We nod,

we smile,

we laugh.

We question,

we encourage,

we suggest.

We dance.

We dance around, around, and around,

avoiding,

seeking,
opening,
closing.

looking for direction.

We dance.

We dance closer,

ten much farther,

holding our breath

for the moment which cannot

be put off....

Our dance must end.

The unknown lurks.

We dance.

In writing these poems the members of the groups stated that they had to step back and analyze their group membership role and interactions with others. Even though the counseling students created the poems independently, their writing indicates their awareness of what is necessary for them as individuals and collectively as the group to move through the group process and establish cohesion within their groups. The poems continue to be a semester assignment, but the timing of the assignment coincides with the professor's perception of any struggles the groups may be experiencing in moving through the storming or transition period or if this creative exercise could be more helpful in asking the students to review their overall group

experience. It is the professional experience of this author that the usage of the creative arts has proven to be more effective during the transition period, but it may also be useful to determine the timing of the intervention by analyzing the reaction papers and having a sense when group members might need a gentle “push” to give them confidence in their ability to have a successful experience as a member of a group.

As presented earlier in this article, Lyons (1999) views the success/failure of using creative arts as an overall learning experience for the group members and a foundation for discussing any difficulties students may encounter in trying to organize their thoughts about their observations and experiences in the group process. This seems to describe the learning process that took place during the semester activities discussed in this article because the creativity of the activity was much less important than the process that the students experienced while trying to create a finished product. In this way, a failure would only occur if students did not even attempt to express themselves through this medium.

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