

Student perceptions of the emotional and academic outcomes of participation in a group process module¹

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Abstract

Literature suggests that collaborative group work is conducive to productive learning. However a growing sense of uncertainty about the academic value of an undergraduate module that made use of group work led to the desire to gauge more fully students' perceptions of this way of learning. An interpretive methodology, using a focus group and questionnaires, was employed to address the question. The importance of the maintenance of trusting relationships between the students, and between the student and tutor emerged strongly, along with the positive value of a clear and explicit direction for the group. A model for thinking about how to structure and frame such groups and how to position oneself as a tutor within such groups is proposed in response to the findings. The author concludes that paying attention to the relationship between educators and learners is vitally important within the context of group-based teaching and learning.

Keywords: group-based learning, collaborative learning, educational relationships

Introduction

This paper outlines the findings of a research project conducted within the *University of Derby* and financed by a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund and conducted during the 2007/8 academic year. I will begin by putting the research into a situational and theoretical context before outlining the methodology adopted. Examples from participants' conversations will be used to illustrate a number of emerging key themes, from which a tentative model for thinking about process groups within higher education is put forward.

The module that provoked this research is entitled *Interpersonal Development (IPD)* and is seen as a key component within an undergraduate degree programme, entitled *Creative Expressive Therapies*, that aims to develop an understanding of the therapeutic and expressive potential of creativity within health, education and community settings. The programme integrates traditional lecture-based learning, arts-based workshops and

studio practice. The general philosophy that underpins the ethos of the programme is that the arts can aid the expression and communication thoughts and feelings in both a complementary and alternative way to the spoken or written word. Enabling such expression can help to develop increased levels of personal self-esteem, confidence and well-being as well as contributing to better understanding between individuals (Rogers, 2000). It is a model that has its roots in occupational therapy, the various arts therapies, community arts, as well as arts-based and participatory research methodologies that have been developed within the social sciences over the last ten to fifteen years (Gauntlett, 2007). Destinations for students after graduating include such professions as primary education, social work, human resources, community arts and the various arts therapies.

Students on the programme have a range of arts-based backgrounds, including visual art, drama, dance and music. The IPD module is a level 5 module and is worth 15 credits. It takes place during the second year of the programme, with the cohort of approximately forty-five students being divided into three groups of fifteen. The module runs for twenty weeks across the autumn and spring semester and is assessed by the students writing a three thousand word essay in which they are asked to reflect upon their own experiences of being a member of the group, their observations of the group's development, and the role of the arts within those two. The three groups are facilitated by different members of the staff team, but are structured in the same way, with each group meeting being conducted in the following way: thirty minutes of reflection upon the previous meeting(s); thirty minutes exploring a set text; one hour and fifteen minutes of using arts-based exercises to explore themes that have emerged during the earlier reflections upon experience and responses to texts. Students take turns in leading the reflections and responses to texts. The arts-based exercises are at first directed by the staff facilitator but as the group develops students are encouraged to take responsibility for their design and implementation.

Experiential in nature, the module has the aim of facilitating the exploration of interpersonal dynamics and group processes, with its theoretical basis grounded within psychodynamic thinking (Yalom, 2005), group process theories (Agazarian & Peters, 1981) and creative group work (Doel & Swandon, 1999). It also acknowledges the power of learning through experience within groups (Bion, 1961; 1962) and makes use of reflective practice (Schön, 1983). The module, with its focus on group processes, is deemed to be of value to the programme it is situated in because in order for students to become effective arts-based facilitators it is important to understand from first-hand experience the kinds of events and forces that can shape groups, and the ways in which the arts can facilitate group development and cohesion. This type of group is more commonly used within postgraduate courses and particularly those that lead to professional qualifications, for example masters programmes in Art Therapy and Dramatherapy; as such the research literature about these types of training group tend to focus upon the postgraduate experience (Payne, 2004; Poulsen & Nathan, 2004; Swan-foster *et al*, 2001) rather than the undergraduate experience. What emerges from those studies is strong evidence of the developmental potential of such groups, with an acknowledgment of their problematic nature in terms of the impact they have upon the relationships between participants as students and a resultant need for such groups to

be framed and timed appropriately. Research that focuses upon the undergraduate experience is concerned more with collaborative group work than with process orientated groups, but there is a recognition of the strong force that interpersonal factors will have upon the student experience and the need to time the group accordingly to avoid a loss of focus and an increase in student frustration (Bourner, Hughes & Bourner, 2001). Group work then, regardless of the amount of explicit attention to interpersonal processes, has been shown to be of value, although problematic, and my own reflections upon being a facilitator of IPD groups confirmed those findings. I also had a growing sense that the module did not quite fit with the overall aims of the programme (that has been through a number of revalidations since its inception in 1993 including a gradual shift of emphasis away from an exclusive focus upon creativity within therapy towards creativity in other contexts – education for example). I also had concerns that the module raised feelings of anxiety and uncertainty within the students beyond an acceptable level.

At the same time as this growing unease there was an awareness of the steady emergence within primary and secondary education of the need to attend to the emotional component of teaching and learning. The *Social & Emotional Aspects of Learning* (SEAL) initiative promoted by the *Department for Education & Skills* (DfES, 2007) is a good example of this development within primary education, whilst the *Caspari Foundation* (<http://www.caspari.org.uk>) has been advocating for the inclusion of a psychotherapeutic perspective within children's education for some time. A key component of this turn towards the emotional is the value placed upon relationships that are based upon trust and foster a sense of belonging, with the relationship between peers and between students and teachers being of equal importance. Cherrie Kassem, in reviewing earlier research writes that "the cooperative learning gurus, maintained that developing a positive classroom climate involved creating a situation in which students felt cared for, accepted, and safe" (2002, p.364) and encourages teachers to build trusting and meaningful relationships with their students and to facilitate an awareness of group processes and dynamics within the classroom.

Concerning the place of emotions within higher education, researchers from Sheffield Hallam University (Beard, Clegg & Smith, 2007) state that the affective is always present within higher education even if it is often downplayed when there is an over emphasis upon cognition and rationality. They go on to describe how learning comes about through participation within social interactions, and that situated self-esteem (self-esteem that is grounded in social feedback rather than personal perception) is key to this intersubjective approach to the construction of meaning within education. The authors do take rather a critical and limited view of anything that appears to stray into the realms of therapy when reviewing the concept of self-esteem, but I would argue that they base this upon a limited view of therapy and fail to consider therapy within a group context. However the research they conducted with first year undergraduates revealed that students placed great emphasis upon the development of relationships between themselves and with their lecturers when describing their emotional journey through the first year - with self-esteem being very closely bound up with the quality of those relationships. Similar results appear in another piece of research with first year

undergraduates, conducted by Dilly Fung (2007), that aimed to explore the metaphors students use to describe their adjustment to higher education. Fung writes:

“In a very wide variety of ways, students’ narratives represent learning as arising from collective and interactive experiences, rather than from individual approaches to study which may characterised as ‘deep’ or ‘surface’. They do not construct learning as something happening solely *within* themselves as individuals, but as something which happens to groups through interaction.” (Fung, 2007, p.6)

The key message then that emerges from research literature is that trusting and supportive relationships between all participants within education enables the development of self-esteem and the construction of learning and meaning, with group based learning having the potential to contribute positively to that.

On the one hand then was a wealth of supportive research concerning the potential for groups within education, whilst on the other hand was my own concerns about the way the module I was responsible for delivered that potential. At the start of the research process the enquiry was not so explicitly focused upon the relationship component of the module but more upon the link between the affective and cognitive elements of the module. As such the aim of the study was to assess student’s perceptions of taking part in the module, so as to enquire as to the ways in which the experience impacted upon them academically and emotionally. That aim translated into an explicit question became: Does the module have a perceived positive, neutral or negative effect upon the student’s ability to be an effective and reflective learner within the programme as a whole? By conducting a systematic study I also had the objective of gaining student feedback that was qualitatively deeper than was currently possible through the module evaluation process.

Methodology

The evidence required to best answer the question asked was deemed to be qualitative in the form of verbal and written responses, through the use of focus groups – a cost effective way of gathering useful data about participant’s perceptions (Green, 2007) - and targeted module feedback forms. Ethical approval for the project was granted via the *University of Derby’s* research ethics process. Two research assistants² were employed to conduct the focus groups in order to minimise the distortion my involvement might have, as both a group facilitator and a focus group moderator. Of the three IPD groups that took place during the academic year under consideration, two had been facilitated by myself and the third by a colleague within the subject area. The conducting of the research took place during the second half of the 2007/8 academic year. Invitation to participate in the focus group was opened up to those students who had been part of the module in the previous academic year (the 2006/7 academic year), and of the dozen or so students who expressed an interest five eventually attended the focus group. Students were asked to sign consent forms, which included permission to use conversations within published material. Helpfully those who did attend were drawn from the different groups within the module thus providing the opportunity for

discussion and comparison to emerge. The conductors of the focus group were provided with the following prompts to help them structure the meeting should the conversation stall:

- Thinking about the emotional and cognitive component of the module – what was good about the experience?
- What was less good about the experience?
- In what ways did the module enhance your academic skills? (At the time and now)
- In what ways did the module diminish your academic skills? (At the time and now)
- What links do you think there are between the emotional component of the module and the development of learning styles and strategies?
- What have you been able to take from your experience of the group into other areas of the programme?
- How could the module be organized and delivered differently to aid the development of emotional and cognitive processing?
- Are there any areas of the module that you feel need further research?

The resultant transcription was analysed by the research assistants and me independently using thematic content analysis (Low, 2007). After independently identifying themes within the transcript we met to discuss how the different interpretations complemented or differed in order to select those themes that appeared to be the most consistent and frequent. The resulting themes were given to the focus group participants to make further comment upon. Only one participant responded to the emailed request to make comments upon the identified themes. Ideally a larger focus group, or two parallel groups, would have been conducted and a better response to the identified themes achieved.

As well as the data gathered from the focus group, the research questions were given to those students taking part in the module that were still meeting during the 2007/8 academic year. The questions were asked in addition to the normal module evaluation process that takes place at the conclusion of every module delivered at the *University of Derby*. Students were given the option of responding to the questions and asked to sign consent forms if they did wish to do so. A total of twenty-four students chose to respond to the written questions. Whilst less 'deep' than the focus group transcript the questionnaire responses did provide important parallel data with the questions being more targeted: *How has the module contributed to your emotional intelligence?* And: *How has the module contributed to your cognitive development?* However two issues need to be taken into account when considering these two sets of data and the merits of using them together. The first is that each cohort is different – different individuals will construct different group dynamics; the second is that the later cohort (those who were invited to respond to the written questions) experienced a group in which I, as the facilitator, had already responded to my initial concerns and conducted the group and myself differently to previous years. More will be made of this later but essentially I was more directive, didactic and transparent within the group.

Emerging themes

Emerging themes from the focus group (summarised in Table 1) indicated that there were positive and negative components of the experience, both of which offered the opportunity for students to learn about groups – including how a group should not be run. Positive aspects of the group experience which contributed to learning included explicit use of creativity and theory in the group, in depth discussions about readings, and direction and involvement from the facilitator. The negative aspects that contributed to learning included the emergence of powerful group dynamics, feelings of chaos and of vulnerability and the many uncomfortable silences. The emergence of positive and negative aspects, and the extent to which those contributed to learning, was influenced by the structure of the module, the roles of the facilitator and of the participants, and the level of support offered. The lack of explicit structures, roles and support systems led to confusion about the purpose of the groups and the role of the facilitator and left some participants feeling very vulnerable. The negative aspects of the groups – which were accompanied by feelings of confusion, anger and frustration – could be seen as contributing to learning but they also evoked feelings of vulnerability. This vulnerability was compounded by the damage done to the relationship between student and tutor as a consequence of role confusion. The positive aspects of the group emerged more readily when the facilitator was more explicit about the purpose of the group, was more directive in their introduction of theory and creative tasks, and more involved generally. Explicit links between theory and experience, when made by the facilitator, also contributed to the positive aspects of the group with the essay helping to connect theory and experience.

I want to spend some time illustrating the themes of role confusion and support using examples of the focus group discussion. A key exchange that took place towards the beginning of the focus group; it follows a question one of the focus groups members had asked, wondering if having both men and women in the group made a difference to the mood of the group (within the transcripts 'Facilitator A' refers to myself and 'Facilitator B' refers to a female colleague):

Participant A: Not even male - just personality and the fact that I think there were a few people in our group that had that calming effect, but sometimes, as like you said, were totally saturated and couldn't kind of overcome it, and ours went off on such a level that we wanted it to, because we didn't have that kind of influence, and actually the tutor became a scapegoat for it, and we were desperate for him to have some input, because we kind of lost control of it. Whereas you sound like you had a really calm group so the tutor was just there as a witness.

Participant B: I suppose personally the first few sessions were very much, in my mind anyway, we were trying to figure out the roles in the group, and I reckon I developed and talked to other people in the group as well. So there were benefits in contact. Potentially that was

sort of laid out a little bit clearer, you know, the fact that it was a person centered approach.

Participant A: I think that was my main problem with it. If it is seen as therapeutic space, then people had to be given support, and on our course there is no support. If you are given that space, you need to follow it up and there needs to be something, that is acknowledged next to it, if it doesn't happen within, then there needs to be something to say, you know, this comes alongside the course, because its needed. Because in our group, people were like, so distraught, and they were just left to walk out. There was no security. I said that to [facilitator A], the whole thing is so unsafe, and also knowing that as a student what was going on with some of the members, and knowing how vulnerable they were. I mean for me the whole learning was how not to do it.

These themes are returned to throughout and a number of examples – taken from different participants at different points of the transcript - help to illustrate this:

As a facilitator, either you're running a therapy session, or you're not. And there's no middle ground.

Because at times we said there is no reason for you to be in here, and at other times we were absolutely desperate for him to say something, to hold what's going on and bring it back to where it was supposed to be, but we never really felt that did we?

In my essay I talked about transference, and as far as my personal transference with [facilitator A] being a facilitator, because I feel that his role wasn't sort of clearly set out at the beginning, sort of thing

The students were struggling with the search for clarity about the facilitator's role within the group, which was not contained by theories of transference due to the blurring of roles between facilitator and tutor. In particular one student found it hard to negotiate the transition between the two:

I think with [facilitator A] again, it might be the same, that role of teacher you know. And you do look up to them. And they have been there for the first part of the course, totally standing in front of you, educating you, da, da, da,...And then starting with IPD with [facilitator A] it wasn't just that transition, it went straight to him being, I am not involved, you're in control. Which I think probably that was fine, but I would have just liked that sort of transition to have been stated by him...

Towards the end of the focus group there was a lengthy debate about way the module could be delivered, the differences between facilitator styles and the effect upon the

relationship between student and tutor of both being involved in the module. The following statements made by two different participants illustrate this point:

In terms of like, what you said about has it had an effect on my academic learning, I think for me now, this year especially, I seek out much more from my tutors. Like, I will go and see them and I will make them sit down, and make them talk to me. Because that's not going to happen otherwise. Because we just do not get, either the academic, or the emotional support on this course, that you maybe require. So, it's sort of, from that experience of IPD, I'm realizing how much of a brilliant resource [facilitator B] was as a tutor. In terms of my learning. I've sort of actively spent much more time going to my tutors, and like, having tutorials with them, and stuff like that. Especially around dissertation and things. Which has been very useful.

... it's really taken a lot for me to gain that contact with [facilitator A] again, after him being so detached in IPD. Like now, in my dissertation. Like, I've seen him like, a lot. Fortnightly. To talk about it. Because I know that he is this resource. Because he's a tutor. He's an experienced therapist. And he has this knowledge. But, in IPD I didn't think any of our potential including his, was used to it's best ability. I think everything was, just kind of, tiptoes in the water. Or headfirst dived in. There was no middle ground.

In summary then, the themes emerging from the focus group suggest that the students found that the module worked best when it worked more like a seminar, where there was a very clear expectation of what level the group should be working at, where the relationships between the students were not put under too much strain, and where the roles of student and tutor were maintained so that that relationship could continue outside of the module.

The written responses revealed that the students felt the module developed their emotional intelligence by helping them to become more aware of their feelings and to be more open about them, in an intrapersonal and interpersonal way. Whilst less prevalent than the focus group's experience, some students in this cohort also found the feelings evoked by their participation too overwhelming to aid emotional learning and there were also some feelings of being judged by the group. In terms of cognitive development the written responses stated that students felt that the module helped with the expansion and clarity of thought, the noticing of thought patterns, the understanding of ones own emotional processes, the making of theoretical links between experience, emotions and ideas, and the growth of awareness and reflection. On the negative side there was the thought that trying to incorporate so much experience into an essay format was too difficult.

Anecdotally, outside of the focus group, participants stated to me that they found the focus group itself a useful format for reflecting upon the experience of IPD and I believe also that it contributed to a sense of being heard by the institution.

Emerging Themes from Focus Group

Positive aspects of the group experience which contributed to learning:

- Explicit use of creativity and theory within the group
- In depth discussions about readings
- Direction and involvement from the facilitator

Negative aspects of the group experience which contributed to learning:

- Emergence of powerful group dynamics
- Chaotic feelings within the group
- Feelings of vulnerability
- Uncomfortable silences

The emergence of positive and negative aspects and the extent to which those contributed to learning was influenced by:

- The structure of the module
 - How directive or non-directive the facilitator was in the group
 - How clearly and explicitly was the expected level of emotional engagement
 - The balance of creativity, expression and theory
- The roles of the facilitator and of the participants
 - Was the facilitator also a tutor
 - Was the facilitator also a therapist
 - Was the facilitator also a facilitator of another group in another module with the same students
 - Were participants students or group members
- The level of support offered
 - The amount of support from tutors
 - The amount of support from university systems
 - Expectations that students will support each other

Table 1: *Emerging Themes from Focus Group*

Discussion and development of theory

Thinking about the question: Does IPD have a positive, neutral or negative effect upon the student's ability to be an effective learner? The results show that the focus group predominantly felt that the module had a negative effect, whereas the written answers indicated a more positive response. The slightly harder question of how the module influences the student's ability to be an effective learner seemed to receive a response

that suggests that the module helps to clarify thinking and emotional processes with particular reference to being with others. The importance given to the relationships within the group, between students and with the tutor, fit well with the findings of Beard, Clegg and Smith (2007) and with those of Fung (2007), which highlight the importance of supportive relationships within higher education and the role of the relational and the intersubjective to the construction of meaning. This last point resonates with Lev Vygotsky's claim that the construction of a shared language enhances learning (Hanko, 2002). This construction takes place best when there is an environment in which students feel that they have adequate support and guidance from the tutor and the academic institution. To achieve a good enough level of support and guidance in this instance, given that the students are 2nd year undergraduates on a programme that does not insist that students be in personal therapy (as many therapy based postgraduate programmes do) and that the module only runs for 20 sessions, it seems that whoever is running the groups has to be a tutor more than a facilitator (and certainly to not be a therapist); either that or the group needs to be run by someone from outside of the programme to avoid damaging the relationship between students and tutors. Being a tutor, in this context, seems to mean providing more direction and more explicit linking of theory with experience. There is maybe something also about focusing upon creativity more than expression, with creativity suggesting a focus more upon a contained definable product or process. Again this is about appropriate levels of direction and containment, and something that requires more investigation.

As a way of helping to visualise and frame the themes identified a tentative model has begun to be constructed where it might be possible to plot the position of a process group such as IPD within an imaginary two-dimensional space. In figures 1 and 2 the *Axis of Proximity* plots the extent of the facilitator's closeness to the group in terms of leading its direction – how didactic and leading is the facilitator? The *Axis of Domain* measures a place within the domains of cognition and affect – concepts that are borrowed from education theory (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964). Where those two meet a *Space of Intent* is formed that indicates the intended task of the group and the role of the tutor.

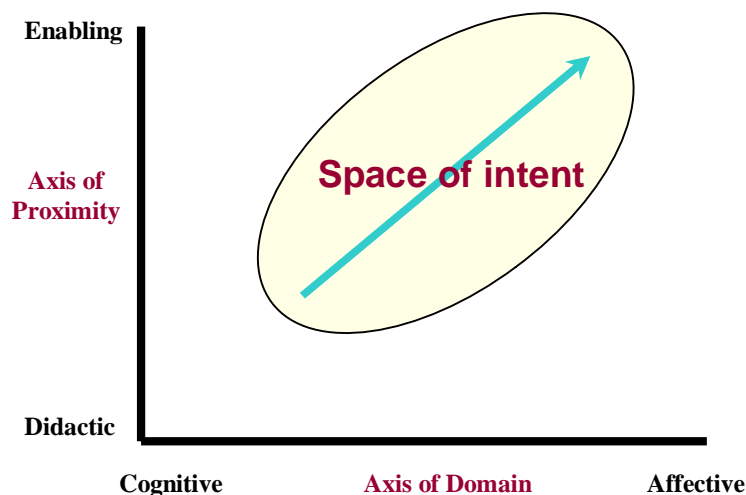


Figure 1: *Concept of 'Space of Intent'*

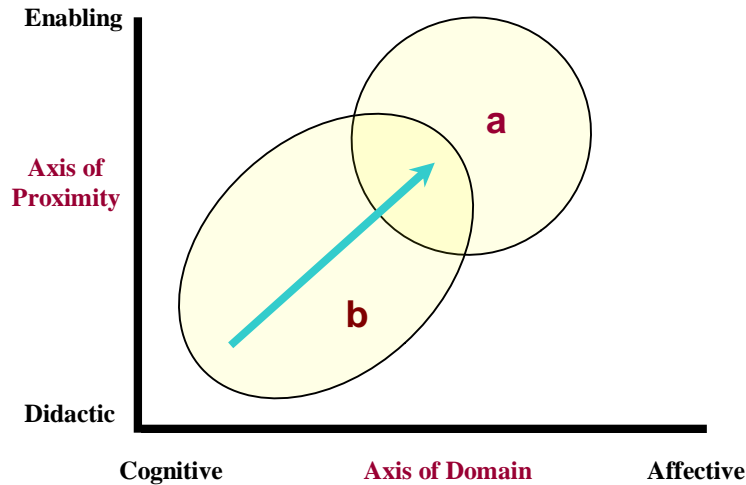


Figure 2: *Movement of 'Space of Intent' over time*

The arrow represents a general movement that might take place within a group the longer it proceeds. In this study, the groups that provided the participants of the focus group occupied a *Space of Intent* that started out at the enabling and affective area and seemed to stay there (item a in diagram 2); whereas the written feedback was provided by participants of groups that began towards the didactic and cognitive area, stretching out towards the enabling and affective area as the group progressed (item b in diagram 2).

What students seem to be indicating is that a better experience is gained if the group begins towards the didactic and cognitive, with an intention to move towards the enabling and affective. Moving too soon to the later area generates too much anxiety and runs the risk of fixing the group at that stage. It also risks damaging the relationship between the facilitator and the students, especially where the facilitator is also a tutor to those same students. Of course such diagrams can in no way capture the complexity of any group and the cognitive and affective domains are not as diametrically opposed as they are in these diagrams, but I do think the diagrams can help to visualise the relative difference between the groups and the direction groups might take.

In terms of the future development of the module, in light of the findings and my own reflective process, it is proposed to continue developing the module in such a way that the emphasis is more upon education than therapy and more upon creativity than expression. This will mean more active direction, more explicit linking of theory with experience, helping students think about their own narrative history of being in education and, most importantly, maintaining a relationship with students that provides support and guidance. These changes also reflect the way that the programme is evolving, and whilst acknowledging that such groups do enable the development of

reflective practitioners, they acknowledge that the groups also have the potential to raise anxiety too much, limit academic achievement and disrupt relationships. Figure 3 gives a visual example of the way the module will develop, reflecting a shifting emphasis away from therapy and towards education, and from expression towards creativity.

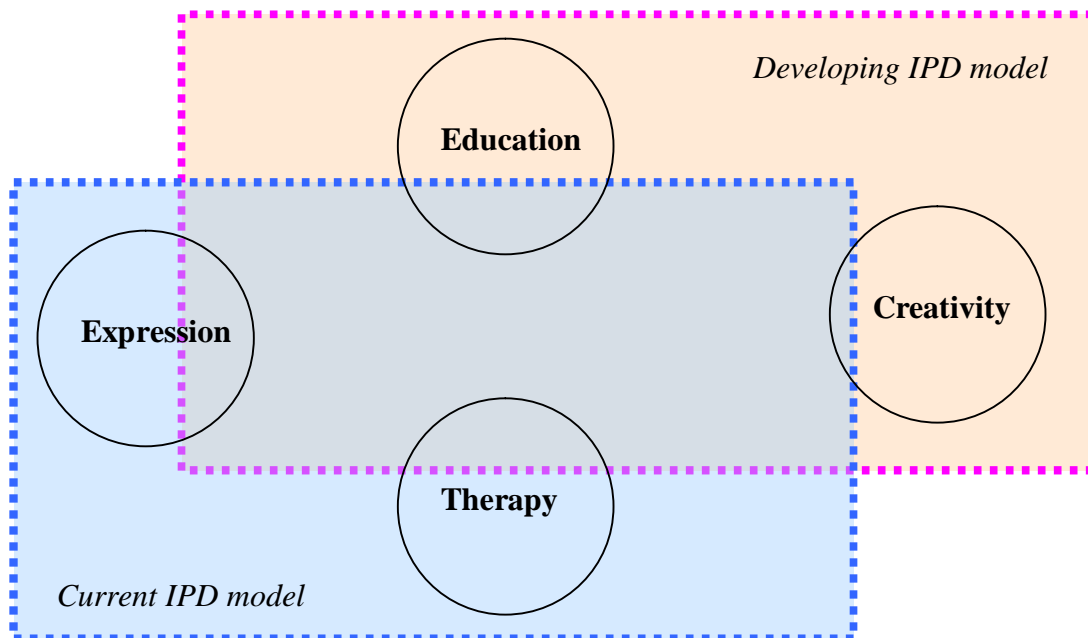


Figure 3: *Current and developing model of IPD*

In order to continue conducting the module in an ethical way that maximises the potential of the group experience to aid the development of effective and reflective students, changes have been made to the module, with this particular piece of research contributing to the depth of understanding required to make those changes meaningful. With the increased recognition of the affective component of learning and teaching within higher education, and the high value placed upon relationships within the associated research, there is a need to think carefully about the impact of dynamics and processes that any group based learning might have upon educational relationships. On a practical note, where resources allow, it is suggested that groups such as those that formed the focus of this study, be facilitated by someone who is not normally in contact with the students. Where that is not possible, the emphasis should be more upon the didactic and directive rather than the affective and the non-directive.

Conclusion

This qualitative and interpretive piece of research has revealed that undergraduate students do benefit cognitively and emotionally from process groups but only when those groups are grounded within an educational model and not a therapeutic one.

What the students expressed was a need to have a clearly defined and consistently close educational relationship with their tutors who are able to provide clear guidance along with explicit theoretical links. The study supports the findings of other educational researchers who have identified the value of good working educational relationships within higher education (Beard, Clegg & Smith, 2007; Fung, 2007).

The findings of the study have proved beneficial to myself, contributing directly to my own practice as an educator and facilitator within the context of the module under investigation; I believe also that the study has contributed to the continuing development of the programme that hosts the module and to those colleagues facilitating similar groups. However, due to the limited size of the study, it is only tentatively that I suggest the findings can be applied to the wider higher education context. Any further research into this area would need to have a wider sample size and greater level of student feedback and response to the identified themes. Despite these limitations I suggest that attention to the relationship that exists between students and educators is worth consideration regardless of the context and that the findings of this study can be of some use to other educators seeking to manage the use of similar groups – particularly within those programs that involve the teaching of therapeutic practice.

In addition being the member or facilitator of any group is a complex and challenging experience but in a changing higher education system, where there is an increasing emphasis upon distance and flexibility, this research contributes to the equally valid requirement to consider and investigate the affective and the relational elements of education, where closeness rather than distance is called for.

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¹ This is an extended version of a work in progress report that appeared in RESPONSE – an online journal devoted to diversity in education and produced by the University of Derby - <http://www2.derby.ac.uk/response/issue-four-part-1-2008-issues-37/40-work-in-progress/87-student-perceptions-of-a-group-process-module>

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