

USING VANCE PEAVY'S GROUP METHOD : THE EXAMPLE OF DEVELOPING INTERCULTURAL STRENGTHS

DR. SAULI PUUKARI

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Introduction

When we meet people from other cultures as teachers or counsellors it is important that we are aware of our own cultural background and personal history . We may also have knowledge, skills, previous experiences, and other capabilities which can be very useful in meeting people from different cultures. We can regard all these as our strengths. I will briefly present a group method developed by Vance Peavy and discuss how it can be used in developing intercultural strengths.

I first learned the group method in a workshop given by Vance Peavy and after that I have used it successfully in a number of different situations. The method has proved to be very useful also in intercultural situations. I have used it as part of training for guidance counsellors and other professionals in developing both general and specifically intercultural counselling strengths. The group method appears to be very flexible and works well for a variety of age levels and professions. A counsellor or a teacher can easily modify the method for different purposes by changing the instructions. I will now present the group method in the form I have usually used it and share ideas how it can be used for developing personal strengths, particularly in intercultural teaching and counselling. For a more detailed description of the group method, please refer to Peavy 1993 and Peavy 1997.

1. Vance Peavy's Group Method in a Nutshell

The basic idea of the method is to help participants become more aware of their personal strengths and encourage them in using and further developing their strengths. The method works well only in small groups including about 5 – 8 members. The leader of the group first tells about the method for the group and demonstrates it by asking a volunteer from the group to work with him or her as an example case.

Participants tell a "success story"

The participants tell stories in turns about their past experiences in a situation where they have been successful in one way or another. The content area of the situation is given by the

leader and it depends on the goal (what specific strengths are to be developed). Let's assume now that you as a leader wish to develop participants' strengths in, for example, making first contacts with people from other cultures.

Other participants listen to each story carefully and make notes about strengths of the story-teller

You as the leader explain that personal strengths, here, have a very broad meaning, including knowledge, skills, experiences, features of personality, empathy etc. Do not define these terms "scientifically" but encourage participants to make notes of all kinds of personal strengths that each story teller appears to have. The strengths can be either clearly seen in the story or they can be inferred from the story. Note making is supposed to be started during each story and you should give a couple of minutes for the

participants to complete their notes after each story ends.

After each story the participants share their observations about the personal strengths

You now ask each participant to tell, in turns, what personal strengths they saw in the story-teller, one strength at a time. You can ask the story-teller to briefly tell what he or she thinks about the comments of other participants. Depending on the ages and backgrounds of the group members, many of the told strengths may already be known to the story-teller, but usually there are a couple of strengths that are new to him or her. After the strengths have been briefly – but with no hurry – discussed, the participants give their notes to the story-teller, and the next participant tells his or her story.

At the end of the group session the leader can summarise key observations, ask about the experiences and encourage the participants to use and develop their strengths.

You as the leader are supposed to observe the process, and at the end of the session you can make concluding remarks by summarising key observations, perhaps making some connections to possible other activities or studies of the group members. This can help the participants in linking their personal strengths, particularly the ones they have just discovered, with different contexts and encourage them to use their strengths more often.

2. Variations of the Group Method

Instructions for different purposes

Vance Peavy's group method can be easily modified by changing the instructions. The most obvious change is the content area of the story. You can use the method for different purposes just by asking participants to choose the content area of the story according to the goals you have in mind. For instance, I have used the method at the beginning of our school counsellor education courses asking the new students tell a story about a situation where they have succeeded to help another person, maybe a student, by providing them guidance and/or counselling in one way or another. This content area fits well with the goals of the counsellor training and helps the students become more aware of their counselling-related strengths. In inservice-training courses on

multicultural counselling (see e.g. Puukari & Launikari 2002) I have asked the participants to tell a story about a situation where they have succeeded in helping an individual or a group of people from other cultures in one way or another.

I have also used the method with elderly people who work as volunteers in a church group which takes care of catering and conversations with people who come to seek company of other people. I asked these volunteers to tell about a situation where they had succeeded in making a good contact with a person during a conversation. Furthermore, the method could be adapted for use in the classroom situation for Social Personal and Health Education group work. Guidance counsellors involved in the training of in-school peer mentors could also use this method to focus on the 'strengths' of a good mentor. These are only a very small sample of modifications that could be done. Use your imagination to create new ideas on how to apply Vance Peavy's group method!

3. The Role of the Group Leader

The role of the group leader may vary considerably depending on the members of the group. With a group of well-educated, experienced and outgoing people who have some common goals, the role of the leader can be quite small, whereas with a more heterogenous group the leader may have to be very active in supporting, explaining and encouraging the group members. One important aspect in leading the group is to make sure that all participants feel comfortable and get positive feedback from other participants. Some people may have learned that giving feedback means being critical, but here the idea is to find personal strengths, not weaknesses.

It is common that with almost every group some individuals need more encouragement than others. Particularly, if you are working with young people, who have serious difficulties, it is of crucial importance that you make every effort you can to ensure that the atmosphere in the group is positive and supportive. This may sometimes mean that you need to select the participants of the group to make sure that certain individuals who do not get along well together are not in the same group.

This group method is mainly intended for encouraging the participants by helping them

become more aware of their personal strengths, not, for instance, for conflict-resolution situations. However, the method could work well for a group of "problem" individuals who have already started understanding the nature of their problems and need to become more aware of their personal strengths in social situations. This suggests that the possibilities and target groups of Vance Peavy's group method can be many, but you have to have goals for which it is suitable and you need to consider selection of participants if you have a good reason to assume that you could run into difficulties by putting certain people into the same group.

My own experiences in using this method with multicultural groups have been very positive. Even when some participants of the group have had language difficulties (we have used English) the method has worked well. As a team leader I have naturally helped those members who have had language difficulties to tell their story, and I have made sure that the group does not become critical towards them. Almost always, the other group members have spontaneously given help and support to those with language difficulties. The feedback from the participants after the session has been very positive and they have felt themselves more empowered to develop their strengths.

4. Why the Group Method Works Well?

To put it simply, the group method works well, because we as human beings need encouragement and positive feedback! Naturally the feedback has to be genuine and honest and it should be based on the story – otherwise the story-teller may not "buy it". Becoming more aware of our strengths is important in developing ourselves. This is particularly true in developing our intercultural strengths. Our multicultural awareness is a requirement for becoming more capable in dealing with challenges related to intercultural situations (see e.g. Sue & Sue 1990; Sue et al. 1992; Lairio & Puukari 2002). Therefore, it is good to try to encourage the group members, at the end of the session, to analyse and discuss possible new insights they may have had regarding their multicultural awareness. Group experiences and group discussions are often one of the most fruitful ways to learn more about one's own multicultural awareness and change it.

One very interesting challenge with multicultural groups is to discuss the possible – often probable - differences there are in different cultures in understanding what can be considered successful in a certain situation. Cultural habits can be quite different, and this makes Vance Peavy's group method even more powerful: It not only makes individuals become more aware of their own personal strengths, but it helps them understand that certain behaviours which in his or her own culture are positive can be seen less positive, even negative, in another culture.

The group method is also a built-in learning process for developing skills both in giving and receiving positive feedback. I am sure that we still have a lot to do in our schools and other institutions in learning how to be more supportive and encourage each others. The group method is an excellent way to learn this. We also need to learn to receive positive feedback. Depending on our cultural and personal history we may have difficulties in really hearing, seeing and feeling the positive feedback we get from others. It has been wonderful to see how some participants have been deeply touched by the feedback they have received from other group members and from the leader.

The fact that almost without exception, each story-teller gets same type of observations from several group members, reinforces the effects of the feedback. It is also good that each participant may keep the notes written by others: He or she may read them again later on – a good hint for those bad days we all sometimes have. We should never underestimate the power of genuine positive feedback!

Start using it!

The best way to learn Vance Peavy's group method is to start using it in real-life situations. Do it, modify it, and share your experiences with others – we all need encouragement!

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Dr. Sauli Puukari

Dr. Sauli Puukari works as a senior lecturer at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland in the field of guidance and counselling. He has been actively involved in developing training on multicultural counselling and has carried out research with his colleagues on multicultural counselling and published articles on topics dealing with multicultural counselling. He has also has given workshops on multicultural issues at national and international levels and worked as an external evaluator in a Leonardo project "Rainbow" which produced a training course on multicultural counselling and a web-site which is now run and updated by Center for International Mobility, CIMO, Finland (see more in <http://rainbow.cimo.fi/>).

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