

EXPLORING TINKER TOYS AS A TOOL FOR REDUCING ANXIETY AND ENHANCING GROUP DYNAMICS IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of Tinker Toys as a tool for reducing anxiety and fostering positive group dynamics among graduate and undergraduate students. Tinker Toys, traditionally a children's construction set, provide sensory, fine motor, and cognitive benefits that may translate into meaningful experiential learning in therapeutic and classroom settings. By engaging in hands-on, collaborative activities, students can improve their comfort levels, enhance communication, and build trust within diverse group environments. The research utilizes a mixed-methods approach, incorporating qualitative observations and quantitative surveys. Participants include 17 graduate students from a clinical supervision course and 40 undergraduate students from a small group dynamics counseling course. In structured group activities, students first construct a designated object using Tinker Toys, then repeat the task while blindfolded, relying solely on memory, verbal communication, and tactile feedback. Observers document interactions, noting changes in anxiety levels, teamwork, and overall group cohesion. Post-activity reflections and surveys assess the impact on students' emotional resilience and interpersonal skills. Preliminary findings suggest that hands-on experiential learning with Tinker Toys can significantly enhance students' ability to manage anxiety and collaborate effectively, regardless of demographic factors such as race, gender, or ethnicity. The study contributes to counseling education and group therapy by demonstrating how structured, interactive exercises can improve emotional regulation, communication, and teamwork. These insights may inform future pedagogical strategies and therapeutic interventions aimed at fostering resilience and cooperation in diverse academic and professional settings.

Keywords: *Experiential learning, group dynamics, anxiety reduction, communication skills, hands-on activities.*

1. Introduction

Group dynamics and anxiety management are critical competencies in counseling education. Experiential learning activities provide students with opportunities to practice communication, leadership, and teamwork in real-time. This study examines how Tinker Toys, a simple construction set, can be leveraged as an effective learning tool in academic settings to promote group cohesion and reduce student anxiety.

2. Design and objectives

The project aimed to:

- Assess whether anxiety levels decrease during hands-on, collaborative learning.
- Evaluate group dynamics such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving.
- Compare Tinker Toys to other experiential tools.
- Document the long-term impact on participants' interpersonal and professional development.

3. Methods

A total of 57 students (17 graduate and 40 undergraduate) participated. The activity consisted of two phases: building a structure using Tinker Toys (Phase 1), and repeating the task blindfolded (Phase 2). Observers documented behaviors, and participants completed pre- and post-activity surveys on anxiety and group interactions. Follow-up reflections and interviews provided qualitative insight.

4. Procedure

Participants were grouped into teams of 3-4 and tasked with building an object using Tinker Toys. Five minutes in, they disassembled their models, donned blindfolds, and attempted to recreate the design using only memory, touch, and verbal cues. This transition simulated clinical conditions where verbal communication becomes critical. Observers noted changes in roles, communication styles, and stress management. Afterward, students debriefed and reflected on their experiences.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Communication and collaboration

Clear communication was pivotal. During blindfolded tasks, students developed verbal precision and active listening.

5.2. Leadership and role distribution

Leadership emerged naturally in some groups. Those with defined leaders generally performed better and adapted faster.

5.3. Problem-Solving and decision-making

Conflict resolution was key. Groups who resolved disagreements respectfully completed tasks more efficiently.

5.4. Emotional impact and anxiety

Anxiety declined as group trust increased. Humor and shared success helped reframe stress positively. Students with higher initial anxiety reported the most notable improvements.

5.5. Personal reflections

Participants described the activity as revealing and transformative.

6. Comparison with other experiential tools

Compared to traditional experiential tools, Tinker Toys stand out as an inclusive, low-stakes method for fostering communication and teamwork. Unlike role-playing, which can be emotionally intense and anxiety-inducing, Tinker Toys reduce social pressure while still promoting collaboration. Team-building activities often emphasize competition or performance, which may deter introverted or anxious students. Art-based therapies, while useful for emotional processing, often lack the interaction necessary to foster strong group dynamics. In contrast, Tinker Toys provide a relaxed, tactile, and interactive experience that combines sensory engagement with communication, helping students practice trust, memory, and empathy under mild stress.

7. Long-Term impact

Follow-up data collected 1 to 6 months post-intervention show that students retained many of the interpersonal skills developed during the Tinker Toys activity. Participants reported using improved communication and conflict-resolution strategies in clinical settings. Some described applying the activity's lessons particularly trust-building and patience to internships and real-life group work. Pre/post anxiety and stress surveys, as well as reflections, revealed enduring gains in emotional regulation and group leadership. These outcomes were especially significant among students who initially identified as having moderate-to-high social anxiety.

8. Conclusions

Tinker Toys provide a low-cost, accessible, and effective tool for reducing anxiety and strengthening group dynamics. The hands-on, non-threatening format supports skill development in communication, trust, and leadership. These outcomes support its continued use in counseling and supervision education.

Additional survey feedback highlighted those students felt more comfortable contributing their ideas after the blindfolded activity. Several noted how the absence of visual cues led to increased empathy and improved listening. These reflections support the idea that Tinker Toys offer more than a physical task. They provide emotional insight and trust-building.

Observers reported specific examples of how students negotiated roles, adapted to group feedback, and acknowledged individual strengths. In one case, a quieter participant became the most vocal during the blindfolded phase, guiding peers with remarkable clarity. This shift illustrates how the activity revealed hidden leadership and adaptive problem-solving.

9. Key takeaways

Key takeaways from facilitators included the importance of debriefing to link hands-on work with clinical supervision principles. They emphasized how moments of frustration, confusion, or success paralleled dynamics students would face in real counseling teams. Thus, the Tinker Toy activity becomes not just experiential but transformational.

From a pedagogical standpoint, this activity offered a direct simulation of clinical supervision scenarios where communication, patience, and role negotiation are critical. These soft skills are difficult to teach through lecture alone but were consistently observed and practiced during this project.

Comparatively, traditional team building often forces vulnerability too quickly or under pressure. With Tinker Toys, students felt the challenge was both engaging and achievable. In one undergraduate group, laughter and collaboration replaced early frustration, and students began associating group work with shared success rather than individual evaluation. Observers also commented on the natural emergence of leaders who had not previously taken initiative in classroom settings. For example, one facilitator remarked, "It was striking to see the quieter students suddenly become the clearest communicators when the group had to work blind. That reversal of dynamic taught us a lot about hidden strengths."

Participants noted that trust became a central theme, especially when vision was removed during the blindfolded task. As one student reflected, "I had to rely on my group more than I ever thought I would. It made me realize how much I tend to take control when I can see, and how letting go felt both scary and freeing".

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