8. Teleconferencing group supervision with social work students on field placement: a small trial evaluation

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ABSTRACT

In 2007, AASWWE funded a Research and Education grant to research and evaluate the experience of a small group of externally enrolled social work students and their supervisor who would use a group teleconference as the mode of supervision, seeking feedback about the effectiveness of the process. The project aimed to trial an alternative, creative support process of group supervision for external students on placement, in order to analyse its effectiveness. After notification that the project had received funding, and following the JCU Ethics application and approval process in late 2007, it was evident that the project would have to wait a few months due to the timing and availability of students on placement.

The project was conducted between May and July of 2008 when students were on their first placement.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

There are increasing challenges in finding sufficient agencies willing to provide student placements. Often an agency may be willing to provide a placement if an external supervisor can be found to provide the professional supervision. There are only a limited number of social workers available to provide such external supervision and in some areas there are no experienced supervisors available. As a result supervision is primarily via the phone. Group supervision has been mooted as an alternative that this project has investigated. The project was designed to trial and evaluate whether group supervision by phone, provided by an experienced student supervisor, is a viable alternative for some students on placement requiring external supervision.

Bogo, Globerman and Sussman (2004) noted that group supervision is proposed as an economical adjunct or alternative to the traditional individual tutorial method that is resource intensive. They found that the literature on group supervision agrees on the key features, which include small groups of students who meet with one supervisor on a regular basis and that through discussion, students learn from exposure to a wide range of ideas and perspectives offered by their supervisor and peers. They also noted from their study that it was essential for the supervisor to be skilled in working with groups for the group supervision to be successful.

Kadushin and Harkness (2002) state that group supervision is simultaneously both economic and capable of a wider variety of learning techniques and strategies. They note that it assists with developing professional identity and that in group supervision; the individual can become less dependent on the supervisor, moving through dependence on peers to greater dependence on self.

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Group supervision has been found to be a cost effective and a supportive way to provide supervision in agency and fieldwork settings (Marks and Hixon 1986; Schreiber and Frank 1983). It has also been found to enhance student field experience and assist them developing professional identity (Woodside 1987; Worden 2000).

Abercrombie (1983) stated that students learned more from being able to compare their judgements with those of their peers than with those of their teacher.

Lindsay (2005 p 85), in his research on group supervision in social work student placements in Ireland, found that group supervision, when well done, contributes significantly to their learning and that this perception is shared by practice teachers. His research suggested a model of good practice in which group supervision was alternated with individual supervision; and where the supervisors used principles of best group work facilitation, attending to issues of preparation, group maintenance, monitoring and intervention. Although there were some reservations, the overwhelming response of students who had experienced group supervision was extremely positive. Lindsay (2005, pp. 81-82) noted in his study that: 'the opportunity to give and receive peer support was the benefit of group supervision most frequently cited by those who experienced it', and also that: 'It is necessary to provide a combination of individual and group supervision'. Lindsay also stated: the consensus among both students and practice teachers was that a system of group supervision alternating with individual supervision allowed them to draw on the benefits of both approaches most effectively. This conclusion supports similar findings by Davis (2002) and by Walter and Young (1999).' This approach of alternating group and individual supervision each week is what was done in this research project. In the six weeks of the trail, participants received both individual and group supervision weekly.

METHOD
Research Design: This project employed a highly qualified and experienced student supervision consultant who provided six sessions of weekly supervision by phone to a group of externally enrolled social work

students on placement. The supervisor chosen had expertise in facilitating group supervision. This matched the findings of Bogo et al (2004 p. 206) who identified that 'the field instructor's competence in working with groups was of paramount importance'. To recruit the participants, externally enrolled students on placement were contacted and offered the option to participate. Once recruited, students were linked by phone weekly in a conference call link up for one hour with an external supervisor for six weeks. Each student participated in an individual interview prior to the commencement of the group supervision sessions and then again after the group supervision had concluded. Before the trial started, the supervisor was briefed on expectations, and was also interviewed at the conclusion of the trial for their feedback and evaluation of the process.

The group supervision offered was in addition to the students' usual individual supervision sessions with their designated field educator on placement. This takes into account Lindsay's (2005) findings that alternating group and individual supervision was useful. In this trial, however, the supervisor is different in the group supervision from the individual supervision sessions.

Process: Letters were sent to fifty-four (all) externally enrolled students in April 2008 inviting interested students to participate. Three students responded. They were sent an Information Sheet and Consent Form. Pre-trial interviews were conducted in mid April 2008. An experienced external student supervisor was briefed and confirmed, and the supervision sessions commenced in May 2008. The six weeks of group supervision ran from 19th May – 23rd June 2008. This six week period was in the middle of their placements, after students had settled in. Each session was for one hour. The supervision was limited to this six week period rather than for the whole 13 week placement due to the limitations of the funding available.

All students already had an individual social work supervisor in the agency, or external to the agency, to meet the usual university supervision and assessment requirements of the student placement.

The group supervision sessions were additional to their usual weekly individual supervision sessions with their field educator. The weekly group supervision sessions were an 'extra' and did not form a formal part of the placement assessment and feedback. The supervisor of the group supervision sessions did not communicate with the students' field educators or the agencies – this was not part of the design or purpose of the trial.

Post-trial interviews were conducted with the students and supervisor in June – July 2008. The interviews were transcribed in July 2008.

DATA ANALYSIS

a. Analysis of the pre-trial interviews:
The profile of the three student participants includes that all three were mature age students with prior welfare work experience. The three students had different professional interests and were on placement in agencies that were not similar. One was placed with a government department; one with a non-government agency, and one with a practitioner in private practice. Two lived in South East Queensland and one in Sydney, NSW. Two were female and one was male. Only two of the three students linked in to the group supervision regularly.

As part of the pre-trial interview, students were asked to define good supervision. There were some similarities in their response comments. These included: 'feedback in areas where changes may help', 'another perspective from someone with experience', 'strengths based', in a 'comfortable, trustworthy relationship', 'new ideas', 'not overwhelmingly hierarchical'.

When asked what they were hoping for in participating in the group supervision process, response comments included: 'interaction with other students', 'extra support', 'extra learning', 'exposure to a different form of supervision', 'to see how different it is to one on one supervision', 'to experience different processes and outcomes', 'to experience different ways of learning', 'to see what others are going through – see what else is out there, other ideas' and 'a different learning experience'.

When asked what they were able to give in participating, response comments included: *'participation', 'my experiences', 'enthusiasm', 'self awareness and self reflective skills', 'can draw on my own involvement, how I am feeling about it and what is going on', 'experiences working in the industry', and 'previous supervision experiences'.*

None of the participants had experienced group supervision before. One participant had been part of case reviews at her workplace.

b. Feedback from the student evaluations:

A pre-trial theme from the individual interviews is that the students were looking for extra support, extra learning, and interaction with other students on placement, a learning experience, and participation.

The overall theme in the post-trial interviews was that students valued the peer support component linked with the supervision.

In relation to group size, the two regular participants would have preferred a larger group size. The third student only linked in for the first of the six sessions. The two regular students commented that having two students was too small. The length of the sessions, one hour, was sufficient. The frequency of the sessions: 'weekly was perfect. I liked how it was on a regular time. It gave a sense of comfort.....that backup which you could look forward to'.

When asked about how participants found group sessions and the experience of group supervision, the responses included: 'really good – I love supervision, and I love having the chance to be able to touch base with other people – to network, to hear their thoughts. I felt like it was a really good mentorship where we all learnt from each other and ourselves. I felt like it was also creating friendships and networks and building on that professional development. I think it was excellent'. And another comment was 'Peer person to share things with …I was on the same journey....felt like it was an extra placement almost'.

When asked if the sessions met expectations, answers included: 'Most. Group size not met'. One participant noted that the facilitation by a

supervisor, rather than solely peer supervision, had not been expected'. Another stated 'Yes – exceeded expectations. It was something I looked forward to'-and 'Able to talk to a peer and a supervisor as well'.

It is significant that students stated that if they had to choose between individual and group supervision, they would probably choose group supervision. One student commented that: 'it feels a lot more comfortable to be able to discuss with colleagues and co-workers – you are treated on the same level......it is a more empowering process where we can learn from each other when we are at the same level and we can learn from ourselves, rather than sitting back and waiting for your supervisor to give you some ideas'.

When asked what was of most benefit, comments included: 'Being able to connect with others; being able to mutually discuss things we all had an interest in'; 'touching base' and 'peer support'. Also, 'Having that constant commitment knowing that the regular time each week we could touch base with each other'.

Students were also asked whether they had any suggestions, changes or recommendations they would like to make. One student suggested that it would be good if the university offered as part of the field placement the option to link into group supervision because sometimes it was difficult to access supervision time in placement as supervisors get called away. If group supervision was offered: 'I actually think it proactively emulates professional development and normalizes the process'.

One student also commented that after every single group supervision session, she wanted to set aside more journal time; even though she had just journaled before: 'I needed to process what had just happened – I floated on another level. It was separate to my field prac yet I could link it back in. It was really good'.

The benefit of having an experienced supervisor facilitating the group was also reflected in one feedback where a student stated that whatever the group discussion was on, the supervisor was able to align it with a framework of learning, which was very useful.

The third student who participated in the project in a very limited capacity was contacted for feedback. He had found it difficult to prioritise attending the group supervision sessions over other placement commitments such as client interviews. He provided feedback to some of the questions, but also felt unable to comment on most of them due to his limited attendance.

c. feedback from the supervisor/ facilitator evaluation:

The supervisor provided some interesting insights in the post trial interview.

A general comment was 'it was quite productive for the two students, although the group size was too small. Weekly was the right frequency. I think it would have lost its momentum if it was fortnightly'.

The length of sessions of one hour worked. The sessions were thought to go 'really, really fast'. For some sessions, the group could have continued for longer. The supervisor commented that sometimes settling into the group session after coming out of a very different context, for both the students and the supervisor, took some time. This was different without the 'normal meet and greet sort of stuff that would happen if it was face to face.

Regarding the use of technology, one comment was 'all the teleconferencing went really, really smoothly'. It is interesting to note that for this supervisor, telephone was his stated least preferred means of communication, but even in the absence of a face to face meeting with participants, it worked very well. If this supervisor was to do this work again, he would like the opportunity where possible to meet the students face to face, even informally. The two students did manage to meet face to face, which the supervisor believes would have been beneficial as they would have a visual image of each other. This is a technological issue.

The supervisor made some interesting comments about gender and phone conversations, wondering if women tend to be able to communicate more freely on the phone than men do. There was not much opportunity to explore this further. It could be researched more in a further group supervision trial.

In relation to the supervisor's goals, the supervisor stated that he: 'was trying to develop in the students a sense that they had responsibility for their own planning......and to reinforce a concept of peer supervision.... so if they had some responsibility as practitioners, to connect with other practitioners to facilitate their own learning without the sense of waiting for the so called expert to come along and take them through stuff'. The supervisor also made some distinctions between: 'a professional consultative process as opposed to an on the job learning process where supervision is much more an organizational function.'

The group supervision process differed a little from other group supervision groups the supervisor facilitates in that, initially, the students did not see themselves 'in a practitioner mode'. Over the life of the group this changed, but certainly initially the students were 'you're the teacher, we want you to tell us what we need to be doing.' The student role was dominant at the beginning.

In the last session, the supervisor redefined supervision as a consultation process rather than a control process. This was in response to the students both having the idea that supervision is about being told: 'This is how you do things and this is what you do'. 'We started making some of the distinctions between a professional consultative process as opposed to an on the job learning process where supervision is much more an organizational function'.

As for models or strategies used in supervision, the base concept used was 'that they are adult learners....so are responsible for the learning'. The supervisor assumed a facilitative 'power position' to keep them focused on their learning, e.g. by requiring them to bring an article or case to discuss.

The supervisor offered some comments regarding the transition for final placement students to becoming practitioners and suggested that towards the end of the final placement, a peer supervision group model with perhaps a couple of facilitators as resource people to join in as required could help with that transition.

FINDINGS

Despite the small group size, the group supervision experience for participants in this research was declared a success by the students and the supervisor. It is significant to note that the students all stated that they would choose group supervision over individual supervision, if they had to choose between the two.

Overall, it appears that the combination of peer support and well facilitated supervision has been valued by the students and the supervisor. One student's recommendation was for there to be such group supervision arranged by the university to support students on placement. Whilst this is a very small trial and there could be dangers in generalizing on the basis of this research alone, it indicates future use of group supervision by teleconference for students on placement combining the aspects of peer support and supervision would be worthwhile, adding value to the student learning experience on field placements. This is supported by the findings of Bogo et al (2004).

LIMITATIONS

Due to the limited funding available and the time line associated with the funding and reporting back requirements in a specified time period, this project was able to offer the weekly group supervision for only 6 weeks of the 13 week student placement. As such, conclusions drawn from this study are limited in their applicability as it is recognised that this is a very small sample and too small to reliably transfer to other settings.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of group supervision by teleconference for students on placement combining the aspects of peer support and supervision appear to be worthwhile, adding value to the student learning experience on field placements and reducing the sense of isolation identified by students.

It would be useful to replicate and expand this study with a larger number of students, perhaps for a longer time period, such as a whole placement period, to further explore and document the experience

of group supervision on student learning and experience on field placements. Weekly group supervision is recommended as the frequency. This may particularly benefit those students enrolled externally in social work degrees who are often more prone to feelings of isolation.

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