Interpersonal Classroom Model: Learning from diversity in group practice courses

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***Abstract**: The Interpersonal Classroom Model (ICM) is a teaching approach designed for group practice courses. The ICM places development of interpersonal communication skills as the central focus of in-class time. Guided by Kolb's experiential learning theory, this teaching approach posits that students can prepare to work with diverse client populations by first learning to communicate across lines of social identity difference existing within the classroom. This paper presents three examples of social identity dialogues students engaged in during ICM group practice courses. These examples include the topics of race, religion, and sexual orientation. This paper concludes with initial benefits of the ICM approach reported by professors and undergraduate students.*

***Keywords**: group work; interpersonal classroom model; race; religion; sexual orientation; groupwork*

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> As we demonstrate to our clients our humanness, vulnerability, willingness to risk, spontaneity, honesty, and lack of defensiveness (or defensiveness for which we later apologize), we model the very behaviors we hope to see in our clients. (Shulman, 2009, p. 33)

Introduction

'Let's put our desks in a circle,' I told my students as I walked into the classroom on the first day of the semester. As they began moving their desks, one student asked, 'are we going to sit in a circle every time?' 'Yes,' I responded. Before I reviewed course expectations, assignments, and schedule for the semester, I talked to my students about the importance of sitting in a circle. 'Organizing our desks this way places us at equal distance from the center of the room and allows us to see every other person, regardless of where we sit in the circle.'

The first day of class is the most important one because it is the day my students and I begin to create a safe environment; one where students feel safe to express their opinions yet open to hearing responses from others. My primary mission is to create an environment where students can develop skills needed to work with clients from diverse cultures and backgrounds.

When I first taught an undergraduate group practice course, I became aware of challenges my students faced as they developed communication skills important for group leadership. My students struggled to share and listen to other students' experiences related to social identity membership such as race, religion, and sexual orientation. While these topics remain taboo in most arenas of daily life, a cohesive classroom environment allows students to openly explore them. In casual conversations, many might avoid talking about social identities out of fear of saying something offensive or not appearing knowledgeable to others. A safe classroom environment allows students to trust that others will listen to them and respond respectfully when they speak.

I am a licensed clinical social worker with experience leading process groups for clients. Interpersonal communication is a primary focus of my groups. As a group facilitator, I employed groupwork as a training mechanism to support my clients as they learned to communicate across lines of identity difference, for example race, religion, and

sexual orientation. My desire to understand how individuals effectively communicate across lines of difference and to prepare future social workers to support clients in this endeavor, informed my decision to pursue a doctoral degree.

As a doctoral student, I began teaching required group practice courses for undergraduate students at The University of Texas at Austin in the School of Social Work. As an assistant professor, I currently teach group practice within an elective course for undergraduate students in the Department of Social Work at Texas Christian University. Class meetings occur at a frequency of either two times per week for one and a half hours, or once a week for three hours during a 16-week semester. There is an average of 15 students attending each class meeting. The course is primarily comprised of senior undergraduate students, yet occasionally junior students also elect to take the course. As a result, most of these students learn group practice methods the year before they graduate from the university and begin working as licensed social workers.

The Interpersonal Classroom Model

To provide an open and safe classroom environment for my students, I created a new teaching approach called the Interpersonal Classroom Model (ICM). The ICM is guided by experiential learning theory, which defines learning as the process of acquiring knowledge through the 'transformation of experience' (Kolb, 2015, p. 49). Kolb's theory posits that learning occurs through a cycle of four modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. The ICM follows Kolb's experiential learning cycle explicitly. Each week, students engage in an experiential group opportunity (concrete experience), complete an online reflection journal entry (reflective observation), learn to apply group practice principles to classroom experiences (abstract conceptualization), and set new goals for their next experiential group opportunity (active experimentation). This ongoing cycle allows students to track their personal skill development over the duration of a semester, while also allowing the instructor to respond to individual student learning needs in real time.

Here is a brief overview of the ICM approach adapted for a group

practice courses taught twice a week on Mondays and Wednesdays. On Monday students learn course content and on Wednesday students engage in an experiential demonstration group. After a Monday discussion about the skills 'active listening' and 'offering feedback,' students then practice these skills in a Wednesday demonstration group where they sit in a circle and engage in dialogue. In an open format, students are encouraged to select conversation topics that are related to course content and appropriate for class. The instructor's role is to facilitate dialogue while making observations regarding areas of individual and group improvement. After class on Wednesday, each student completes a journal entry describing their individual experiences during the demonstration group. The instructor reads each journal entry to prepare course content for the following week.

The ICM teaching approach places interpersonal skill development as the central focus of classroom instruction. It provides opportunities for social work students to learn from the diversity of other students before working with diverse clients in professional settings. The ICM approach allows me to support students as they learn to communicate across lines of difference, in a variety of social identity contexts. Here are three examples of diversity conversations occurring within undergraduate group practice courses shaped by the ICM approach.

Example 1: Race

Within a cohesive and safe classroom environment, students can share race-related experiences and ask questions they would otherwise not be willing to ask. Mid-semester, I gave my students a handout with a list of social identities. I told them to review the list and think of one time they experienced privilege and one time they experienced marginalization relating to specific social identities. The following week students broke off into pairs and shared their experiences with each other. After students completed this exercise, they engaged in an open dialogue on the topic of racial identity. Of the 20 students in this class, there were six African Americans, three Asian Americans, five Latinx Americans, and six European Americans. The racial diversity existing within the classroom created an opportunity for students to hear from other students representing diverse racial identity categories. Mary, an African American woman, spoke first about her racial identity.

She opened up about her frustration with the current national focus on violence against women without a greater acknowledgment of violence towards racial minorities. Looking around the room, I saw her comments resonate with others.

After Mary spoke, there was only a moment of silence before Deanna, an African American woman, said she shared the same frustration. As I listened to both women converse, I panned the room paying attention to the facial expressions of the other students. I noticed Sarah, a European American woman, on the verge of making a comment so I invited her to join the conversation. She asked Deanna about black student clubs on campus and if she could attend. Sarah acknowledged she did not know what campus life was like for African American students.

After Sarah spoke, others also voiced having limited awareness of racial identity experiences different from their own. As I listened to the words of each student, I noticed a teaching opportunity present itself. My students sincerely wanted to ask each other questions, yet some seemed fearful to say anything that might reveal a lack of awareness on their part. I encouraged my students not to assume that individuals with the same racial identity share the same identity related experiences or can speak for each other. This opened a new conversation topic: how to ask future social work clients about their experiences in a non-assuming manner.

During this conversation, I felt inspired by the maturity my students demonstrated. They balanced sincerity and curiosity as they asked and answered race-related questions of each other. The interaction between Mary, Deanna, and Sarah created an open atmosphere for other students to join the conversation. The class witnessed these students support one another, allowing each student to trust they would also receive the same support. The ICM is designed to create this type of open atmosphere. At times disagreement occurred, yet these students seemed to trust that their classmates would listen to them even if they did not share their same opinions or perspective.

After the in-class dialogue, I read each student's reflection journal entry. Mary wrote about the challenges she faced by introducing a topic she was 'too nervous or uncomfortable to bring up.' It interested me that although she was nervous, she still took the risk of speaking in class. She set an example that appeared to inspire Deanna to join her. Deanna wrote that she 'was really happy Mary brought the topic up about her

frustrations' because she shared the same frustrations. It seemed as if Mary's remarks also motivated Sarah to speak up as well. Like Mary, Sarah also wrote that she felt 'slightly uncomfortable' speaking about the topic of race in class. While Sarah questioned whether her contribution to the conversation mattered, Deanna wrote that she commended Sarah for 'taking a risk and being self-aware and curious.'

After witnessing these classroom conversations and reading student reflection journal entries, I noticed how interpersonal dialogues on the topic of diverse social identities can lead to new learning opportunities for students which are less likely within a traditional lecture format. Students not only engaged in the topic, but also learned from the experiences and perspectives of their fellow classmates. Witnessing these student interactions increased my awareness of the spectrum of experiences occurring within one diversity related conversation.

Example 2: Religion

Students may not know about their classmates' religious identities unless they voluntarily share them. This presented a challenge of how to discuss religion while maintaining sensitivity towards others' beliefs. I want my students to learn how to maintain sensitivity while discussing religious identities. Early in the semester, I noticed Marcus, a self-identified Christian man, regularly wearing shirts promoting his faith. I also observed Riley, a self-identified atheist woman, wearing a shirt with the image of Charles Darwin. As weeks went by, I wondered if these students would comment on each other's shirt representing a distinct religious perspective.

One week, a student asked about how to respond when disagreement occurs between group members. She brought up the example of members with diverse religious views. Marcus responded to the student's question stating that he appreciates hearing from others with diverse religious backgrounds. Riley responded to Marcus by disclosing that she was an atheist, telling him every time he spoke about his faith it made her feel self-conscious. She recalled a comment he made about people being distant from God and how it sounded as if he was describing her.

Marcus said he spoke about his faith openly because he was grateful for it and wanted to share it with others. Riley mentioned that she didn't want to believe negative stereotypes she heard from her friends about

Christian students on campus. Marcus said he also remained cautious before buying into stereotypes he heard about atheists from fellow Christian students.

What initially manifested as opposing religious views led to a lively dialogue between these two students. I noticed the rest of the students listening and learning from their interaction. They witnessed these two students focus more on hearing each other's views than defending their own.

Riley and Marcus taught me that students have the capacity to build understanding across the dividing lines of identity without devaluing the other's identity or discarding their own. I witnessed these students develop mutual empathy and build common ground with each other. At the end of the semester, it seemed as if both students gained understanding for each other in a manner that transcended basic tolerance, leading to mutual respect and greater appreciation.

At the end of the semester, Riley told Marcus she appreciated the understanding she gained from him when he spoke about his beliefs. Marcus told Riley his conversations with her expanded his awareness of what it means to be atheist and how it was different from what he previously thought. In his final reflection journal entry, Marcus wrote that he and Riley built a 'bridge' founded in 'a sense of acceptance and respect despite one another's differences.'

Example 3: Sexual Orientation

Like religious identities, students are often not aware of the diversity of sexual orientations existing within the classroom. One day, several students voiced interest in leading women-only groups in the future. During this conversation, we discussed the topic of sexual orientation as it relates to leading a group of diverse female clients. Many contributed to the conversation including Janet, who openly identified as lesbian. Janet wrote in a previous reflection journal entry she assumes 'others might not like gay people and therefore shut me out.' I noticed Janet proceed with caution regarding the comments she shared with others.

Hailey, who also identified as lesbian, voluntarily disclosed her sexual orientation to the class. After Hailey spoke I noticed a surprised look on Janet's face. Hailey mentioned being 'out' in other social circles and wanting to share this information with her peers in the class.

Other students voiced their appreciation for her courage. When Janet witnessed other students' reactions to Hailey, she brightened. I used this opportunity to tell my students that it is important to withhold assumptions about other people's sexual identities and to avoid heteronormative expectations for future clients. The other students voiced support for Hailey and the courage she demonstrated with her words. Later that week, Janet wrote in her reflection journal that she appreciated when Hailey came out to the class. Janet gained appreciation for the importance of maintaining some uncertainty in her interaction with others, especially those she perceives as different from herself. My students learned how quickly personal perceptions can be challenged by the next comment they hear. Janet and her classmates learned to explore and appreciate differences and to never rule out the possibility of discovering surprising similarities.

On the final day of class, I encouraged each student to speak briefly about what they learned from our semester-long demonstration group. Hailey thanked the class for accepting her. In her final reflection journal entry, she wrote that she learned 'the importance of courage and being genuine' and that the course 'gifted me the opportunity to actually hear real perspectives and gain insights different from my own.' Hailey's account highlights the primary reason I developed the ICM teaching approach: to create an open environment where students can learn from the diversity existing within the classroom. Hailey wrote that 'the group experience personally was definitely much more educational than any book or lecture.' Using the ICM allowed me to create opportunities for Hailey and others to learn from firsthand experience.

Conclusion

These classroom examples further confirm to me the learning opportunities group practice courses offer to social work university students. So far, the ICM approach has demonstrated preliminary effectiveness as a teaching approach with benefits for social work students and instructors. For example, after employing the ICM in my group practice courses, other social work instructors began using the ICM in their group practice courses as well. One instructor reported that she gained new perspective on how differently each of her students

experienced the time they shared together in class. Another instructor reported that she noticed an increase in her students' communication skills between the first and last week of the semester.

Students also reported benefiting from their participation in an ICM structured group practice course. For example, one student reported gaining insight regarding how his interactions outside of class influenced his interactions with students in class. Another reported an increase of confidence in her ability to speak with others, including her ability to discuss difficult subjects.

I have only pilot tested the ICM approach in undergraduate level group practice courses. Future studies can pilot test the ICM in graduate level group practice courses and within other types of social work courses. Group practice classes offer students an open environment to learn and develop vital practice skills. As Lawrence Shulman said, 'we model the very behaviors we hope to see in our clients.' Using the ICM approach allows me to model for my students the values and skills I hope they will, one day, model for their future social work clients.

References

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