



Learning by Doing in Virtual Environments: An Experience in Social Work with Groups

ABSTRACT

This article presents a teaching experience linked to the course Methodology of Social Work Intervention with Groups (MTSG), taught at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). The purpose of this article is to present the results of the systematisation of a practical experience linked to a virtual teaching-learning process in the field of social work with groups in the context of the health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The article first outlines the framework of action of the teaching-learning experience and its pedagogical principles. Subsequently, the process of transition from a face-to-face model to an online model is discussed. Finally, key factors essential for the successful implementation of this experience are highlighted.

Keywords: Social Work with Groups, Social Work Education, Teaching Model, Experiential Learning.

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I. Introduction

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, addressing challenges in teaching and learning processes within social work methodology with groups has required the adoption of new scenarios and innovative solutions (Kessler et al., 2022). However, it is important to recognize that many of these needs and challenges were pre-existing long before the pandemic struck.

For instance, the transition to online education highlighted the already existing gaps in digital literacy among both students and educators, the lack of adequate technological infrastructure, and the necessity for pedagogical strategies tailored for virtual environments.

The pandemic merely accelerated the urgency to address these issues. In the context of social work, the methodology applied in group settings also faced significant shifts. Social work education and practice, which heavily rely on interpersonal interaction, had to adapt rapidly to online formats. This adaptation included redefining how group dynamics are managed, how empathy and support are conveyed in a virtual space, and how effective engagement is maintained (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

In conclusion, the challenges presented by the pandemic were not entirely new but were existing issues that required urgent and innovative solutions. In the field of social work methodology with groups, this period has been a catalyst for rethinking and enhancing our approaches to teaching and learning, ensuring they are resilient, inclusive, and adaptable to both current and future needs.

Due to the health crisis caused by Covid-19, some measures were implemented preventing face-to-face classes. Thus, it became essential to adapt teaching to an online modality. This situation became more complex because the Methodology of Social Work with Groups course has a strong practical component, where the requirement of physical presence was considered indispensable.

However, there are educational experiences prior to Covid-19 in the field of social work where the incorporation of digital elements showed good results (Jacinto & Hong, 2011; Muskat & Mesbur, 2011; Simon, Cohen, McLaughlin, Muskat, & White; Callister & Love, 2016; Byrne,

McGovern & Bradley, 2017; Carter, Damianakis, Munro, Skinner, Matin & Andrews, 2018). Some of these experiences have been developed entirely online, while others have been developed in hybrid formats, using elements drawn from an online modality without losing direct contact.

Academic literature has documented changes in the requirement for physical presence in teaching methodologies, particularly following the cancellation of face-to-face classes due to Covid-19 (Beason-Abmayr, Caprette, & Gopalan, 2021). These changes have been explored in the field of social work (Berger & Paul, 2021), social work with groups (Saldanha et al., 2021; Bergart, 2021), and even in adaptations of social work practicum programs (Baciu & Trancă, 2021).

In this context, this article attempts to present a teaching experience linked to the course Methodology of Social Work with Groups (MTSG), taught at the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). The teaching-learning process proposed in this course is eminently practical and makes use of the students' own interactivity in different group contexts.

It was necessary to make a transition to a virtual modality without losing the practical component inherent to the subject. This transition was easier due to the prior integration of digital tools into class dynamics (For example, virtual campus and Google Drive) and previous experience in online teaching (Ducca et. al., 2023; Arias, Alonso, Ducca & Brea, 2023).

II. Design And Methodology

The didactic methodology emphasizes experiential learning. The students (N=130) participate in different group experiences planning, facilitating and evaluating their group project, adopting different roles through the course: participant, observer and social worker. Throughout this process, the students are challenged to integrate the content of the different theoretical sessions, and they have at least three supervision sessions (regarding the different phases of the group life cycle: start, development and end). It is worth mentioning that the topic and content of the group is chosen by the students at the initial stage (such as social skills, healthy leisure alternatives, and emotional management).

The method carried out for the systematisation and evaluation of the learning experience is based on different qualitative information gathering systems, such as participant observation, the final reports and self-evaluation of the students in their final work, and the information contained in the digital tools used: Virtual Camp (Moodle), Blackboard Collaborate, Google Meet, Teams, among others.

Table 1. Materials produced in the teaching-learning process

	AUDIOVISUAL	WRITTEN	OTHERS
CORPUS OF MATERIALS	Group sessions conducted telematically via Meet	Final projects carried out by students	Virtual Camp (Moodle); Virtual Forum; Chats; BlackBoard Collaborate; e-mail; etc.
SELECTION CRITERIA	These are the recordings of the sessions of the different group projects. The audiovisual material generated makes it possible to evaluate the group process and the teaching-learning process.	The final works consist of the set of documents generated in the group process: the group project; session sheets; group chronicles; individual and group reflections; and evaluation of the process.	The use of telematic tools allows us to increase the number of interactions and the quality of these interactions. These are usually questions about the evaluation of the course, or notifications necessary for the development of the course.
SAMPLE SIZE	Group 1: 8 group projects (approx. 72 hours of audiovisual material) Group 2: 7 group projects (approx. 63 hours of audio-	Group 1: 8 final papers (640 pages total) Group 2: 7 final papers (636 pages in total)	Group 1: 75 interactions in virtual environment Group 2: 95 interactions in virtual environment

visual material)

Source: own elaboration

Pedagogical Principles

It is important to highlight several elements on which the teaching methodology is based. First, this experience takes place after a previous social work with group's course, which focuses on theoretical aspects. The course on which the paper is based focuses on praxis, understood as reflective practice. The relationship between theory and practice has been the object of a constant debate since the beginnings of human reflection and, in particular, it involves a problematization in those professions which, like social work, have an origin based on social intervention and transformation. Despite this, it is worth making reference to the gendered division in terms of theory (masculinized and legitimized) and practice (feminised and discredited), derived from the difficulty of entering the university environment on equal terms. This can be seen in the differentiation between sociology and social work and the formation of the (interdisciplinary) Chicago School of Women (García, 2010).

Therefore, the pedagogical logic of the course seeks to overcome this false dichotomy by providing the possibility of participating in an experience in which feedback between theory and praxis and reflexivity play a fundamental role.

Secondly, as the main content has to do with social work with groups methodology, the standards for the practice of social work with groups promoted by the International Association for Social Work with Groups (IASWG) (AASWG, 2006) are incorporated into the teaching-learning process. Thus, as far as the pedagogical aspect is concerned, special attention is paid to the respect for the autonomy of the students and the democratization of the teaching-learning process. In other words, group work is used to achieve the pedagogical objectives, making the students responsible for their learning process. The supervision, based on the expertise and background knowledge of the teaching team, is meant to promote participation through interpersonal learning under a pedagogical modality of learning by doing.

This translates into a strongly experiential pedagogy, with a high requirement of presence and participation that seeks to put into practice theoretical knowledge (such as composition, structure, and group processes) as well as to improve skills and attitudes necessary for the planning, execution, conduction and evaluation of a group process. Thus, the pedagogy used emphasizes dialogue, interaction, or reflective action, as well as focusing on the experience lived by the participants themselves in the teaching-learning process. It is a dialogical pedagogy and, therefore, contrary to banking education, understood as a vertical pedagogy where the teaching team has a knowledge that it deposits in the students, understood as if they were empty vessels to be filled (Freire, 1978).

The theoretical and practical framework in which the subject is based includes: the influence of ecological models (Vinter & Galinsky, 1985; Tropman, 2004); the use of different types of groups depending on their objectives: socio-educational groups, social support groups, mutual help groups, socialization and leisure groups (Kurtz, 2004; Nash & Nash, 2004; Nash and Snyder, 2004; Roffman, 2004; Zastrow, 2015; Toseland and Rivas, 2017), as well as the different stages of group development (Tuckman, 1963; Garland et al., 1976; Shulman, 2016); or the tasks, roles and leadership within the group (Doel, 2006).

The pedagogical model from which the authors use takes into account a two-way dialogical relationship between the teaching team and the students, but also between the students themselves. To sum up, it is a subject based on the dialectical relationship between theory and praxis of a real group process incorporating the principles of the standards for the practice of social work with groups: democratic principles and respect for autonomy.

Structure

The experience was conducted with two groups of students, approximately 140 participants. In terms of structure, each course consists of a total of thirty sessions, which are divided into regular lessons (with the whole class) and small group work classes (around 20 students). In the small group sessions, participants are divided into smaller groups of between six and twelve participants.

Large Group Sessions

The large group sessions are used to explain the theoretical contents which are then experienced through the practical sessions. The contents taught are divided into four themes, which correspond to the different phases of a group process (Planning, Starting phase, Intermediate phase, and Final phase). A total of fifteen large group sessions were given. In the initial sessions, the focus is on different models of planning and on the meaning and logic of using tools such as the contract and group chronicles (Toseland & Rivas, 2017; Kurland & Salmon, 2005; Zastrow, 2008). The aim is to ensure that learners have, from the outset, the necessary tools to plan and initiate their own group process. The pedagogy is, again, participatory, facilitating reflection and discussion in the classroom.

In addition, in the theory sessions, each group of students will have to present a reading that they choose from a range of texts provided by the teaching team. This reading will have to be worked on and presented by each group in front of the rest of the class. This is not a typical presentation, in which a part of the content is distributed and presented one-way, usually with the support of some audiovisual support. Rather, it is a presentation that must be prepared as a group and presented to the (larger) group of the class as a whole. The aim of this presentation is to learn how to conduct sessions using larger groups, so the set of techniques used is very broad.

Small Group Sessions

In the small group sessions, with the necessary support and tools, the students live the whole life cycle of a group experience in first person. There are a total of fifteen sessions, which accompany the development of the large group sessions. In the first two sessions, the pedagogy and logic of the subject are explained, and the groups are formed. Each group defines its content, aims and scope and makes a whole group presentation of the resulting project in the third session. For example, groups can have the aim of improving social skills, professional competences, emotional management, and healthy leisure. Only two vetoes are established for choosing the content and group objectives: groups whose content is strictly therapeutic cannot be carried out, nor can they pretend they are other people, because the participants are the students themselves. In session four, the group starts by developing a total of nine group sessions, where different roles are exchanged (social worker, observer and participant). The 'social worker' must prepare the session beforehand and then lead the group, while the 'observer' must remain outside the group dynamics and develop a chronicle of what has been observed.

In short, the students, divided into groups, must start from an initial idea to plan, execute, conduct and evaluate a group project. In the process, the students must go through different roles: social worker, observer and participant. The teaching team plays a supervisory role, supporting them throughout the group development. Supervision is the product of observation and takes place in the large group sessions, but also in three group supervisions scheduled for each group in accordance with the initiation, development and closing phases of a group's life cycle.

Written documents are generated in the process: group project, worksheets, group chronicles, and any element necessary for the group dynamics. They must be accessible to the teacher and the rest of the class. All this material, together with the individual and group reflections of each participant, makes up the final work required for part of the evaluation of the course.

Table 2. Planning of the large and the small group sessions

Large Group-Contents	Small Group-tasks
Lesson 1. Planning in Social Work with Groups	Presentation of the Group Project
Lesson 2. The starting phase in Social Work with Groups	1st Group Session - Group Chronicle
Lesson 2. The starting phase in Social Work with Groups	2nd Group Session - Group Chronicle
Lesson 2. The starting phase in Social Work with Groups	Group Supervision
Group reading presentation	

Lesson 2. The starting phase in Social Work with Groups	3rd Group Session - Group Chronicle
Group reading presentation Lesson 2. The starting phase in Social Work with Groups	4th Group Session - Group Chronicle
Group reading presentation Lesson 3. The development phase in social work with groups	5th Group Session - Group Chronicle
Group reading presentation Lesson 3. The development phase in social work with groups	6th Group Session - Group Chronicle
Group reading presentation Lesson 3. The development phase in social work with groups	Group Supervision
Group reading presentation Lesson 3. The development phase in social work with groups	7th Group Session - Group Chronicle
Group reading presentation Lesson 4. The closing phase in Social Work with Groups	8th Group Session - Group Chronicle
Group reading presentation Lesson 4. The closing phase in Social Work with Groups	9th Group Session - Group Chronicle
Group reading presentation Lesson 4. The closing phase in Social Work with Groups	Group Supervision / Closing of the course
Group reading presentation Source: own elaboration	

III. Evaluation

The evaluation of the course prioritizes the learning process over the outcome. In other words, the focus is not solely on whether the group successfully meets the proposed objectives but rather on the learning experiences that occur throughout the course. The reflections derived from the group dynamics, together with the teaching supervision itself, provide us with sufficient tools for the evaluation of the practical content of the subject. The following questions are an example of the issues students have to reflect upon: Why are we not achieving our objectives? How can we improve group participation? What can we improve in the next session? What would we change in a future group experience? Why did this session go so well? What is it that made group cohesion so strong? How did we make the whole group feel comfortable participating? Professors evaluate the extent of theoretical aspects incorporated in the reflection.

Results: From Physical Presence to Virtual Presence

With the implementation of physical distancing policies due to the Covid-19 health crisis, it became necessary to adapt teaching to an online format. The challenge was to preserve the core elements of the teaching methodology: presence, interaction, and real experiences.

As previously mentioned, students are responsible for planning, executing, and evaluating a group project, during which they rotate through different roles, including participant, observer, and social worker. In addition, during the course, the students are challenged by different theoretical sessions and at least three supervision sessions (corresponding to different phases of the life cycle of a project: start, development and closure). The content of the sessions, again, is chosen and developed by the students themselves (social skills, healthy leisure alternatives, etc.).

In order to carry out the adaptation to an online modality, a transition period was necessary to re-schedule the structure of the subject, think about the digital tools available to us, and select those that would allow us to adapt without losing the pedagogical characteristics inherent to the subject.

Previous experiences had already demonstrated the use of online groups as tools for research (Poynter, 2010; Gaiser, 2008) and social intervention (Arias & Barron, 2009; Arias & Segado, 2013; Davis & Goodman, 2014). Therefore, it was proposed that students would continue facilitating group projects, adapting them accordingly to online resources.

Digital tools were already being used diachronically: the course was already being developed under a mixed model: the use of the virtual campus (with tools such as the forum) and e-mail were already functioning; and the material generated in the group sessions (group chronicles, technical sheets, or other elements) was stored in shared Google Drive folders (through the university's own accounts). With the policies of physical distancing, it was necessary to incorporate synchronous elements due to the need for a high degree of interaction needed.

The large group sessions, where the theoretical content is the main focus, were developed using Blackboard Collaborate. This platform allows different elements to promote interaction: provide different roles, raise hands, take turns to speak, divide the class into smaller groups, share screens, ask questions, express reactions, among other elements. Despite being on streaming, the sessions were recorded and stored on the virtual campus so that students could access them at any time. The presentation of the readings by the students was also developed through this platform. Creativity was encouraged, resulting in a multiplicity of resources, different techniques, and methods: creation of audiovisual material, role-playing, competitions, gamification, discussion forums, etc.

As for the practical sessions, it was the students themselves who had to adapt each group proposal to an online environment. The sessions were carried out using Google Meet. After a period of adaptation and uncertainty due to the difficulty of developing their session's online and technological difficulties, the experience was successful. Contents have been developed using a multiplicity of methods and techniques: audio-visuals, music, writing and the expression of emotions.

The sessions were scheduled sharing a Google calendar with the teaching team. In this way, it was possible to monitor the development of the sessions, and even join in via the Google Meet links to carry out supervision. All the sessions were recorded and incorporated into the shared Google Drive folders, together with the rest of the material generated. The recording of the sessions facilitated supervision for the teaching team, but also helped the students to assess the work done, facilitate the role of the observer, and improve their skills and competences for social work with groups.

The tools used were, therefore, the following: Virtual Campus (Moodle), UCM email, Blackboard Collaborate, Google Drive, Google Calendar and Google Meet. However, other external tools and applications such as Kahoot or Youtube were used in the sessions.

Table 3. Digital tools used in teaching experience in social work with groups

Virtual (Moodle)	Campus Diachronic use:
	- Access to didactic materials
	- Access to the recording of the theoretical sessions
	- Virtual forum (group questions)
	- Notices and notifications
E-mail	Diachronic use:
	- Student communication

-	Individual issues/questions
Blackboard	Synchronous use:
Collaborate	- Theoretical sessions
	- Readings presentation
	- Group supervisions
Google Drive	Diachronic use:
	Dossier with materials generated in the development of the group proposals: group project, group contract, technical sheets, or any other material
	Access to group session recordings
Google Calendar	Diachronic use:
	Session planning
	Google Meet access
Google Meet	Synchronous use:
	Development of group sessions
	Tutoring

Source: own elaboration

Key Elements for a Meaningful (Virtual) Teaching-Learning Process

Some elements were indispensable for the teaching experience and successful development. In this section, we will discuss the elements that have enabled a successful adaptation to a model of virtual attendance. Though some aspects have to do with the exceptional situation of the health crisis that we have experienced in the context of the adaptation of the subject, the results can be extrapolated to other contexts.

Firstly, it was important to be available to answer questions and address needs, as far as possible, resulting from the uncertainty produced by the health crisis in the educational context. After the cancellation of face-to-face classes, students asked for answers about assessment, the academic calendar, and other concerns. Providing accurate and clear information about the structure of the classes and the continuation of academic training was essential. Since the initial conditions of the subject changed, a participatory and flexible rescheduling of the timetable for the subject was necessary, as well as a clarification of the changes in the assessment criteria and requirements to pass the subject.

Secondly, it was also necessary to dedicate a class, or as much time as necessary, so students became aware of all the digital tools that were going to be used. Although it may seem that students, who are mostly young, may have adequate knowledge of new technologies, it should not be assumed that they have a good knowledge of the digital tools that we were going to use.

Thirdly, it was also necessary to give individual support to the specific problematic situations that students presented, mainly regarding the context of Covid-19. This means that the teaching staff was accessible through different media: virtual campus for group issues or e-mail for individual issues. Due to the health crisis, some participants were essential workers and faced challenges with availability due to work commitments. Besides that, we had no major difficulties in terms of connection or other material elements. However, support for devices and/or technical difficulties (internet access, computers, adequate housing, etc.) were also provided. It is worth mentioning that the Complutense University carried out a campaign to solve this kind of problem (where laptops and USB portable modems were lent).

Lastly, it is important to highlight the continuous motivation provided to students and the recognition of their work. Due to the restructuring and planning of the timetable, and the adaptation, in the middle of the course, to an online modality, the students had made an effort to adapt their group projects and carry them out.

IV. Conclusion

The outcome of this experience can be considered positive. The pedagogical objectives have been achieved while maintaining the guiding principles of the teaching-learning process. The students have benefited from a more complete learning process, as they began by participating in groups with physical attendance and ended the course by carrying out groups virtually. Therefore, part of the skills acquired by the students includes leading groups in virtual environments, the use of digital tools in the field of social work (with its ethical implications), and flexibility in the planning of any social project, and especially facing unforeseeable external situations.

This experience demonstrates that meaningful and participatory online teaching is possible, comparable to instruction in a physical classroom setting. However, there are limitations related to material constraints and internet access, making this approach not universally applicable across all geographical settings. Despite these challenges, certain advantages can be highlighted, such as improved work-study balance, greater compatibility with family responsibilities, reduced commuting time to the study center, and increased flexibility. This teaching experience in the field of social work with groups demonstrates its practical applicability.

It would be an oversimplification to suggest that traditional classroom-based teaching should be abandoned entirely. However, this experience demonstrates that a meaningful virtual teaching-learning process can be successfully developed in the field of social work with groups. Such an approach can be valuable for expanding training and knowledge beyond spatial limitations or for professionals with limited availability. In summary, while there are some limitations, primarily of a material nature, and this model may not be applicable in all contexts, the experience has been positive, highlighting its potential.

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