

GROUPWORK

The use and purpose of activities

Groups exist for all sorts of reasons of course. The types of groups I am talking about here are those that aim to be useful to participants in some developmental way, possibly a healing way, help people deal with stress and distress, help them start to realise their hopes and dreams.

Groupwork like this is basically a process of change, and as such seeks to offer those who enter it the possibility that their lives might in some way be different; better. Group work is about adding something to the lives of those who participate in that group. It is about learning, or change, growth, development. This can be particularly important for someone in difficulty or distress, and the group process seeks to offer this person some path or direction that they might be able to explore, some experience which challenges the inevitability of an unchanged and difficult future, some experience and hope that the future and they within it, can be more uplifted, more optimistic, more meaningful. These are only words I know, but a group experience can fill them with meaning.

Groupwork activities can assist in this aim. While they can be used for any number of specific purposes, as they are described here, they seek to address one of two fundamental purposes throughout the group process. Without being too romantic or claiming too much for the activities outlined here, they can, individually or collectively be extremely useful in aiding these two fundamental purposes:

- Inviting a person into a process. That is, '**engagement**'
- And within that process, attempting to create for them, a new experience. That is, one of '**difference.**'

Engagement

Engagement is about inviting people to 'connect' with a process. Part of this is to come to know and have confidence in the group facilitator and the group process. Sometimes this needs to happen also with other members of the group; but most importantly people come to trust that the process:

- Is interesting
- Is respectful of them
- Has something to offer them.

Difference: to create/offer a new experience

A person might do something they have not done before, be asked a question or ask a question they have not previously considered, be adventurous when normally seek safety, act generously when normally not so, experience an emotion thought unavailable to them, laugh when they thought themselves beyond joy. Such experiences suggest, however faintly, that life can be different; that change is possible, that a new future can be chosen.

The possibility of change in life is at least hinted at because people are:

- Having new and unusual experiences
- Experiencing themselves as somewhat different people.

Interactive Activities-a warning

Activities in work in groups or with individuals, can be extremely useful, invigorating, touching and even liberating. They can also be irritating, embarrassing, disturbing or counter-productive. It's also useful to think less in terms of 'ice-breakers' and more in terms of: 'What do we need to do in this group now? What will help create the right feeling, atmosphere, relationships...to do that? And with all activities, it depends on how and when you use them, who with, and all the subtleties of language, humour and delivery that go with the activities.

Tools of the process not the process itself

Activities are not something in themselves. They are used to advance a process in some way, to create a feel or introduce an idea to be explored. They can often be quite short and quite simple. They are tools of a process and not the process itself. How and when they are used is important. They are deliberate strategies of a process, seeking to contribute something at differing moments within it. Having said all this, there is no reason why they cannot also be fun, joyful and full of humour where appropriate,

Why use activities?

- They can offer people a way to comment
- For some, activities make it possible for them to respond, whereas they otherwise could not
- They can help responses be more meaningful
- They can give the non-verbal people a 'voice'
- They can be creative, and hence interesting
- They can be playful, a little fun, yet address serious content.

Using Activities

There are of course, no hard and fast rules about the use of activities in the process of learning. But which ones are used, and how they are used, is extremely important. The following may be useful to you to bear in mind when selecting or developing activities for groups.

Purpose

All activities need to be done for a purpose. Even if the activity is to help people 'wake up' after lunch, it saves time and keeps people focused on why they are there, if the activity relates to the purpose for which people are present.

What purpose?

While activities are done for a purpose, and sometimes to make a point, they can also be powerful tools for helping people explore who they are and the lives they lead. And with intention, more often than not, they do not seek to elicit set responses. The purpose is to elicit people's thoughts and feelings about an issue; and hopefully in an intriguing way.

Appropriate length and complexity

It is important that an activity does not become so long or complicated that these factors take over from its purpose. The purpose is not the activity; the activity is to aid the purpose. They are a vehicle to help develop a process; to help people in some way to learn, to grow, to experience certain emotions, to experience something in relationship to another person, to experience themselves in some new way.

When to introduce the purpose of an activity?

The purpose of an activity can be explained before or after it is presented. Which of these will be appropriate will depend on the purpose. However, people will need to know enough so that they will feel inclined to participate.

This means:

- Feeling safe, that is, that nothing embarrassing nor hurtful will happen
- Feeling confident that the activity has purpose
- Feeling sufficiently interested in the process to participate.

Presenting in multiple styles

It makes sense to present in ways which take into account different learning styles and have multiple aspects to them. These would include the visual, touch, sound, verbal and non-verbal and physical, as well as more reflective aspects.

Inviting responses in many styles

Similarly to the above, it is important that people are able to respond in ways which fit for them. Some people for example are verbal, others less so. Some will respond in quite practical ways, others will be more abstract. And I include in this, the possibility of maintaining privacy. That people can be fully part of an activity but keep their responses unvoiced, private.

Safety and challenge

People do need to know that nothing awful will happen to them, and that they will not be asked to do anything beyond them or which they really do not wish to do. It is equally important that activities often need to be exciting and challenging. People's lives can be richer if they are able to extend themselves; to learn, to have new experiences of thought and emotion.

Playfulness

While activities need often to address serious issues, they may still be playful. In fact, if done sensitively, this playfulness can often help painful issues become more manageable.

Playful, not 'foolish'

'Playful' however, does not mean 'foolish'. People will need to feel that the activity has purpose and dignity.

Does the facilitator participate or offer an opinion?

Whether the facilitator gives their response to an activity will depend to a large extent on the impact that this might have on the process. If doing so will reduce the presenter's capacity to facilitate the process then it is unwise to do so. On the other hand, if

responding seems an important aspect of a sense of mutuality in the process, then to contribute one's own response may well be the most appropriate thing to do.

Incorporating responses

The purpose of an activity is to invite responses. With the larger purpose of the group in mind, these responses need to be incorporated in some way, be taken into account, in the rest of the process. This in part, is the purpose of inviting responses; to guide what content, or emphasis, the facilitator will then take up next.

Personal style

A facilitator does have a specific role in a group, and does need to maintain an appropriate and useful 'boundary' so that they are able to facilitate. At the same time, group process can be a profoundly intimate and personal process for all involved in them. This is as true for the facilitator as it is for other group members. Consequently, a facilitator's style and delivery, language, timing, sense of humour and personality, are integral elements of the process and inseparable from it.

What follows?

Often a critical part of an activity, is what follows it; the discussion, and unique questions which can be explored because the activity has created the moment to do so, or the reflection. Activities are rarely a 'thing in themselves'. Often they start to establish a process within which ideas can be examined, issues or concerns explored, new experiences ventured into.

Some reasons why activities fail

- Not experienced as relevant. 'What's this got to do me?'
- Poorly timed
- Embarrassing! As opposed to 'fun' and 'playful'
- Without meaning. 'Why am I doing this?' 'This is pointless!'
- Intrusive or disturbing; getting at emotional 'stuff' we have no right to for this group, or in a way which is not useful or too disturbing
- Insulting. As opposed to 'insightful'. For instance, by demonstrating that a person is a poor listener, or that they are unkind to others.

Some things which help them succeed

- Ensuring that the issue raised is relevant
- Ensuring that an activity can be responded to
(If you ask a person if they would prefer to fight with a person verbally or physically may make it pretty hard for some people to respond at all!)
- Instructions:
 - Do need to be clear
 - Can suffer from too many negatives. Saying something like: 'Those who do not disagree that it is a bad idea to not argue with friends, please stand over here' ...tends to confuse!
 - Usually say them 3 times. Yes. That's 3 times!
- The 'offer' to participate needs to have a tone, a style, an energy, a wording and body language, which says to people: 'Jump in, be part of it! It might be fun'. Or: 'It might be difficult, but perhaps also useful'

- The wording and tone need also to suggest that we know that this is a person's response here today, right now. They are not necessarily locked into this response forever
- It helps some people to know that they will have a chance to discuss their responses more fully a little later if they wish
- Equally, it sometimes helps if people know they can keep things to themselves and will NOT be asked to discuss anything at all
- And possibly the most important; the activity needs to be fun, interesting, intriguing, stimulating...all of these!

Have fun.

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