

## Using “Family Groups” in Psych 48 - Family Therapy

Over the winter break I thought about how I could better teach and engage my students in the learning process. I was not satisfied with the depth of their learning, especially since most of these students were preparing for careers as paraprofessionals in counseling. In spite of the fact that there are individual reflective writing assignments, individual hands-on creative projects and contextualized examples of theoretical information presented in my lectures, learning was still on the surface. I thought about group work projects instead of individual projects, additional assignments and different ways of giving feedback and then I stopped. I realized that I was going about it in all the wrong ways.

I asked myself, what are the most important concepts that I want students to learn and apply in their own life as well as in their careers? How can I contextualize family systems theory? How can I help the light bulbs go off in their heads instead of hearing my words repeated back to me or worse yet, text from the book. I came up with the following learning goals. They need to learn that the “family” is a “system” and that the system is the main focus. They need to learn that there are many different and diverse family systems and that there is not one “right way”. They need to learn what weakens the system and what makes the system strong and resilient. What better way to learn this than through an in class “Family Group”? Collaborative group learning is not a new concept but I “tweaked” it to help the students experience what I wanted them to learn.

The first day I randomly divided the class into assigned “Family Groups”, ten groups with about five in each group. They were all given a handout containing a statement of purpose for the Family Groups, explaining what I expected them to do and learn from this experience. I assigned extra credit Family points that can only be earned by the performance of the entire family group, not just individuals in the group. Family points centered around family performance on tests and quizzes as well as full family participation in discussing/answering group questions. This prevented the possibility of just a couple of people doing all the work for their group and allowed students to still be able to earn the grade that they individually aspired to. This is what they were given as an outline:

### **FAMILY GROUPS - EXTRA CREDIT**

**(58 POSSIBLE POINTS)**

#### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of your Family Group is to help you learn, understand and apply the information you are learning in class, not just earn extra credit points. Your goal is to understand the dynamics of a family system as well as try to create a functional (as opposed to dysfunctional) family system. Each Family Group might be different from the other or your own family system, as it is in the real world. Try to think “out of the box” when trying to solve Family

Group problems and utilize the information from class to help you understand and participate in your Family Group in new and different ways than you normally do. **This might require you to take a look at yourself as well as others in a different way.**

Your Family Group Meetings will be the first ten minutes of class (**No meetings on Chapter Quiz days**). Your Family Group should be prepared to discuss Family Group issues or work on a group question that I will give you when you walk into class. This means the members of your group need to be to class on time and be well organized. You will only have ten minutes. It would be appropriate for your groups to schedule additional time out of class (e.g. study, tutoring, support groups).

### **How to Earn Points**

**Special Assignments:** 3 pts for each assignment when every Family Group member receives a “C” or better.

(3pts X 5)

**TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS 15**

**Chapter Quizzes:** 1 pt for each quiz when every Family Group member receives a “C” or better.

(1pt X 16)

**TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS 16**

**Tests:** 3 pts for each test when every Family Group member receives a “C” or better.

(3pts X 4)

**TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS 12**

**Family Participation Questions:** 3 pts for each question when **all** Family Group members are present in class to participate in answering the question.

(3 pts X 5)

**TOTAL POSSIBLE POINTS 15**

They were asked to talk about family strategies that can be used to strengthen their family system. The overall strategies addressed communication, support and resources. This confirmed for me that they understood the basics of what was important in a family system.

When the first quiz was taken none of the family groups earned extra credit points, so I had each family group discuss what could be done within the family system to help the system work better. These ideas were shared with the class. I also offered myself as a resource in case there were students who did not feel comfortable sharing their needs with their family group or their family group couldn't come up with any ideas. They came up with different study techniques and group study but also support and resources available in the community and at the college.

As the family groups started to function as a system I asked each individual student to answer two questions anonymously. Question 1: What have been the benefits of being in a family group? Question 2: What have been the problems in being in a family group? Here is a summary of the responses:

### **Benefits:**

We look after each other and study together

There is someone to call if I have a question

Call members who are absent from class

Made new friends and created some close relationships  
Helps me communicate with others  
Found out about new resources  
Opportunity to apply learning strategy into family unit  
When a member needs help we communicate with each other  
Feed off of important information from a group member  
Easier to ask for help  
Sharing our own experiences/life stories is helping us to understand the material  
We may not always see eye to eye but we are respectful of each other  
This is my second time taking this class. Now that I have the support of my family I am doing much better  
Our family is diverse so we have a lot of input  
Get to hear diverse opinions from different cultures and ages  
Able to have more in depth discussions in a limited amount of time as opposed to large classroom discussions  
Nice to feel connected to the class and other people  
Positive feedback, encouragement and understanding  
The family helped me be accountable for my grades  
I study harder so I won't disappoint my family members

Problems:

Some family members don't consistently come to class  
Some members do not display an equal level of commitment, participation, contribution  
We don't have any problems at this time  
We communicate well so we don't have any problems  
Two family members are not reliable and appear to have personal problems that affect the family  
The family is not functioning to its potential  
Not everyone studies  
Some students don't want to help themselves despite repeated attempts to help them  
We have no males in our group so we only have the female perspective  
We have different schedules and it's hard to get together to study  
Everyone holds themselves accountable so there are no problems  
Shy to participate in discussions beyond the family group  
There seems to be a power struggle

My next step is to have the families take the list of benefits and problems and discuss them within the framework of family systems theory. Since the semester is not over, I can't make any conclusions as to the efficacy of this new strategy. However, it is obvious from the student comments that the families have provided a good structure for peer support and collaborative learning at the very least.