

Forming peer practice groups using a sociometric process by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

Abstract

In this example, your training group has seventeen students, and will be forming peer practice groups during an upcoming training weekend. The following are some suggestions for ways to accomplish this using a sociometric process. Criteria are offered which relate to a variety of issues being considered.

Peer practice groups

Most training groups have people with varying levels of skill. And, some persons have more experience and are chosen more often to direct thereby increasing their access to practicing the role of director. A side benefit of peer practice groups is to increase the opportunities for all students to have the role and to experience feedback in a smaller, more contained unit. The group size of seventeen can be divided in a number of ways: (1) 3 groups of three, 2 of four; (2) 3 groups of four, 1 group of five; (3) 2 groups of six, one group of five; (4) 2 group of 5, one group of seven, etc. Having this flexibility may make it easier to make assignments on the data collected from the sociometric process.

Peer practice groups offer more opportunities to direct and they also provide opportunities for the group members to explore personal or work related issues in a small group. It is important to have the understanding that bringing issues before the small groups which involve unfinished business with the larger group or any of its members is to be discouraged. It helps to have a contract that these sorts of issues are reported into the whole group when the larger group reconvenes for its regular training session. Also, the protagonist agrees to speak directly to any group member about an issue which came up which involves him/her, sharing the issue and ways the person was portrayed in action. This reduces the "keeping of secrets" which can weigh the group down and contribute to divisiveness.

Generating criteria in the group

The actual wording of the criteria can identify some of the variables in the selection of potential group makeup, such as: proximity and the ease of getting together for practice; ease in sharing personal data; having others who have strengths in processing; the manner and style in the delivery of critical remarks; the level of spontaneity they have and engender in others. To accommodate specific variables the criteria may have "qualifiers" attached. For example, "Of the people living closest to me geographically, whom do I choose to be in a small group with to practice directing, twice monthly for two hours?"

Here are a few possible criteria:

1. Whom do I choose, not choose or am neutral to being in a group to practice directing?
2. In order to have the rigorous processing I need at this stage in my directing, whom do I choose to have in a peer practice group with me?
3. In order to feel the support and encouragement I need in my directing at this point, whom do I choose to be with in a peer practice group?
4. Since I get very annoyed and upset when people are late or cancel on me, whom do I choose to be in a peer practice group which will meet on time and with fewer cancellations?
5. Of the people I know less well, whom do I want to be in a peer practice group with as a way of extending my knowledge of them as a person?
6. Of the people I imagine to be at a similar level of skill as me, whom do I choose to be in a peer practice group with?
7. Of the people living near me, whom do I choose to be with in a peer practice group?

Generation of data, pen and paper or in action

The group may want to use this opportunity to complete a full scale, classical sociometric test. Once the criterion is selected each person writes on an objective data sheet 1 for the sociometric test their choices (1) to choose to be with in a peer practice group, (2) to not be with; and (3) choose to be neutral toward the person on this criterion. A perceptual data sheet may also be completed in order that group members may check out their perceptions. Having time to share the data in dyads is important. This can be accomplished using a pairing format called "odance card" (Swenson, 2006)²

By talking with one another in private group members begin to know more fully their position in the group, and know where they have reciprocal connections. Using pen and paper each person is making their choices known using the same time frame.

Choices made in action are impacted by the subtle movements toward and away. The time frame stretches to allow slight adjustments due to perceptions people have about whether or not they are actually a choice for someone or not. Still, group members can all see the possibilities for groups forming, take into account the size of groups and the range of strong-to-weak connections. In groups where part of the goal is that each person end up in a satisfactory peer group, the members will make adjustments to help meet this goal as much as possible.

Persons in the group can be asked to record choices made in action. As well, the facilitator can ask that people indicate a choice by placing a hand on the shoulder of the person they are choosing. When the arms are extended, and everyone is facing into the circle, it is possible to see the group's action sociogram. You may need to go to several levels of choice before the level of choice reveals sufficient inclusion to begin to form groups.

1 Hale, Ann E. (1985) Conducting Clinical Sociometric Explorations
(workbook edition) Roanoke, VA, Royal Publishing Co.. p. 179.

2 Swenson, Eva (2006) "Using Dance Cards to Facilitate the Sharing
Phase in Sociometric Explorations" • Journal of Group Psychotherapy,
Psychodrama and Sociometry, Volume 59, no. 3, (Fall, 2006) pp. 109-116.

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