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Beyond Group Work Camp: A bridge to symposia and conference participation via professional presentations

Shirley R. Simon¹

Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is twofold - to describe a Group Work Camp workshop that facilitates continued professional involvement beyond the camp experience, and to share the information offered in this session. The workshop provides information about developing peer-reviewed presentations for professional association conferences and addresses the benefits of such presentations. It identifies different presentation formats and describes the abstract preparation, submission and review processes. It addresses the dissemination of supplemental material related to the presentation. Detailed recommendations for navigating the preparation and presentation processes are shared with the hope of easing anxieties for new presenters. By scheduling the workshop near the conclusion of camp, it builds upon the group experience to facilitate continued involvement with the association and its activities. It provides a bridge and a method for further professional groupwork engagement and outlines a path for post-camp connections.*

Keywords: *Group Work Camp; groupwork; International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG); professional associations; conference abstract; poster and paper presentations.*

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Introduction

Group Work Camp is a highly energizing, engaging experience for the vast majority of participants. Interpersonal connections and learning take place in an interactive, low stress environment. Individuals new to groupwork are able to engage with seasoned professionals as equals. As a result, new practitioners often begin to identify with the methodology, the professional community and the sense of camaraderie that exists among members. Once this connection is forged, however, it can be challenging to maintain and to facilitate ongoing involvement.

Since Group Work Camp is traditionally a biennial offering, camp organizers anticipated that participants would ask ‘What’s next?’ or ‘How can I follow up on this experience?’ To address this, organizers scheduled a workshop on the subject of preparing and submitting an abstract for a conference or symposium presentation. It was hoped that attendees of this workshop would consider building on their camp experience by participating in the annual symposia of the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) or another groupwork conference, and potentially create and deliver effective conference presentations. Emerging social work professionals are typically unaware and unsure about the expectations and processes involved in professional presentations and thus would benefit from information and confidence-building activities that encourage their involvement in these professional activities (Boddy, Daly & Munch, 2012). By providing the knowledge, tools and support for creating and preparing a presentation, the sometimes daunting nature of the abstract submission process could be diminished. Moreover, by scheduling the workshop near the end of the camp experience, the participants would likely already have experienced a relative degree of comfort with one another and would feel more at ease asking questions and being vulnerable about the extent of their knowledge and concerns without feeling judged. The workshop built on the esprit de corps and cohesion that the earlier days at camp had established, and offered a bridge to further professional groupwork engagement.

Background

Many of the attendees at Group Work Camp, and subsequently at this workshop, were students and emerging professionals. Their attendance was facilitated by the camp organizers, who raised funds to provide numerous financial scholarships to interested students. The organizers recognized the critical importance of involving students in professional association activities and in groupwork events in particular. It is well documented that participation in professional associations benefits the new practitioner, the profession and the association itself (Desmond & Symens, 1997; Gonzales & Scarcella, 2001; Knight, 2002; Simon, Webster & Horn, 2007). Students and emerging professionals gain exposure to mentors and leaders in the field, access to cutting edge theory and practices, networking opportunities, educational leadership experiences, and opportunities for career advancement and professional identity development (Royce & Hechtman, 2001; Mazibuko & Gray, 2004; Messmer, 2005). By definition, a profession must include a professional association (Greenwood, 1957), and linking students and emerging professionals is an obvious ongoing necessity for strengthening the voice of the profession. The associations gain additional participation and new memberships, opportunities to influence new generations of professionals, and the energy and enthusiasm typical of newer professionals. These contributions are particularly critical within social groupwork, where the aging of today's groupwork leaders, the increase in untrained or poorly trained groupwork facilitators, the decline in self-identified groupwork practitioners and agencies, and the decreased focus on groupwork methodology within academic social work programs, all diminish social groupwork's role and place within the professional community. (Bergart & Simon, 2004; Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Drumm, 2006; Goodman & Munoz, 2004; Simon & Kilbane, 2014; Sweifach, 2013; Trevithick, 2005).

The knowledge and information from this workshop are shared in this paper with the hope of reaching others who might want to engage with the groupwork community, and might need the resources the workshop provides. Replication of the workshop at future Group Work Camps and conferences is a secondary

objective. What follows is a chronological overview of the process and information shared in the workshop. While it cannot capture the sense of community, mutual aid and group dynamics present in the workshop, it does provide the basics for preparing an abstract and joining such a community.

Summary of the Workshop Content

Introductory Phase

The workshop facilitator, who is also the author of this paper, began by introducing herself and highlighting her experience mentoring over 150 student presentations at IASWG. She conveyed an understanding of what it feels like to be at the beginning of the presentation process and how foreign and overwhelming it can seem. In order to create an environment of open sharing, she normalized participants' natural ambivalence and concerns, and conveyed encouragement and enthusiasm for their ability to successfully craft effective presentations. Aiming to increase group cohesiveness, the facilitator then had participants introduce themselves and share their motivations for attending the workshop. Similar motivations and areas of interest were highlighted as a means of creating community and connection. As individuals shared, the group members began to increase comfort with one another and with the facilitator.

The workshop then progressed to a discussion about the benefits of making conference presentations. Essentially, this discussion addressed participants' frequently unspoken thoughts regarding whether presenting at a conference is worth the effort. The facilitator asked the participants what they thought the benefits might be. The responses included resume building, connection to a professional community, opportunity to share one's work and passion, professional pride, leadership opportunities, networking and potential publications. The facilitator expanded on these responses, providing additional information and examples as appropriate. The presentation then proceeded to a more didactic interaction with a discussion of presentation formats, abstract preparation and submission, the review

process, acceptance and rejection, handouts, and post presentation recommendations.

Presentation Formats

Since the primary objective of the workshop was to provide participants with a basic understanding of the presentation and abstract process, this section of the workshop began by describing the three most common professional presentation formats - posters, papers and workshops. All presentations, regardless of format, include a summary and explanation of one's research or practice innovation. Posters are typically geared toward more entry level presentations. Presenters stand in front of their posters and interact with attendees on an individual basis as they stop and ask questions. Papers, which are presentations to an audience of conference attendees, are similar to mini lectures or lecture-discussion classes. They average about thirty minutes in length and are often paired with other paper presentations on a related subject. Some conferences - particularly those with rigid acceptance criteria - require the submission of the actual paper prior to presentation, but most do not. Rarely does a presenter actually read a paper to the audience; rather, the presenter summarizes his/her work verbally, often with the aid of a PowerPoint. Workshops are typically scheduled for a longer period of time, generally an hour or more, and involve a more interactive, experiential format. Each workshop focuses on one presentation. Recently, some conferences, including IASWG, have eliminated the distinction between paper and workshop presentations. For IASWG, paper presentation, options include two time frames, with the author selecting between a shorter or lengthier time slot.

Abstracts

In order to be invited to present at a professional conference, one typically submits an abstract of his/her work to the conference committee for peer review. Selected volunteer members of the sponsoring association read the abstracts and assess them for suitability for presentation based on a predetermined set of criteria. Each conference publishes a call for proposals - a one page document

available online - which details the type and format of abstracts solicited. From an author's perspective, the goal of the abstract is to receive the formal approval to present at the conference.

An abstract is essentially a summary and justification of what an author wants to present. It has a limited word count, usually between 500 and 750 words. In addition to the abstract, some conferences, like the IASWG symposium, request a summary of up to 75 words to print in the conference brochure. References are also typically required. The abstract can be viewed as having three distinct content areas. The first discusses the background of the problem or situation. It places the proposed presentation within a broader context and explains and justifies the need for addressing the issue, thereby laying the foundation for the proposed presentation. Typically, references and citations are included in this section for validation. The second section explains the research, action, or intervention that was undertaken to address the situation. It describes, for example, the group that was developed, the setting and population, and the strategies and interventions used. It addresses the core of the presentation and tells the reviewers what the author hopes to discuss. The third section of the abstract discusses the results, learning, and/or significance of the work. It also addresses next steps or follow-up. Essentially, this last section answers the question 'So what?', and identifies what the attendee could gain or take away from the presentation. Useful wording for outcome statements includes - 'Participants will gain...' or 'The presentation will provide...' or 'Participants will be better informed/better understand/ have skills at...'. Suggestions and specific tips for optimizing the abstract process were then shared with the workshop attendees. These are delineated in Appendices A and B.

Acceptance or Rejection - What's Next?

Once the abstract has been submitted, work can begin on the presentation, although in reality, many authors delay this until they receive their formal acceptance notification. The notification date is usually listed on the call for proposals, but many conferences are volunteer driven and therefore subject to delays. Assuming the abstract is accepted, it is certainly appropriate to celebrate and share the news with colleagues and friends; however, it is also advisable to immediately

create a realistic schedule for preparing the presentation. Time goes by quickly and too often presenters find themselves working against the clock, producing results that are less than ideal. For co-authors, this is particularly important because there are now two or more schedules to coordinate and one person can easily end up doing most of the work.

It is frequently helpful to identify a mentor or colleague who has previously made presentations at the same conference. This person can support the presentation planning process, review ideas, and even listen to the actual presentation. For authors unable to identify a mentor, the sponsoring association often has experienced volunteers who would be happy to assist. Adequate preparation and role playing are critical for feeling comfortable in front of an audience. There are many resources available on how to make an effective presentation. See Appendix C for a list of some relevant readings.

What if the abstract is rejected? It is hard not to take it personally, to feel angry or defeated, or to resolve never to submit again. It is important to remember that rejections are common for even the best and most prolific scholars. Rather than bury the abstract in a drawer or delete it from one's computer, try to summon the courage to show it to experienced colleagues and ask for feedback. Some conferences provide feedback with their rejection notifications. This can be an excellent learning experience. Sometimes the rejection is not deserved, but simply the bad luck of having a hyper-critical reviewer, or the fact that the conference received far more abstracts than there were time slots available. In any case, rejection is neither unusual nor necessarily a sign of inadequacy. Crafting an effective abstract is similar to riding a bicycle; falling off is part of the learning process.

Handouts

What, if anything, should be distributed at a presentation? While some conferences have specific guidelines or norms about what to distribute to attendees, and it is a good idea to find out about these, it is often up to the presenter whether to provide handouts. Nevertheless, it is far more professional to come prepared with written material to disseminate. It reflects preparation and thoughtful organization and demonstrates respect for the audience's time. For IASWG and many social work/social welfare conferences, it is not necessary to distribute

a formal paper, but it is commonplace for presenters to distribute a copy of their PowerPoint slides and references. Explanatory material and recommended activities are also welcome. Attendees appreciate the resources and the ability to review the material on their own.

For poster presentations, it is particularly valuable to have a clear handout to disseminate. The handout provides space to discuss the poster in further detail, since the poster is only a snapshot and brief overview of the subject. A poster handout could include a copy of the poster, references (which typically are not included on the poster itself), additional information and detail that does not fit on the poster, resources and supportive material. Because poster viewers generally spend only a few minutes looking over the poster content and engaging with the presenter, having a handout allows the connection to continue beyond the face-to-face meeting.

For all presentations, it is highly recommended that the handout contain a cover sheet with the title of the presentation and contact information. The contact information can include author's name, agency or university affiliation, email address, phone number and mailing address. Providing this information in a readily accessible place facilitates further connections, referrals and follow-up relationships. Some presenters also bring business cards for the same purposes.

After the presentation

Enjoy the moment! This is usually the positive culmination of one's work and effort. Remember that most conference participants want a presenter to succeed and will do their best to provide support and encouragement. Being affirmed by professional colleagues in a conference setting is a professional high which can be both inspirational and motivational. After the presentation, be sure to debrief and take notes about follow-up activities. The best learning comes from an immediate assessment of the presentation experience. Consider whether the presentation warrants publication in the symposium proceedings or a journal. Some conferences send presenters written feedback garnered from the anonymous evaluations completed by session attendees. Spend some time reflecting upon whether the experience was worth the effort, and if so, begin to plan for next year's presentation while enthusiasm is at a peak!

Conclusion

Facilitating this workshop was a consistently rewarding experience. Participants' enthusiasm for camp and groupwork was palpable. They were eager to explore options and possibilities. They readily shared potential topics, anxiety about the presentation process, and questions about the details of submission and follow-up. Occasionally they even found a fellow camper with whom to co-author a presentation. It was evident from participants' demeanor, verbal comments and written anonymous evaluations, that participants left the session feeling empowered and better informed. In subsequent encounters with participants they would frequently remark about how helpful it was to receive both information and support to tackle the presentation process. While the workshop provided knowledge and resources, it did much more. It created a pathway for building on the camp experience and allowed the excitement of Group Work Camp to continue in a professionally relevant manner.

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Appendix A

Tips and suggestions for abstract preparation

1. Understanding General Conference Expectations

- Become familiar with the rigor and culture of the conference. This can be done through formal or informal methods. Reading the association's website, reviewing past conference programs, connecting with past conference attendees, or simply emailing the contact person for information can all be valuable and informative. It is important, especially as a novice presenter, to be sure that the conference is a good fit for the type of experience desired.
- Review the call for proposals for the relevance of the presentation topic. Ascertain whether the presentation topic fits the particular conference (e.g., the abstract needs to focus on groups for a groupwork conference).
- Do not be too concerned that the proposal matches the exact topics suggested in the call for proposals. These are typically suggestions only.
- The theme of the conference need not be included in the presentation title or abstract. If the topic is relevant to the overall mission of the conference, that is sufficient. One need not use terms like 'vision for the future' or 'sailing together' even if they are major terms in the conference theme.

2. Understanding Specific Conference Requirements

- Check whether the date and time for submission are firm deadlines. Note the time zone to which the deadline applies. (For example, the U.S. Council on Social Work Education closes their Annual Program Meeting submission site at 10:59 pm CST since it is one minute before midnight in their home office time zone.)
- References - Most conferences, particularly the more academically rigorous ones, require citations and references. It is helpful to see sample abstracts for the extent of references required.
- Verify expectations on the format and style of references (APA, MLA, etc.).

- Check whether and what types of audio-visual equipment (computers, projectors, screens, etc.) are available and whether there is a fee for their use.
- Check on the number of copies of handouts that are recommended to be brought for distribution to session participants.

3. Writing the Abstract

- Check out the conference website to see whether sample abstracts are available.
- Write to the audience (e.g., groupwork reviewers want to see groupwork content).
- Do not include identifying titles or descriptors of the agency or clients (e.g., no actual names, cities, specific addresses, etc.). For instance, one could say ‘a large, urban social service agency working with the homeless population’ but not ‘the Urban Center of Chicago, Inc., working with the homeless group named Movers.’
- Learning objectives – usually refers to 2-5 statements of what a participant will gain from having attended the session. This can be written by stating ‘At the end of the session, participants will be able to: better define ...; have an understanding of current issues in...; have additional skills at...; be able to replicate the model, etc.’
- Teaching methods/strategies - some conferences request identification of specific presentation methods. There are usually examples or drop down menus.
- Co-presenting - If there is more than one presenter, determine whose name will be listed first. Historically, the first author is viewed as having primary responsibility for the presentation, the second author secondary responsibility, the third author next, and so on. Often, acceptance information is only sent to the first author.
- Allow others, both in and out of the field, to review the abstract.
- Proofread for clarity, spelling, grammar, punctuation, and format.

4. Submitting an Abstract

- Online submissions – Allow time to become familiar with online

requirements or forms well before the submission deadline. Unanticipated autobiographical or other information may be needed.

- Try not to submit at 11:59pm for a 12am deadline. The website can crash or close.
- Check word count to be sure it does not exceed limits. Many conferences will not accept abstracts that are one word over the maximum allowed. Word count often includes citations.

5. Additional Resources

- A helpful resource for additional information on conference presentations is *Presenting at a Conference* by Dominique Moyses Steinberg, which can be accessed at <http://www.iaswg.org/assets/docs/IASWG-Student-Presenter-Info-Packet.pdf>. Sample abstracts can also be accessed here.
- For specific tips on preparing a poster, see Appendix B, Guidelines for Preparing a Poster.
- For suggestions on giving a successful conference presentation, see Appendix C, Selected Readings for Delivering an Effective Presentation.

Appendix B

Guidelines for Preparing a Poster*

Poster presentations are a less formal alternative to the traditional paper or workshop presentation. A brief visual and interactive format is used to highlight the authors' work. An effective poster presentation combines high quality content and an engaging interaction style. Recommendations for creating an effective poster are listed below.

Creating/Formatting a poster

Use PowerPoint to create the poster. Use one PowerPoint slide to create the poster.

- Prior to constructing the poster, modify the dimensions of the slide to a width of 42' x 34 -36', or whatever dimensions are called for.
- All poster content must be typed.
- Use common, readable font - e.g., Times New Roman, Cambria, Ariel. Suggested font sizes are ~ 60 pt for the title, researcher name, and institution, 30-48 pt. for subheadings, 30 - 18 pt. for body text, figures and tables. Everything should be large enough to be read from several feet away.
- White space - Have enough white space to keep the poster easy to read. Keep in mind, the poster is supplemented by presenter interaction and handouts.
- A colorful, appealing background can be desirable if not too distracting.
- The use of bullet points, highlighting, headings, charts, etc. is encouraged.
- Avoid acronyms, abbreviations and jargon that are not widely understood.

What to include on the poster

- Title, author(s), position (e.g. MSW student, LCSW, etc.), faculty sponsor/mentor (if applicable), university/agency affiliation
- If the author is affiliated with a college/university, display the institution's logo on the poster. The institution's communications or marketing department can provide access to the logo
- Summary – approximately 75 -100 words that summarize the study/project
- Background/Introduction – a statement of the problem/policy/practice issue

- Methods – a description of the practice-based interventions/ research methodology
- Results/Findings – a description and explanation of the results of the study and/or the learning/knowledge gained
- Discussion and Conclusion – a summary of the learning/knowledge gained and its future implications
- References - can be abbreviated or eliminated from the poster but should be incorporated in the handout
- Relevant charts/images

Printing and transporting the poster

- If affiliated with a university, check printing costs at the university's print shop. It could be significantly less expensive than using a commercial print shop.
- Consider how the poster will be transported. Often inexpensive cardboard tubes are available for travel.

Accompanying handout

- Handouts should contain a cover sheet with the following: title, author(s), position/credentials (e.g. MSW student, LCSW, etc.), faculty mentor (if applicable), university/agency affiliation, the title and place of the conference/symposium, and the date of the presentation.
- Handouts often incorporate a copy of the poster, references, and additional information and detail that does not fit on the poster.
- Copies of the handout should be brought to the conference/symposium to be disseminated to interested participants. Check with conference organizers for the suggested number to bring.

* Adapted from:

Simon, S. R. & Webster, J. (2009) *Instructions for Poster Presentations at the 31st International Symposium of the Association for the Advancement of Social Work with Groups*. Unpublished handout.

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Appendix C

Selected readings:

Delivering an effective presentation

- Belben, C. (2003) Making a gift of yourself: Preparing for successful conference presentation. *Teacher Librarian*, 31, 1, 12
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