

## The Development of a Support Seminar for Entering Graduate Level Students in School Counselling/Counselling Psychology Programs

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### BACKGROUND

Many students who enter Canadian graduate programmes in either counselling psychology or school counselling are new to the university and, perhaps, the city in which the programme is offered. New graduate students may not have taken any university courses since having received their first degrees several years prior to enrollment in their current programmes. Words like "isolated," "frenzied," "confused," and "overburdened" represent some of these students' experiences of the first term of their programmes.

During the 1985-86 winter session, the Department of Psychological Foundations in Education at the University of Victoria offered a non-credit seminar to students entering Masters level programmes. The seminar was initially conceived and organized by Dr. Rey Carr, in consultation with other interested faculty members and former students of the two programmes.

The proposed seminar was based on past students indicating that a formal personal and professional peer support group would have been a valuable addition to their programmes. In previous years, groups of students had made various attempts at such an enterprise. For example, one group hired a graduate from the doctoral programme to facilitate an advanced group processes seminar. Another group formed a peer counselling support group. However, prior to the fall of 1985, the Department had neither formally proposed nor encouraged the formation of a support group.

Questionnaires were sent to 24 Canadian universities who are registered as offering masters level programmes in counselling psychology or school counselling. The questions were:

1. Has your department undertaken or is your department currently undertaking any systematic or deliberate activities to support students who are entering into the first year of their M.A./M.Ed. Counselling programmes? (yes/no)
2. If "yes," could you describe these activities and include the year(s) in which these activities were undertaken and/or whether or not you are currently undertaking such activities?
3. Whether you answered "yes" or "no," could you indicate if you believe these activities are a worthwhile endeavour for a graduate department (yes/no)

Eight responses were received. Although the respondents cannot be presumed to be representative of the total number of Canadian counselling psychology or school counselling programmes, the answers which they gave to our three questions were interesting in their divergence. One university reported that it was not currently operating either an M.A. or an M.Ed. programme. Two respondents said that their universities did not offer any such activities. In response to whether or not such activities might be worthwhile, one wrote "doubtful," while the other entered "N/A," Two other universities stated that, although they did not currently offer "support" activities, both believed the activities would be worthwhile. However, both indicated that lack of resources, particularly faculty time, prevented such activities from being undertaken. Three other respondents said that they were currently offering support activities to their students. One of the universities offers a three-day professional retreat to incoming students while the others offer group process seminars. One of these noted that their seminar was non-credit.

#### IMPLEMENTATION

A written introduction to the intent of the seminar was received by all first-year graduate students prior to the first scheduled meeting. In the introduction, the non-credit course was referred to as a "Seminar on Personal/Professional Growth, Development, and Integration." The intentions of the seminar organizers were to provide a timetabled opportunity for these students to gather to discuss both personal and professional issues and to pursue interests and activities that group members indicated were personally or professionally relevant. Due to the unstructured nature of the course, which out of necessity remained open-ended, the student participants dubbed their meetings the "non-seminar."

Two second-year students, one in the M.A. programme and one in the M.Ed. programme, were approached to facilitate the weekly sessions. A first-year provisional doctoral candidate was approached to be the facilitators' supervisor. The student supervisor would report to Dr. Carr only in general terms to ensure that no professor would have direct involvement in the student group and that potential confidentiality issues would be minimized. Feedback from previous students had led the planners to conclude that, while students valued the contributions and skills of faculty, the group was likely to have greater depth and meaning if participants could be assured privacy or separation from persons who had some evaluative and supervisory responsibilities. Additional benefits of this approach included minimizing further burden to faculty time and creating an experience which would be valuable for the co-facilitators and the supervisor.

## THE MEETINGS

The "non-seminar" was timetabled for 2 hours on Monday afternoons. In all, there were 11 weekly sessions, the first one concurrent with the beginning of the fall semester and the last occurring during the final week of classes for the term. The co-facilitators and the supervisor met each week on the Wednesday following the seminar to discuss process and content of the previous session and to plan for the next Monday. At these meetings, the co-facilitators were able to work on their own personal and professional growth, in addition to ensuring that the supervisor was well apprised of the situation in the group. These meetings varied in length from 1 to 3 hours, depending on the dynamics of the group session being discussed and the issues raised by either of the facilitators. The co-facilitators met for lunch each week just prior to the seminar meeting to finalize plans.

Prior to the first session, the supervisor and the facilitators negotiated roles and planned the session. The purpose of the first session was to introduce the idea of the seminar and all of the interested parties to one another. Therefore, the supervisor and the co-facilitators all attended. As there were 17 participants, the session took a full 2 hours. Two issues were raised. One was whether or not the group was a personal support group or a professional seminar. Although the thrust of the seminar was left in the group's hands, the supervisor clearly stated that the group was not intended to be a therapy group. This appeared to be acceptable to the participants. The other was a confidentiality issue. The co-leaders and supervisor reassured the group that, whatever the issues discussed in the group, the information would remain within the group. Even attendance issues would be dealt with by the group without departmental or student supervisory committee involvement.

During the first sessions, specific information, such as library research orientation and departmental information helpful to new students, was shared. The group agreed upon a general format during the third session. However, the framework was not actually followed until the seventh session when it was written on a chalkboard by one of the facilitators. The outline included business items, information sharing, concerns or questions, and a main topic which had been decided at the previous session or spontaneously arose from participant concerns.

The initial sessions allowed the participants to build enough trust with one another so that, by the third meeting, the members were beginning to become more visible. A few members undertook group leadership responsibilities such as organizing activities or leading discussions. Some became increasingly more active and supportive of the group meetings while others became more resistant to or withdrawn from the group process.

Because the seminar planners intended the sessions to be defined by

the participants' needs, the members devoted hours attempting to sort out what, in fact, they wanted to do with the allotted time. These lengthy discussions marked a conflict stage where the group members challenged and, at times, confronted on another in their attempts to approach cohesion. A consensus of purpose was not easily achieved. However, by the end of the term, the group had reached agreement concerning two issues. Monday afternoon meetings would continue during the next semester and the large group would divide into two smaller groups.

### EVALUATION

Two questionnaires were administered to the support group. One was given at the beginning of the first session prior to any explanations or discussions concerning the group among its members. The seminar members were asked to rate their responses on a five-point Likert-type scale to questions concerning attendance, learning and personal growth, meeting other students in the programme, and involvement in the university community. The post-seminar questionnaire asked students to rate their reactions to the same questions after having participated in the group for one semester.

Fourteen people responded to the first and thirteen responded to the second questionnaire. Twelve sets of matched pre- and post-seminar questionnaire responses were available for analysis. In general, the results indicated that the students felt at least somewhat accepting of required attendance at the seminar, both at the beginning (94%) and at the end (77%) of the semester. A majority of the students (68%) felt that the seminar had assisted them in their learning and development as helping professionals.

Overall, the support seminar seems to have been perceived as positive and helpful by the majority of students involved. From the beginning to the end of the semester, the trend was to either increase their positive feelings (48%) or to retain the same level of positive feelings (16%) toward the seminar. Three reported mixed feelings about the seminar at the beginning and at the end of the semester. One student changed from positive feelings at the beginning to negative feelings at the end of the semester.

Responses to the first questionnaire suggest that, prior to the seminar, half of the students felt involved in the university community and almost half (49%) felt the seminar would help them to feel more involved. At the end of the semester, almost all of the students (94%) felt that the support seminar had probably helped them to relate to their peers in the programme and all of the students felt involved in the university community.