Culture-Centred Exercises for Teaching Basic Group Microskills

Paul B. Pedersen
University of Hawaii
Allen E. Ivey
University of Massachusetts

ABSTRACT

Ten basic group microskills are defined, and matched with experiential and multicultural training exercises for teaching helping skills to group workers. Guidelines for debriefing are offered to help instructors fit the exercises into their teaching or training design. It is argued that these exercises will provide an opportunity to include community resource persons in the multicultural training process and by mobilizing the diverse backgrounds of students within the training setting as a teaching resource. The unique advantage of using microskills in training group workers is highlighted.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article définit dix « microcompétences » fondamentales relatives au travail de groupe et présente des exercices correspondants de formation expérientielle et multiculturelle à l'intention des enseignants chargés de former les travailleurs sociaux de groupe en relation d'aide. L'auteur recommande des lignes de conduite pour les séances-bilans afin d'aider les formateurs à intégrer ces exercices dans leur méthode d'enseignement ou de formation. Il soutient que ces exercices permettent d'inclure des personnes-ressources de la communauté dans le processus de formation multiculturelle et que, de plus, les antécédents variés des étudiants constituent de bonnes ressources pédagogiques dans le contexte de la formation. L'accent est mis sur l'avantage exceptionnel que procure l'emploi de microcompétences pour former les travailleurs sociaux de groupe.

Cultural issues often present some degree of risk when they arise in a group where the members come from diverse cultural backgrounds. This is perhaps especially true for classrooms for teaching and training group workers. The following twelve exercises were developed for teaching a microskills approach in the multicultural classroom with safety (Ivey & Ivey, 1999). The exercises are taken from the book by Pedersen, Ivey, Ivey, and Kuo (2001), and the thirteen specific microskills from the glossary of terms in the book by Ivey, Pedersen, and Ivey (2001). The exercises have been modified to focus on the multicultural aspects of each activity to highlight the indigenous resources available to each classroom both in the classroom and in the community.

Experiential exercises are widely used in counselling classes and their importance has been demonstrated in the literature (Anderson & Price, 2001; Pedersen, 1995, 2000; Merta, Wolfgang, & McNeil, 1993). However, the usefulness of these experiences depends a great deal on the debriefing of the activity linking that activity to the specific teaching/learning objectives of the classroom.

It is also important to protect the safety of participants in these activities particularly when the experience highlights multicultural values. Anderson and Price (2001) point out the dangers of dual-relationship and privacy issues associated with experiential activities. Sharpening our focus on specific cultural aspects and specific microskills, the following exercises help us avoid the ambiguity which might otherwise lead to misunderstanding in experiential activities.

Culture may be defined broadly to include such variables as: (a) ethnographic (ethnicity and nationality); (b) demographic (age, gender, and place of residence); (c) status (educational, social, and economic); and (d) affiliation (formal and informal). In this way, every classroom group is clearly multicultural; students will be able to discover both similarities and differences within their classroom or working groups. The following are the microskills presented in order of increasing complexity.

Exercise 1: Attending Behaviour

"The skills of effective group leadership depend on paying attention to what is going on in the group" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 279).

In an exercise titled "Outside Expert," three or four persons are sent out of the room while the rest of the group is organized into a culture. When the outside experts have left the room, the leader instructs the group to follow three rules, as follows: (a) that members can only respond with a "yes" or "no," a rule which will be disclosed to the experts when they return to help them work; (b) that men may not talk with female experts and women may not talk with male experts because it would be embarrassing and impolite; and (c) that the member will respond with a "yes" if the outside expert is smiling, because that is the response the expert seems to want and if the outside expert is not smiling the member will respond with a "no," as appropriate for all serious questions. When the outside experts return, they are instructed to ask "yes" or "no" questions of individual members. Each expert will try to make contact with each of the group members to gather data on who the group is, what they need/want, how they feel about the outside expert, where they live, and any other relevant information. At the end of five or six minutes the experts are asked to report back individually on what they have learned about this group.

Debriefing guidelines. The leader of this exercise may point out the importance of attending to nonverbal cues (e.g., gender and smiling) and realizing: (a) that "yes" may not always mean "yes" as we understand it; (b) that we tend to evaluate groups quickly as "good" or "bad;" and (c) that the "apparent" inconsistency may be an artifact of the expert (smiling/not-smiling) rather than the group and other patterns characteristic of any group that are typically even more complicated than in this three-rule group. Attending to cultural patterns is not an easy task but misunderstanding and misattribution are the likely consequences of not paying attention.

Exercise 2: Focusing

"The leader and/or group members frequently attend to one particular element of the group at a time. Focusing involves intentionally concentrating the

energy of group members individually and/or collectively" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 281).

Suggest that the group reflect on or share their experiences in the group thus far in two brief discussions (5 to 8 minutes in length). In the first episode, everyone will use an individualistic perspective exclusively and speak in the first person singular ("I," "me," "my," etc.) but not in the plural. In the second episode, everyone will use a collectivistic perspective exclusively (i.e., "we," "us," and "our") and avoid using the first person singular. The content of the discussion will be influenced by the individualistic or collective perspective adopted by the group.

Debriefing guidelines. By sharpening their focus on the use of singular or plural references in their adopted perspective, be it collectivistic or individualistic, participants can more easily rehearse the advantages of focusing for the more complex multiple variables of a culturally diverse group. The advantage of focusing both for the group members and the group leader are derived by the concentration of energy on a particular intentional and defined perspective. In the same way the potential dangers of a rigid perspective held by the group member or leader will also become apparent in the possible misuse of focusing.

Exercise 3: Pacing

Pacing refers to "Being with and empathizing with each member of the group, pairs and subgroups and the group itself. Pacing is another way to describe listening that builds trust — we listen to the stories and narratives of the group and walk with them" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 284).

Ask everyone to select a partner. Each dyad is given a piece of paper and a pen. The two people then take hold of the same pen to draw a house on the paper *without talking.* The silent nature of this activity needs to be emphasized. After two or three minutes the instructor asks them to stop and show their drawings to the group. The drawings are described as "data" on cultural patterns as they influence each member's behaviour.

Debriefing guidelines. Participants will comment on how much information was transferred nonverbally as they experienced the drawing of the house. In the debriefing, participants are invited to reflect on whether their mode of participating in this exercise was characterized by any of the following patterns: (a) being a leader (e.g., being a Number One, on top, in charge, up front, competitive); or (b) being a follower (e.g., the person to facilitate or stay in the background); (c) being relationship-oriented (e.g., helping the other person or being cooperative); and (d) being task-oriented (e.g., drawing a nice house). It is useful to talk about how task-oriented people have a difficult time in cultures that emphasize relationship and vice versa. It may be pointed out that the participant's understanding of "whose pen it was" and "who had control of the bottom of the pen" significantly influenced the experience of this exercise.

Exercise 4: Listening

"Listening is basic to the foundation microskills. The messages others send and the messages we receive may be quite different as we filter the messages through

our own biased perspective. Listening is being able to articulate accurately what was said, felt and meant by the individual or group" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 283).

Attach a sticky label with a positive adjective to the back of each group member. Then ask the members to interact with one another *as if* the sticky label were accurate to give feedback accordingly for about ten minutes. Try and get them to interact with each other in the group so that each member gets plenty of different feedback. Instruct them not to tell anyone what the label says. At the end of ten minutes, each individual makes a guess at what the label says, based on their analysis of the feedback, and takes the label off in turn to see how accurate they were in guessing.

Debriefing guidelines. The danger of our "self-reference criterion" in judging others is our assumption that each of us is normal and those who are different are not normal. In the debriefing, the leader can point out that we actually do wear labels and the labels might not be the ones we think are there or want to be there. We can learn to interpret what other people tell us by carefully listening and interpreting what they say and do toward us. Only then do we have the opportunity to "intentionally" change how we are being perceived by those other people, if we like, by first understanding us as others see us.

Exercise 5: Reframing

"There are many different ways of interpreting past or present experiences. Reframing provides the group member with an alternative frame of reference from which to view life situations and generate new stories" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 285).

Have one group member describe a fairly safe incident which occurred to him or her very recently. Then, the other members are asked to describe the same incident from the perspective of the other people (e.g., family, friends, and observers) who are mentioned in the incident story to see how those perspectives might be different. This incident can then be role-played by group members with alternative endings as appropriate.

Debriefing guidelines. In debriefing the exercise, it is important to protect the person who contributed the incident from possible embarrassment. The instructor needs to be sensitive to real world concerns that might be implicit within the incident. The use of critical incidents can be very meaningful for mobilizing the learning potential of every problem we encounter. Recognizing the multicultural complexity of each group allows us to see the multiple interpretations we might have of the same shared event.

Exercise 6: Reflecting Feelings

"Feelings and emotions are implicit to the group member's words and behaviors. The purpose of reflecting feeling is to make these implicit and sometimes hidden emotions explicit and clear to the group member" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 285).

Recruit a resource person to tell a story for about two to three minutes about a real incident that the person experienced. If the story is precise and sharply

focused, this exercise works better. Ask all members, including the resource person, to give a score from 1 (low) to 10 (high) as a measure of how much of the following emotions the resource person was experiencing in two time frames: (a) at the time of the event, and (b) when he or she was talking about the event. The list of emotions includes: love, happiness, fear, anger, contempt, mirth, surprise, determination, and disgust. Participants may choose other emotions if they like. When everyone has given scores on all emotions, the resource person describes her/his own ratings on the degree of feelings and tells the reason why he or she felt that much or little. The group members can then question the resource person regarding those emotions about which they guessed incorrectly. After having done this activity two or three times, it is hoped that the group members become much more accurate in reflecting the feelings of a resource person telling his or her story.

Debriefing guidelines. It is important to point out the natural tendency to project one's own "sympathetic" feelings on others (i.e., "how I would feel if it were me"). Such a projection can result in error because each of us experiences feelings in different ways and to different degrees even when we face the same event.

Exercise 7: Self-disclosure

"Group leaders and especially members take a big risk when they disclose something private about themselves. Self-disclosure is the process in which an individual member or leader takes the risk of revealing something about herself or himself that would be otherwise considered private so that the group can benefit in some way" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 285).

Have every member spend five minutes drawing symbols, using designs, figures, stick-figures, scribbles, or anything else, but no words. In this, members are asked to demonstrate how they have been influenced through participation in the group thus far. (Alternative topics could be "your culture" or "your identity") When everyone has finished or when a time limit of about 10 minutes is up, have each member of the group (or sub-groups if the group is larger than five persons) describe and explain his/her drawings of the symbols. Members are invited to describe how they have been influenced by the other members and how they may have influenced the others through their interaction in the group.

Debriefing guidelines. The leader might want to point out that the drawings indicate both similarities across members and individual differences. Many participants of this exercise in the past took their drawings very seriously and carefully folded them to save, and regarded their drawings as representations of themselves. Without the use of words, the exercise remains focused on the emotional and nonverbal aspects of the member's influence. As a result, the discussion typically becomes much less abstract or "intellectualized."

Exercise 8: Giving Feedback

"Feedback is a skill used in both basic attending and more advanced influencing microskills. The function of feedback is helping the individual group members

and/or the leader identify how they are being perceived by others on a particular topic or activity"(Ivey et al., 2001, p. 281).

Divide the members into dyads. Have one person be the speaker and the other the listener. The speaker will talk about his or her culture for one minute without interruption while the listener listens carefully *without taking notes.* When the first minute is up the leader asks the listener to repeat back everything the speaker said, felt and meant about his or her culture without interruption for one minute. When the second minute is up, both the speaker and the listener discuss for one minute how accurate and complete the listener was in repeating back what he or she heard. When the third minute is up then the speaker and the listener are asked to exchange their roles and repeat the exercise in the new roles. It is possible to use three persons in the exercise with the third person as an observer to report back what the speaker said and meant and how the speaker was feeling.

Debriefing guidelines. The leader may discuss how we define culture broadly to include: (a) ethnographic (e.g., ethnicity, nationality); (b) demographic (e.g., age, gender, place of residence); (c) status (e.g., social, educational, and economic backgrounds); and (d) affiliations (formal and/or informal ones) as part of our culture. The leader might also point out how difficult it is to really listen and repeat back what others said, felt and meant.

Exercise 9: Reflecting Meaning

"The relationship between and among behaviors, thoughts, feelings and their underlying meaning structure provides a context for the leader to understand a group member's behavior. Reflection of meaning is concerned with finding the deeply held thoughts and feelings underlying life experiences and reflecting those deeper meanings back to the group member for validation" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 285).

Bring a resource person into the class from a culture or population with which the group members are not likely to have had previous contact. It is important to find a resource person who is articulate and authentic. It is easy to find people who are authentic to a population but not articulate, and those who are articulate but not authentic. Ask the resource person to describe difficult decisions he or she has had to make. Have that person describe the situation leading to, but not including, the actual decision that was made. Stop the resource person at that point and have each group member predict what decision the resource person will have made and why. When everyone has made their prediction, have the resource person explain what decision was made and why it was made that way.

Debriefing guidelines. In debriefing this exercise, it is a good idea for you to have worked with the resource person ahead of time and to have coached that person to help you teach the concept of logical consequences or reflection of meaning to the class. Allow the group members to ask their questions directly of the resource person, while you back off from the foreground as a leader as much as you can. Be open to the possibility that the resource person's style might be quite different from your own.

Exercise 10: Conflict Management

"Conflict cannot always be resolved or eliminated and sometimes provides a valuable or painfully necessary element in a relationship. Conflict management is the process of observing individual and group conflict, as when the group leader is being challenged and reframing the conflict into an asset that can lead in a positive relationship" (Ivey et al., 2001, p. 280).

Ask for two volunteers from the group, one male and one female, to role-play a husband and a wife wanting to get a divorce. (A variation of this would be an employer in conflict with an employee, or any two persons in conflict.) Each of the two is asked to describe for a minute or two (but no longer than two minutes) why they want the divorce or how they have been badly treated by the other. At the end of these two brief and uninterrupted monologues, the rest of the group members are asked to play the role of a marriage counsellor (or a conflict manager) and to ask questions of one or the other person who remains in each given role. The other group members may work individually or build on one another's comments; it is desirable that everyone will have a chance to contribute. This process might seem a little chaotic at first, but it gets easier increasingly. The conflict will be seen to escalate as long as the member's comments focus on the "bad" behaviours that one or the other person is doing. (It is very hard not to focus on such behaviours.) The conflict will be less likely to escalate if the group members can shift their focus more toward positive topics and shared expectations. Questions such as this one might be used: "Tell me about when the two of you met and fell in love" This might help the couple in conflict see more clearly that they both want respect, fairness, trust, and safety. This might help them recognize that they share certain positive expectations even though their behaviours for expressing or getting such expectations might be different. The leader might interrupt the group members who act as "marriage counsellors" from time to time, by reminding them to avoid interpreting the behaviour out of context.

Debriefing guidelines. The leader may want to ask each of the two role players to tell how they felt during the interaction. A question may be asked as to which comments seemed most helpful and why. Behaviours have no meaning outside the cultural context where those behaviours have been learned and are being displayed. Win-win outcomes of successful conflict management can best be accomplished by attending to the cultural context.

CONCLUSION

These exercises are intended to introduce the reader to the value of using group microskills to teach indigenous and multicultural perspectives to students preparing to lead groups. Ten specific microskills have been selected and a classroom experience has been matched to each microskill to demonstrate how to examine the influence of multicultural aspects in a safe learning environment. As a final summary activity, the instructor is encouraged to ask group members to identify specifically how these activities have been useful to them.

The instructor may ask each group member to identify an "action plan" describing what they are going to do differently in the personal and professional groups to which they belong as a result of learning these microskills. The plan might involve a professional or a personal activity (or both). Trained students/participants may be encouraged to be specific and concrete by indicating a particular action to be taken.

We recommend that everyone be given about five minutes to come up with their action plan, and each person be invited to share that action plan in turn and the commitment to carry out the plan. We also suggest that the leader explore and identify ways in which each member can find support and carry out their plan through the network of community resources.

Each microskill may be universal in that people in all cultures use observation, listening and questioning skills, but the way that microskill is used is culturally influenced. By focusing on microskills the instructor and students will more easily recognize how group interactions are culturally constructed. These ten exercises demonstrate safe interactions for instructors to introduce as a way of helping students apply each microskill to culturally different contexts in an accurate, meaningful and appropriate way.

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About the Authors

Dr. Paul Pedersen is a Visiting Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Hawaii and a Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University. He has taught at the University of Minnesota, Syracuse University, and the University of Alabama at Birmingham. For six years he taught at universities in Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia. His research and writings focus on multicultural counseling, constructive conflict management in a cultural context, multicultural training, international students adjustment, simulations and structured experiences and multiculturalism as a Fourth Force.

Dr. Allen E. Ivey has been working in the multicultural area since 1966 when he wrote a series of basic multicultural competencies for counselling. He has sought to increase multicultural awareness in his microcounselling and developmental programs throughout his career. He can be reached at ivey@srnet.com.

Address correspondence to Dr. Paul Pedersen, 1777 Ala Moana Blvd #726 Hon. Hi. 96815, 808-944-2882. Email: <ppederse@hawaii.edu>.