

*Applying Choice theory and reflection to enhance student outcomes in Group
Dynamics.*

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Students participating in a group dynamics course at the University of South Australia are introduced to the concept of internal control theory as a way of understanding personal behaviour. Individual choice in behaviour responses forms the basic construct of personal responsibility and this paradigm provides a framework of reflection for all individual behaviour. (Glasser, 1998; Kemp & Piltz, 1995) As individuals interact with one another in a myriad of group settings, they are required to respond to complex and dynamic stimuli, which require continuous behavioural choices. The ability to perceive and respond to this group dynamic in a productive way forms the basis of an individual's social competence. The importance of developing social competence and skills for working effectively in groups is significant because of the vast majority of time that individuals spend in family, work, and social group settings. The course in group dynamics focuses on presenting students with learning experiences to foster the development of emotional and intra personal intelligence and to help them to become critically reflective group members. (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1993; Gardner, 1983)

Group adventure initiative tasks (GAITs) are the central learning experience for students in the course. These novel, problem based challenges stimulate student interest and provide a relevant setting for learning about group dynamics and personal responsibility. (Kemp & Piltz, 1995; Preist, 1986). The groups for these initiative tasks are comprised of students from different programs including Bachelor of Applied Science (human movement) and Bachelor of Education (junior primary/ primary). There are between 10 –15 students of mixed gender who come together as a newly formed group for the 6 week initiative task phase of the course. During the first week, students are introduced to the procedural aspects of the tasks, organised into smaller management groups of 2-3 students and allocated roles and responsibilities for their specific task.

Each sub group is responsible for creating a novel and engaging scenario for the task, preparing the area and clarifying rules. Once the task is underway, the management sub group undertake roles in observing and recording aspects of individual and group functioning. Following the completion of the task there is a period of reflection facilitated through a structured debrief where group outcome and individual behaviour is examined and future action strategies identified. The group is then challenged to consider how this learning transfers to other aspects of their broader life settings.

The purpose of this article is to provide an outline of the theory and the models that are used to develop an understanding of individual behaviour and group functioning. The paper will describe the process of reflection used during the debriefs and illustrate how focus sheets serve as valuable tools to enhance the learning of this process. The value of the Group Adventure Initiative Tasks as a learning experience for developing personal

awareness, individual responsibility and group effectiveness will be outlined drawing on an analysis of the voices of students who have recently completed the course of study at the University of South.

Models to enhance understanding and reflection.

Models or frameworks are valuable tools that enable students to scaffold their learning. They are particularly relevant for developing an understanding of complex systems and processes such as those associated with personal behaviour and group functioning.

During the Group Dynamics course, three Models are used in this manner. The '*Wheel Model of group operation & performance*' (Piltz, 1998) is used to provide a framework for understanding the structure and functioning of groups, the 'Model of Responsible Action' (MRA) (Kemp & Piltz, 1995) provides a framework for examining personal responsibility and the *Model of Choice Theory* (Glasser, 1998) provides a framework for understanding behaviour using an internal control paradigm.

These models provide students with the theoretical understanding that is applied as they undertake a range of experiential learning tasks. Learning in these tasks is demonstrated through knowing in action and students work on developing their personal skills in order to become effective group participants. Learning to become reflective individuals and group members requires sophisticated personal skills and understandings. These include the ability to critically evaluate personal and group behaviour and the cognitive perception to view a range of behavioural options with anticipated consequences. In

addition to these reflective skills the individual must have the ability to undertake personal and collective goal setting and to action strategies for change.

Group Adventure Initiative Tasks provide the setting for exhibiting an array of personal behaviours in an interdependent group setting. The debrief provides an opportunity to undertake the process of reflection and to identify alternative response behaviours. This process is enhanced through the sensitive interface with the group facilitator and with focus sheets that guide individual thinking patterns and provide a framework for group analysis. (Priest & Gass, 1993; Schon, 1990)

Model of Responsible Action

Students are introduced to a variety of reading material that presents internal control theory as a framework for understanding individual behaviour. In an effort to gain clarity and develop understanding of the construct of responsibility the notion of *response* and *ability* is suggested as a way of describing the behavioural choices available to humans as they process and respond to a myriad of situations. The terms proactive and master response patterns have been used to describe behavioural actions that demonstrate the ability to exercise this choice. (Covey, 1990; Kemp & Piltz, 1995)

Model of Choice theory

William Glasser's Choice theory (1998) is an example of an internal control psychology that provides a framework for understanding why and how people behave. It is a

relationship based theory and as such has particular advantages when applied in the context of the group dynamics course of study. Effective group functioning occurs when positive group process are in place and when individuals are able to get along with others, to collaborate, to communicate, to resolve differences and work for a common good. Glasser's theory provides a comprehensive model for understanding the complexities of behaviour and it can be easily and immediately applied as a lens for reflection and understanding of self and of others within group contexts.

Choice theory suggests that all behaviour is purposeful and it is associated with the drive to satisfy genetically determined needs. The theory suggests that every human has a physiological and psychological basic needs profile programmed genetically around the physiological need for survival and the psychological needs for love and belonging, power, freedom and fun. An appreciation of individual need strength and compatibility has been suggested as a significant factor in developing and maintaining long-term relationships. (Glasser, 1998)

Key precepts of Choice theory indicate that all behaviour is chosen and that the only behaviour that a person has control over is their own. This paradigm can be quite challenging as it counters the dominant behavioural perspective (external control) where behaviour response is caused by some stimulus, someone or something, outside the individual. Choice theory also suggests that no body else can make you do or feel anything and all that any person can do to influence another is to give information. The choice of what to do with that information rests solely with the individual, as does the responsibility for the choice and its consequence. The concept of responsibility is

constructed as learning to choose behaviours that satisfy ones needs with consideration of others who are attempting to meet their own needs. (Glasser, 1998)

Total behaviour

When this theory is applied in personal and group settings it generates a proactive approach where individuals are encouraged to accept full responsibility for their own choice in behaviour. Significant in this theory is the understanding that behaviour refers to an holistic, complex set of inter related 'total' behaviour which includes thinking, feeling, acting and physiology. Thinking and acting are aspects of behaviour that are directly within an individual's control. Feelings and physiology are controlled indirectly through association with thinking and acting. All chosen behaviour involves an holistic response of thought, action, feeling and physiology. (Glasser, 1998).

Understanding behaviour

Choice theory provides an explanation of why and how humans behave using a Model to illustrate the components of a complex and dynamic system. Various concepts such as basic needs, choices and consequences, total behaviour, real world, perceived world, quality world, dynamic balance make up this framework. As each individual operates in their living environment, the unique lens through which they perceive the world shapes their view of the real world or reality. An individual's perceived reality is determined by an array of factors including the construct of their 'quality world'. Our quality world portrays a series of pictures of the special world that we would like to live in. It contains special people, our values and beliefs, things that we cherish, that we most like doing and that give us pleasure. The memory pieces within our quality world have been created

from birth and they are constantly modified throughout our lives. The pictures in our quality world of the way that we want to live our lives are framed by our genetic needs and they provide the source of motivation for what we do with our lives. (Glasser, 1998)

When our perceived reality and our quality world are out of balance due to one or more of our basic needs not being met then we experience conflict and our brain signals this distress to the system. This perturbation may be felt in a variety of ways and it provides the trigger for us to select from a range of response choices all of which have a set of consequences. Our choice of response represents total behaviour that is thoughts & actions, emotions and physiology. This behaviour then has an influence on the real world and on our perceived reality which adjusts the dynamic balance of real and quality worlds as basic needs are satisfied and the system readjusts to a new equilibrium.

The Wheel Model for group operation and performance.

The Wheel Model is a framework for understanding the variables and dynamics of group structure and functioning.(Piltz, 1998) It has been refined slightly since its original conception to better position elements of culture and strategic intent and to enable the overlay other models of individual action. The purpose of the framework however has remained unchanged in so far as it provides a skeleton for identifying the key variables that influence group operation and functioning. The selection of the ‘wheel’ as a metaphor for has proved to be a valuable analogy for learning about the dynamics of the system, for investigating group performance and for exploring ways to trouble shoot problems within the system.

Components of the Wheel

The following description will provide a general outline of the framework and the metaphor of the model. The central hub of the wheel model represents the heart of a groups operation and it contains the components of core values, strategic intent / mission vision, goals. The rim is closely related to the hub in that it contains elements relating to operating agreements, group norms and culture. These structures are significant in the functioning of the wheel and of the group. If the hub and the rim are strong, stable and well tuned then the wheel runs true. A group which has a clear, agreed upon common purpose and values that are explicit and collaboratively constructed is also likely to follow a true direction. The inculcation of group norms and the building of a group culture add strength to the foundation of operation for any group. A wheel that has a buckled rim or a poorly maintained hub is likely to experiences problems. Similarly a group that is lacking direction or experiencing major dysfunction is likely to have problems with these core components.

The spokes of the wheel represent a range of group processes including role enactment, problem solving, decision-making, communication, conflict resolution, and reflection. As the group engages in these processes individuals are required to demonstrate an array of skills that will influence the effectiveness of the process. If a wheel has very short spokes and it is rolled over in a single revolution the distance covered by the wheel is less than if the wheel had longer spokes. If group members have refined skills and are able to competently undertake these processes then the capability of the group to function effectively is enhanced and the group has the potential to achieve more.

A wheel can be fitted with different tyres in order to adjust to varying terrains and maintain its performance. The tyre depicts the ability of the group to demonstrate flexibility and to change with varying circumstances and still maintain its performance.

Strategies for enhancing self reflection

Debriefing provides the central learning forum for reflection and it requires sensitive and skilful facilitation. Paramount is the establishment of a safe, supportive learning environment in which trust, respect and responsibility are established as explicit norms. The facilitator requires an array of skills in addition to a sound appreciation of relevant theory. They must be a skilled communicator, sensitive to individual differences, empathetic, able to actively listen and pose questions to engage personal reflection that encourage individuals to think from different perspectives. An important part of the debrief experience is to progressively distribute the ownership of it to the students and to allow them to exhibit their responsibility. Evidence of students accepting this responsibility is demonstrated through evolving individual behaviour that leads to increased levels of group effectiveness during the GAITs. It is also reflected in the depth of discussion amongst the group about application of personal behavioural choices in other aspects of their lives.

A self-analysis focus sheet is used, as a tool to develop reflective thinking patterns and to direct the process of goal setting. Students are encouraged to consider total behaviour associated with a chosen significant event emerging in one of the GAITs. The focus sheet presents a series of questions that require individuals to identify feelings, consider physiology, recall thinking patterns and describe actions and consequences. They are

then asked to consider alternative response behaviours and the potential impact of these choices on group functioning. The final section of the focus sheet requires students to transfer this reflective thinking style to other aspects of their life considering behavioural choices and the consequences on others in the family, work, or social group. It concludes with a goal setting exercise and action strategies for prescribing personal behavioural change.

The wheel focus sheet is used as a checklist to guide reflection and consolidate learning about group structure and function. During the GAITs, it is also used as an instrument to record and monitor the progressive development of the group. The information about the development of the group provides specific feedback for the group on its ongoing performance that can be used as a form of quality assurance. The historical context and specific examples of individual action also provides relevant data for students to draw on as they undertake their group analysis assignment.

The debrief process and both focus sheets are used collectively to enhance student learning outcomes and to identify the connections between personal and group development. Through the series of GAITs, students are encouraged to recognise the alternate range of behavioural choices that exist for them, and identify how their choices impact on the effective functioning of their group.

Value of this learning experience

Results from course evaluations over an 8-year period clearly indicate high levels of student satisfaction with this course of study and specifically with the GAIT experience.

The GAITs have been consistently rated as the most valuable and enjoyable aspect of the course. Examples of student voice concerning the GAIT in 2001 are included below.

'.. the group GAITs helped me to understand the deep dynamics that are involved within groups and how they are very important issues that we need to be aware of in real life situations.'

'I learnt a lot from the self analysis from the GAITs. It made me really look at myself and how I could change for the better.'

'I enjoyed evaluating how our GAIT group functioned as it mirrored many situations in other life settings ..'

'I found that the theory that we were learning could be seen in action in the initiatives'

'GAITs .. more aware of what occurs in group situations and how to modify behaviours'

There is consistent evidence to suggest that this type of structured learning experience is an effective one for enhancing a deeper understanding of personal and group development. It also has proven to be a significant experience for fostering the development of a broad range of generic competencies including critical and creative thinking, communication skills, lifelong learning, the ability to work independent and collaboratively.

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