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Interpersonal classroom model: students experiencing the group process

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the interpersonal classroom model (ICM). The ICM was designed primarily for social work group practice courses. This paper describes the theoretical foundation for the ICM, outlines how educators can employ the ICM, designates five group leadership skills that students will focus on when completing a weekly evaluation survey, and provides an example of the ICM applied to an undergraduate group practice course. This paper concludes with considerations for educators to review prior to implementing the ICM approach.

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“teaching is above all a profound human relationship” (Kolb, 2015, p. 300)

Preface

A SPARC grant from the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) made possible my work on the Interpersonal Classroom Model (ICM). The ICM aligns with the IASWG’s mission to advocate for greater representation of group work in social work curricula and to prepare future group workers via effective and ethical group work education. During the past decade, the SPARC grant program funded many group work initiatives, highlighting their commitment to diversity, advocacy, and group work collaboration.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, the demand for trained group workers increased even though the number of social work educational programs offering group work education courses decreased (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994), a pattern

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NOTE.The International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) SPARC program was established to “spark” IASWG members’ innovative practice, education, training and research projects through endorsement and small grants to advance the IASWG mission. This article is part of a special issue devoted to sharing the outcome of various SPARC projects.

that unfortunately continues today (Simon et al., 2019). This problem is especially concerning because research also indicates that when social work students eventually become group leaders without receiving group work education, they are less tolerant toward group conflict, less knowledgeable regarding group development models, and less likely to facilitate a group defined by the reciprocal process of mutual aid (Steinberg, 1993).

Most social workers eventually lead groups, yet social work education programs rarely offer group work as a specialized area of study (Steinberg, 2019). Many social work students graduate believing that they possess the knowledge and skills required to effectively facilitate groups, yet they actually may not (Sweifach, 2015), because many of them will likely lead groups without training in social group practice methods (Steinberg, 2019). This shortage of trained group workers is a problem that social work group education can effectively address.

To address the paucity of trained group workers, educators employed new strategies to integrate group work into social work curriculum. For example, Steinberg (2019) provided strategies that educators can use to incorporate group work content into social work practice classes. Others found that students gained group work skills via participation in experiential group work opportunities within group practice classes, including within undergraduate (Humphrey, 2014) and graduate (Molina & Jacinto, 2015) experiential support groups.

One study with a sample of 192 social work graduate students found that 90% of study participants described their mutual aid experiential group as a beneficial way to learn group skills (Molina & Jacinto, 2015). These students also preferred experiential group opportunities compared to group role plays, which they considered artificial by comparison. These studies highlight the need for additional understanding regarding how mutual aid groups within the classroom benefit students and ultimately prepare them to lead social work practice groups.

This paper describes a new teaching approach designed for group education courses called the Interpersonal Classroom Model (ICM). Educators can use the ICM to prepare students for group practice with diverse client populations by first learning to explore social identity differences within the classroom. For example, the ICM can guide students communicating across lines of racial, religious, and sexual identities (Tyler, 2017). The ICM also supports students as they develop group leadership skills and an understanding of the group process. To accomplish these two aims, the ICM is closely aligned with experiential learning theory.

To describe the ICM and present how it works, this paper addresses the following topics: (1) experiential learning theory as the theoretical foundation of the ICM, (2) guidelines for how to employ the ICM, (3) five group leadership skills students can develop within an ICM group course, (4) an example

from my experience of using the ICM to enhance students understanding of the group process, (5) and considerations educators can review before implementing the ICM.

Theoretical foundation

The ICM is guided by experiential learning theory, which posits that students who learn knowledge, skills, and values in the classroom carry these lessons with them to the workplace (Kolb, 2015). This theory highlights how learning can become a skill that students develop.

Kolb posited that experiential learning occurs in an ongoing cycle of four modes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. He reported that successful educators tend to teach around the learning cycle and employ the cycle many times when teaching their students (i.e., experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting).

Experiential learning theory applies to various professional contexts, including social work. Kolb (2015) emphasized that professional social work requires highly skilled workers to deal with the social and emotional complexities of people in need. He mentioned that effective service delivery to disadvantaged populations requires workers with active problem solving skills and a heightened sensitivity to the realities of the human condition. Kolb reported that his group related experiences inspired his development of experiential learning theory. He applied the four modes of experiential learning to group work: “We are going to share *experiences* together, *reflect* and share their meaning for us and together *think* about the implications for our group. From this understanding we can *act* to create the kind of group we want.” (p. xvii)

The ICM seeks to create an *affectively complex learning environment* (ACLE, Kolb, 2015). An ACLE prioritizes activities that mirror or simulate what students will actually do as professionals. Students are encouraged to generate and share personal insights, feelings, and learn to discuss information that is currently or immediately taking place. Within an ACLE, learning often occurs in the form of a verbal exchange of expressions of feelings, values, and opinions between the learner, their peers, and the instructor. The instructor serves as a role model for the profession, providing feedback that is personalized in regard to students’ individual learning goals and needs. The instructor also encourages open discussion and critique from students regarding their course. Therefore, this approach is flexible rather than prescribed.

How to use the ICM

Educators can employ the ICM in their courses, by follow these three guidelines:

Students experience all four modes (one repetition of the learning cycle) each week

Each week, students engage in an experiential learning activity (concrete experience), complete reflection journal entries and evaluation surveys (reflective observation), and return the following week for a content learning day to consider how their experiences apply to their group leader development progress (abstract conceptualization), which informs the new goals they set for the next experiential learning day (active experimentation). In other words, each week represents one full round of the experiential learning cycle. The instructor encourages student learning by facilitating experiential activities, reading journal entries and reviewing survey results, which inform the instructor's development of course content for the following week. For a comparison of the experiential learning cycle and the weekly ICM cycle, please see [Figure 1](#).

Educators designate weekly class time for content learning and experiential learning

Educators will divide time allocated to content learning and experiential learning. For example, if a group practice class meets on Mondays and Wednesdays, the instructor will use Mondays to focus on exploring theoretical foundations for group practice, with students learning group skills, such as how to pre-screen members when starting a new group. The central focus of course content learning days is abstract conceptualization or thinking. Content learning days may include a didactic component with short lectures, discussion questions, and presentations by the instructor or students (Dennison, 2005). The content learning days may also include analysis of vignettes, watching videos of group sessions, and conducting group role plays (Berger, 1996).

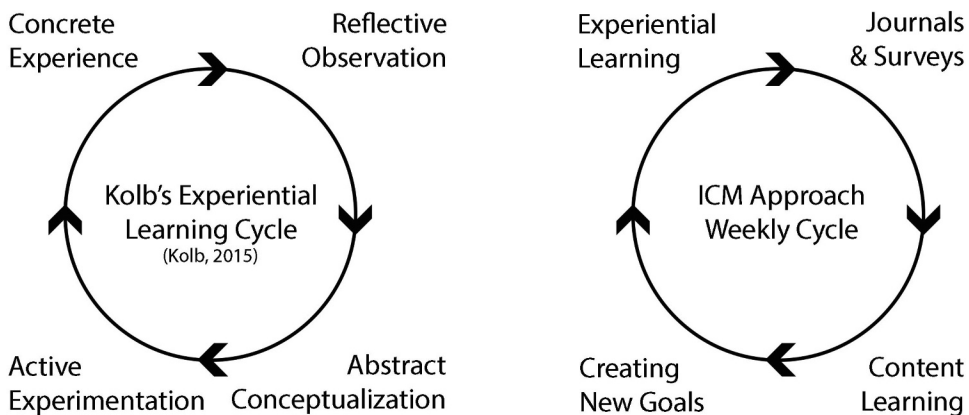


Figure 1. ICM weekly cycle.

On Wednesdays, the instructor will provide experiential learning opportunities. The central focus of experiential learning days is to engage students directly with the group process. Experiential learning days may include experiential group participation facilitated as one large group led by the instructor or experiential group leadership led by students taking turns as the group leader (Berger, 1996). Depending on class size, students may take turns leading one larger group or several smaller separate learning groups (Dennison, 2005). Educators may employ a variety of experiential activities to familiarize students with different theoretical approaches, yet they will want to make certain that the option they select maintains continuity, so students can experience an evolving group process over several weeks or for the duration of the semester.

Students complete a journal entry and survey after each experiential learning day

Students complete a reflection journal entry after their weekly experiential learning day. Journal entries represent written assignments that assist students in solidifying what they learn (Knight, 2000) and are an example of a short weekly log students use to write about group processes occurring within the classroom (Berger, 1996). Each student will write (a) 100–300 words (b) in first person (c) *only* about their in-class experience during the experiential day. After the instructor reads each reflection journal entry, they provide short written responses to acknowledge each student's reflection process and to provide goal related recommendations.

Students will also complete a weekly evaluation survey after the experiential learning class meeting. Educators can remind students that their survey responses are anonymous. There are different methods to assure that student survey responses remain anonymous. For example, the Qualtrics survey platform allows educators to determine if a student completed a survey, without access to their individual responses. Educators only need access to the class average for survey responses. Students will complete a short 15-question survey administered on paper or online. To review the survey questions, please see [Table 1](#). Humans often forget many important details 24 hours after an event (Rubin & Wenzel, 1996). Therefore, educators should encourage students to complete their journal entries and surveys soon after the experiential learning day.

Group leadership skills

I designed an evaluation survey for students to complete on a weekly basis after they engage in the experiential learning day. This survey represents five different group leadership skills that I want students to develop. Each week

Table 1. ICM weekly survey.

Please answer the following questions only about your time during the experiential group meeting this week. These questions focus on your perception of yourself, the group leader, and other members. Respond to each question on a scale of 1 (disagree) to 4 (agree). Remember to answer all questions and “submit” your survey.

Individual Questions

Mindfulness	I remained present and attentive for the duration of group today.
Here-and-now	I expressed my thoughts and feelings about what happened in group today.
Mutual Aid	I offered feedback to others and received feedback from others in group today.
Group Conflict	I spoke in a direct and caring manner when I disagreed with others’ views.
Group Cohesion	I worked on developing trust in my relationships with other members today.

Leader Questions

Mindfulness	The leader encouraged members to be present and attentive during group today.
Here-and-now	The leader encouraged members to express their thoughts and feelings in group today.
Mutual Aid	The leader encouraged members to offer and receive feedback from each other today.
Group Conflict	The leader encouraged direct and caring communication during disagreements.
Group Cohesion	The leader encouraged members to develop trust in their relationships today.

Members Questions

Mindfulness	Members remained present and attentive for the duration of group today.
Here-and-now	Members expressed their thoughts and feelings about what happened in group today.
Mutual Aid	Members offered feedback and received feedback from each other in group today.
Group Conflict	Members spoke in a direct and caring manner when they disagreed with others’ views.
Group Cohesion	Members worked on developing trust in their relationships with each other today.

they evaluate their efforts toward developing these skills, my role as group leader in supporting them to develop these skills, and their fellow students’ skill development. By evaluating themselves, the group leader, and their fellow group members, students can observe changes they notice happening in an ongoing manner during the weekly experiential opportunities. This evaluation survey addresses the following five skill areas: mindfulness, here-and-now comments, mutual aid, group conflict, and group cohesion.

Maintaining mindfulness

Mindfulness represents engagement in the present moment with awareness and attention. Kolb used the term *mindful experiencing* as a state in which an individual is present, attentive, and accepts life as an emergent process of change (Kolb, 2015). There is substantial empirical support for inclusion of mindfulness in group work settings (Windle et al., 2014). Social workers use mindfulness practices within groups provided to a variety of populations, e.g., adolescents (Malekoff, 2017) and older adults (Campbell, 2017). In the context of the ICM teaching approach, mindfulness represents the group leadership

skill of being consistently present and attentive to what is occurring within the group meeting. This is a group leadership skill students can develop participating as the group leader or as a group member. Mindfulness enhances an individual's ability to pay attention to what happens around them (Yeganeh & Kolb, 2009) and to observe their current thoughts and feelings (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). For students to become group leaders who support members in becoming mindful, they first must cultivate this skill.

Commenting on the here-and-now

Commenting on the here-and-now means to vocalize thoughts, feelings, and observations happening in the present moment. Experiential learning theory encourages a here-and-now focus (Kolb, 2015), and students can develop a here-and-now focus by commenting on classroom experiences (Knight, 2000), especially ongoing group dynamics. Group dynamics are forces emerging within a group that influence how members interact with each other (Toseland, 2017). For example, if one group member who was previously talkative suddenly became silent for several meetings, this may influence how other group members interact with the quiet group member. Group dynamics are products of here-and-now group interactions between members and can represent what members bring into the group from their outside social environments (Toseland, 2017). Therefore, students must learn to constructively respond to group dynamics, especially cultural differences and insensitivity between members (Knight, 2000). Group leaders must assist members in identifying and articulating their feelings (IASWG, 2015), and social work educators can support students to first develop their own capacity to respond to the present moment via here-and-now comments.

Facilitating mutual aid

A primary aim for group leaders is to facilitate mutual aid between group members (IASWG, 2015). Mutual aid in group work involves group members giving and receiving assistance to one another (Knight, 2014), including assistance toward achieving personal goals (Drumm, 2006). Group members can aid one another through providing interpersonal feedback. Group leaders can encourage group members to provide feedback to each other and also to the group leader regarding their role and actions in the group (IASWG, 2015). Feedback represents responses from one member to another, including praise for goal related progress or pointing out discrepancies between another member's words and actions. Group leaders can encourage group members to respond to other members' problem solving efforts, especially if they have faced a similar issue (Gitterman, 2017). Group members can share their perspectives on life issues and concerns and engage in a give-and-take with

other group members (Gitterman, 2017). Social work students can learn to contribute to the development of a mutual aid environment by providing feedback as a leader or member during an experiential demonstration group.

Addressing group conflict

In addition to facilitating mutual aid, addressing group conflict is another vital group leadership skill (Sweifach, 2015). A primary goal for group leaders is to help group members mediate conflicts within the group (IASWG, 2015). Group leaders can support members to explore contradictions and differences that arise in the ongoing group process (Drumm, 2006). Group leaders can also support group members to develop conflict resolution skills that they can use during group meetings and outside of group social interactions (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Conflicts will happen and are a natural occurrence within the group process (Sweifach, 2015). Students can learn to understand group conflict as an opportunity for individual growth and group development. Educators can make use of group conflicts arising in experiential group participation to prepare students for group conflicts when they eventually lead client groups.

Enhancing group cohesion

Group leaders seek to cultivate a cohesive group work environment for group members (IASWG, 2015). Group cohesion represents a shared sense of solidarity between group members (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) and also represents group members' mutual appreciation for other group members, the group leader, and the overall group process (Tolman & LeCroy, 2017). Developing group cohesion may involve a group leader highlighting commonalities between group members and encouraging direct member-to-member communication (IASWG, 2015). Cohesion, in part, represents trust existing within group members' interpersonal relationships (Burlingame et al., 2018), and cohesiveness is mediated in an ongoing process of building trust between group members (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Trust is especially important in group work with multicultural (D'Andrea, 2004) and marginalized populations (Ortega, 2017). Educators can train students to enhance group cohesion by supporting their efforts to develop trust within their interpersonal relationships during experiential learning opportunities within the classroom.

Classroom example

This classroom example demonstrates how the ICM works in an undergraduate group practice course with 20 students. Students participated in a weekly experiential demonstration group as members. This example includes

responses from student reflection journal entries collected during an IRB approved study. At the beginning of the semester, I informed students that participation in the study was optional, with no offered incentives, and that their decision to participate or not participate would not affect their course associated grade. Each of the enrolled students consented to participate in this study. The quotations represent students' word-for-word responses, yet I removed student actual names and replaced these names with pseudonyms for confidentiality. This class example relates to the leadership skill of facilitating mutual aid.

On the third week of the semester, I began the weekly experiential demonstration group with the students, and we described our current moods and goals for the day, an abbreviated type of check-in (e.g., Duffy, 1994). Starting each group by sharing our current moods and daily goals represented a group norm that we established on week one and also signified my effort to help students develop goals for individual member growth (IASWG, 2015). When students share their weekly goals with each other at the beginning of each experiential demonstration group, they create an opportunity for other students to respond by providing direct contextual feedback.

We went around the circle sharing moods and goals, and Sidney (a European-American female student) said her mood was "upset." After the remaining students shared their moods and goals, I said "the floor is open," indicating that anyone could speak. I remember my words were followed with silence. Philip (an Asian-American male student) asked Sidney why she felt upset and she reported that she felt that some of the other group members were "not very supportive."

I asked Sidney if there was anything else she wanted to share at this time. She reported that she did not have anything else that she wanted to say. A few students attempted to draw attention away from Sidney's previous comments, yet several other students seemed to struggle with the prospect of addressing another topic. For the duration of the meeting, students attempted to focus on their relationships with each other, yet during our conversation, students seemed to return to the interpersonal tension that began when Sidney vaguely described other students as not very supportive. Similar to our group norm of sharing moods and goals at the beginning of each meetings, we also ended with a final go-around with students sharing something that stood out to them during the meeting. During this final go-around, tension was the dominant theme.

One day after our group meeting, I reviewed student reflection journal entries. Philip wrote in his journal entry that he "had the most tense experience of group yet." Regarding his interaction with Sidney, he wrote: "I wasn't sure what to do. I was considering my options in my head as to how, as a group member, I could contribute." It seemed as if Philip felt stuck between wanting to support Sidney and also wanting to respect her decision not to share more.

I was surprised when I read Sidney’s journal entry. She wrote, “I could not convey what I was feeling.” Sidney said that she was “not scared of confrontation,” but was just not sure that she could communicate her thoughts and feelings in a “manner at which others could understand.”

After reading these journal entries, I noticed a pattern. Students seemed ready to provide mutual aid, yet hesitant to offer feedback to others. Regarding their hesitancy, one student said, “I am afraid that I will say the wrong thing which always makes me hesitate to say something.” I noticed a drop in survey scores in students’ evaluations of whether “Members offered feedback and received feedback from each other in group today.” (Figure 2). Reading the reflection journal entries and reviewing the weekly evaluation survey results informed my decision to provide a learning activity the following week that focused on giving and receiving feedback.

During the next content day, I set up a large circle of desks with two desks in the center facing each other. I described the pattern I noticed of students feeling hesitant about providing feedback to each other during our last group meeting. I also told students that when members provide mutual aid to one another during the group process, it strengthens the group overall. I said that the two chairs in the center of the room represented an opportunity for students to sit across from someone and provide mutual aid by sharing what we appreciate about each other.

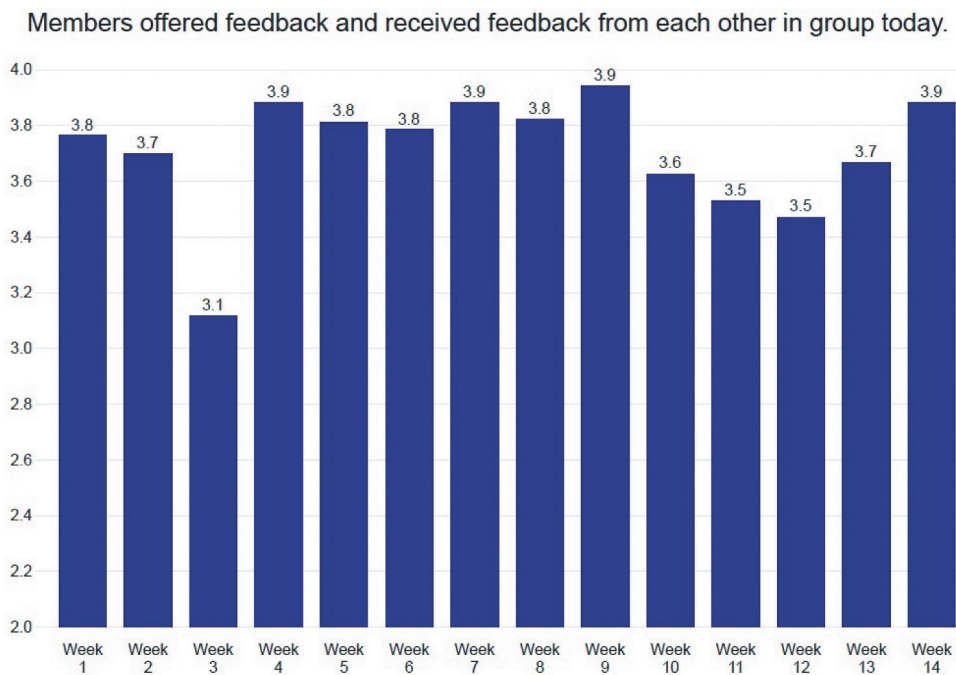


Figure 2. Survey results example.

This activity involved three steps: (1) two students sitting in the chairs in the center of the room, (2) one student sharing what they appreciate about the other student, (3) and then hearing what the other student appreciates about them. To begin, I demonstrated how the activity worked by sitting in one desk and encouraged any student to volunteer and join me. One student walked to the center of the room, sat across from me, and I said to them, “You do a great job by inviting quieter students to join our weekly conversations.” I left my desk for a student to take my place.

Every student received an opportunity to provide feedback to one student and receive feedback from another student. I then facilitated a classroom discussion about the activity.

Students reported that they now felt less hesitant to offer and receive feedback. Students also reported feeling surprised when they heard what other students appreciated about them. This activity seemed to decrease their hesitation and increase their desire to support one another.

During our fourth experiential group meeting, students seemed proactive in their group participation. They assertively shared what they appreciated about each other. Students seemed willing to step out of their comfort zones to voluntarily provide feedback and even explicitly ask for feedback from others. During our final go-around, students reported that they were grateful for the supportive group atmosphere and the overall lighter feeling in our experiential group. In this manner, the ICM enabled me to respond adaptively to the learning needs of my students and facilitate mutual aid opportunities by encouraging students to give and receive peer feedback.

Considerations for educators

Thus far, I have used the ICM approach within undergraduate group practice courses and my students seemed to benefit from completing weekly reflection journal entries and evaluation surveys. Educators may consider using this model in graduate level group practice courses. The ICM teaching approach is adaptable and may supplement various group education topics and contexts, e.g., stress-management groups for rural BSW students (Clements & Minnick, 2012).

The ICM appears to work well with group education courses that include a weekly experiential group component for several weeks or the duration of one semester. The ICM may not work as well for group work courses with significant mid-semester transitions. For example, if an instructor divided students into two separate groups, and these groups exchanged members frequently, this strategy may render the evaluation survey results useless in terms of representing a consistent portrayal of student responses. Educators

can maintain membership continuity in experiential learning groups to yield survey results that represent an ongoing group process.

These initial evaluation survey questions will provide educators with a unique way to explore the group process with students aligned with specific group leadership skills and across students' perceptions of themselves, the group leader, and other group members. I share this survey with educators to provide a tool they can implement in their group courses, yet I also want to note that others are welcome to create and tryout additional questions. For example, I previously included the statement "I experienced group today as personal and meaningful." I enjoyed reviewing my students' responses to this question, yet soon realized that expecting students to answer more than 15-questions on a weekly basis can lead to response fatigue.

I typically wait until the end of the semester before sharing survey results with students. I considered the alternative of sharing results with students on a weekly basis, yet this plan would require additional class time for survey results reporting and could disproportionately influence students if they witnessed lower or higher survey scores and decided to respond differently. Sharing results at the end of the semester allows students to compare each week's results at the same time. Educators using the ICM can customize how they present survey results to students.

The strategy of students completing reflection journal entries and evaluation surveys seems equally relevant to both in-person and online classes. Experiential learning theory posits that although "the idea of a learning space conjures up the image of the physical classroom environment, the concept of learning space is much broader and multidimensional" (Kolb, 2015, p. 288). Educators are increasingly offering online group practice courses (Carter et al., 2018; Muskat & Mesbur, 2011; Simon et al., 2015). In this manner, I intend for the ICM to be applicable to virtual online classrooms in addition to in-person traditional classrooms.

The ICM offers educators a flexible approach to train future group work practitioners that prioritizes essential principle based group leadership skills common across many social work group types, such as psychoeducational groups, support groups, and task groups. One ICM survey question invites students to rate their work to develop trust within member-to-member relationships, yet they can develop trust in many ways. For example, Steinberg (2019) describes the skill of *reaching for a feeling link*, stating that "asking others to connect with a feeling that has been expressed helps the members of a new group relate to one another emotionally" (p. 124). Educators can support students as they relate with each other on an emotional level and thus increase trust and group cohesion between them and other participating students. In this manner, the ICM offers educators a flexible structure to explore many group related skills.

Students who enroll in an ICM group practice course can expect to gain an understanding of the ongoing group development process by reviewing changes that they identify in their own weekly survey responses and notice in the final survey results shared at the end of the semester. When educators share the results across all survey questions, students witness firsthand how theirs and their fellow classmates' perceptions change throughout a full semester experiential group. In this manner, students will gain an appreciation for the fluidity of member experiences within a 15-week training group process experience, which can prepare them to guide group members through the same process when they lead groups in the future at professional settings.

The ICM provides an open space for students to communicate across social identity lines. For example, in a previous semester, a Christian Latinx-American male student and an atheist European-American female student explored different negative stereotypes they heard regarding the other person's religious identity (Tyler, 2017). This experience resulted in them developing mutual empathy for each other and making commitments not to perpetuate negative stereotypes. These students increased cohesion within their relationship, which likely will inform their efforts to increase cohesion between diverse population and community group members in the future.

Conclusion

The experiential learning cycle is not a circle that goes around, but rather an ascending (Kolb, 2015) or adaptive (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) spiral within the group process. As students develop vital group leadership skills within the classroom, we as educators can support them as they ascend to becoming effective group leaders for clients in specialized group work settings. In conclusion, I want to share a summary statement a student shared in her final journal entry:

You told us since the beginning of the semester that it was only a 15 week process, and it's gone by so fast . . . I show a lot of gratitude towards this process and I am delighted that this was a part of my social work education. (Kyra, Indian-American female)

I invite readers to consider using the ICM teaching approach in their group practice courses. I support fellow educators in the mission to promote group education within the broader field of social work education. The demand for effective group workers is on the rise, and we as educators can respond by training students to develop skills within the classroom that they can then apply in professional settings. I designed the ICM to support educators in this endeavor.

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