

Great Conversations in Social Work: Using Groupwork to Promote Inclusive Dialogue and Collective Action Around Social Justice

Final Project Report

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Project Description

“Great Conversations in Social Work” reflected a year-long effort aimed at providing opportunities for inclusive dialogue, mutual aid, and collective action around social work and social justice at New Mexico State University. Through this project, faculty and a community partner facilitated four group sessions for students, faculty and community social workers in exploring aspects of social justice in the current socio-political environment. Sessions utilized a model centered on dialogue and collective action to probe central themes including social justice and democracy and social justice in health. These sessions were intended to build self-awareness and understanding of the ethical principal of social justice as it relates to social work among participants. More importantly, participants experienced a model of group work which relies on collaborative dialogue to build mutual understanding and lay a foundation for collective action.

Experiences and Outcomes

We initiated this project in response to the deep need for community, mutual understanding, and mutual support that we saw arise in reaction to the 2016 elections. We were able to fulfil our intended aims of offering four community dialogues and engaging students, faculty and other community members around issues of social justice. Over the course of four dialogues, 32 individuals engaged in these groups with 19 individuals attending the first dialogue and 6 or fewer attending subsequent offerings. Participants provided rating the following statements from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Percent of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with each is indicated below.

- 1) This experience has shaped my understanding of social justice. (76%)
- 2) This experience has allowed me deeper understanding of the perspectives of other participants. (76%)
- 3) This experience has exposed me to a meaningful model of work with groups. (72%)
- 4) I would recommend this experience or one like it to others. (81%)

Interestingly 3-4 participants strongly disagreed with all statements. It would have been helpful to understand their experience in more detail although these individuals did not leave open-ended comments.

Participants were also asked to offer any open-ended feedback they wished in response to these questions. The most commonly reflected theme was the challenges people faced with just listening and their desire to learn to “listen more”. Others expressed a desire for more diversity of perspectives to be represented, with one individual stating “Only certain people will attend something that’s called a dialogue on social justice”. This feedback was highly instructive to us as facilitators.

As these numbers reflect, participants generally found these to be meaningful, positive experiences that they would recommend to others. As these numbers also reflect, the level of participation in these dialogues was lower than we had hoped. Simply getting people “to the table” turned out to be one of the key challenges of this project. This challenge is also reflective of the critical lessons learned as we did this work.

Lessons Learned and Implications

One of the most exciting lessons we learned was the hunger for this type of dialogue that we found outside the social work community. Because we advertised our dialogues to social work courses which students in other majors take as electives and within our college which also houses nursing and public health students, we were excited by the participation from students in these fields. For them, this was a unique opportunity beyond what they typically receive in their courses. Furthermore, their participation provided new depth and dimension to the dialogue among social work students as they heard new perspectives and questions about justice-oriented issues.

As noted in outcomes, the central challenge we discovered was getting people to attend these dialogues. While it is always a challenge to work around personal schedules and make “extra” events like these worthwhile, informal discussions with students about why they did or did not attend revealed that the lack of participation went beyond being busy. In fact, one of the key lessons learned for us in terms of using groupwork as a tool for mutual support and collaborative action is that the actions we take in bringing people to the group are as important as what happens in the group.

Our approach to recruitment was fairly straightforward: fliers, announcements, personal invitations etc. One student pointed out to us, however, “You know there are only certain types of people who are going to show up at a dialogue about ‘social justice’”. This statement was transformational in our understanding of what it means to facilitate groups. It highlights the reality that the process of group formation begins before people come together and that the foundations for mutual support and interaction are laid before the group begins.

As we seek to continue the dialogues that this project started, we are keenly interested in how we communicate the purpose of groups and what we can do to encourage people to come to the table. We know the experience they have once they get there is often transformative. However, in times of fear and uncertainty, people are hesitant to be seen and often fear what it might mean to attend or speak in a group. Finding ways to address these fears and support people before they arrive are our next steps forward. We believe that these insights are also critical for others seeking to use groupwork as a tool for healing in challenging times and look forward to more work which offers insight into the dynamics of group formation in communities impacted by fear and division.

We hope to use what we have learned and accomplished through this project in several ways. We are currently in the process of submitting a manuscript to the journal *groupwork* which explores the idea of trauma-informed group engagement in an effort to respond to the challenges we had

with group formation and engagement. We have formalized our efforts to provide open spaces for dialogue to the social work community through the implementation of bi-annual town halls and have worked to integrate these types of opportunities into our own curriculum. We are currently considering how we can share our learning regarding the integration of trauma-informed care into group formation and engagement with community partners (such as “The Great Conversation Las Cruces”) to support the work they are already doing in the community and plan on using these tools to facilitate a series of student groups in advance of our student legislative advocacy day in 2019.