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## Intentional Work Group Experiences: A Pedagogical Tool for Counselor Educators

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## Abstract

Work groups “promote efficient and effective accomplishment of group tasks among people who are gathered to accomplish group goals” (ASGW, 2000, p. 3). Due to the prevalence of use in actual counseling settings, counselor educators frequently use work groups as a pedagogical tool in educating counselors-in-training. This article introduces a classroom intervention designed to help counseling students develop self-awareness and skills pertaining to participating in work groups. Using constructivist pedagogy as our theoretical basis we will describe the intervention and the qualitative approach we incorporated to evaluate the intervention’s impact in the classroom. Results and discussion including contextualization, limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research will follow in the remainder of this article.

## Keywords

Work groups, counselor training, constructivist pedagogy

## Author's Notes

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Case consultations, psychoeducational curriculum development, advocacy and community engagement plans, grant proposals, and interagency collaborations are just a few reasons groups of counselors convene for non-therapeutic purposes. The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW, 2000) identifies four types of groups that are relevant to the practice of counseling: work groups, groups for psychoeducation, group counseling, and group psychotherapy. Each group has different objectives and therefore different dynamics that require specialized skills when counselors participate in each. Work groups “promote efficient and effective accomplishment of group tasks among people who are gathered to accomplish group goals” (ASGW, 2000, p. 3). Effective work groups require team members who have developed skills in the areas of collaborative: (1) communication, (2) goal setting, (3) planning and task coordination, (4) and conflict resolution (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Sundstrom, 1999; Stevens & Campion, 1994).

Work groups are highly interdependent. The overall performance of a work group is unattainable without contributions from each group member as well as successful interactions between members (Marks et al., 2002). These interactions include: communication, goal setting, and planning and task coordination. *Communication* refers to group members’ capacity to understand and exchange information in a collaborative manner that enhances sharing networks and thus the attainment of task outcomes (Stevens & Campion, 1994). *Goal setting* is important in that developing objectives collaboratively allows the group as a whole to know what is to be accomplished and when the work is completed. *Planning and task coordination* uses communication to agree on the most effective ways to sequence and orchestrate activities designed to accomplish the group’s goals (Sundstrom, 1999). Inevitably conflicts will arise within the work group process. Conflict resolution strategies that address both the needs of the

individual and concern for other group members include: (1) problem-solving, (2) obliging, (3) dominating, (4) avoiding, and (5) compromising. While not all strategies listed are effective in moving a work group towards goal attainment, the predication of a member's conflict resolution strategy is complex. Most often, issues such as type of conflict, personal style, and feelings of safety and belonging within the group influence any member's given strategy (Einarsen et al., 2003).

Regardless of your professional counseling identity, you will find opportunities to engage in a work group. For example, professional school counselors will often participate in work groups such as Individual Education Planning teams, school counseling curriculum teams, and 504 committees. Likewise, community/mental health counselors find themselves working in groups with both internal (e.g., designing interventions, writing grants) and external (e.g., interagency collaborations for financial development, access to client groups, multisite interventions) constituents. The list of work group activities continues for rehabilitation, career, college, marriage & family, and other counseling modalities. Therefore learning how to navigate work groups is an important skill for counselors-in-training to acquire.

Mirroring the prevalence of work groups in the practice of counseling, counselor educators frequently use work groups (e.g., group projects, papers and advocacy actions) as a pedagogical tool in educating counselors-in-training (Lara, Pope, & Minor, 2011; Pope, Coker, & Pangelinan, 2011). The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP; 2005) identifies four distinct professional identity standards related to work groups. These standards include strategies for interagency and inter-organization collaboration and communications (II.G.1.b); roles and responsibilities as members of interdisciplinary emergency management teams (II.G.1.c); roles and processes of advocacy

(II.G.1.h); and advocacy processes needed to address institutional barriers that impede access, equity, and success of clients (II.G.1.i). However, a thorough review of the counseling literature using the key terms work groups and task groups coupled with the terms teaching, counselor education, and pedagogy revealed no counseling classroom interventions designed specifically to teach work group skill development.

This classroom intervention is designed to help counseling students develop self-awareness and skills pertaining to participating in work groups. The intention was to help students develop work group skills such as collaborative communication, goal setting, planning and task coordination, and conflict resolution (Einarsen et al., 2003; Sundstrom, 1999; Stevens & Campion, 1994). To meet this goal the first and second authors identified two essential elements of the intervention. First, students needed a lexicon by which they could share personal reflections upon their tendencies or styles (i.e., attentional and interpersonal aptitudes and biases) while working in groups. Second, students would require aids that allowed for self-reflection and safe dissemination of feedback regarding their styles from peers and the course instructor. Using constructivist pedagogy as the theoretical basis for the intervention and the qualitative approach, we incorporated constructivist pedagogy to evaluate the intervention's impact in the classroom.

### **Constructivist Pedagogy**

The definition of constructivist pedagogy has been debated for several decades with little consensus and many instances of myopic focus within individual academic disciplines (Davis & Sumara, 2003; Richardson, 2003). One general definition that incorporates an individual psychological perspective on teaching and learning is offered below.

Constructivist pedagogy has been thought of as the creation of classroom environments, activities, and methods that are grounded in a constructivist theory of learning, with goals

that focus on individual students developing deep understandings in the subject matter of interest and habits of mind that aid in future learning. (Richardson, 2003, p.1627).

In constructivist pedagogy, the objective is to develop knowledge by beginning with the students' internal world as it interacts with the external world (Walters, 1994). One hallmark of this educational perspective is the efficacy of encouraging students to approach realistic dilemmas from a stance of reflection, self-monitoring, and cognitively complex problem solving. The benefits of a constructivist stance for counselors-in-training include accelerated skill development (Nelson & Neufelst, 1998; Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007) and increased confidence in the performance of counselor related tasks (Tang et al., 2004).

This approach to pedagogy blends well with theoretical approaches to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Piaget, 1970). For example, Kolb's Four Stage Learning Cycle describes four sequential yet repeating stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation before repeating the cycle. Concrete experience is action-oriented, allowing the knowing subject to gain knowledge from direct interaction with the object of knowing. Reflective observation involves contemplative thought on the concrete experience that leads to personal meaning making. Abstract generalization is the process by which the knowing subject modifies existing rules and theories, or constructs entirely new ones, pertaining to his or her interaction with the object of knowing. Finally, active experimentation is the testing of the modified, or new, rules and theories leading to more efficacious behaviors, improved feelings of self-efficacy, and skill development.

Utilizing the constructivist approach to education, the participants in this study were Master's level counselor education students enrolled in one of three counseling courses. The object of inquiry is the work group process. The objective of the intervention is to allow students

to more effectively engage with the work group towards the goal of improved effectiveness as counselors and advocates.

### **Intervention Description**

The intervention was included as an assignment in three counselor education courses, two taught by the first author (i.e., Group Procedures in Counseling, and Career Development and Counseling) and one by the second author (i.e., Crisis Intervention and Consultation). While all enrolled students completed all parts of the assignment, data was used for only those who chose to participate. The assignments were comparable. Students in all three courses were given the task of identifying target client group/issue, had almost identical course time reserved for group meetings, had comparable group assignments, earned equivalent points as a percentage of their overall grade for the course, and followed the same timeline for data collection. The only requirement between the universities was the assignment in the courses stated above had to have a group component so the work group experience of the participants could be examined.

A PowerPoint presentation consisting of ten slides was used by both instructors to introduce the group work assignment. The purpose of the assignment was put in context using the 2009 CACREP Standards that applied to work groups. Next, the concept of feedback loops and their use in counseling was introduced using the examples of Johari's Window (Hase, Davies, & Dick, 1999) and Interpersonal Process Recall (Bernard, 1989). Instructors then led a discussion on the important components of effective feedback loops. Common language used by both givers and receivers of feedback was essential for clear understanding and the ability to incorporate feedback into their group work practice.

The Test of Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS; Nideffer, 1976) was chosen as a framework for providing feedback within the work groups. The TAIS is designed to improve performance in social situations by identifying the environmental and interpersonal situations that increase a respondent's emotional arousal. TAIS was chosen because it provides descriptive language of personal styles that influence the way one performs necessary work group tasks (e.g., communication, goal setting, planning and task coordination, and conflict resolution).

The four quadrants delineated in the TAIS were identified and labeled with the descriptors: Observer, Deliverer, Creator, and Problem Solver. The designation observer describes Nideffer's (1976) upper left quadrant broad/external and is someone who rapidly assesses their surroundings, has good street sense, and anticipates reactions from others. Deliverers fit in the upper right quadrant narrow/external and are adept at implementing programs, taking action, and being focused on delivering. Creators represent the lower left quadrant broad/internal and describe those who prefer to analyze and plan, develop goals and organize processes, and learn from the past to predict the future. Finally, problem solvers systematically rehearse their course of actions, wish to solve problems, and incorporate logical thought processes.

A one-page feedback form (See Appendix A) was used to gather feedback about individual group performance. All group members were asked to rate both themselves and their fellow group members at specific points in the work group process. The feedback form was comprised of seven items. Items one through four asked the respondent to rate each group member on their demonstration of behaviors consistent with each of the four TAIS styles (observer, deliverer, creator, and problem solver) with 0 representing no behaviors demonstrated and 4 representing consistent and effective demonstration of each behavior while working in the



group. Question five asked the respondent to guess how many hours each group member worked on the project outside of the group meetings. Question six asked how each group member contributed to the assigned task. Finally, question seven asked how easy each group member was to work with during the project.

Forms were completed at three different points during the group project time span. The first round of feedback was considered a baseline completed only by the individual about himself or herself. For round two, each group member completed a feedback form about himself or herself and each member of the work group. The form was completed a third time by each group member about himself or herself and each member of the work group. Each group member received a summary report of the responses after time two and time three. The summary reports presented each student with an individual assessment of themselves and then summaries of their peers including averages of the ratings on the four style questions and the projected number of hours worked outside the group. Responses to question six and seven were presented as a narrative list with the subject's own response bolded. Students were asked to compare and reflect upon the similarities and differences between their self-assessment and that of their peer group members.

The culminating assignment for the process was a reflection paper. Students were asked to answer the following prompts:

1. What was the process like for you?
2. Identify the areas where your self-perception matched that of your peers.
3. Identify the areas where your self-perception did not match that of your peers.
4. As a result of this process:
  - a. What will you continue to do the same when working in groups?

- b. How are you planning to change to work more effectively in groups?
- c. Based on this experience, how would you describe the old adage. “Counselor, know thyself?” In other words, what have you learned about your own process of self-reflection?

The reflection papers were used as the source of data for this phenomenological study.

### **Method**

Institutional Review Board approval was attained from both participating institutions and the ethical codes for research of both the American Counseling Association and The Association for Counselor Education and Supervision were followed. The research questions for the study were: How do the participants describe their experience of participating in a classroom based work group? How do the participants understand and make sense of their experiences while using the structured work group intervention designed to help them develop work group skills?

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from classes taking place in the summer of 2010 at two CACREP accredited Master’s level counselor education programs in a mid-Western state. Students from the first university (n=28) were a mix of school and community counseling students completing the courses Group Procedures in Counseling and Career Development and Counseling. Thirty-two students were invited to participate in the study and 28 chose to participate (87.5% response rate). Each course was a core requirement in both programs of study. Students from the second university (n=16) were a combination of school and mental health counseling students completing the course Crisis Intervention and Consultation. Eighteen students were invited to participate in the study and 16 chose to participate (89% response rate). The students from the first university are from an urban context who had or were currently in

different careers than counseling while returning for a post graduate degree. The students from the second university were primarily from a rural mid-Western context. Most students from both universities were working full-time concurrently while completing their counseling degrees. Because these students were completing their coursework and the researchers were professors of their programs, the researchers did not collect detailed demographic data in order to secure a higher response rate. Additionally the purpose of this research was phenomenological in nature, which doesn't necessarily explore group differences as we were exploring the common themes that emerged from their experience in the work group.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A qualitative approach was chosen to elicit individual meaning from the experiences of students in their work groups. Using this approach to research is beneficial because of the nature of its focus on understanding complex social situations without previously defined parameters (Sue et al., 1992). Van Manen's (1990) a hermeneutical approach to phenomenology was used in collecting and analyzing data. Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology attends to the description of the phenomenon of study, but also to the interpretation of the phenomenon or lived experience. In the context of this study, phenomenological analysis sought to construct the experiences of students in their work groups. In order to explain the students' work group experiences 44 master's level counseling students self-selected to participate in the study.

For the purposes of this study, the researchers utilized Van Manen's (1990) holistic approach to data analysis. The holistic approach focuses on the transcript in entirety looking for a phrase or a sentence to encapsulate the essential meaning of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). Data gathered from the reflection papers was read and reread by the first and second authors independently to capture the fundamental meaning expressed in each paper. We strove to

understand how the lived experience of each student was translated to the page as they worked their way through each phase of the intervention. Essential themes were derived by each author, independently, while variations were described using the selected reading approach (Van Manen, 1990). Selected readings were captured in a compilation of specific statements or phrases compiled independently by each reviewer to be shared later in the analysis. The two sets of independent findings were then shared for all 44 papers so that consensus could be derived amongst the theme names and selected readings. The process of bracketing (Van Manen, 1990) was employed during the shared consensus process so that the analysis stayed in contact with the concreteness of participants' lived reality.

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Maxwell (2005), the key to validity, with regard to qualitative interpretation, pertains to possible threats to the researcher's interpretations of the phenomenon. Using Van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology does not call for the researcher to take a scientific, removed approach to research. Van Manen (1990) stated, "To establish a strong relation with a certain question, phenomenon, or notion, the researcher cannot afford to adopt an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness" (p. 33). The researchers took steps to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of the lived experience portrayed in this study as mentioned above (Creswell, 2007).

While qualitative research from Van Manen's (1990) perspective values the role of the researcher as an individual interpreting the data, research rigor requires integrity be evident on the part of the researcher to ensure that the interpretations are grounded in the data. To ensure integrity, validation techniques or methods were used to reduce the threat to validity (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) suggests that qualitative researchers select at least two validation

techniques or methods. The two validation techniques used in this study were an inquiry auditor and member checks.

**Inquiry Auditor.** The researchers (authors one and two), reviewed the reflection papers independently and then met to co-construct themes and selected readings that emerged. The inquiry auditor (third author) received the 44 reflection papers in addition to the researchers constructed themes and critically examined the themes to ensure accuracy. This resulted in the four themes that emerged and are described further in the results section in this manuscript.

**Member Checks.** Member checks were conducted via email 22 months after the completion of the courses. All participants (n=44) were sent an email invitation including the original reflection paper they completed as part of the study, a summary of the emergent themes as determined by the authors and verified by the inquiry auditor, and short questionnaire. Respondents (n=12) answered three member check questions. The final member check consisted of the open-ended questions:

1. How does this reflect your recollection of the experience?
2. What additions or extractions would you make from these themes?
3. From the themes that resonate for you today, how does this influence your current work as a counselor/counselor intern?

These questions were designed to illicit the accuracy of the themes that emerged. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) member checks increase the trustworthiness of qualitative studies because it allows subjects to confirm that the findings of the study accurately portray the experience.

The following is one student's response to the member check questions. Her response exemplifies what this pedagogical tool hoped to accomplish:

I have never really given any thought into what my exact role in a group setting is. I find it very interesting to put a label on how I work in a group and to see how others in the group perceive me. As we concluded our group project, I began to really notice each group member falling into a role and somewhat embracing our talents.

This student captured the essence of this project during her written submission used in the primary data analysis for the project.

The first question confirmed that the summary of emergent themes accurately reflected the student's recollection of their experience. Each of the twelve responding participants confirmed that the emergent themes matched their recollection of the process using language such as, "These themes seem to be right on."

Question two offered participants the opportunity to identify additions or extractions they would make from these themes. The majority of the participants (n=9) offered no changes to the emergent themes. Those who did respond to this prompt (n=3) simply reframed the wording of one of the themes to better reflect their own recollection. For example, one participant stated that, "I would just say that it all comes down to the concept of self-perception." This statement fits well within the theme of insights gained/ blind spots.

Finally, the third question asked how the themes resonated for the participant currently as it influences his/her current work as a counselor/counselor intern. Respondents consistently reported that the experience impacted their confidence and has effectively improved their ability to work in task groups. As one wrote,

I am pleasantly surprised to read what I had written – I love going back in time and realizing that I was more mature than I realized – in fact, as I begin a new professional/vocational/academic journey [as a counseling resident], I will consult my

reflections and use them to remind me of both my blind spots and my strengths. I will endeavor to be mindful of my peers' processes and check in regularly to see if my perceptions of our work together match the perceptions of my peers and what the match, or lack thereof, says about our work in general, and our group in particular.

## **Results**

This study aimed to uncover the rich experiences of master's-level counselors-in-training participating in counselor education courses at two CACREP-accredited programs. A phenomenological approach to the data analysis provided a framework for the researchers to reveal the consistent themes in addition to noted differences in participant experiences. The primary themes that emerged via the hermeneutical process were group organization, insights/blind spots, personal perceptions/ expectations, and practical application. The overall themes were represented of the experiences of the counselors in training as they participated in a structured classroom intervention designed to build self-awareness and skills when participating in work groups.

### **Group Organization**

Participants recognized that there was a component of group organization that saliently impacted their perceptions of and engagement in the work group. Within this theme, group organization during the early stages of meeting (i.e., scheduling of tasks and meeting times), group goal and member role setting (i.e., task assignments), and participation (i.e., ability to attend early meetings, feeling of belonging based on length of time in program or program identity – school versus mental health) contributed to the level of member engagement, development of group cohesion, individual role identification, and approach to the evaluation of other members. For each participant there was an experience of group organization that

influenced his or her participation in the work group. The following excerpt described one participant's experience of scheduling meeting times and early group organization.

...we had a diverse group which consisted of some members who worked during the day, some that worked at night, and some that didn't work. Therefore, it was difficult to schedule meeting times with group members.

This participant spoke to the challenge of balancing multiple schedules and how this experience assisted in learning the importance of "acting as a consultant and working with others." Another participant also shared his/her experience of the beginning organization as negotiating tasks early on in the group. The group member was hesitant initially regarding the group process and expectations. The following excerpt illustrates the experience.

The fact that I am at a different point in the program than the rest of the group was painfully obvious to me in the first meeting. However, the group was able to divide the project into individual tasks and each member worked equally hard to complete the task that they volunteered to complete. The entire process of creating the workshop went smoothly.

For this particular member, because the work group immediately organized themselves through the delegation of group tasks, it contributed to the overall member engagement and development of group cohesion. For another group member, her experience was different, in that, they had challenges surrounding the development of the group topic initially.

This group project was not without its normal complications. The decision to come up with a group topic was slightly more difficult this time. I believe this was due to the fact that some individuals were school counselor students while others were mental health students. Once the decision was made to go with 'self-mutilation,' the project did become



easier...I made sure that I did my fair share and wanted to make sure that the project was completed to a high standard.

For this group member, the process of group organization included deducing the topic based on group member differences comprising of both mental health counseling and school counseling students. The participants each experienced group organization through early organization, delegation of tasks, and the development of group cohesion.

### **Insights Gained/Blind Spots**

Students spoke to how the experience of using this intervention made them more aware of themselves in relationship to others. They reported becoming more aware of the types of things in groups that trigger their responses to other group members and the work group process (e.g., communication style, follow-through). In addition, self-perception and group member perceptions at times had discrepancies for students. The discrepancies invoked various emotional responses from fear to appreciation. Specific examples of work group reflections regarding the phenomena are highlighted below.

For each of the participants, there was an experience of becoming more aware of their blind spots as they engaged in the work group. The following excerpt illuminated one participant's experience of recognizing the value of collaboration when being involved in a work group context.

I never asked for advice, never "ran ideas by" someone. However, over seven years of teaching, my individual approach to everything has quickly been exposed as a damaging way to operate in education and especially in counseling. Realizing this about myself, collaborating is something I consistently work to improve. This work group assignment helped me advance in my ability to trust others and their opinions and to depend on the

strength of multiple opinions and experiences. I cannot do it all as well as a group of experienced individuals can. I am giving the independent contractor in me the pink slip.

Through the process of the work group, this participant experienced a realization of the tendency to take on an individual approach to tasks rather than consider how group members may benefit the experience and process. Upon reflection, the group member became aware that the individual contribution is not as critical as the synergy that accompanies working with a collaborative whole.

Similarly, another participant shared the experience of becoming aware of her difficulty trusting other members to contribute to the work group process. The following excerpt illustrates the experience.

One of the things that really came to my attention while doing this project was my lack of trust in the other members to do the work. I have a lot of confidence in myself to write a good paper and more or less had the attitude that I wanted to do that so that I knew it would be done well. I realize now that in a consultation and/or collaboration, that is not the approach to take, especially in a consultation in which the point is to help the consultee learn and/or improve in a certain area. If I do the bulk of the work and do not let the consultee share the responsibilities, then he/she will not likely get as much out of the consultation as they could.

For this group member, there was recognition of the value of shared responsibilities within the framework of the project. The awareness of this blind spot was gained through the interaction and reflection within the work group experience.

Another group member recognized that her perceptions at times had discrepancies between her group members' perceptions. These discrepancies invoked awareness surrounding her interactions within the work group that may be potentially stifling to the work group process.

One major thing that I want to change is being perceived as a person who is not open to other group members' ideas. In reading the feedback of my peers, someone stated that I do not like an idea that is not my own. I instantly started chuckling to myself because, although I am not always conscious of being dominant in a group setting, I can see that this is a valid statement and something that I want to change about myself. Another statement from a peer was that I was not always "on task," and would sometimes relay research that I had found (while reading it from the book, article, etc.) while the group was on to something else. Again, this is a valid statement and one that I am now very aware of.

This participant became more aware of the characteristics of herself that may not be helpful to the work group process. As a result of her experience and reflection, the participant was considering how she may interact in work groups in the future. Overall, the participants each experienced blind spots through gaining personal insights surrounding their interactions within the work group. While participants experienced an awareness surrounding their blind spots, they also were prompted to take action further in light of their new awareness.

### **Personal Perceptions/ Expectations**

Group members did not approach the work group task without bias. Personal perceptions, past group experiences, and performance expectations all seemed to influence members' expectations and approach to the work group. In the area of personal perceptions one member reported,

I am a perfectionist. This aspect of group work has always been a struggle for me. Though I definitely enjoy the time spent together planning and designing projects and papers, it always goes south for me when the actual writing of the paper or presentation of the project occurs ... simply because everyone wants to do their own thing.

In addition to personal perceptions, many group members reported previous experiences with classroom work groups that had sullied their perception of the satisfaction and efficacy of working in such groups.

The process of working in a group was much more pleasant than I had expected. Often in undergrad it was difficult to work in groups because of conflicts in personality or time schedules but in this group we all seemed to work in harmony.

Finally, personal performance expectations can be a salient factor in one's predisposition to classroom work group assignments as illuminated by the participant who stated, "At first, I was a little confused because I was not sure how this assignment could interpret my level of competence for the assignment."

### **Practical Application**

Students spoke to how their experiences with the work group would inform their future professional development activities. Student reflections in this area diverged into two distinct areas based upon their receipt of external feedback from peer group members: new insight into their future work with clients and external confirmation of personal strengths.

Students became cognizant of how their behaviors impacted the work group dynamic and translated this new insight into their future work with students/clients by identifying areas for personal growth. This insight proved relevant to participants in multiple ways, including personal attributes:

I am pretty assertive and I like things done a certain way, so I tend to get things done my way. That's not always the best way to do things. I need to spend more time listening and value others' opinions and ideas more. I need to learn that it's okay to try different ways of doing things.

Furthermore, some participants made connections to the specific nature of their future work setting and the importance of group work.

As a school counselor I will work with many different groups of people-parents, the administration, other professionals in the community, and my co-workers in the school. I can use my skills as a creator while working in groups in the future to keep everyone on the same page. In my opinion, when groups are unorganized people do not get along as well. Tension mounts when groups procrastinate and fail to delineate tasks.

Finally, participants recognized that advocacy and social justice would be an integral aspect of their future work as counselors. Through reflection of their experience within the work groups, participants drew insight regarding the power and voice they can be for their clients. The below excerpt depicts a participant's experience.

In terms of advocacy, I have realized I need to be more of a problem-solver. I need to get in the action and do everything I can to be a voice for my clients. Simply following the lead of someone else will not adequately get it done and I will have to step it up to be a good advocate for my clients in the future.

A second area that emerged within this theme found that participants benefitted from external confirmation of personal strengths and attributes that contributed to positive group development and cohesion. This confirmation was, at times, perceived as validation for attributes that were no surprise to the participants.

The best part of reading the feedback was seeing that my group members appreciated my organization, planning, and preparation. I have worked in groups in the past and felt my efforts went unnoticed, but that was not the case in this group.

### **Discussion**

Results from this study provide preliminary findings supporting the efficacy of implementing a constructivist technique for developing counseling students' self-awareness and skill through work/task groups in the classroom. Four themes emerged in this study: group organization, insights/blind spots, personal perceptions/expectations, and practical application.

Students indicated that group organization impacted both their perceptions and subsequent engagement in the work group. This theme is linked to both the notion of the pre-group phenomenon, as well as the early stages of group development (norm setting) (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Early expectations and the possibility of creating a working group are dependent upon the symbiosis of group member expectations and group leader behaviors as they initially approach the task at hand. The successful resolution of any conflict or tension that arises during this earliest stage is imperative to successful completion of the group's objective. This experience seemed to be an example of constructivist learning where students actively engaged in and understood why the forming stage of any group is critical.

The experience of the work group intervention seemed to also contribute to greater insight with regard to blind spots. Students indicated that they were more aware of themselves in relationship to others, as well as their general sense of being in the group environment. Areas for interpersonal improvement were highlighted, particularly as it pertained to their counselor development. Most students seemed committed to working on aspects of self that were perceived somewhat negatively, and indicated that this was good interpersonal learning.

More powerful were the attributes that were revealed to participants through the group process:

The two areas where I found the most discrepancies [between self assessment and that of peers] were that of creator and observer. The most shocking for me was the role of creator. I have never really felt that I excelled in the role of creator. I like hearing other people's ideas and making them work. I don't think I realized that this is one aspect in the role of creator. My peers rated me much higher in the role of creator than I did myself. As we concluded the group project, I found this to be accurate and it actually empowered me and gave me more confidence when working through our project.

Given that part of the intervention was to receive feedback from peers, another theme that emerged in the study was personal perceptions/expectations. Students were presented with the feedback of others' experiences of them in group which provided an unexpected opportunity to work on personal areas that were perceived as needing self-improvement. Regardless of personal predispositions, the introduction of peer feedback seemed to have spurred many participants to deeper reflection and action. The series of quotations from a single participant in the following two paragraphs demonstrates the constructivist process of approaching a realistic dilemma from a stance of reflection (on self and peers), self-monitoring (comparison of personal assessment with that of peers), and cognitively engaging in complex problem solving which, in this case, lead to action (Walters, 1994).

Said one participant about providing feedback to peers, "I have been surprised to realize through this whole experience that I can be very critical of others on paper." This same respondent reported her perspective on her first self-assessment, "I assessed myself on my prior knowledge of how I usually like to work in a group." Then upon receiving peer feedback this

same group member stated, “I was somewhat disappointed that my work group did not see that [creator] part of me yet, and I knew I was going to work hard so they would see my creator side.”

Judging from the second round of assessment and feedback, this same participant reported,

I was happier with the outcome of this assessment and I think it was due to the fact that I was able to prove myself to be a worker. My peers graded me as a deliverer. I like to be the person that gets the ball rolling, follows through, and gets things done. I was so thrilled when I read the comments.

It would seem from the case described above and others that unexpected feedback received from peer work group members elicited feelings of surprise and resulted in the counselors-in-training being motivated to change perceptions and work intentionally on areas that were perceived as needing self-improvement. This was one of two common reactions to unexpected feedback with the second being the demonstration of resistant to the feedback from their peers by either ignoring the feedback or refuting its legitimacy. For example, one group member stated,

Luckily, I found an additional piece of myself more important than the issues discussed above [peers not having similar experiences] through this experience. As much as I would like to deny this realization, I was like a child throwing a temper tantrum because I did not get my way. I wanted to gather up my toys and go home.

Finally, students spoke to the impact upon their future group activities. It seemed as if there were two distinct aspects to this theme, as students spoke to insight regarding their future work with clients as well as the external confirmation of known personal strengths. The work groups highlighted areas for personal growth as it related to future work with clients. This theme not only reflects increased self-awareness, but also provided a means with which to increase their



self-efficacy regarding counseling work. While the simple act of raising self-awareness through this intervention would have provided benefit, the goal of the authors was to impact student development as counselors. The salience of this intervention in regards to practical applications as reported in this section provides the most powerful confirmation of its efficacy. Each of the four themes was supported by the inquiry auditor and member checks.

## **Implications**

**Counselor educators.** The impact of the participants' experiences in the study provides implications for counselor educators. The experiences of the participants identifying ways to be more effective as counselors and advocates may encourage counselor educators to implement a pedagogical process that encourages systematic reflection within the work group context. A detailed focus on curriculum and resource development has the potential to enhance the training and development of emerging counselors. Specifically, counselor educators can utilize an instrument similar to the one used in this project (see Appendix A) into core counseling courses to assist in facilitating student awareness surrounding further areas of growth and reflection.

As the researchers engaged students in the process of reflecting and observing group members throughout their work group experience, the authors considered what contributing factors impacted the discrepancies of group members' experiences. The researchers found themselves considering numerous questions. For example, as we facilitated the course(s) do we think the efficacy of the work groups had to do more with group member personality than the intervention? What about the combination of students? How does development and length in the program impact group member interactions? These questions help the teaching faculty to be mindful of constructivist principals and Richardson's "goals that focus on individual students

developing deep understandings in the subject matter of interest and habits of mind that aid in future learning” (2003, p.1627).

**Emerging counselors.** The emergent process of integrating the work group reflection within pedagogy challenges counselor educators to consider whether they believe emerging counselors should utilize this type of reflection with clients. Because the exchange of feedback is considered essential in promoting inter- and intra-personal learning within the therapeutic group context with clients (Morran & Stockton, 1991), it appears feasible that a tool and reflective process similar to the “Work Group Feedback Form” applied in this study may be effective for counselors use. This tool can provide a framework for counselors as they teach clients to receive and give both positive and corrective feedback.

### **Limitations**

Although the researchers combined methods to ensure credibility of the research findings, there were limitations present in the study. The limitations included the selection of participants (only participants from CACREP-accredited programs were selected), potential bias because students were in the author’s courses, the member check method, data collection method (reflection papers), and the duration between data collection and the member check.

The participants included in the study were from CACREP-accredited counselor training programs; thus, the inquiry did not investigate the experiences of participants from non-CACREP-accredited counselor training programs. It is unknown how the emergent process may have been affected or what uniqueness could have emerged if voice was given to participants from non-CACREP-accredited counselor training programs. Furthermore, participants were recruited only from the authors’ classes opening the possibility that coercion or social persuasion may have influenced their participation and responses.

The member check interview was limiting, in that, the themes were verified by email. Although the researchers worked diligently to accurately determine the accuracy of the themes through email, the subtle nuances of verbal and nonverbal communication remained unexplored. For example, if the researchers had used face-to-face interviews to conduct the member check, there would have been an opportunity to explore the participants' verbal and nonverbal communication patterns. Face-to-face interviews had the potential to promote fuller disclosure.

The data collection method was reflection papers which would not allow for follow-up questions like an interview would. Although the reflection papers yielded accurate results as to the participants' experience in their work groups, it did not allow for further clarification questions. Further clarification questions may have resulted in more themes or sub-themes to emerge. Finally, the use of reflection papers did not illicit verbal and non-verbal communication patterns which may have provided opportunity for further reflection.

The research also presented potential limitations because of the time that elapsed between data collection and the member check. The participants received a summary of the researchers' interpretations before the member check via written descriptions identifying the themes that emerged. Because the member check was conducted three semesters after the data was collected and analyzed, it is unknown what impact the lapse of time between the work group experience and reflection had on the emerging process.

A final limitation that emerged was the researchers' decision to not include a detailed demographic questionnaire. In the research methods section participants are described in the context of the universities where the participants were selected, however more detailed information regarding the participants (i.e. race, gender, religious orientation, sexual orientation) was not collected and could be potentially useful information. Further quantitative studies may

benefit using the TAIS and uncovering potential group differences and responses attained from the use of the instrument.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The present study provides insight for counselor educators who currently or might in the future use group work as part of their classroom pedagogy. Future studies might continue to explore the nature work group development through classroom interventions by assessing student awareness and skill development throughout their counselor education training instead of in a single class experience. Furthermore, the study of work group experiences, awareness, and skill development in clinical course settings and practica/internship placements would further enhance knowledge of the developmental nature of work group skill acquisition and the impact it has on counselor-in-training development.

The results of this study might provide an early stepping stone to future research designed to develop means of assessing work group attitudes and skills. These instruments might include measures of attitudes towards working in task groups, observation check lists that can be used by instructors, and supervisor questionnaires to be used in clinical training environments and professional settings. Regardless of future research endeavors, work groups will likely remain a salient aspect of counselor training and effective practice.

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Appendix A  
Intentional Work Group Reflection Worksheet

Counselor-in-Training Being Assessed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Course Description      CNS ED 6200       CNS ED 6250       CNS ED 6300   
 Completed by            Instructor       Peer       Self

Please rate the Counselor-in-Training along the following group roles.

1. Observer – assesses surroundings, has common or “street” sense, and anticipates reactions of other group members
2. Deliverer – implements actions, acts, and focuses on delivery
3. Creator – analyzes and plans, develops goals and organizes, and uses past to predict the future
4. Problem solver – solves problems, uses logic to facilitate group process, and rehearses before speaking

1. Observer – assesses surroundings, has common or “street” sense, and anticipates reactions of other group members

Rejects	Indifferent	Emerging	Accepts	Embraces
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Deliverer – implements actions, acts, and focuses on delivery

Rejects	Indifferent	Emerging	Accepts	Embraces
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Creator – analyzes and plans, develops goals and organizes, and uses past to predict the future

Rejects	Indifferent	Emerging	Accepts	Embraces
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Problem solver – solves problems, uses logic to facilitate group process, and rehearses before speaking

Rejects	Indifferent	Emerging	Accepts	Embraces
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. How much total time do you estimate that this counselor-in-training dedicated to your work group?

\_\_\_\_\_

6. What was this counselor-in-training’s contribution to the assigned task?

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

7. Describe how easy this counselor-in-training was to work with. (Was s/he a team player? Did they contribute in a meaningful way?)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_