Virtual and Face-to-Face Group Work: An Inter-Professional Supervision Course

by
Marcia Beaulieu, N. Ph. D.
Assistant Professor, BN Program
School of Nursing, McGill University
email: marcia.beaulieu@mcgill.ca

Francine Graner, M.S.W.
Coordinator of Field Education
School of Social Work
McGill University

Estelle Hopmeyer, M.S.W., S.W.
Associate Professor
School of Social Work
McGill University

Caroline Storr, MBA, OT(c), erg
Academic Coordinator of Clinical Education-OT
Faculty Lecturer
School of Physical and Occupational Therapy
McGill University

Anne Vogt, M.Sc.(A.), S-LP
Coordinator of Clinical Education
School of Communication Sciences and Disorders
McGill University

Description d'une expérience de développement d'un cours en ligne pour les superviseurs des programmes de santé et de services sociaux de l'Université McGill : cadre conceptuel, défis, forces et facteurs dont on doit tenir compte pour favoriser le développement du sentiment d'appartenance à une communauté.

Description of an experience in the development of an online course for field supervisors, in health and social services at McGill University: conceptual framework, challenges, strenghts, and factors to consider to help developing a sense of community belonging.

***Intervention*, la revue de l'Ordre des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec.**
Numéro 133, (2010.2) : 31-38.

Field placements are a core component of health and social service programs. During placements, quality supervision is essential to ensure that students learn how to assess and intervene competently and acquire an increasing ability to perform professional functions independently. Supervisors need guidelines, teaching tools and ongoing support from educational institutions to carry out their teaching, particularly in times of increased practitioner workloads. Teaching outcomes can be enhanced when students can also learn from each other in a group setting.

This paper will describe an inter-professional online supervision course consisting of five modules that was designed to meet supervisory knowledge and support needs for professional programs in Health and Social Services at McGill University. This initiative contributes to the growing body of literature regarding online professional development and builds on a presentation given at the 32nd International Symposium on Social Work with Groups in Montreal, Quebec, June 5th, 2010.

Following a brief background of the course, the paper will focus on the design, theoretical framework, and development of two communities of learner groups: the instructional team and the participant supervisors. This will be followed by a short discussion of implications for online group work. The paper will conclude with challenges, the strengths of the McGill model, and future directions.

BACKGROUND

Both the McGill Training and Human Resources Project and the Consortium national de formation en santé (CNFS) received substantial funding from Health Canada's Official Languages Health Contribution Program to assist provincial initiatives in ensuring first-language access to the full range of health and social services; English in Quebec and French in the rest of Canada. This funding allowed a team from the University of Ottawa, a member

of CNFS, to develop a number of modules for an online supervision course for French-speaking supervisors across Canada. The McGill project received permission to translate and use these modules for English-speaking supervisors in the sixteen regions of Quebec. Subsequently, the McGill instructional team revised these modules and developed and piloted a new module on Advanced Supervisory Practice.

COURSE DESIGN

Using an asynchronous teaching platform, an inter-professional group of field coordinators and professors from the Schools of Social Work, Nursing, Physical and Occupational Therapy and the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders developed five completely online modules. The goal was to create a voluntary, non-credit course, offered at no cost, that supervisors would find engaging, helpful, and accessible given their hectic schedules. This group shared common concerns of educating field supervisors in their respective disciplines and members had independently developed different teaching tools to cover the same content.

The existing CNFS modules (CNFS, 2005) were translated and re-examined to determine the suitability of the content and learning activities for the Quebec English speaking community. It became apparent that for this target audience, new audio-visual material and content development related to changes in the healthcare milieu would be required. New collaborative models of supervision, such as the 2:1 model of supervision, were included in our modules, along with strategies for implementation in the practice setting. The five modules developed at McGill consisted of i) Basics of Supervision ii) Building Trust iii) Learning Styles iv) Performance Evaluation and v) Advanced Supervisory Practice.

Table 1

Each module had a timed release date and ran for four weeks. Each week introduced a new sub-topic with an asynchronous threaded discussion enhancing participant engagement (Thomas and Storr, 2005). To create a sense of community, the first module included an online forum for participants to introduce themselves. To validate the modules and assess participant satisfaction, pre- and post-questionnaires were used. Upon completion of each module, participants received a certificate of completion. Concurrent with the online community of learners, the instructional team met regularly in a face-to-face forum to adjust content, plan future modules, and update audio-visual teaching clips.

The design of the CNFS modules (CNFS, 2005) and the McGill supervision modules (Training and Human Resources Development Project, 2005) is distinctly different from the other online supervision courses presently available in Canada developed in British Columbia (Kassam, Dryna, MacLeod, Neufeld & Tidball, 2007) and at the University of Western Ontario (Bossers & al., 2007). Other courses tend to follow the more traditional distance learning model and do not include the asynchronous, threaded, facilitated discussion feature that was deemed integral to the modules developed at McGill University. During our online course, the instructional team rotated to facilitate the weekly discussions based on open-ended questions relating to theoretical content and practice scenarios, contributing to increased interaction amongst the online participants, as well as with the instructors.

Diagram 1

According to Moore (Moore, 1993, as cited in Rovai, 2001), transactional distance is the psychological and communication space between learners and instructors. Learning is concerned with both content and process or, using Moore's terms, structure and dialogue. Moore defines structure as the amount of control exercised by the instructor in a learning environment and additional structure tends to increase psychological distance and decrease sense of community. Dialogue, as explained by Moore, is the amount of control exercised by the learner and more dialogue tends to decrease psychological distance and increase a sense of community. With the McGill modules, the dialogue is embedded in the course.

The key components of dialogue are sharing an experience, thought or question, obtaining a response and then reflecting on the exchange. The richness of the McGill modules is this

shared group exchange of both good and bad experiences, questions posed to share others' expertise, and exploration of possible responses.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of the online supervision courses was based on several different models. These included transactional distance (Moore, 1993, as cited in Rovai, 2001), online group facilitation (Lally & Barrett, 1999) and group tasks (Rovai, 2001). Additionally, Ashton's metaphor of the four hats (Ashton, & al., 1999 as cited in Maor, 2003) and Schiller's all women's group model (Schiller, 1995) provided useful frameworks for exploring and analyzing group processes.

Rovai (2001) suggests that both online instructors and face-to-face instructors must be conscious of two primary functions related to group facilitation: (1) group task and (2) building and maintaining the group. Group facilitation should lead to a shared construction of knowledge through involvement and dialogue. Lally and Barrett (1999) propose that computer-mediated communication is capable of supporting socio-emotional communication as well as task-oriented communication; in fact, without personal emotional communication the group will not be nurtured. In face-to-face groups, this tends to happen naturally as a skilled facilitator may initiate group sessions with a "social component". To build a virtual community of learners, it is important for instructors to encourage appropriate social exchange.

Four Hats

The 'four hats' (Ashton & al., 1999, as cited in Maor, 2003) refer to the pedagogical, managerial, technical, and social roles and activities that instructors need to assume in order to establish a successful online community of learners.

Pedagogical Hat: The pedagogical hat subsumes all course design elements and the concrete teaching and learning experience. One challenge for the instructional team was to promote a learning atmosphere where virtual group members could form a cohesive group, connect through dialogue-rich discussions, share reflections, and engage in peer-learning. We therefore designed the course to facilitate dialogue and reflection, and encourage participants to learn from each other. An instructional team member posted:

> "The instructional team can really take a back seat as the other participants…are really interacting with each other. We really appreciate the feedback you are providing each other."

Virtual group members quite quickly began to engage in virtual 'dialogue' as was evident in the following comment:

> "Also in the quiz, I see the question as comprising two stages…concrete experience…and then reflective observation…What do you think?"

Managerial Hat: To design a well-coordinated online course that could be easily maintained and function seamlessly, good managerial skills were essential. As previously described, the instructional team put considerable thought and effort into the course design and course facilitation.

Technical Hat: The technical hat is crucial for establishing an easily navigated, user-friendly platform that is free of technical 'glitches'. The IT support person was therefore integral to the operation of the course, including 'trouble-shooting', as required, on the 'Web-CT' platform. According to participant feedback, the online registration process was improved. Some 'tech-savvy' virtual group members also assumed the technical hat and occasionally offered helpful suggestions to others. A few expressed support to fellow group members who were experiencing technical difficulty. Fortunately, the technical solutions were successful and, over time, the instructional team found that the online courses became almost 'glitch-free'.

Social Hat: The social hat helps to create a supportive, positive atmosphere for interpersonal connection and communication flow. The virtual barrier of anonymity of the virtual group needed to be broken down, so that the members could view each other as 'real people'. The instructional team, therefore, decided to offer a friendly welcome, introduce themselves, share their background, and also to provide one 'fun fact' about themselves. This was in line with the initial developmental stage

of women's groups (Schiller, 1995). The virtual group members were encouraged to do the same and also to 'attach a photo', if they wished.

An instructional team member introduced herself in the following manner:

> Welcome. I teach in the School of Nursing. I participated in the pilot of this Module and learned a lot. Despite my French last name, I am a Jamaican-born Chinese. Boy, does that get me into trouble on the phone and when people meet me in person!

One of the virtual group members had the following to say about herself:

> I'm glad I finally got in. I am an OT at a Hospital. I work with injured workers and help them back into their workplaces through ergonomic assessments and job-coaching. Fun fact: My little baby is 15 months old and I spend most of my "free" time running around after him!

At the same time that emphasis was placed on the social hat for the virtual group, a parallel process was occurring with the instructional team. The team was composed of five female colleagues from various disciplines at McGill University. Our process closely followed the development stages of the 'all women groups' described by Schiller (1995). After an initial involvement as strangers, the team quickly "established a relational base", sharing teaching tools and supervision models. Following replacement of one member, the group gradually moved to Schiller's third stage of mutuality and interpersonal empathy. At this stage, issues unrelated to the supervision course, but related to 'work', were discussed (including accreditation and contracts with teaching centres) and a joint inter-professional workshop was organized. The workshop presented some administrative challenges, moving the team into Schiller's fourth stage: challenge and change. Collaboration on the conference presentation and this paper moved the group back to a high level of mutuality. During the last meeting of the team, the majority of time was spent on a lively discussion of issues at work, rather than on the online course.

COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

Our course design and group processes facilitated the emergence of an inter-professional community of learners. Such a community offers opportunities for students to "own their own learning and feel a sense of responsibility towards their own and the learning of others" (Maor, 2003). This may require challenging one's own ideas and beliefs, as well as reflecting on and responding to others' ideas and personal experiences. Peer learning is developed through a focused discourse (Maor: 130) as members work on common activities or towards common goals. The group structure creates a "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), which is the distance between an individual's actual problem-solving ability and his or her potential ability under the guidance of more capable peers or a teacher. Expected collaborative learning outcomes include co-construction of knowledge, individual development, distributed expertise, and a sense of belonging (Evans & Nicholson, 2003; Lally & Barrett, 1999; Maor, 2003).

Creating an online community of learners poses challenges; some are similar to those found in face-to-face teaching and learning situations while others are distinct to the virtual medium. According to Rovai (2001), the quality of interactions is the key variable in developing a sense of community online. He identified eight factors that may influence this variable: student-instructor ratio, transactional distance, social equality, also called democratization (Lally & Barrett, 1999), collaborative learning, group facilitation, self-directed learning, social presence and instructor immediacy, and lurking. The literature suggests that group size can influence interaction quality; too few members generate few interactions while too many members can overwhelm a single instructor and other participants, especially if the course has active discussions. A minimum of eight to ten and a maximum of twenty to thirty students are needed to promote good interactions (Rovai, 2001; Lally & Barrett, 1999). In face-to-face educational groups the same numbers can work to the benefit of participants. The social equality factor is described as equal opportunities to contribute to the discussion, without the time and social status constraints that may operate in face-to-face situations. Lurking refers to registering for a course without actively participating in the discussion. In effect, lurkers are bystanders

who lack commitment to the group and receive benefits without giving anything back. Social presence is indicated not only by postings but also by reference to others' contributions. These strategies allow individuals to know others are 'listening' and responding just as they would in a face-to-face interaction. Social exchange among participants is a further factor proposed to support developing a sense of community. Such exchanges may range from introductions at the beginning to ongoing social disclosure; they contribute to building trust and sharing openly (Maor, 2003; Lally & Barrett, 1999). Between October 2009 and January 2010, we mounted Module 3 (Learning Styles) and Module 4 (Performance Evaluation) of our series incorporating the above factors. A brief overview of how these factors operated will be followed by an examination of a subset of participant interactions to show an example of co-constructing knowledge, individual development, and distributed expertise.

Instructors

Instructors were responsible for group facilitation, social presence, and immediacy. Although we had not capped registration, fifteen and ten participants registered for modules three and four respectively. The low participant-to-facilitator ratio resulted in a high level of instructor social presence and immediacy with an average of nine to eleven instructor postings per week in Module 3. Mentioning participants' names, restating or referring to their comments, and threading the discussion to a specific participant's postings, signified social presence. Instructor immediacy declined in Module 4 during December. However, the highly self-directed group continued discussions until mid-January.

Over time, the instructors became an inter-professional group of learners, learning from and about each other. During planning sessions, they shared reflections, assigned facilitation responsibilities, and exchanged relevant articles, tools, models, presentations. Through discussion and consensus, they selected materials and issues for the modules. The following reflection on learning styles originated in a planning meeting and was later posted in a discussion forum.

> I agree that the Kolb model allows students (and supervisors) to understand how they learn…This model has allowed me to understand how I function in other parts of my working life. For example in meetings do you jump in with comments or do you think about the discussion and only weigh in the next day?

The Johari window from Social Work, a Learning Styles Inventory from Nursing, a model for two students to one supervisor by Communication Sciences and Disorders, and a grid for evaluation and feedback from Physical and Occupational Therapy were among the contributions that were integrated into the modules. Although these materials were highly relevant to the entire group, only the contributing member was aware they existed.

One example of learning about each others' professional world became something of a touchstone for our differences. Simply saying "remember the bracelet" generated much amusement as well as a reminder that we could not take for granted that we all operated in the same way. The bracelet incident involved a video clip of a nursing student being reprimanded by her supervisor for wearing a bracelet in a clinical setting. Both the Social Worker and the Speech-Language Pathologist were bewildered by the supervisor's behaviour. However, the Nurse and Occupational Therapist immediately understood that in professions with frequent therapeutic physical contact, infection control and maintaining skin integrity preclude wearing some jewellery. Hence, the context provided a platform for inter-professional group learning.

Participants

Participants were expected to be self directed, active in discussion, and responsive to others' postings. While sharing experiences, they described strategies and approaches they had found helpful, examined their practice, identified areas to improve, revealed feelings, and analyzed their own and students' behaviour.

Module 4 introduced the Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955) and a video clip showing a student's defensive response to feedback. The window has four panes: the *arena* where dialogue and sharing occur, the *blind spot*, unknown to an individual but possibly known

to others, the *façade* or public face that the individual chooses to reveal, and the *unknown* pane, that contains aspects hidden from both the individual and others. All participants applied the window to the video clip. The following was a typical reflection:

> The supervisor may start out the feedback session by providing the student with positive feedback in the arena pane…[and] also ask the student if there is anything else she would like to share about herself and how she feels the placement is going (façade pane).

Several postings agreed with exploring the "façade" pane since in so doing the student might share past evaluation experiences that could explain her behaviour. Others used the window to reflect on their own past experiences or to propose different future uses.

> I went through a similar situation…with my stagiaire (student) last year. I now find the Johari window a very useful tool to … open the subject of the reaction of the student to feedback….Another way could be to present the tool to the student so she can use it with her client and after, either ask her for an example of it in student-supervisor relation or …. make the relation between it and her reaction the next time I give her feedback.

Other participants liked the idea of sharing the window with the student, showing they were "listening". One participant reminded the group that the window works both ways by describing a personal "blind spot" experience.

> I have encountered a situation similar to this. I sensed the student was feeling uneasy and reacting defensively. I reiterated calmly, that she was doing a wonderful job and that the areas requiring improvement were very small compared to the areas in which she excelled….She thanked me for my candour and kind words and informed me she wasn't aware she was doing a great job because she didn't feel I related this to her. When I look back, I think this may be true…

Through exploring the topic from multiple perspectives and sharing approaches participants co-constructed knowledge, contributed to each others' development, and enhanced the group's competence level. The discussion forum had become a zone for proximal development.

As participants openly shared thoughts, feelings, and challenges associated with negative feedback, they admitted to insecurities and discomfort giving such feedback and anxiety and defensiveness receiving it. Several acknowledged this was an area for improvement. Comparing their own experiences as students with their current roles provided insights into the sources of their supervisory behaviour, their own professional growth, and the necessity for feedback in professional development. Such reflections also generated empathy and non-judgmental approaches to students, and great sensitivity to tone and language in giving negative feedback. One person said she searched for "tactful and supportive" language; another for the words "to soften the blow". The level of disclosure suggests that a high level of trust had been established among the participants and they could see they were not alone with their concerns.

Participants found learning from each other not only valuable, but they also appreciated the inter-professional nature of the group. Over the course of the two modules, various participants noted:

> "I liked reading non social work articles (on failing students)"; "I have always enjoyed reading the view points of the other professionals.
>
> It was nice to see the opinions of different professionals. The difference in backgrounds was also great. I learnt a few things from comments that were brought up in the discussion group."

Like the instructional team, the participants had become an inter-professional group of learners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ONLINE GROUP WORK

We found four important factors to consider for online group work:

1. <u>The need to be a skilled and active group facilitator</u>

Such facilitators aim to demonstrate their presence, deliberately encourage linkages among participants' contributions (including those of co-facilitators), and enrich the dialogue. In the online course, facilitators accomplished these goals by acknowledging almost all postings, adding new content, and posing lead questions. They advanced the dialogue by

such comments as: "What do the others think?" or "Have you thought about…?"

2. The need to exercise group-management skills

Group management requires attention to individual participant involvement. While literature suggests that online courses can reduce social hierarchy and create social equality, it became evident that several participants had more experience and expertise than others. Facilitators and participants responded positively to their postings validating their expertise and leadership. The very active participants did not become as domineering as they might have become in a face-to-face group. The absence of non-verbal communication in the virtual group and the design of the online course that did not require all participants to be together at a particular time may have helped lurkers have less impact on the group than the silent member in a face-to-face group.

3. The need to pay attention to group building and to develop the 'social hat'

This involves creating and supporting a 'safe' environment that can permit feedback and risk taking. Facilitators modelled risk taking through introductory postings, named participants in their reflections, and gave positive feedback and validation. This was done through comments such as: "Thank you for sharing this with us."

4. The need to be aware of and to respond to the stages of group development

Here the overall aim is to reduce facilitator centrality and increase participants' sense of community. In the initial stages of group development, there is a need to be aware of "approach/avoidance" behaviours and to encourage participation of lurkers. Later, during the "working stage", there is a need to encourage participant self-direction by commenting on how effectively the participants are doing this, for example: "the facilitators can take a backseat now."

STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The strengths of our online course reside in the content and discussion. The highly focused content was relevant to all disciplines and addressed several difficult issues that supervisors often face. The asynchronous discussion forum provided a space for thoughtful responses that opened possibilities for new ways of thinking about and approaching these issues. In addition, the on line modules met a need for continuing professional education and provided strong support for field supervisors. Positive comments, along with the post-module evaluations, attested to a high level of participant benefit and satisfaction. As for the instructional team, besides using our group work skills gained from teaching, we are now a highly functioning inter-professional group. The main challenges that we encountered included maintaining an adequate group size and group retention, providing timely and effective technical support, as well as the commitment of the instructional team to facilitate discussions. The inter-professional team is continuing to collaborate on improvements to their online course. Future directions include developing a student-focused online module and increasing circulation of the modules in order to support supervision in the field.

Notes

The views expressed here do not necessarily represent the official views of Health Canada.

The instructional group acknowledges the contribution of Mariette Xenopoulos, Educational Technology Consultant, to the development and maintenance of the online modules. It also acknowledges Jeanne Claessen, former Head of Clinical Program in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, for her contributions.

Descripteurs :

Université McGill // Enseignement assisté par ordinateur // Service social des groupes // Service social - Étude et enseignement (Éducation permanente) - Québec (Province)

McGill University // Computer-assisted instruction // Social group work // Social work - Study and teaching - Continuing education - Quebec (Province)

References

Bossers, A., Bezzina, M. B., Hobson, S., Kinsella, A., MacPhail, A., Schurr, S. (2007). *Preceptor Education Program (PEP) for Health Professionals and Students.* Extracted from the website of the University of Western Ontario on October 14, 2009: http://www.preceptor.ca.

Consortium national de formation en santé (2005). *Ateliers en ligne* : *répertoire « supervision ».* Extrait du site de l'University d'Ottawa le 18 septembre 2009 : http://www.cnfs.ca/uottawa/pages/activites_de_perfect.html.

Evans, J., & Nicholson, K. (2003). Building a community of learners: Manhattan College Elementary Education Program. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *Winter 2003*, 137-149.

Kassam, R., Drynan, D., MacLeod, E., Neufeld, L., & Tidball, G. (2007). *The BC Preceptor Development Initiative.* Extracted from the website of the University of British Columbia on October 14, 2009: http://www.practiceeducation.ca.

Lally, V., & Barrett, E. (1999). Building a learning community on-line: towards socio-academic interaction, *Research Papers in Education*, *14 (2)*, 147-163.

Luft, J., & Ingham, H. (1955). The Johari window, a graphic model of interpersonal awareness. *Proceedings of the western training laboratory in group development* (Los Angeles: UCLA).

Maor, D. (2003). The teacher's role in developing interaction and reflection in an online learning community, *Educational Media International*, *40 (1)*, 127-138.

Rovai, A. (2001). Building and sustaining community in asynchronous learning networks, *Internet and Higher Education*, *3*, 285-297.

Schiller, L. Y. (1995). *Stages of group development in women's groups: a relational model.* Chapter 10 in Group Work Practice in a Troubled Society: 117-137. N.Y.: Haworth Press, Kurland R. & Salmon R. (eds).

Thomas, A., & Storr, C. (2005). WebCT in occupational therapy clinical education: Implementing and evaluating a tool for peer learning and interaction, *Occupational Therapy International*, *12 (3)*, 162-179.

Training and Human Resources Development Project (2005). *The Art of Supervision: A Series of on-line Modules for Health and Social Services Professionals.* Extracted from the website of McGill University on November 11, 2009: http://www.mcgill.ca/hssaccess/two/supervision.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.