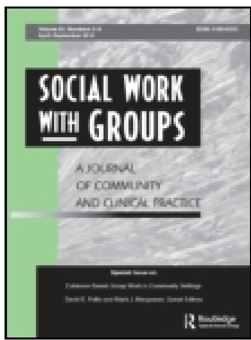

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The Purpose, Benefits, and Challenges of "Check-in" in a Group-work Class

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The purpose of this article is to illustrate, through teaching examples and student logs, a technique, called "check-in" routinely used in the author's group-work classes. Check-in is a process where students are invited, in the beginning of each class, to share their struggles, questions, dilemmas, accomplishments, and failures related to their group-work learning. Check-in requires students to listen and offer support, ideas, challenges, and guidance to each other. The goal of check-in is to help students develop their group-work skills and knowledge. Integrating democratic teaching practice with group stage development theory, particularly beginnings and middles, this article explores the process, complexities, and skills inherent in the check-in process. Implications for group-work practice skills are discussed.

KEYWORDS *check-in, democratic teaching, classroom community, group developmental stages, parallel process, mutual aid*

INTRODUCTION

The matching of group-work skills with stages of group development is a subject generously covered in the social group-work literature (Berman-Rossi, 1993; Birnbaum & Cicchetti, 2000; Duffy, 1994; Garland, Jones, & Kolodny, 1973; Glassman, 2009; Kurland & Salmon, 1998; Northen & Kurland, 2001). A less explored topic is teachers' understanding and use of classrooms as laboratories for teaching about group work. The purpose

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of this article is to illustrate, through teaching examples and student logs, a technique called "check-in," that is routinely used in the author's group-work classes. Check-in is a process where students are invited, in the beginning of each class, to share their struggles, questions, dilemmas, accomplishments, and failures related to their group-work learning. Check-in requires students to listen and offer support, ideas, challenges, and guidance to each other. *Check-in*, defined as "to report, as by presenting oneself" (Newfelt & Guralnik, 2008), is introduced on the first day of class and instituted as a class norm. Check-in in the classroom has a dual purpose and typically occurs in the first 25 to 35 minutes of the class.

First, it provides students with opportunities to talk with each other about their field work experiences, particularly the common ups and downs associated with launching groups in the field. Check-in participation (listening and talking) offers students peer validation. They soon realize that they are not alone in their struggles in the field and classroom. Check-in is guided by a teacher (the author, in this case) who also serves as the students' field advisor. The goal of check-in is to help students to develop group-work skills and knowledge.

Second, by participating in check-in, students are able to have the experience of being members of a classroom group as students, not clients. During check-in, the concept of the *parallel process* is emphasized with attention to roles that emerge in the classroom and how these roles can be translated to practice settings. Parallel process is "The way in which the process on one level (such as supervisor-worker) parallels the process on another level (such as worker-client)" (Shulman, 2006, p. 608).

By integrating democratic teaching practice with group stage development theory, particularly the beginning and middle stages of groups, this article explores the dynamics, complexities, and skills inherent in the check-in process. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that many social work practice classes incorporate some time for students to "get things off their chests" regarding their field practice experiences and their overall learning, the check-in process described in this article is carefully planned, skill based, and informed by democratic teaching and social group-work theory and principles.

Check-in allows everyone to have a voice and encourages mutual aid, in the classroom, from the start of the semester. Check-in is often used as an opening ritual for groups in practice settings, with the purpose of "taking the pulse" of the group (Duffy, 1994, p. 164). This technique requires a teacher who is not afraid to use herself or himself to model group-work skills and processes. Additionally, check-in requires a belief in the humanistic values of group work, such as that "people have the right to take part and to be heard" (Glassman, 2009, p. 23).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review covers three areas: (1) the philosophy and skills inherent in democratic teaching, specifically group potential in the classroom (Freire, 2001; hooks, 1994; McRae, 2009; Plancha, 2007; Reynolds, 1942; Schwartz, 1964; Shulman, 1987); (2) furthering understanding of group developmental stages and related worker practice skills (Bartolomeo, 2009; Berman-Rossi, 1993; Birnbaum & Cicchetti, 2000; Duffy, 1994; Garland et al., 1973; Glassman, 2009; Kurland & Salmon, 1998; Northen & Kurland, 2001; Shulman, 2009; and (3) the use and value of the student's expression of emotion in the classroom (Chung, 2010).

Democratic Teaching: The Class as a Group

In *Learning and Teaching in the Practice of Social Work,* Bertha Capen Reynolds (1942) stressed the value of people learning collaboratively. Nevertheless, the use of a group-work class as a springboard for learning group work skills is an understudied subject in social work, with some exceptions (see, e.g., Schwartz, 1964; Shulman, 1987). Building on the work of William Schwartz, who identified a classroom as a living group, Shulman (1987) offered a compelling portrait of the classroom group process in his article "The Hidden Group in the Classroom: The Use of Group Process in Teaching Group Work Practice." As evidence of his teaching philosophy, Shulman (1987) said, "There is a hidden group in every classroom. The group can be a powerful force for effective learning" (p. 30).

Shulman (1987) discussed the teacher's need to balance process and content to promote mutual aid in the classroom Although educational goals must come first, with openness and flexibility from a teacher, students can learn and benefit from their group membership in the classroom (Shulman, 1987). Shulman (1987) emphasized the importance of teachers maintaining an educational contract and cautioned them to "not allow the class to turn into a therapeutic experience by probing into [students'] personal lives" (p. 15).

Sharing data is a common classroom mutual aid dynamic that can be tapped in to. Here, according to Shulman (1987), "The teacher is not the only source of knowledge since all students bring life experiences to the classroom, often substantial practice experiences" (p. 7). A dialectical process emerges in a class when different viewpoints are expressed with attention paid to the unique contributions of each student. A classroom environment that feels safe for students to broach taboo issues and receive support for taking honest risks is essential. The type of class where mutual aid dynamics are recognized, valued, and used for the group benefit happens when the teacher tells students that: "We establish a culture in this

class in which you feel free to risk your mistakes and failures, as well as successes" (Shulman, 1987, p. 22).

Although social work educators and practitioners offer a particular perspective on mutual aid in the classroom, there are other voices to consider as well. Through their writings on democratic pedagogy, progressive educators have contributed to another, similar vision of a classroom environment based on equality, mutuality, and respect (Freire, 2001; hooks, 1994; McRae, 2009; Plancha, 2007). In explaining her vision of "engaged pedagogy," hooks (1994) said,

> As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence . . . the professor must genuinely value everyone's presence. There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences that classroom dynamic and that everyone contributes. (p. 8)

Further emphasizing the value and importance of democracy and equality in the classroom, hooks (1994) said,

> To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach, who also believe there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred, who believe that our work is not merely to share information, but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. (p. 13)

Using the metaphor of "teaching like a bass player," McRae (2009) stressed the importance of educators being conscious of power dynamics in the classroom, as well as the importance of seeing oneself as group member and a group leader, just as a bass player contributes to the foundation of the music and plays a role as a one of the musicians. The result is that everyone participates equally. Emphasizing the benefit of mutuality for students and teachers alike, Plancha (2007) defines *democratic teaching* as: "A commitment to helping students discover their self expression, develop consciousness, claim a new and ever-evolving awareness . . . [and] a dedication to the idea of democracy" (p. 124). These scholars provide a philosophical context for understanding check-in as a way that challenges the traditional hierarchical classroom.

Group Developmental Phases

An understanding and respect for stages of group development—pregroup planning, beginnings, middles, and endings—is critical for group-work learning and practice (Bartolomeo, 2009; Berman-Rossi, 1993; Garland et al.,

1973; Glassman, 2009; Kurland & Salmon, 1998; Northen & Kurland, 2001; Shulman, 1987). In her writing on the specific components of group development, Berman-Rossi (1993) said, "a more highly developed group is better able to satisfy members' needs, which originally drew them to the group" (p. 70). She maintained that group workers who have an awareness of how groups develop and change over time can act with a higher degree of skill.

Although there are several approaches to stage development theory, the Boston model (Garland et al., 1973) is particularly influential in social group work. By integrating observations and analyses of process recordings of children's groups, Garland et al., created a five-stage model of group-work practice. The emblematic stages include (1) preaffiliation, (2) power and control, (3) intimacy, (4) differentiation, and (5) termination.

With an emphasis on power, control, and authority issues, Glassman's (2009) seven-stage model offers another take on a group's development: (1) We are not in charge, (2) We are in charge, (3) We're taking you on, (4) Sanctuary, (5) This isn't good anymore, (6) We're okay and able, and (7) Just a little longer (pp. 61–80).

A classroom is a type of group with similar dynamics and developmental milestones. Check-in happens at the beginning of each class. Beginnings in group work come with a specific set of challenges and opportunities, as Kurland and Salmon (1998) explained,

> The beginning stage of group development is especially important because it provides the foundation for what will follow. It is common for members to enter a new group with mixed emotions—excitement and hope about the group's potential benefit, combined with fear and dread that the group will be a negative experience. They may also be concerned that they, personally, will not measure up to their own and others' expectations. (p. 36)

Groups and, by association, classes, are complex human organisms that are best understood within the context of time. Each phase of development has unique dynamics and requires specific knowledge from the worker (or teacher) (Berman-Rossi, 1993; Duffy, 1994; Glassman, 2009; Shulman, 2009). Workers must pay especially careful attention to the beginning sessions, "to set a proper stage for the work that will follow" (Shulman, 2009, p. 112). Contracting, tuning in to the authority theme (the relationships between the group leader and the members) and the intimacy theme (the relationship among the members) are all important stage-related elements (Glassman; 2009; Schwartz, 1964). Glassman's (2009) Stage Theme 1 purports that, "We are not in charge." In this stage, workers bring to the group's start a clear vision of democratic membership, as she explained, "a committed professional, is dedicated to the success of the group, as a productive environment and experience for each member" (p. 63).

In her article on the use of check-in “and other go-rounds” in group work, Duffy (1994) explained, “A go-round is an activity in which each group member is asked to respond, in turn, to a particular stimulus. The activity is known variously as a check-in, go-round, agenda-go-round, round, or round-robin” (p. 163). Although it does not address educational groups per se, Duffy’s article has particular relevance for classroom dynamics. She warned against misuse of check-in and the importance of workers deciding how to respond to the themes presented by members. Duffy said, “Misuse generally occurs when the procedure ignores, interrupts, tries to speed up or circumvent the natural development of the group” (p. 167).

Although focused on the other end of a group session, Birnbaum and Cicchetti’s (2000) article on sessional ending skills resonates with the check-in concept. They said, “Individual and group development is enhanced when the group worker recognizes that single sessions have beginning, middle and ending phases (p. 37). These authors outlined five practice skills for purposeful sessional endings, two are especially relevant here: (1) allocation of time: “setting aside time for sessional endings involves a skill” (p. 46) and (2) developing norms: “Usually the group is more accepting when the sessional ending is part of the group contract from the onset of group formation” (p. 46).

Student Emotions

An important element of check-in involves students learning to feel and share personal aspects of their learning process. Being open to receiving feedback from peers is part of this process. Emotions are an integral and often-overlooked component of social work student learning. Chung (2010) in her study on the use of emotions in the classroom said, “Using the construct of emotions as a focal point in the clinical social work practice curriculum can advance student practice, as well as their motivations in the learning process” (p. 77). With an understanding of the parallel process, Chung added, “In recognizing the importance of tending to their own emotional needs, students also become more adept at enhancing their empathy toward their clients” (p. 88). Although check-in maintains an educational focus, there is no question that students’ feelings emerge in the process. Helping students learn how to navigate emotions as part of their social work skill set is a valuable task for teachers.

Summary of Literature

Seeing the natural similarities between groups in communities, agencies, and classrooms makes sense. It is important for group-work educators and

practitioners to conceptualize a class as a form of a democratic community. In using check-in in educational settings, it is critical for teachers to understand how different developmental stages inform group dynamics in the classroom and how check-in changes with the developmental phase of the class. Check-in is not just reporting and moving on to the next person. It requires a worker to look for connecting themes among the members (Duffy, 1994). Although focused on education, check-in may involve the expression and understanding emotions as a part of the learning process. The purpose of this literature review was to place the process of check-in into a broader theoretical context.

ILLUSTRATIONS OF CHECK-IN

History

The year-long social group-work practice course described in this article, is offered in a school of social work where the practice teacher (author) also serves as the field advisor. This is a 2nd-year practice course required for Group Work majors. Most classes have between 10 and 20 students. There are some sections that are offered to traditional students, those who are in school and field work during the day, as well as to nontraditional students, those whose jobs also serve as their internships and who attend classes in the evening. Practice classes, whether offered in the evening or during the day, are the ideal forum to help students address field work struggles, concerns, and accomplishments. Although the school has historically small and supportive classes and a strong advisement component, this type of in-class group supervision was markedly missing from students' experiences. A need was evident.

Laying the Groundwork

For check-in to be a conscious and deliberate process, rather than haphazard student sharing, specific classroom elements are put in place each semester. The most important among them is the establishment of a classroom community (hooks, 1994).

> SEC (Author): I want to talk about how we will come to work together as a group. I like to call this, "establishing a classroom community," which means we consciously work together in the spirit of democracy. In this class, all of your voices and perspectives matter and will be an integral part of this class. The first expectation I have is mutual respect. This means that we will work together to respect each other and our unique learning process. The second is confidentiality, meaning what is said in

> here, stays in here. This will help facilitate mutual trust. What else might be important?

In this example, I clearly articulate the expectations for the type of class this will be and the importance of students knowing that each one of them is part of the powerful classroom whole. Setting the tone is especially needed to begin to establish an open and respectful climate conducive for check-in.

Establishing the Norm

Check-in is a class process that changes and deepens depending on the developmental stage of the group. Verbalizing norms is a skill necessary in the beginning phase. Here, workers (and teachers), "let the group know what actions are acceptable and unacceptable as one begins to establish standards of expected behavior" (Kurland & Salmon, 1998, p. 41). In the beginning, the norm is established that "check-in" will happen in every class meeting. The teacher emphasizes that check-in is a valued and important class action, because it allows for group participation, problem solving, and peer support across field placements, student personalities, and other factors. The importance of weaving check-in into the fabric of each class cannot be overstated. In the first class, I introduce the concept of *check-in*, including the classroom community emphasis, through an introductory statement. After an overview of the course and student introductions, I direct the discussion to the structure and elements of each class session.

> SEC: Hi everyone. Welcome to Group Work I. I am really looking forward to getting to know each of you and us as a group. Before getting to the syllabus, I'd like to start by laying out the structure of this class. Because this is a group-work class, some of what happens in this class will mirror group-work dynamics, although we will stay focused on our educational purpose. I'd like to suggest that we reserve 25-35 minutes at the beginning of each class for "check-in." Check-in is a time at the beginning of class where you are invited to share your struggles, questions, dilemmas, accomplishments, and failures related to group work in your internships. Check-in also requires you to listen to and offer support, ideas, challenges, and guidance to each other.

Each class, like each group in practice, has a beginning, middle, and an end. Articulating the expectation of each of these class elements helps students understand what is expected of them and what is possible in the process.

Maintaining the Contract

Although students generally easily grasp the concept of check-in, they sometimes are unsure what is okay to bring up. Students may fear that a topic is inappropriate or that it may take time away from class. Others worry that one student's problems will take over or there will be no way for everyone to relate to the issues presented. Keeping true to the educational contract of the classroom and university context is extremely important (Shulman, 1987). For these reasons, teachers need to be clear about what is acceptable and not acceptable, while modeling and encouraging students to bring up what is on their minds, so the process can be genuine and meaningful. The following example shows a student, who is unsure, asking about bringing something up. While I answer the student directly, I am conscious of involving the whole class in the process.

Ruth: What is okay to bring up in check-in?

SEC: That's an excellent question. Some of this depends on what we decide as a class, but in previous years, I asked students to bring up topics related to group work, internship experience as well as issues related specifically to group-work practice, and overall student life. What you bring up should be connected to your learning in social work school. Does that make sense? What should be off limits?

Jennifer: Well, I don't really think check-in is the place for anyone to bring up personal issues, like being depressed or something like that.

Keisha: Yeah I mean, that's what therapy is for, right? I think we should focus on school and placements and stuff like that.

SEC: Okay. So check-in needs to be focused on your learning, and that can be broadly defined. We will have an educational focus to class and check-in. I assure you class should not and will not become therapy.

Here, I have an idea in my mind, based on years of experience, of what check-in is and should be, but I involve the students in a discussion of what would best fit their needs. Assessing for needs is an essential group-work skill, particularly at the beginning (Kurland & Salmon, 1998). I also reassure students that check-in will remain educational.

Lending a Vision

In early classes, the use of check-in is a leap of faith for students who may feel skepticism and fear of precious time wasted. A teacher needs to first believe in the process and then "lend a vision" (Glassman, 2009) of the powerful learning potential of check-in. Duffy (1994) articulated the value of a worker being a model for members during this early process, "The worker models and nurtures such norms as mutual support, collective

action, appreciation of difference, self disclosure . . . freedom of interaction, honesty and spontaneity of expression" (p. 169). Students begin to believe in the process if there are a few elements present: (1) a teacher who has a vision of the benefit of the process, (2) a careful and clear introduction and explanation of check-in, and (3) skillful facilitation where goals are met, everyone is included, and real concerns are addressed. This introduction needs to be restated each time, until the students themselves begin their own check-ins. In the following illustration, I normalize student skepticism about check-in and make efforts to tap in to students' real concerns.

SEC: Welcome back everyone. Let's get started with check-in. As we talked about last class, check-in is something we will do at the beginning of each class. There are at least two purposes for check-in: one for you to get answers to your questions in a more informal way, and second for you as a class to begin to form into a kind of group. It's tough starting groups, and you may have strong feelings about the process. As our class develops, as we get to know each other, check-in will deepen as well. You'll see. Would anyone like to begin by asking a question or sharing something about your field placement?

Ben: This sounds like a waste of time, I am sorry to say. I have other classes where all we do is chat and complain about our placements. How will this be any different?

SEC: I am glad you raised this, and I am guessing others have the same concern. I want check-in to be meaningful and important and not, as you say, a "waste of time." But we will have to work together to make this happen. I want us to decide together what will be meaningful to bring up. You will see over time that check-in will be purposeful and deliberate. You will see how much you all have in common, and I will guide the discussion at first and make sure the time is being used well, but soon you will see how much you all have in common, with your placements and beginning to learn group-work skills. Would anyone like to start?

Beth: Hi everyone. I guess I'll go first, even though I am not sure how this whole check-in thing works exactly. I am wondering how many groups we are supposed to be running. I am asking because it seems like a lot of work to get a group started, and I don't think I am going to have time to do too many group with all the other stuff I have to do.

SEC: I see a lot of heads nodding so I know Beth has hit on an important question. One function of check-in is for me to address common issues like this one, as well as to give you all the chance to talk openly about deeper issues, perhaps your fear about becoming a group worker, in a safe environment. But this takes time. In answer to Beth's question: you each will be responsible for envisioning, planning, and facilitating two original groups over the course of the academic year. Who's next?

In this illustration, the students use check-in as a way to ask specific questions and to voice worries common for beginning group-work students. Although I want to have the students talk to each other, I am conscious of my authority position and of the beginning dynamics of the class, where we are all a little tentative. I find that I have to answer a few advisement questions directly. In the following illustration, I talk openly about my authority role.

> SEC: I want to point out that I was particularly active during check-in just now. Part of this has to do with the fact that we are all beginning, and we are getting accustomed to the check-in process and to each other. The second is that you do have specific questions that I can answer as your advisor, and we can use this time to do that. As we move on in the semester, I will model and encourage you to talk to each other.

Check-in: Beginning Classes

Similar to beginning group-work sessions, the first classes of the year require a particularly active and engaged teacher. Check-in evolves as the class evolves. The teacher uses different skills depending on the group phase (Berman-Rossi, 1993). Here, is an illustration from a third class session where I model what students may want to bring to check-in.

SEC: Hi everyone. Welcome to class three. We are going to get started with check-in. Would anyone like to share something from your field work?

Marc: Okay. I have a question. I know we are supposed to have two groups each, but my field instructor says that there is a policy at the agency that students cannot run groups alone. I feel frustrated! What do I do?

Leah: Yeah, I have the same issue. I told my field instructor that I have to run two groups, and she looked very worried. I feel like I am a burden to her now.

SEC: Okay, what Marc and Leah are bringing up are very common realities for group-work students: having to go through several hoops to get your groups up and running. Let's hear more about that from the rest of you.

Margaret: This may sound crazy, but I think my field instructor may actually be afraid of groups. When I told her I was a group-work student, she looked very nervous.

Susan: I feel the same way.

Rhonda: Me too. My field instructor says she knows more about casework than group work.

In this example, I tried to avoid "casework in a group" (Kurland & Salmon, 1998) and worked to get everyone involved in the discussion around the common theme of barriers to establishing groups. By identifying a theme, I help students feel more at ease and secure in the check-in process.

They know what is expected of them. Because check-in is time-limited, identifying and keeping to a theme is a valuable facilitation skill.

Check-in: Middle Classes

There is a closeness and intimacy in the middle phase of groups. Consensus becomes important. Membership is more cohesive and goal oriented. The worker is less directive, although present and active. Members demand work from each other and are also more themselves—less holding onto a façade to help them fit in (Berman-Rossi, 1993). The group's purpose may shift as needs of the members change and develop (Kurland & Salmon, 1998). Check-in develops as the class matures and becomes comfortable taking risks with each other. Roles have been established, and conflict has surfaced. In the following illustration, I am less directive as the students have begun to establish ownership over check-in.

SEC: Hi everyone. Welcome to class seven. Okay, let's get started. I am opening up check-in.

Serena: I have something. I mean I am so annoyed. I started my Teen Girls Group, as you all know, and I am really excited. I had six girls show up this week, and they were ready to talk. Then my field instructor knocked on the door and told me that she wants to sit in and observe. That's not what I want and not what we are supposed to do. So, I told her that and she left. I know the girls did not like that. They think that I'm not in charge and I don't care about the group.

Teri: That's awful. But at least you stood up to your field instructor. In supervision, I think you could ask her to give you a chance. That's the only way you can be a good group worker is through facilitating groups on your own. She doesn't sit in on your individual sessions, does she?

Gail: Maybe you could try it with her. She may have something valuable to offer. You just don't know. In my placement, I run my own groups. But I know I make mistakes. I freeze up, or sometimes I become too strict.

In this example, the students are comfortable with each other and with the expectations of check-in. They are somewhat familiar with each other's placements and personalities. They don't need much direction to get things going. Remaining mindful of the time, I listen carefully to the key themes.

STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON CHECK-IN

Check-in is a meaningful and often beneficial process for students who sometimes write about these experiences in their biweekly group-work logs.

Logs are private communications between my students and me. They are generally not shared with the class. The themes presented in student logs are instructive for the learning and teaching process. Interestingly, one of the most pronounced themes written about in the logs is the meaning that students ascribe to being members of their class group via the check-in process.

Becoming a Group Member

Check-in is a way for students to become group members themselves. This membership is meaningful and surprising, as one student reflects in her log:

> I very much enjoyed our check-in session this week in class. It was hard for me to believe that this was just our third session together—the level of comfort I think people are feeling with one another makes it seems as though we have been together much longer. Last year, my Foundations class was supposed to be run in the same fashion: begin the class period with a check-in, which was supposed to be a time in which classmates could seek advice and share experiences from their field placements with one another. The desired outcome was that we would feel comfortable with one another and be able to support each other and help each other out, but for one reason or another, it did not happen. . . . I was astounded by the way in which members of our class stepped up to offer advice and support to the member of our group who was really struggling with her placement and balancing school with the demands of her family life. The level in which people were willing to share experiences and information about their own life was amazing, given that we had only two class periods together prior to this. This was an invaluable class experience to me, and I look forward to seeing our group next week (to me, we are no longer a class, but a group) and checking in with each other to see what the week brought.

Some students truly embrace the purpose of check-in and use the process to honestly learn about themselves. As we see in this log excerpt, this student is clear and positive about what check-in means to her. Still, she understands and values that the process can sometimes be gently confrontational.

> I thought about what check-in means to me. Check-in for me is very important. It allows me to express to my peers the frustrations that I am having with a particular issue. Or I may be able to talk about something positive that I did. I get to share the good and the bad. I can hear from others what they may be doing right, and I may be doing wrong. Sometimes when discussing things during check-in, my classmates may put me in check. An example of this is when I spoke about a client being

> late. My classmate immediately pointed out to me that I was late to class that evening, so why would I think me being late is acceptable, and the client being late isn't acceptable?

Seeing Mutual Aid in Action

As the class develops and members bond, the check-in process becomes a forum for students to really participate in a mutual aid process and help each other and themselves.

> This evening, check-in was intense. One thing I can honestly say, [when] I walked away from class, besides the feelings of validation regarding placement logistics and supervisory concerns, was the fact that the group process continues to unfold in a very progressive manner. For example, S. challenged P. on something that she said. P. seemed to have misinterpreted the comment. What I admired most about this interaction was the fact that the discussion was held in a very respectful manner between the two group members with no body language expressing any degree of animosity. Last class was a very interesting check-in. I am very moved by the group's ability to genuinely offer advice that not just benefits the one member in crisis, but the entire group as a whole. Last week, someone brought up a predicament of being frustrated in field and many of us listened, helped problem-solve, and gave unique, distinct advice.

For the students, check-in is not just about problem solving and advice giving. There seems to be a power in being all in the same boat, as students. Commonalities unfold in the check-in process. Class becomes a natural group, as the members can immediately come together as students of group work, as seen in this log example:

> I realize that being in a group, almost everyone shares something in common. I asked myself, what do I have in common with this class group? And I thought about it for a while. Now I realize that all members of the group are concentrating in Group Work, some of the members have prior experience facilitating groups, some have no experience at all.

As the semester progresses, the commonalities shift from students of group work to include discussions of more complex parallels, as we see in this log example:

> When K. shared his experiences, the commonality of our group of students, with diversity in lifestyles, support networks, etc. was reflected in our discussion. I was able to share with K. how I had struggled with balancing school and family. H. shared how she had to depend on her

> husband and mom last semester in order to make accommodations at work. As the discussion continued, the entire group was able to address and relate to K's discomfort.

Teacher as Group Worker

By way of introduction and modeling, I always say to my class, "Please listen to my words but also watch what I do, as I will be modeling group-work skills through the way that I teach." Check-in allows students to be group members and allows the teacher to serve as the group facilitator. Students value this modeling, as the following except from a student logs shows:

> During check-in, I was observing not just the members of our class but also the way in which you ran the class. To me it seemed as though this was the perfect example of how a group was supposed to be run. As the facilitator, you were able to guide the group and help us to help each other. As a result, people were open to it, and it seemed as though the members who really needed support were able to receive it. You were also able to conduct the group at an appropriate time so we will still be able to accomplish the lesson for the day.

Another student commented on my ability to get the mutual aid process going during check-in and showed the value of a teacher allowing students to share their common struggles. Students can learn how to develop their own unique styles and techniques in part, through watching a teacher/group worker in action.

> During check-in, [the professor] inquired if anyone else could relate or had similar experiences to R.'s feelings. The professor allowed the process to unfold, and remained silent for the most part and then, once it seemed that the concern was explored enough, commonalities were presented to the group.

Frustrations Around Member Roles and Dynamics

As in any group, members of the class assume different roles; these roles powerfully affect the check-in process and the overall class dynamic. Moreover, members sometimes have different levels of investment and commitment to the check-in process; some students feel inpatient and eager to move on to the content piece, whereas others receive but do not offer help. The following log excerpts illustrate student frustrations with a monopolizer, as well as a class member who does not seem to value the check-in process.

> The problem I am having in group is one of the members has a problem with everyone who speaks after her. I feel she has become selfish after she speaks for about 15–20 minutes and then wants the class content to begin. I understand that she is frustrated and going through a lot, but we all are, which is why we do check-in.

It is disheartening for students when another student is less invested in the check-in process, as we see in the following log excerpt:

> What was very challenging for me was my ability to move away from the comments of a particular group member. I did not appreciate when he stated that he saw no purpose in check-in when he was the one the group was invested in. I did not find it fair for him to say that he'd rather engage in course material than check-in. I was baffled he not only was resistant to the professor's offer of help, but dismissed the group process that occurred around his field crisis. I felt horrible for my classmate who felt compelled not to share after this comment was made [about check-in having no value]. I really felt as if the dynamic of the group and the purpose of check-in at the moment was lost.

Modeling Group-work Skills

Check-in is meaningful and important in and of itself as a way for students to get support and peer guidance around field, practice, and student issues. However, check-in must move beyond the student role. A teacher needs to push the lesson further by emphasizing the field work implications. Students also need to be taught to identify the practice implications within class. The following log shows a student thoughtfully reflecting on the parallel process of her role as a member of the check-in group and the implication of this experience on her groups in her field placement.

> I was happy to be back in class this week since I missed last week due to illness. I really feel as though I am getting the experience of being a member of a group, which is a new feeling for me. I have belonged to many groups before, and still belong to groups, but this feels more like a therapeutic group in a way, not a group for a project or an organization. By *therapeutic*, I mean a group where members can vent and share frustrations, trials, tribulations, successes, accomplishments, feelings, etc. This week I noticed that even though I just missed one session, I felt as though I had missed out on a lot. So much happened to the members of the group in a 2-week span and I was struggling to catch up. I was also surprised to find that I actually missed all of the members of the group and I had been thinking of them in-between meetings. Even though we have been just having our group for a few weeks, I feel as though there is already a bond established

> between all of us, and everyone really values our time together. I think this is a very important feeling to remember when facilitating my own group. If someone misses a session, they may feel left out or out of the loop upon returning. I want everyone in my [internship] group to feel included and that their presence and participation are wanted and necessary. I don't want anyone to feel left out, and I hope that the members of my group feel the closeness and bond that I feel in our own class group. Until this year, I never understood how powerful a group can be, and I hope that I can be successful in facilitating a strong and cohesive group.

Teaching students ways to use check-in with their own groups is a valuable way of transmitting the in-class experience to the field.

CHECK-IN CHALLENGES

The Clock

One of the biggest challenges in ensuring a successful check-in is the clock and keeping check-in within the set time frame. For time to be used well and not wasted, check-in needs to adhere to a set time—approximately 25–35 minutes in a 2-hour class—unless negotiated otherwise. Staying true to the educational contract, the class must move on to the "content." A danger in the middle phase is check-in dominating the entire class time. It is important for the teacher and the students to contract when check-in begins and ends. Sometimes during a particularly active and involved check-in, as seen in the following illustration, I may need to stop the action and remind the class of "3 minutes left in check-in." If the students need or want more time, this can be negotiated.

Petra: I am feeling really overwhelmed with my placement and all the work I have to do for midterms. My bereavement group is going well, thanks to all of your support. And my field instructor is great. Here's the problem. I am just so sad all of the time, hearing all these stories of death, dying, and grief. It's too much. Does anyone else feel they take their clients' pain home with them?

Ben: I do. I really understand what you are saying. Let me tell you what happened last night in my Father's Group. It was so intense . . .

SEC: Ben, I appreciate that you are in the middle of your story, but I am going to stop you for a minute to point out the time. We have 3 minutes left of check-in. I know we are in the midst of some deep issues, so how do you all want to proceed? We can extend check-in until Ben finishes or we can end check-in now.

Here, although the time was running out, I stayed true to the democratic norms and gave students an opportunity to decide the next steps. Sometimes I may ask for a vote, but I am the tie breaker. In classes where check-in consistently runs over, teachers need to bring up this issue directly with the class and encourage them to problem-solve. For example, students have solved the problem by assigning rotating time keepers and allowing students to check-in for only 5 minutes each.

Group Roles

Another challenge has to do with emergent student roles. As in any other group, classes might have their scapegoat, monopolizer, deviant, and quiet member (Northen & Kurland, 2001). A teacher must be cognizant of the power these roles have on the check-in dynamic. A monopolizer who, week after week, uses check-in for his or her own personal supervision without offering support to others, needs to be gently confronted. Similarly, a quiet member needs to find a reason to invest himself or herself in the process, as we see in the following example:

Cara: Are we starting check-in?
SEC: Yes Cara. Is there something you want to bring up?
Cara: I feel like I am always talking, putting myself out there in this class. We never hear from you (points to classmate Max). I mean, what's up with that? [Max shrugs].
SEC: So Cara is raising the issue of some people participating in check-in more than others, particularly Max. First, let me remind you that talking during check-in is optional. But levels of participation affect the group as a whole. Max, do you want to respond to Cara?

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

A graduate-level social work class that resembles a democratic mutual aid group has special relevance for the process of teaching group work. Through detailed examples from classes as well as excerpts from student logs, this article demonstrates the benefits and challenges of using check-in, as well as the parallels to group-work practice. As shown in the student log excerpts, for check-in to be meaningful to students and the class as a whole, it must be approached with preplanning, thoughtfulness, skills, and a positive vision. Students need to have an investment in the process and be able to get their educational needs met by participating in an honest and genuine way.

Group-work students can learn ways to interpret and adapt the check-in technique for use with their groups in the field. For example, by being a

member of a class with check-in built into the norms, students can develop skills to encourage their group members to share information and to talk about struggles and accomplishments, before moving on to the content of the session.

Time management skills are also relevant for students in the field and for new group-work practitioners. The process of check-in helps students envision their sessions with a beginning, middle, and an end.

Above all, through learning the value of being members of a democratic classroom community, students have firsthand experience of the mutual aid process. With thoughtfulness, skill, and self awareness, group-work students can use this experience to inform and improve their professional group-work practice.

Check-in has the potential to be an instructive group process for teachers and students alike. In conclusion, is a list of six specific classroom skills required for teachers to successfully plan and implement check-in. These concluding skills serve as a practice guideline for social work teachers to facilitate check-in in a consistent, democratic, and educationally sound manner. These skills are also relevant for group-work practitioners.

1. Establish the norm early and often: The norm of check-in, nestled within the philosophy of the class as a democratic system, needs to be articulated by a teacher from the start and regularly reinforced as the semester progresses.
2. Lend a vision: Students need a teacher who is knowledgeable and enthusiastic about the process and benefits of check-in and about the overall value to the class and the field.
3. Model group-work skills: Put the phrase "actions speak louder than words" to work in the classroom. Group-work teachers are at their best when they consciously and deliberately model the skills they are teaching.
4. Keep to the contract: Teachers need to adhere to the educational contract of the class within a university context. Although emotions and life struggles often show up during check-in, it is important to stay focused on the educational objectives. Turning check-in into group therapy is inappropriate and not beneficial to anyone. Additionally, keeping check-in time limited is crucial.
5. Emphasize the practice implications: Teachers need to help students use and adapt check-in as a valuable group-work practice technique for their groups in the field.
6. Check in on check-in: Take time at key points in the semester to ask students about their experience with the check-in process, either through a class discussion or in their logs. By keeping the communication open, teachers can make necessary classroom adjustments to ensure the class needs are being met.

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