

## INITIAL COURSE DESIGN PHASE OF GROUP WORK EDUCATION USING AUTHENTIC E-LEARNING

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Group work education develops student competences for praxis. The Authentic eLearning framework has the potential to strengthen course design, develop critical thinking, multiple perspectives, articulation and reflection. This qualitative study conducted using educational design research explored the pedagogical practices of South African social workers in group work education. Ethics clearance for this study was received and data were analysed using content analysis. Findings identified educator strategies including the use of real-world context, reflection and group collaboration, but the study noted the potential for incorporating technology-enhanced learning. Extrapolating from this study, opportunities for educators in this field during the Covid-19 pandemic are indicated.

**Keywords:** authentic e-Learning, experiential learning group work education, simulation, situated pedagogy, social work pedagogy, technology-enhanced learning



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### INTRODUCTION

Group work in a multitude of contexts offers the potential for the advancement of social functioning through the process of people collaborating for personal and social change to address shared challenges. This is in part because experiential learning expands the potential paths for learning in social work education (Banach, Foden & Brooks, 2019; Shulman, 2005, 2016; Teater, 2011). This article explores the processes of teaching and supervising group work in four South African universities and how the Authentic Learning framework and in particular the Authentic eLearning framework (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010) may provide a pedagogically improved method of course design for praxis. Teaching group work using the Authentic eLearning framework (Herrington *et al.*, 2010) has not been explored in depth within the South African social work context (Nel & Pretorius, 2019), and this topic was the focus of the author's doctoral study (Pillay, 2017).

### AUTHENTIC ELEARNING

Authentic learning was originally put forward by Herrington *et al.*, (2010) as a way of situating and simulating real-world contexts using collaborative learning activities, which are very appropriate for teaching group work. The creation of authentic learning environments is suitable for teaching and for enhancing professional education in particular by emphasising and enabling the applied aspects of learning (Barnes & Gachago, 2015). When used in an eLearning context, the same elements have value as in a face-to-face or blended learning environment. The critical aspect is the learning theory that supports the elements of authentic learning and authentic eLearning. Thus the creation of an authentic learning environment provides pedagogy that is relevant and, it is contended, effective both in face-to-face authentic learning environments and for Authentic eLearning.

Furthermore, the Authentic eLearning framework enables the educator to be more thoughtful in applying the elements at every phase of the design and facilitation process and so enhance pedagogy. In keeping abreast with the developments in technology-enhanced learning, Herrington *et al.*, (2010) embedded the Authentic Learning framework in eLearning, highlighting the pedagogical potentialities of the framework. This is the context of this study. In their teams, Authentic eLearning is defined as the use of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) methods where students do not just use the technologies, but use "technology as tools for analysing the world, accessing and interpreting information, organising their personal knowledge and representing what they know to others" (Herrington *et al.*, 2010:8). In this way technology is used to support critical thinking and collaborative learning. In this article this type of learning is referred to as eLearning. An example of this is the use of online discussion forums where students can share ideas, debate and cocreate knowledge within a participatory culture that is a form of simulation of the group work process. Moreover, the use of the Authentic eLearning has the added potential to improve learning accessibility, collaboration and access to multiple perspectives and sources of information.

Herrington *et al.* (2010) introduce the use of eLearning, contending that virtual reality can mimic or simulate the real world and thus promote Authentic eLearning. Here learning occurs within a simulated environment that is far removed from traditional apprenticeship, because the environment is thoughtfully designed to create web-based representations or simulations of a micro world. This can provide a powerful, safer and more accessible vehicle for learning, for example, in group work education. Reeves

(2006) describes it as a space that provides opportunities for simulated apprenticeship and valuable learning opportunities.

While the Authentic eLearning framework has value for all forms of learning, its additional value includes the use of TEL, as there is a dearth of information on methods to teach group work with technology, especially in group work education (Cartera, Damianakisa, Munrob, Skinner, Matin & Andrews, 2018). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face learning has become challenging and some recommendations for teaching group work online are offered later.

In the larger study of which this is a part, the author had selected an educational design research approach to evaluate her own and others' practice as group work educators: the initial phases of the study involved exploring how ten social work practitioners facilitate the teaching of group work. The group was comprised of six social work educators and four field instruction (FI) supervisors from four higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa, who were involved in developing student social workers' capacities in group work.

Educational design research requires that problems and solutions should be explored in the literature and in the field, so that improved design and practice pathways may be created (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). In this article the practitioners' views and experiences are foregrounded, and then set against the Authentic eLearning framework (Herrington *et al.*, 2010). This is to identify strategies in common with the framework, as well as opportunities for increased educational benefits in delivering group work education in various educational formats and settings.

Social work educators traditionally develop and improve their own teaching practice from peers' and colleagues' experiences, which is partly what informs the rationale for this research approach. This article describes an exploratory journey into how these 10 participants in South African higher education engage with teaching group work within the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme. The author will refer to them jointly as *practitioners*.

In this article the Authentic eLearning model is discussed in terms of how it coheres with the development of praxis when teaching group work skills. Next the methodology of educational design-based research is explained and the findings are presented. Finally, a discussion and conclusion are presented, as well as some recommendations for teaching group work which could be of value for teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **PEDAGOGICAL PRECEDENTS FOR AUTHENTIC ELEARNING**

Authentic eLearning evolved from various pedagogies, including a method of apprenticeship, whereby a novice learns from a skilled practitioner within the real-world space where the activity occurs (Herrington *et al.*, 2010). Through traditional apprenticeship, the novice has regular access to a model of expertise against which to benchmark their own developing skill, as well to several *master* practitioners and different models and types of expertise. In addition, the value of working and forming relationships with people who are at different skill levels is considered helpful (Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989; Corey, Corey & Corey, 2010). This develops what Lave and Wenger (2001) call *a community of practice*, wherein the novice becomes more expert by engaging "in legitimate peripheral participation", moving gradually towards greater agency by learning from others as well as the expert. This process of learning resonates with the professional praxis of social work, which instils the integration of theory with practice (Teater, 2011). It also assumes the role of the educator, field instruction coordinator and more knowledgeable peers as experts, who have substantial experience, knowledge and passion for the craft (in this instance group work). As an educator in the field of group work, the author knows that knowledge is not just found in textbooks; it has become clear to her that learning and teaching need to replicate the real world, so that students develop competence by doing and by finding solutions through the kinds of interactions and engagements that are necessary in the workplace (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington & Brown, 2014; Herrington *et al.*, 2010). Collins *et al.*, (1989) were the seminal role players of the Cognitive Apprenticeship learning model, which is one of the antecedents of the Authentic eLearning framework.

Moreover the subsequent Situated Learning Model developed by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) differs from apprenticeship learning; they state that “meaningful learning will take place only if embedded in the social and physical context within which it is used” (Herrington et al., 2010:15); this may only occur in the real-world setting. Instead the Situated Learning Model extended the context of learning to include the use of technological activity and interaction to “enculturate students into authentic practices” (Brown *et al.*, 1989:37). Building on apprenticeship and Situated Learning, Authentic eLearning was evolved using an educational design research approach derived from the work of Ann Brown in 1992 (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012).

## THE AUTHENTIC ELEARNING FRAMEWORK

The term *authentic* in this article refers to learning designs that create opportunities which develop real-world skills through providing simulations of real-world situations which impact on the learner’s sense of agency and integration of theory with practice (Herrington *et al.*, 2010). The nine elements that make up the Authentic eLearning framework (Herrington *et al.*, 2010) are discussed below.

Firstly Authentic eLearning comprises the development of *an authentic context that reflects how knowledge is used in the real world*, thus offering students the opportunity to develop the requisite skills for conducting group work. The second element is the development of a *complex authentic task, one that is ill-defined* (as in the real world), so that students can become used to complexity and explore different paths to finding a solution. Thirdly, it is also argued that *tasks should be worked on independently and collaboratively over a sustained period to allow for iteration*. The fourth element is that the task should provide students the opportunity to examine a problem in terms of *multiple roles and perspectives* while working in groups: playing the roles of group leader and group member is a way of facilitating competence in this element. The fifth element is access to *expert performance and modelling of processes* which may include multiple sources of information from text-books to expert performances through web-based resources (Herrington & Parker, 2013). The sixth element is the aspect of *collaboration* where students work with peers to co-construct knowledge. The seventh element is that of *reflection*, which is a golden thread in social work education, to enhance thinking, develop “critical evaluation and self-awareness” and get a better understanding of their “knowledge, skills and attitudes” (Bassot, 2013: 6). The eighth element is *articulation and presentation* so that tacit knowledge is made explicit through debate, role-play, discussion and presentations. and students can debate aspects of new understandings. The ninth element is *scaffolding and integrated assessment* by the educator, as the student develops proficiency. The approach advocates *seamless authentic assessment* that ensures feedback, so that there is iteration for a final polished product to emerge as an outcome.

## PRAXIS DEVELOPMENT IN GROUP WORK EDUCATION

Group work, described by the founders of the journal *Social Work with Groups*, as an “incredible positive and affirming way of working with people” (Kurland, Salmon, Bitel Goodman, Ludwig, Newmann & Sullivan, 2004: 3). Group work, it is argued, is intended to meet the socio-emotional needs of members in a goal-directed manner to accomplish tasks; the intervention is directed at individuals as well as “the group as a whole within a system of service delivery” (Toseland & Rivas, 2009:12). A significant part of group work education is field instruction, also known as field education, work-integrated learning, fieldwork training and field practicum. Field instruction is regarded as a signature pedagogy of social work (Shulman, 2005; Wayne, Bogo & Raskin, 2010;). Field instruction, while debated, does include the ability to develop capacity to perform as a social worker with “awareness that emphasizes the development of the professional self” (Earls, Larrison & Korr, 2013:194). Field instruction, while contested by some, is seen by others as the heart or essence of social work, which by its very nature is regarded as a practising profession (Homonoff, 2008; Knight, 2000; Teater, 2011). The experience gained during field instruction allows students to hone their craft and to integrate theory with practice (Bogo, 2008).

While group work intervention is believed to be an essential skill for students of social work, group work practice is diminishing as an intervention, as it is often not clearly understood and is seen in some quarters as being on the periphery of work done by social workers (Kurland *et al.*, 2004). In addition, it is well documented that group work has been declining in popularity in the Western world (Birnbaum & Auerbach, 1994; Drumm, 2006; Kurland & Salmon, 2002; Sweifach & LaPorte, 2013). However, it is encouraging to note elsewhere in the literature that group work is regaining ground lost and is used effectively with cancer survivors and people with disabilities, amongst others (Lee, 2018; Sweifach & LaPorte, 2013). Moreover, Knight and Gitterman (2018:3) contend that group work in the community provides a bridge between micro and macro contexts, as wider social justice concerns can be addressed through it: this is because it is an intervention that promotes both “individual empowerment and community change”. Furthermore, within the South African context there is an increased focus on the social developmental approach that promotes the wellbeing of society (Patel, 2012), while internationally it has been recognised that the integration between group work and community work needs to be strengthened (Knight, & Gitterman, 2018). It is therefore promising that group work has an integral place in the BSW curriculum at undergraduate level in South Africa (Pillay, 2017).

It is, however, a concern that group work and especially group work education is under-researched, and it is hoped that this study will contribute to how the field may expand (Steinberg & Salmon, 2009). Moreover, there are very few books on the subject of social work with groups written from a South African perspective, except for a book called *Working with Groups* by Becker (2005). Globally there is still a need for research regarding the application of social science innovations in praxis and research (Feldman, 1987; Silverman, 1966).

The key skills in group work include facilitating democratic participation, social action, mutual aid and a focus on disenfranchised and marginalised groups. These group work skills are still as relevant today as they were in 1979, when the Advancement of Social Work with Groups (AASWG) was formed, to secure the place of group work within the social work curriculum and practice (Rosenwald, Smith, Bagnoli, Riccelli, Salcedo & Seeland, 2013).

The critical nature of these social work skills reinforces the need for better understanding of the most effective methods for group work education. Historically, teaching methods for group work have ranged from a didactic, teacher-centred style using mainly lectures, to a student-centred approach using pedagogical principles to guide course design. It is indisputable, however, that during undergraduate training it is vital to equip students to think like a group worker, so that they may successfully enter the workplace with the foundational skills that can prepare them for an unknown and complex future (Barnett, 2004).

Other group work skills include: active listening, restating, clarifying, summarising, questioning, interpreting, confronting, reflecting feelings, supporting, empathy, facilitating, initiating, setting goals, evaluating, giving feedback, suggesting, protecting, self-disclosure, professional use of self, cultural humility, modelling, conflict management, linking, blocking and terminating (Corey, 2012). Two South African authors see the following skills in group work as useful: purposive utilisation of social work principles; creation of meaningful relationships; handling group feelings; programme planning; observation; communication, leading, reporting writing; exploring and using aids; evaluation; and diagnosing (Strydom & Strydom, 2010).

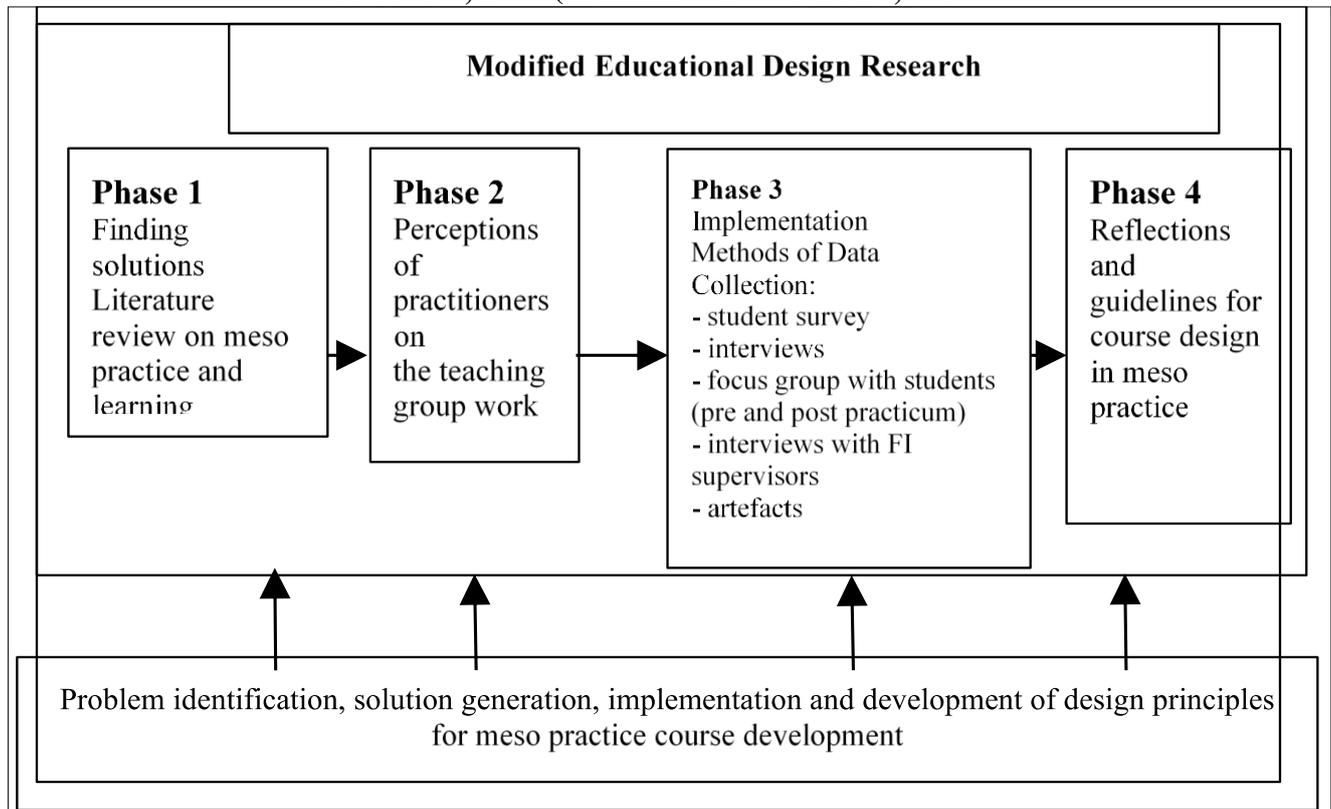
Skills in group work that are developing include the use of power and engaging diversity (Basso, Pelech, & Wickham, 2010), which has special relevance within the South African context. This is the ability to exercise cultural humility, placing the client as the expert and the group worker as the learner (Jacobsen, 2019).

### **Study design and methods**

This article is derived from a sub-study within a qualitative research study conducted between 2013-2017 on group work education for undergraduate students within a South African university, using Educational

Design Research (EDR). This type of phased research is a multifaceted, iterative, complex educational intervention to improve praxis (McKenney & Reeves, 2012). As Figure 1 illustrates, this article is mainly focused on Phase 2 of the study.

**FIGURE 1**  
**ADAPTED FROM THE FOUR PHASES OF EDUCATIONAL DESIGN RESEARCH BY**  
**REEVES, 2006 (HERRINGTON ET AL., 2010:59)**



EDR occurs in the real world, with real people who live complex lives (Teras & Herrington, 2014). A significant limitation of EDR is the long-term phased engagement and refinement of the process, which can take between two and five years (McKenney & Reeves, 2012; Reeves, Herrington & Oliver, 2005). EDR can be confused with action research, where educators “study their own teaching practice to solve personal challenges in the classroom” (Reeves *et al.*, 2005: 107). However, the difference between action research and EDR is the use of design knowledge and theory to develop design principles accessible to other educators, which can be used to solve practical problems in the classroom (Reeves *et al.*, 2005:107). This article attempts to show practical workable solutions derived through EDR, by paying careful attention to the views of practitioners, and by understanding the problem from their perspective. In this way, praxis is foregrounded through analysis of practical problems encountered by practitioners regarding the way they teach and supervise students in group work.

### AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of the article is to explore how the elements of authentic learning contribute to the teaching of meso practice or group work in South African higher education settings. The objectives of the study are to understand the way in which practitioners designed their courses, their methods of undertaking field instruction, their attitudes to technology-enhanced learning (TEL), their assessment methods and teaching style.

## DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE

This part of the qualitative study used individual face-to-face interviews based on semi-structured interview schedules to elicit data. The participants were purposively selected as they taught or supervised group work in four HEIs in South Africa. Only one of these HEIs could be described as previously historically disadvantaged. These HEIs were large contact institutions with an established social work programme of more than twenty years. The FI supervisors were all from one HEI. (See Table 1 below.)

The researcher contacted the educators directly via email and then followed-up with a telephone call to those who were willing to be part of the study. The FI supervisors were contacted via email, based on a list supplied by a contact person at one institution; all those who responded positively to the invitation were selected. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed location.

**TABLE 1**  
**DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE SAMPLE OF GROUP WORK EDUCATORS AND FIELD INSTRUCTION SUPERVISORS**

Demographic Factor	Subcategory	Number
Gender of educators	Male	1
	Female	5
Gender of FI supervisors	Male	2
	Female	2
Age of participants	25 - 30	2
	31 - 40	2
	41 - 50	2
	51+	4
Years of teaching and supervision experience	1-2 years	4
	3-4 years	1
	7 years	1
	9-10 years	3
	20 years	1
Groupwork educators (N=6)	Field instruction supervisors (N=4)	

Table 1 illustrates that the 10 participants included three males and seven females, who ranged in age from 34-58 years. Relevant work experience ranged between 1- 20 years, with the mean being 6 years and 7 months.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analysed using content analysis; the raw data were coded into themes for analysis (Babbie, 2013). Content analysis uses recorded human communication and is conducted using the raw data and extracting the main themes (Babbie, 2010; De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delpont, 2011). The analytical constructs were located in the Authentic eLearning framework and the experience of the practitioners (White, & Marsh, 2006).

## METHOD AND CRITERIA FOR DATA VERIFICATION

Key issues of trustworthiness, consistency, confirmability, credibility, transferability and dependability were taken into account, based on the 1985 model of Lincoln and Guba (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). To ensure representivity so that the data represent the problem, the context and/or the participant's views, the author ensured that all data were transcribed verbatim, and PhD supervisors audited the raw data. Confirmability ensured that the findings could be verified by other researchers (Shenton, 2004), while

the author used reflexivity to ensure that factors such as power dynamics, race and gender were consciously addressed while data were analysed (Pillay, 2017).

## ETHICAL CLEARANCE

The Senate Research Committee of the University of the Western Cape provided ethics clearance. Participants had the right to refuse to participate and provided informed consent for the interview and audio-taping of the session. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

## LIMITATIONS

One criticism levelled at qualitative research is the multitude of variables that the researcher has to address, and that the research is complex and requires long collaboration between the researcher and practitioner, which can be difficult to describe in rich detail (Barab & Squire, 2004; Herrington, McKenney, Reeves & Oliver, 2007). The researcher has little control during data-collection events (Yin, 2009). Some of the limitations of the study included what the participants regarded as socially desirable responses (McKenney & Reeves, 2012) and the phased method of educational design research.

## FINDINGS

The author believes that through engagement with the practitioners, she came to the realisation that teaching group work requires a generous practitioner, who is prepared to share the knowledge and methods they have used, and to open their teaching methods to scrutiny. Through a process of examining the factors that drive course-design decisions, she believes that practitioners can learn from each other to strengthen their own teaching and learning. However, the author was also curious to see whether group work practitioners' methods demonstrated any synergy with the Authentic eLearning framework which she is engaged in trialling. She was cognisant that this was not the framework that any of the practitioners had actively sought to use; thus none of the nine elements of Authentic eLearning were foregrounded if they did not feature in a practitioner's response. The elements that were evident are explained next.

Practitioners were asked to report on their teaching approaches and several themes featured prominently in the ten interviews. In the process of content analysis, the author considered the following five aspects of learning and teaching group work to interrogate her data. They are: the use of real-world examples and activities; the use of small group collaborative learning; the use of and attitudes towards TEL; the nature of assessment; and finally the teaching styles and attributes of group work practitioners.

### **Theme 1: The use of real-world examples and activities in course design, which are contextually relevant for the students, based on their needs and the needs of the workplace**

The importance of real-world experience featured prominently as a strong basis for scaffolding learning in group work. Practitioners used students' own experiences of belonging to groups to shape the activities. Rene noted, "the starting point of teaching is starting where the student is and building from their own experiences".

Furthermore, the use of engaging activities was regarded as important in group work education – to bring out skill use, skill development and how these skills are honed, while engaging in these activities, and not just by understanding the theory. Rene explained that the learning occurs in uncomfortable spaces and not all activities need to evoke happy emotions:

*Learning is about feeling. Feeling results in deeper learning and feelings are not always comfortable in group work. I firmly believe at the moment that you feel how it feels and you practise some of the things that you want to carry into the way you conduct group work, then this is a deeper learning. So it is a very interactive way of teaching ... I run my theory class the same way as you would conduct a group. (Rene)*

The above quotes support the view that the process of learning and teaching requires thought on how group work skills are used in the field, as well as encouraging students to develop a deeper appreciation of what it feels like to be a group member. Being a group member can be exposing and even

uncomfortable at times and getting students to experience these different perspectives and the range of emotions felt in the real work is praxis pedagogy in action. This aspect of feelings or affect coheres with what Boler (2017) terms the “pedagogies of discomfort”, where aspect of emotions are brought into the teaching space.

Moreover, use of real-world examples is one way to support student learning and help the process of integration. To achieve this aspect required designing the classroom experience to mimic a group setting, whereby students adopted roles of group leader and group members. This type of course design strategy creates opportunities for student collaboration, cooperation, skill enactment, articulation in the Authentic Learning sense, and deeper reflection. These quotations illustrate praxis in action for learning (Yoo & Carter, 2017).

### **Theme 2: The use of small group collaborative learning in class**

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the importance of collaboration amongst students. Four educators stated that “student[s] work together on certain projects [and] students engage in role play” (Rene, Neels and Emily). Educators saw value in small group learning and experiential learning using role-play activities and group discussions, so that students could interact in class groups that mimic group work in the real world, but initially in a safer space. Similarly collaboration and communication were enhanced using authentic activities in a study conducted using authentic learning by Alioon and Delialioğlu, (2019). One educator noted that “students need to appreciate how it feels to be a group member, so that they know how their members feel” (Emily).

However, as in the real-world, these types of teaching methods do create tensions: working in groups can be fraught with conflict and not all members take on and accomplish tasks of equal weight, as was expressed here.

*Funnily, students complain that they do not like group work because they feel that their marks are watered down because they do all the work, and somebody piggybacks on them. So, they find that they would rather do individual work. So that could be another reason because students say this is not fair. (Neels)*

Practitioners acknowledged the discomfort of using collaborative activities, as students who are strategic and value independent work often raise misgivings about group work, because conflict arises around task distribution and accomplishment. On the other hand, getting students to understand and work through these real-world challenges develops conflict-management strategies and better introspection capacity. Assessment that focuses on both individual and group work was found to partly alleviate these challenges. The elements of Authentic eLearning that were evident in this theme included the use of real-world activities, scaffolding, collaborative small group learning and will be further discussed in the other themes.

### **Theme 3: The use of and attitudes towards TEL**

Still related to the pedagogy was practitioners’ diverse engagement with TEL. All four higher education institutions made use of a learning management system: two institutions used proprietary software and two institutions used open-source software. All institutions had geographical areas on campus where wi-fi was available, with varying degrees of signal strength. Commonly used applications of technology included PowerPoint, email communication to students, DVDs and YouTube clips. Interestingly however, the use of PowerPoint slides was reported to be boring by some students.

*I also use PowerPoint presentations quite a lot and then you know.... But after the end of the first term I said to the student that I am finding that very few students contribute, so I asked what was the issue and they said that the PowerPoint was boring. (Neels)*

Neels’s comments reinforce the need for more engaging and possibly real-world related experiences to generate student engagement. An example of fostering student engagement was achieved at one institution through the use of online discussion forums (or groups) where students were able to

collaborate online to share knowledge and learn from each other. Interestingly this institution had good technical support, which suggests that this may have critical impact. However, the educator acknowledged the significant time investment required for using technology on a course both initially and in subsequent iterations.

*I live on Edu-link [the learning management system] even when I am at home and during my research day. (Veena)*

None of the practitioners made use of any social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. However three FI supervisors did use the WhatsApp application and found it effective. (WhatsApp is a messaging service for smartphones that uses an internet connection to send multi-media messages as a lower-cost method of communication with the students):

*WhatsApp improves communication and sets the tone for work - it is cheaper to use than if students have to telephone and most students do not have airtime. I have found that on WhatsApp students are respectful of boundaries and times to text messages at. (Anne)*

This quote by Anne indicated the contextual realities that data costs are high for students, and using WhatsApp has been effective. In another study in the Western Cape, WhatsApp was found to be a valuable platform for dialogic interactions that were not expensive (Rambe, Chipunza & Ng'ambi, 2020).

All practitioners made use of email communication and saw the value of using technology features, as Siphon [Practitioner] noted, “we are living in a digital world that uses technology to communicate”. That said, and while the practitioners saw the value of interactive teaching, there was significant dependence on a didactic lecturer style using PowerPoint presentations, which are commonly used to convey learning material to classes ranging from 40 to 315 students. There was, however, limited use of TEL in pedagogically sound ways as recommended in Authentic eLearning. In these contexts, it appears that the potential promise of using technology to enhance pedagogical value is still to be realised, providing opportunities for interaction, engagement and flexible self-directed learning. The next theme focuses on assessment.

#### **Theme 4: The nature of assessment**

In many instances of Authentic eLearning assessment, students work together on a challenging task and the final assessment would be a product or a performance that demonstrates skills, showing that learning and metacognition have taken place (Ashford-Rowe *et al.*, 2014; Nel, & Pretorius, 2019). This type of seamless assessment was not evident from the interviews with the practitioners, and the methods used for assessment included relatively traditional formats such as report writing, tests and assignments, as well as a summative assessment in the form of an examination. However, there was one large individual task at all institutions – the creation of a portfolio of evidence, which was part of the field instruction process. A novel real-world assignment described by one educator required students to observe an open community group.

*The assignment is on the support group the [students] had observed and requires students to critically reflect on the process so that they can design a suitable group work programme. (Veena)*

In addition, the use of meaningful assessment and formative feedback is a core capacity of group work practitioners, as it impacts on the success or failure of the student in the course. This is evidenced in the statement made by Rene, who noted “proper assessments .... I pay a lot of attention in third year to assessment”.

The aspect of iteration is critical in Authentic eLearning, and Herrington *et al.* (2010) recommend that feedback should be integrated into the course and not confined to the end of the course, when students may fail. This is illustrated by Thandi's observation:

*... the critical engagement with literature or either what was happening in those groups was very limited. Umm, a majority of students at first attempt did not pass the assignment. They were given an opportunity to rework with in-depth explanations and a little more engagement with kinda like more theory at fourth-year level and they were able to perform better. (Thandi)*

The value of assessment in learning and teaching is critical in Authentic eLearning and Ashford-Rowe *et al.* (2014) suggested assessment should be seamlessly built into the course design process at the outset and linked to constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996).

### **Theme 5: Teaching style and attributes of the group work practitioners**

The final theme focuses on the teaching style used by the practitioners. Practitioners described their style of interaction with students as facilitative and participatory. Lee [Practitioner] noted that her teaching style requires “*Participation, umm, probably from the students*”. She equated her teaching style with that of a mentor, describing her supervisory role as such:

*... part of it is mentoring and obtaining information from them about what they are having difficulty with and asking questions that are geared toward giving direction to where they are at. (Lee)*

Richard was also consciously integrating reflection into student interactions.

*Ok, mainly I try to make it as participatory as possible cause I have realised I can actually know more about their challenges and get to know more about their strengths, areas of improvement if I allow them to participate. I allow them [the students] to share how they feel towards the experience ... (Richard)*

Veena describes her teaching style as using a building block approach and adds that she “*loves practice more; I believe it (competence in practice) has to come from experience not classroom work.*”

Finally, practitioners raised the aspect of creativity in teaching their courses, noting that group work is an art, and creativity is used to incorporate varied activities in course design.

*... group work should not be boring ... group work is about activities, it is not talk, talk, talk ... boring groups have boring group leaders. No lecturer should be boring but a group work lecturer should definitely not be a boring lecturer. (Rene)*

This comment from Rene clearly illustrates that the teaching of group work needs to be designed to include fun, creative and physical activities, and involve a passion for the subject matter. Activities are viewed as integral to group work, which is logical as the roots of group work stemmed from the Recreation Movement (1924-1974) in which members engaged in collective activities to create a sense of belonging and community (Rosenwald *et al.*, 2014).

Another practitioner, Emily, highlights her high expectations of students to develop as self-regulated learners, who are able to seek out knowledge through research, and understand the value of iteration.

*... somebody [the educator] who encourages students to go research, somebody who actually does not spoon-feed them, uh, somebody who gives, uh, constant feedback to the students let's say like after the submission of a report and the you sit them down and say this is what I think you should improve on. (Emily)*

Development of reflection was another style adopted, so that students understand reflection in practice and on practice (Chang, & Huang, 2018; Schön, 1988).

*Yah, one of the exercises I did do was to ask them to self-reflect on their own strengths and challenges and how do they see themselves as a group worker. (Bob, Practitioner)*

This section discussed aspects of practitioners’ pedagogical practices, including those outside of and relevant to Authentic eLearning; those that showed synergy with Authentic eLearning included the use

of authentic tasks to teach group work, scaffolding, reflection, group collaboration and metacognition around group dynamics, as well as multiple perspectives and iteration.

## **DISCUSSION**

These findings illustrate that the practitioners used various strategies which are synergistic with Authentic e-Learning to develop group work competences. They frequently sought opportunities to enhance real-world application of theory, using contextually relevant activities and examples found in group work practice. Practitioners recognised the critical importance of developing a consciousness in students around being in a group, which is essential to group work development. This type of experiential learning invites simulated experiences and engagement in authentic and complex environments before the social worker enters the field. The practitioners' course design strategies took account of the experience of students, and offered activities which fostered collaboration, participation, self-regulation and reflective skills in students. The use of TEL was integrated mainly for communication and could be further exploited to encourage articulation, debate and co-creation of knowledge, as well as to incorporate expert performance and other forms of group work simulation, e.g. through discussion groups. While practitioners acknowledged the value of TEL, many felt that time and resource demands were prohibitive.

Assessment practices, while seen as important, were often traditional and seldom seamlessly integrated into the course; nor did they enable students to work on complex authentic problems over a sustained period. The absence of this sort of practice could be attributed to large class sizes. Nevertheless, creativity and the facilitative style of the practitioners was positively highlighted. While findings revealed evidence of many of the assumptions and practices of Authentic eLearning in the practitioners' practice, there may be value in consciously factoring more of the elements into course design at an early stage.

### **Recommendations for Online teaching of group work**

The following recommendations are offered based on the author's experience in blended forms of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. They do not stem directly from the research, but are offered as an extrapolation of the findings to support colleagues. The author believes that during periods of distance teaching as a result of disasters such as COVID-19, teaching methods for group work should remain student-centred and include the complex and difficult aspect of affect.

*Access.* Early in the course design process, educators should seek to understand the type of access students have to devices, data and wi-fi as well as their level of digital literacy, as these factors are essential to achieve equitable online teaching.

*Collaboration and real-world tasks.* Courses should be designed so that students can work online using break-away groups. Students should be invited to choose topics with a real-world significance for them. This choice gives students agency and voice and motivates them to explore and co-create knowledge. The use of discussion forums assists in enabling students to collaborate online around a social condition that is relevant to group work. The educator should have read the posts and responded to them as well as refer to the posts in teaching. Conflict is to be expected in groups and open discussion of students who do not engage in group tasks should be incorporated. Consideration should be given to giving marks for both individual and group work.

*Teaching online.* Short videos should be created which are motivating and fun. The educator should experiment with a variety of methods, such as podcasts. It is important to remember that most students will view content on their mobiles, so the design should be suitable for a small screen. Teaching material should be planned so that Hyflex methods are used for synchronous and asynchronous learning. Hyflex methods gives students a choice between face-to-face and online methods on learning and instruction.

*Articulation.* In order to support articulation or enactment of new skills in as real a way as possible, students could be asked to develop annotated PowerPoint slides or share their artefacts and photographs. This sharing of artefacts and experiences also supports the creation of a social presence in the online environment.

*Multiple perspectives.* The use of a variety of resources from YouTube videos, online journals and talks by experts in the field can widen students' experience of a topic. Collaboration with local and international colleagues to offer guest lectures or seminars online is a possible strategy and makes fewer logistical demands if online.

*Iteration.* Educators should give students feedback on the first draft of their work so that they can improve the final submission.

*Reflection.* Students may be asked to offer their reflections on the course and on the participation of peers.

*Coaching and scaffolding.* Online teaching is time intensive and an educator need to review the contributions from students and support them where necessary; online learning also offers opportunities for a quicker response to students' difficulties.

## CONCLUSION

Understanding course design and teaching of group work from the perspective of ten practitioners from four HEIs offered a rich and informative perspective on the praxis pedagogy they used. Several of their practices were synergistic with Authentic eLearning, including scaffolding, the inclusion of real-world context into learning, reflection, group collaboration, multiple perspectives and iteration in various forms. The data suggest that some of the elements of Authentic eLearning were present. The elements of Authentic eLearning that were not evident were: pedagogically aligned use of technology-enhanced learning; development of a polished product and authentic assessment. The use of an Authentic eLearning framework (which is complex and rigorous) can be seen to offer significant opportunities for enhancement of group work pedagogy, while offering some technical and workload challenges.

Through this exploration, the author became convinced as researcher that Authentic eLearning offers a promising set of design principles for enhancing a constructivist group work learning environment (Jonassen, 2008). This provided confirmation of her proposed objective to explore the praxis of Authentic eLearning through her own learning and teaching; this process will be reported on in a forthcoming article. This section of the study, however, further suggested that course design should foster articulation of competence and enhance authentic assessment practices as an element of professional learning, while taking advantage of the pedagogical affordances of TEL.

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