SECTION 2

The Tutorial Group and Tutorial Process

In PBL, a great deal of the learning process takes place in the tutorial group where students carry out their main work (Barrows, 1992). The major difference between the group work and tutorial groups is that the dynamic interplay is a part of the task and the educational process in PBL (Hammar Chiriac, 2008). Group dynamics are regarded as important means for learning and professional development. A reasonable assumption may be that the interaction within the tutorials will have a great impact on the quality of learning (Savin-Baden and Howell Major, 2004). Even though one of the learning advantages of PBL is theorized as being embedded in the group dynamics, this aspect is not focused in research about PBL or tutorial groups. The study by Hammar Chiriac, 2008,included in this section, proposes a model to interpret and explain group dynamics in PBL, based on the combination of two theories on group work.

Roles and functions in the group

The members of an efficient and productive discussion group must provide for meeting two kinds of needs--what it takes to do the job, and what it takes to strengthen and maintain the group. What members do to serve group needs may be called functional roles. Statements and behaviors that tend to make the group inefficient or weak may be called nonfunctional roles.

Here is a list of the kinds of contributions that are performed by one or several group members:

Task Roles (functions required in selecting and carrying out a group task, given below in sequence).

- Initiating: getting things started, suggesting new ideas, suggesting new definitions of the problem, trying a new attack on the problem, or introducing new material.

- Giving and asking for information: offering facts or generalizations, sharing understanding of a topic, giving information freely, soliciting everyone's input, gathering information.

- Giving and asking for reactions: stating opinions and reactions, sharing feelings about what has been said, getting reactions from all group members, seeking clarification of values, suggestions or ideas.

- Restating and giving examples: by restating, the presenter of the original idea gets feedback; restating clarifies ideas. Examples reinforce meaning and aid understanding, they aid in the search for accurate statements of and understanding of an idea.

- Confronting and reality testing: challenging ideas and information. Often groups allow misinformation and misstatements to pass by out of politeness. Learning takes place when ideas are challenged (politely, of course). Try to envision how a proposal might work if adopted, how an idea will work in the real world.

- Clarifying, synthesizing and summarizing: clarifying ideas and previous statements, pulling together related ideas or suggestions after the group has discussed them. Clarifying, synthesizing and summarizing help provide closure.

Group building and maintenance roles (functions required in strengthening and maintaining group life and activities).

- Encouraging and sponsoring: being friendly warm, responsive to others, praising other for their ideas, agreeing with an accepting contributions of others, encouraging all members to contribute, sponsoring ideas of others, especially those who may be less aggressive in speaking out.

- Gate keeping and time keeping: trying to make it possible for another member to make a contribution to the group by saying, "We haven't heard from Jim yet," or suggesting limited talking time for everyone so that all will have a chance to be heard, limiting discussion on a topic to an agreed-upon time limit.

- Standard setting: expressing standards for the group to use in choosing its content or procedures or in evaluating its decisions, reminding the group to avoid decisions which conflict with group standards.
- Following: going along with decisions of the group, thoughtfully accepting ideas of others, serving as audience during group discussion.

Both group task and maintenance roles

- Evaluating: submitting group decisions or accomplishments to comparison with group standards, measuring accomplishments against goals.

- Diagnosing: determining sources of difficulties, appropriate steps to take next and analyzing the main blocks to progress.

- Testing for consensus: tentatively asking for group opinions in order to find out whether the group is nearing consensus on a decision, sending up trial balloons to test group opinions.

- Mediating: harmonizing, conciliating differences in points of view, making compromise solutions.

- Relieving tension: draining off negative feeling by jesting or pouring oil on troubled waters, putting a tense situation in a wider context.

Types of non-functional behavior

- Being aggressive: working for status by criticizing or blaming others, showing hostility against the group or some individual, deflating the ego or status of others.

- Blocking: interfering with the progress of the group by going off on a tangent, citing personal experiences unrelated to the problem, arguing too much on a point, rejecting ideas without consideration.

- Self-Confessing: using the group as a sounding board, expressing personal, non-group-oriented feelings or points of view.

- Competing: vying with others to produce the best idea, to talk the most, to play the most roles, to gain favor with a leader.

- Seeking sympathy: trying to induce other group members to be sympathetic to one's problems or misfortunes, deploring one's own situation, or disparaging one's own ideas to gain compliments or support.

- Special pleading: introducing or supporting suggestions related to one's own pet concerns or philosophies lobbying.

- Horsing around: clowning continually, joking, mimicking and otherwise disrupting the work and progress of the group.

- Seeking recognition: attempting to call attention to one's self by loud or excessive talking, extreme ideas, and unusual behavior.

- Withdrawing: acting indifferent or passive, not participating, daydreaming, and whispering to others.

Included in this section are the following references:
Barrows HS. The Tutorial Process (1988). Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Springfield, Illinois:
 Review of the general Principles for tutorial teaching (pg. 19-20)
 The first session for a new group (pg. 21-25)
 Appendix I – The PB/SDL tutorial process (pg. 51-56)
 Appendix II – A Series of Hypothetical Tutor-student Interactions (pg. 57-64)

Hammar Chiriac E. A scheme for understanding group processes in problem-based learning. Higher Education: 55:505-518, 2008.
http://www.springerlink.com/content/0006u17527876201/

Johnson DW, Johnson FP. Joining together: group theory and group skills (4th ed). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Pg. 20: Comparison of Effective and Ineffective Groups.