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Learning Together: Social Work Students and Service Users Reflect Critically on Their Diverse Life Experiences

Abstract

In this chapter, the author introduces the concept of a project week where social work students study together with a diverse group of unemployed social work clients. This involves a learning approach as a formative research process, focusing on establishing and maintaining relationships and highlights communalities. The subject matter references a public forum organized by, "aqua muehle Vorarlberg", during which students and service users present the results of their collective project week. The issues researched focus on unemployment, education, qualification, illnesses, discrimination and inclusion. A document analysis of learning journals together with records of feedback sessions and presentations of outcomes form the basis of this contribution. A series of new possibilities arise when groups form equally, leaving their "normalities" of familiar learning environments behind. The experiences are evaluated positively by the participants despite being described as exhausting, emotional and difficult. Role ambiguity contributes to a valuable experience of exchange.

Introduction

This chapter provides an example within social work education to highlight possibilities of cooperation and mutual learning strategies between social work students and social work service users while participating in a field project. This field project is organized between FH Vorarlberg (University of Applied Sciences Vorarlberg, Austria) and "aqua muehle Vorarlberg", a local NGO working in the field of adult education and employment.[1] The project group presents their yearly project outcome,

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[1]   AQUA Mühle Vorarlberg gGmbH, Abbreviation: aqua muehle, Webpage: https://www.aqua-soziales.com/Aqua/Web/aqua.nsf/Pages/Aqua (accessed: 05.12.2017).

reflecting critically on their diverse life experiences while using a political forum to voice their ideas for a better and more inclusive future of the labour market. The research for this contribution consitutes a documentary analysis of students' reflective diaries, records of feedback sessions and presentations of outcomes within this performed project work in the years between 2009–2016. The presentation of the results within this chapter is divided into three aspects: results for social work education, results reflecting service users' input and feedback and results, analysing student's reflective diaries. At the closure, a summary with a brief outlook into further research aspects is provided.[2]

The social work education programme in Austria consists of a 3-year Bachelor degree programme due to the EU-wide harmonization within academic degrees known as the Bologna Process. In Austria this means that every federal state provides a social work degree programme at a university of applied sciences. So far, these Bachelor programmes all cover social work studies that do not involve a specialization but rather involve a generalist or holistic focus enabling their students to work within all areas of practice after graduation. This six semesters study programme leaves little time to cover all these wide range of important theoretical and practical aspects relevant for social work. Critical voices within the academic debate within the German speaking social work scene often refer to this dilemma as it hinders the process of professionalization of this young discipline (i.e. Staub-Bernasconi, 2010: 115–132). Others hold the position that the future within social work education will rely more on a two-tier system, assigning different tasks and responsibilities to graduates of Bachelor and Master programmes. This model considers Bachelor of Social Work graduates as "front line" social workers who focus on direct client work and Master of Social Work graduates more to focus on management and research tasks.

A further critique of the short Bachelor of Social Work education programmes lies within the heavy focus on knowledge reproduction or fact-based learning for exams instead of reflective action, student-based-learning processes or experimental forms of learning. Jennifer Moon provides examples of research outlining a conception of a continuum of approaches within learning strategies – from "deep" approaches stretching to "surface" approaches. She concludes that a:

> deep approach is where the intention of the learner is to understand the meaning of the material. She is willing to integrate it into her existing body of previous ideas, and understandings, reconsidering and altering her understandings if necessary. The new ideas are 'filed' carefully and integrated. In contrast, a surface approach to learning is where a learner is concerned to memorise the material for what it is, not trying to understand it in relation to previous ideas or other areas of understanding. It is as if the new ideas need to be retained for the moment, but not 'filed' for any lasting purpose (Moon, 2001: 5)

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[2]   Parts of this chapter are previously published in German: Böhler, 2016: 10–14.

This project week was established to engage with such a different strategy in the form of a creative learning process involving students' cooperation with service users and reaching for "deeper" and more lasting experiences of learning. This process of mutual learning, reflecting and voicing the results to a wider audience could be seen as a form of action research and learning strategy. Its focus lies on participation and action – its goals include the enrolment as change agents to social problems involving inequality issues in the wider society of Vorarlberg, Austria.

From an action research point of view, this can be considered with relation to the paradigm that knowledge production from and within cooperation of social work clients - those who are directly involved – is an important and valid form of knowledge production, combined with scientific approaches of documentation and research (Whyte, 1990). Furthermore, the focus on action implies that there is an intention for change involved which follows Kurt Lewin who strongly insisted that science develops hypotheses with proximity to praxis and with the intention for results being useful for implementing changes in society and are thus problem solving (Lewin, 1948).

Critical reflection on all levels forms a key accompaniment to this process. The importance of reflection processes is highlighted within all social work literature – within practice, education and research areas. However, within academic education, courses that practice and hence provide learning spaces for the practice of critical reflective skills are more the exception than the rule. Reflective journals combined with experimental forms of teaching/learning are one important aspect to be included within social work curricula (see further analysis, Boehler, 2015). The goal of the Bachelor degree programme of social work in Vorarlberg, Austria is to provide a knowledge based, solid and reflective learning process within these six semesters. This regular but special project week forms an important part of this goal, however small it may be in terms of the overall curricula. All involved groups are practicing strategies such as learning by doing, engaging in building working relationships while reflecting diverse stereotypes of other group members within this process.

Learning together – working together: project work between University Degree Programme and a local NGO aqua muehle

The field project began in 2009 and was developed into a regular annual event that takes place each year at about the same time on the 1st of May: Labour Day in Austria and throughout the world. The results of the project cooperation between the local social work degree programme

at the FH Vorarlberg and the NGO aqua muehle are presented at the well-attended, yearly aqua forum where about 200 workers, politicians and educators meet to discuss various ideas and concepts.

The project week has a series of clear goals that provide a framework for the collective work. The concept of cooperation on a horizontal, equal basis is encouraged in order to enable a flexible, inventive and less rigid working environment. A focus is placed on the expansion beyond normative working spaces, marking both a physical and psychological departure from the participants' comfort zones. This theme of unusual working practices is expanded to the formation of the learning and research group where a particular emphasis is placed on the personal level of reflection and relationship-building whilst cognitive knowledge takes a less dominant role in the process. Finally, various aspects relating to diversity should be highlighted including the recognition of large group heterogeneity within the categories of education, social status, age, ethnicity, life experiences, etc.

Further expectations involve an essential enthusiasm from the participants for the topic of the project that manifests itself in an active working model of learning. The concept of a holistic learning process involving "Head, Heart and Hand" provides an effective theoretical background to this process (Rummler, 2011: 54). The selection of the participants is therefore an important part of the success of the project and this has as its starting point a strong focus on voluntary participation. These initial steps to create the group include an introductory meeting with a trusted person.

Once the project is in its closing stages and the results for the presentation are being chosen and formulated there is a deliberate emphasis placed on the autonomy of the participants. The goals here are a lack of censorship and a move away from a primary focus on presentation quality. In recent years a number of highly creative presentations have been independently designed by group members including, amongst others, a series of digital stories involving audio files combined with photographical narratives and a complex collective sculpture that represented the meaning of home, identity and belonging ("Heimat-Wand").

To summarize, the project week takes place on a yearly basis. The project group consists of about 20 people: social work students, social work clients (aqua muehle), a university lecturer (FH Vorarlberg) and a field social worker (aqua muehle). The project includes a preliminary meeting, four full project days, a finalizing meeting and the presentation at the public event (aqua forum).

Methodology

This paper looks back at seven years of experiences and includes three different perspectives. The research focus for the participating students lies mainly within the document analysis of their reflective journals. The introduction and theoretical and methodological instructions on how to write these reflective journals are given to the participating students before the project week. Their main emphasis lies on the reflection of the group process and their communication strategies while working on the project. Guiding questions for their reflection involved:
– What have I learned?
– How did I feel? How do I feel now?
– What could I observe within my own communication strategies?
– What did others do?
– What will I work on improving?
– What seemed important? Unimportant? Difficult? Irritating?, etc.

These reflective learning journals are written with a clear goal to slow the pace of learning while increasing the sense of ownership. They acknowledge the role of emotion in learning and give learners an experience of dealing with unstructured material which encourages metacognition (learning about one's own process of learning) and enhances learning through the process of writing (Moon, 2005: 26). The document analysis of these journals over the last years provides a good basis for understanding some key aspects underpinning the learning processes while engaging in the field project work of designing and experiencing mutual learning processes.

The research focus for the results regarding the participating service users means that the focus lies mainly within the document analysis of diverse material used as a presentation of the results at the public event aqua forum i.e. PowerPoint presentations, photos and video presentations and the documentation of the feedback session during the project weeks involving students and service users' perspectives.

Results – for social work education

An assessment of the project week's results in terms of didactic innovation revealed a diverse range of new learning experiences for the students involved. These involved the pervading biographical and self-reflective elements of the pair introduction and the subsequent emphasis placed upon personal experiences of employment and unemployment. This was achieved through a combination of private reflection and discussions in the large group. The process of working together with

another participant to formulate open questions for an interview illustrates this interwoven learning experience. The participants were invited to reflect on the initial stage of choosing – i.e. did they actively select their working partner or were they a passive part of this process? By reversing this process in the second group exercise, the participants were not only able to consider their own active or passive roles but were also challenged to reflect and analyze the criteria they were consciously or unconsciously employing in their choice of partner. This led to a deeper speculation on how initial judgements are made during social exchanges and what motivations lie behind decisions that are made in a social context. The act of writing these thoughts in a learning journal provided a further space for the participants to deepen their understanding of their own choices and reactions. This is shown by the following text example taken from a reflective diary:

> Back in the large group Thomas Vogel asked us whether we were chosen or whether we actively chose someone. I had actively chosen D.... Now everyone who had been chosen had to become active and choose another person for an interview. I was chosen by N. I had noticed her right from the beginning of the day because of her unusual hairstyle and make-up. At the beginning I didn't find her very nice but it gave me the motivation to get to know the personality behind the pretty face.

The project week was also able to include the concept of creativity within the learning process through the participants developing artistic interpretations of the differing thematic areas being discussed. This expressive aspect of learning and interaction was of particular importance to the late former director of aqua muehle, Thomas Vogel, an important pioneer in Vorarlberg's social scene. In the Annual Report 2011 he wrote:

> It is an expression of freedom that we actively participate in creating the world we live in. In Vorarlberg people say "schaffa" and not "arbeiten" (to work). "Schaffa" means to help shape something new and bring it into creation (Vogel, 2011: 6-7).

The pictures and symbols that emerged from this artistic process were able to communicate certain themes and ideas without involving the act of verbal description, an element of the workshop that diversified the nature of the exchanges between the participants. The interpretation of these artistic works in turn inspired questions and discussion in the larger group, bringing a combination of energy, trust and emotion to the communication that was enormously positive to the learning experience whilst at the same time, on occasions, testing the boundaries of the project week. The art exhibit created in the 2015 "Heimatwand" provides a clear example of the creative potential of the participants, a process that required personal courage and a level of trust not always available to the individuals involved.

Results – reflecting service users input and feedback

For many service users the initial step in deciding to take part in such a project week was a courageous decision in itself. Merely anticipating the process ahead generated an acute sense of anxiety. One service user admitted that "I couldn't sleep for 2 days before because I was so nervous".

However, as Andreas Nuncic and Kerstin Beiter state in their report on the project week in 2014:

> Themes such as fear and insecurity are clearly apparent. The voluntary setting, the open nature of the discussions, the focus on curiosity and the high value placed on individual experience create a climate in which even the most insecure participants are empowered to contribute. (…) The insight gained into differing life perspectives is experienced by everyone as an enriching process (Beiter, Nuncic, 2014: 6).

The intensive discussions involving one's own personal identity and attitudes were further analyzed in feedback processes. A variety of diverse themes emerged with particular importance placed on the differing concepts of belonging (both the students and the service users), personal skills and talents and the effects of these on social grouping and value judgement. The following statements reflect some of these themes:

> At the beginning I was sceptical but now I would immediately participate again;
>
> I felt myself to be on the same level – there were no arrogant snobs;
>
> The collective work and the communication showed me again that we are all equal regardless of our educational levels;
>
> During these days I got to know myself in new ways;
>
> It was a valuable time, a gift to be here;
>
> I felt at home.

A final important aspect for the all the participants of the project week was the coming together again at the official aqua forum event where every year the results of the project week are presented to the public with the participants taking a prominent part on the proceedings. The experience of being on public show in such a large arena, reading out texts or recognizing their own artistic endeavours being displayed on large screens is not only a wholly new one for most participants but also a moment of great pride. A large part of this pride involves the sense of group belonging, being part of a group that has learned with each other and from each other. This is where knowledge production by service users and social work students is able to reach out and have its own voice and wider audience for social change.

Results – analysing student's reflective diaries

For the students participating in the project week the learning experience was viewed as emotional, unusual and intensive. Through their use of learning journals to enhance the process of reflection the students were able to focus on relevant themes that were a central part of the project week. The development of groups was one of these themes that was consistently referenced:

> I could feel the teamwork and the WE-feeling amongst us students and the participants sense that they are being strengthened with every day of the project week. We are constantly entering into relationships with each other, whether it is during the "teaching", in the breaks, whilst eating lunch or in the train. I think, that was the essential point.

> In terms of intercultural understanding I have learnt a lot about myself during this day. I had the feeling that we had already melted into a group by the second day.

This process of building groups with one another was regularly associated with a range of emotions and reactions, including insecurity (mirroring that of the service users), expectations, fears and a constant sense of surprise when being confronted with the unknown.

> I am proud that I could successfully engage in the process without knowing where it would lead to.

The students also made explicit references to the various didactic methods that had been experienced during the project week, noting this as an essentially different learning experience to what they had been used to up until this point.

> I could experience studying as a personal debate with a topic and not as a large pile of knowledge. I also think that this brought me a step further in developing a self-aware and professional identity.

The concept of pre-ordained social roles in a learning context was something that the project week challenged, including the personal expectations of the participants and what they were able to learn through their experience of exchange. This was clearly apparent in several honest descriptions that surfaced in the learning journals:

> What changed was my somewhat naïve understanding of what was to be expected from several days of continuous group work together with people from different life backgrounds who I have never met and – being aqua muehle clients – are completely unknown to me.

> This connection with people from aqua muehle showed me that you don't have to be a philosopher to be able to philosophize, one can say a lot without knowing the entire scientific vocabulary and one can have a lot of ideas without knowing theory.

Summary and outlook – to focus on establishing and maintaining relationships and highlight communalities

There are a series of important conclusions to be drawn from this teaching and learning experience. The reduction, wherever possible, of hierarchical relationships is an important lesson to learn through the readily apparent success of didactic strategies that move in the opposite direction; encouraging a collective learning environment in which no one feels inferior to anyone else. Working towards this general goal necessitates constant focus on the unheard voices within the group. This can be enacted through the various didactic methods of creative work and journal writing. Both contribute to the rich expression of personal experience for people who are perhaps unused to being asked to reflect or speak out in a big group of people.

Continuing with the theme of self-expression, this is further encouraged by a keen awareness of spaces where people come together to exchange. For this space to expand and flourish the learning experience requires a strong supportive structure and a conveyed sense of permission. The learning spaces should indicate that each participant is welcome, everyone arrives together in order to learn with each other. These small structural steps often deliver considerable returns in terms of the participants' potential to learn and share. The service users benefit from being made visible and having access to the public, forming relationships where communication to facilitate understanding is the core motivation of exchange. This requires a certain amount of creativity in the didactic methodology, including non-traditional formats of learning, teaching and reflection such as working with symbols, art and pictures or the use of learning journals to intensify the reflective process.

For the students of social work, the direct process-orientated group work with service users enhances their practical skills in an unusual and challenging environment where reflective work plays a natural complementary role. A further welcome side-effect is the public exposure afforded to the practice of social work, the academic course of studies and the situation of the service users involved. One of the most remarkable outcomes highlighted is the introduction of new possibilities when groups form on an equal level, leaving their "normalities" of used learning spaces, learning environments and comfort zones behind. This process is clearly challenging as it directly involves and scrutinizes the underlying value bases of all participants. Unger describes several of these aforementioned issues as central to all action research processes – i.e. social justice, environmental protection, human rights, democracy education (Unger, 2013: 1).

Even though the experiences are often described by the participants as exhausting, emotional and difficult to master the overall response tends to be highly positive. It seems to be a very valuable experience to leave the roles of "students" as well as "service user" behind for a while and experience working together as an act of mutual exchange and learning together. Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned is the need to place more focus on what individuals share with each other and less on the differences between them. This aspect of the project week was encapsulated by this extract from a student's journal:

> I happened to find out at the end where the project week was heading towards. Because of this I found it good that the audience at the aqua forum couldn't differentiate between the students and the service users. That was good!

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