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On Equal Terms

– a University Course for Social Work Students and Service Users

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It is crucial for social work education to provide opportunities for students to gain a sincere and genuine knowledge of the conditions of life that are common for their forthcoming clients and patients. Social work students and service users with experiences of multiple social and personal problems now meet, as they are participants in an experimental course at the School of Social Work in Lund, Sweden. In this paper the teachers report their experiences.

Introduction

Since the autumn of 2005, the School of Social Work at Lund University in Sweden has run a course with the title “Social Mobilisation, Community Work and Structural Change”. The course runs for six weeks and is an integrated part of the final semester of the social worker education.¹ One of the goals of the course is that the students should learn about sustainable forms of integration and social change. The course is aimed at students – social work students – who are attending a 3.5 year social work education, as well as individuals who are recruited from various service user organisations. The course is optional and is chosen by students as a module in the final semester. When recruiting individuals from service user organisations – service user students – a diversity of groups who risk being marginalized in Swedish society is striven after. Examples of these students are people with experience of addiction, ethnic minorities as well as people with various forms of disablement and psychiatric disorders. We can admit about 15 service user students and 30 social work students each semester.

¹ Students study social work at the university level within the framework of social science to an exam of 140 credits, 3.5 years. 1 Swedish credit is the same as 1,5 ECTS credits. In 2006 social work can be studied at 21 universities and university-colleges in Sweden; <http://www.hsv.se>. At about half of those you can receive the title “Socionom”, BSW in social work. In order to work as an independent professional social worker you have to be a socionom. 2 500 students a year are examined.

The course, as far as we know, is unique, in that it addresses itself towards groups who are not usually given the chance to meet on equal terms in a common educational context. Furthermore, service user participation within the education of social workers is as yet relatively unproven and occurs only sporadically within Swedish social work education (Socialstyrelsen 2003).² Although service users and former clients are engaged as lecturers, this is a rather passive form of participation. Even if service user participation is somewhat more common in social work education in some other countries, for example Great Britain, even there it consists almost exclusively of the use of different service user representatives as lecturers (see for example Levin 2004, published at Social Care Institute for Excellence, SCIE).

During the first two weeks of the course all students are given the chance of sharing their life experiences through both group work and presentations. Furthermore lectures are given on empowerment, social mobilisation and social enterprise. After this the class spends a couple of days at a Future Workshop conference – a method for drawing out and realising ideas, where desire and creativity are combined with a democratic and energetic work ethos, where lust and creativity are combined with action driven work (Jungk & Müllert 1984, Denvall & Salonen 2000). At the conference, students form project groups according to their interests. These groups will develop innovative plans for the development of practical social work over two weeks. The project groups present their project plans before a panel consisting of influential politicians and researchers, who will critically evaluate the relevance and feasibility of the plans. During the time that the students work with their project plans they also attend lectures on the phenomenon and practical knowledge of projects.

As well as aiming to give the students an increased knowledge of empowerment, social mobilisation, project ventures et cetera, we as

² The National Board of Health and Welfare, (www.sos.se).

teachers, view the course as a challenge and as a possibility for the creation of new meeting places for research, practitioners, service users and students. We are critical of the social constructions of solutions and problems that education and practitioners tend to provide social work students with. Through the close contact that the course offers between individuals who have experienced discrimination and exclusion and future professionals with social commitment, unexpected encounters as well as new possibilities emerge.

The course will be held over five semesters and is carried out in project form, financed by the structural funds of the European Union through the Equal programme.³ The course is continuously evaluated, partly by the teachers of the course, and is partly a subject for independent scrutiny. The evaluation work gathers together amongst other things the background of the students, their expectations for the course as well as what they have learnt and their experience of the course.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss some of what we have experienced during the first two semesters of the course. The course has, so far, been a very positive experience. The form is innovative and favours not only social work students but students from service organisations along with their organisations. Through various pedagogical approaches the participants of the course emerge as complex individuals, and this contributes to a deeper understanding and a more personal interpretation than the former rigid categories: social worker student, service user, former addict, young girl, Romany and Muslim, for example. That our experiences have been positive does not imply that the course is free from challenges and problems. Even if we were somewhat prepared, sometimes we have been surprised by the feelings the course has evoked in some of the students.

³ <http://www.esf.se/esf/templates/Page.aspx?id=607>

The course as a project in a surrounding discourse

There is an increasing interest in the utilisation of the knowledge and stories of vulnerable people in research and the development of knowledge in social work (Beresford et al., 1999; Krumer-Nevo, 2005). Michael Krumer-Nevo (2005) gives in his article "Listening to life knowledge: a new research direction in poverty studies" examples from Israel, Belgium and the USA of how researchers work in collaboration with peoples' own experiences of vulnerability. A quote from Tardieu opens his article:

"We discovered that the main thing was not to give the poor the chance to make their voice heard, but to open our ears. It is not about empowering the poor, but about humanising citizens and institutions." (Tardieu 1999:75)

This quotation can be used not only as a starting point for a critical discussion on how social work is often organised and carried out in practice, but also how it is communicated in social work education. Despite many indications that marginalisation and structural causes have increasingly led to social problems during later decades, many researchers have pointed out that social assistance has been individualised, as well as when searching for solutions for various problems as when finding solutions (Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, the professionalization of social work has involved bureaucratisation, which tends to estrange the professional from the client/service user perspective. Salonen (1998) argues that being a client involves being in a state of dependence on an organisation that the individual does not have any influence over. Kristiansen (1999, 2005) describes how practitioners in social work are characterised by a lack- and problem orientated viewpoint of clients and service users. This creates

categorisations and a construction of stereotypical roles, which often maintain an us-and-them mindset in connection to social contributions. We argue that this development is also reflected in social work education in Sweden. The lack of participation in social work education (Socialstyrelsen, 2003), which we referred to in the introduction, can be seen as an expression for this.

We would argue that the course “Social Mobilisation, Community Work and Structural Change” involves a critical deconstruction of social work. Through students from service user organisations and the students attending social work education working together, the service user perspective is brought into the education in a totally different, integrated, way, than when it is only communicated through separate lectures by invited service users. This change in discourse can be compared to Adam’s (2003) description of a paradigm shift in social work, where empowerment is not described as a method, but rather as a new perspective, which replaces an old paradigm in which the treatment of clients earlier dominated social work.

There exist similarities between the layout of the course and Gutiérrez’ (1990) description of five steps in the process towards empowerment; to accept the client’s definition of a problem; to identify and build on strengths; to work with the analysis of the client’s situation from a power perspective; to teach specific skills as well as mobilising resources for the client and speaking for them.

Jan Fook (2002) describes how different perspectives, such as, the service user perspective and a professional perspective are rooted in different logics. Similarly the scientific perspective and a practitioner’s perspective represent different discourses that exist contemporaneously to one another but seldom come into contact. Over and above Gutiérrez’ (1990) client aimed objectives, as mentioned earlier, the course aims to create a platform for a dialogue between people who are characterised by different discourses.

Experience shows that the synergetic effects that occur, act to mobilise not only those with experience of outsidership but also students who do not share those experiences.

The categorisation paradox

There exists a paradox in the layout and goals of the course. During the recruitment phase of students from service user organisations we assume what can be seen as rigid and one-sided ways of categorising people. In order to be eligible for the course one can be a Romany, immigrant, you can have a background of addiction or experience of psychiatric or physical illness. That we recruit on the grounds of these types of categorisation is due to us striving after a multiplicity of perspectives of discrimination and outsidership, but it therefore becomes an important objective to complicate these rigid categorisations. This involves a challenge for us as teachers, to contribute to the students venturing outside their categorisations and forming new groupings and finding comradeship over and above the original categorisations. One example of how the course challenges categorisations and develops affinity and solidarity was expressed when a woman with a physical disability recited her poems that dealt with outsidership and many students expressed how moved they had been. A Romany man asked if one of the poems was written about Romanies, and by this implied that she had a powerful insight into his situation and experiences.

Through the students, social work students as well as those from service user organisations, being able to work together and share one another's personal stories a feeling of kinship to all humankind emerges in the larger group. The "ordinary" is elucidated by the students from the service user organisations together with experiences of vulnerability emerging from the social work students. In a written reflection one student summarised the course's paradox in the following way:

“Something I see as being important to bear in mind is that the individual can only to a certain extent represent and be the spokesperson for their group. The experience of different events is subjective and can vary greatly even within what can appear to be a homogenous group. A disabled person can, for example, never say that they know how other disabled people experience their situation and so on. It has been of great interest to follow the differing points of view that are to be found within the various groups represented. By this I mean that it is important to have a humble attitude when confronted with different interpretations of situations, and this is something that this course has taught me. I believe that I have seen that individuals in what appears to be a homogenous group are less alike than one would believe, at the same time we as people are more alike than we often believe. It is interesting to see how basically alike we are, despite all the dissimilarities ...”

In order to clarify this categorisation paradox theoretically the intersectional concept (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2002; de los Reyes, 2005) is both interesting and applicable. Using it as a starting point one can say that understanding of vulnerability demands knowledge that goes beyond one-dimensional and over-simplified categorisations.

Insights and learning

The students are consistently positive about the course. When the students reflect in the evaluation of the course there are, however, some differences between the social work students and the students who come from service user organisations.

Many of the students from service user organisations point out the boost to their self-confidence that can be involved in completing a university course. They maintain the importance of being able to relate their experiences, undisturbed, to future social workers and how they develop new relationships and a deeper understanding of what it involves to sit on the opposite side of the desk in the role of “helper”. At the same time the greatness of the challenge that this presented the group, in which many carry with them the experience of earlier failures at school or work, is not to be

underestimated. The majority, for example, have not been aware of how much of their time studying will demand and that one must spend a lot of time in school and that it takes self-discipline in order to understand the compulsory literature and to write examination papers.⁴ We have therefore reserved special resources in the form of a mentor in order that students can have the possibility of receiving support and extra tuition, undisturbed.⁵

The students of social work maintain the importance of encounters with individuals with, often painful, experiences of being discriminated by authorities and that the often rigid construction of a “client” that up until then has been conveyed in the education is challenged. For many students of social work the course involves a revaluation of the image, which was created during the previous semesters, of their own identity within social work. The course often, at least in the beginning, involves for many a process where prejudices and preconceived ideas are challenged, and this in turn can lead to a grieving process over lost illusions of how one conducts oneself in the practice of social work. One social work student described this in the following way:

“Without really understanding what it was due to, I often felt myself provoked and often quite irritated when I travelled home from school, especially at the beginning of the course. I sometimes got the feeling that many of the service user felt that they had exclusive knowledge of what socially vulnerable people’s needs were and that the solutions definitely didn’t come from the School of Social Work ... The course has primarily

⁴ The demand can be summarised: Full time studies together with individual study after school hours involving reading circa 900 pages of Swedish and English literature, compulsory attendance of between three to five days a week, an individual written examination paper of four pages, a two hour presentation of the organisation they represent, project work in groups and the presentation of the project plan to a panel.

⁵ Besides the tuition that is also offered to students of social work which involves amongst other things, workshops and free access to dictionaries, computer rooms with internet and libraries the service user students also have access to: individual- and group based study coaching for the study of the literature, individual coaching for the examination paper, conversational support to aid reflection during the course, group based supervision, support and guidance in preparation for the presentation of the organisation that the student represents, Swedish summaries of the English course literature together with an English-Swedish word list based on the course literature.

made me look at myself, and connect things to myself. Why was I provoked? Irritated. The university is a context that I have certain expectations of and one behaves in a certain way. This context was recreated in a very stimulating and refreshing way, even if in an occasionally rather laborious way. It felt as if a lot of my knowledge became more real in the company of the service user students and I have learnt things that I did not learn from normal lectures.”

The course is demanding in that it forces students to step outside their “comfort zone” and therefore having to expend a lot of energy in order to understand and show deference to “the other”.

“I feel that the course has been difficult in a different way to earlier courses, because it has demanded something else from me. For my part I feel that a lot of time has been devoted in trying to work out the service user students and trying to make sure that they are a part of the group, both in the classroom and the smaller groups. This has meant that I have invested more feeling than has been necessary earlier in my education and this in turn has led to me feeling overworked. I have, however, as I wrote earlier, thought that this has been great fun and I feel that I have learnt a lot. Both about myself and about all the interesting people that have dared to venture into the enclosed world of higher education, so brave.”

Diversity objective is not consensus

There exist innate differences of opinion that one cannot, or should not, strive to remove. Instead, it is desirable to clarify the types of opposition that can arise when people, with different norms of what can be said in public meet. During the first course, which was held in the autumn of 2005, students of social work on numerous occasions contacted us teachers, after becoming upset that certain students from the service user organisations did not have the “right” opinion. One of them stated that she felt her rights were being infringed, which is interesting considering that when infringement of rights is discussed within social work, it is usually the service user whose rights are infringed upon.

During the second course (spring 2006) we have had greater success in creating a permissive atmosphere and a higher level of tolerance. A female

social work student described a meaningful encounter during the course in the following way:

“On my way home to Malmö on the train, I asked Moussad about his wife. I knew that they got married quite a long time ago in a Middle Eastern country but that she had not yet come to Sweden, and this made me curious. How had they met? Was it an arranged marriage? How did it feel to know that they would soon meet? Moussad told me that he was introduced to his wife, who belongs to the same tribe as him, when he visited relatives in his homeland. They realised that they liked each other and after having got to know each other over five months got married. It was an arranged marriage but with love, I thought with relief. This was two years ago, and now, at last, she had been given a residence permit in Sweden. Moussad seemed pleased and excited when he explained that his wife would be arriving in a few weeks. When Moussad told me this he asked me if I had a boyfriend, or perhaps was engaged. I have a girlfriend I answered. Moussad looked at me with a smile and didn't know what to say. I saw by his expression that this was something very big for him. He had probably never met anyone homosexual before. Moussad soon thought of something to say, but he said that he was unsure of what to say for fear of offending me. I respect you for what you are, he pointed out several times./.../ This meeting illustrates for me the six weeks that this course comprised. I have met people whom I probably would never have had the chance to meet. There were various points of departure, but the encounters, which were created over the weeks, created relationships where I and those I met were on the same level. The meetings that occurred in the classroom gave the insight that not only were service user students and social work students different, but that we are all different, and this in turn leads to the insight that in fact we are all alike. The encounters that have been made possible have involved a testing of my prejudices, values and knowledge. The days have been long and intensive, in the evening I have been tired. Reflection, intensive and constant reflection, have characterised this period. Naturally, I have learnt a lot from this, both for myself as a person and on a professional level. A process has been set in motion, a process of reflection, which I believe, can be continued in the future, and especially during the time when I first begin work as a social worker.”

During the second course both service user students and social work students have been extremely generous in sharing stories about themselves that have pointed in all directions. There is a consensus over, for example, the view of the importance of being met with kind treatment, participation and empowerment, but overall there has been a great diversity amongst the views held by the students. The example above is one of many showing how people with different points of view and perspectives have been able to co-operate in different projects despite dissimilarities and differences of opinion.

Discussion over the art of mobilisation without infringement on the rights of others

To lead a course that aims to be meaningful for people from various cultures, from organisations that represent different (and often opposite) perspectives is a balancing act. The objective for such a leadership must be to capture tensions, utilise processes and to be a stabiliser in an ocean of personal experiences and journeys. Thereby, the course becomes an example of the difficulties that social mobilisation work is often confronted with.

People want to have a role. The need for self-realisation is innate and a very tangible need for a student who has almost completed their education and is soon to head out into working life. During the first course we learnt how important it was that both social work students and service user students were given the possibility of entering into a positive and important role during the course. That this would demand so much active planning and contemplation was something that we had underestimated. Social workers tend to reflect too little on how important it is for the client to conquer another and more productive role than that of being a client. To allow everybody to step forward as individuals early on in the course counteracted the tendency during the second course towards a tug of war between the practitioner perspective and the service user perspective. In order to counteract a stereotypical us-and-them mindset and in order for integration to succeed the actors need to become something other than the original stereotypes.

Experience shows that many service user students view the course as a major challenge partly due to previous failures having led them to not dare to raise their expectations. A young physically handicapped woman described the way she felt before embarking on the project work in this way:

“The advantage with the course is that social work students and service user students exchange and share one another’s work and life situation. This became clear during the project work. We had as our goal to give people with a foreign background employment through the use of a social enterprise. My fellow students said: ‘Of course people who have been unemployed for a long time are happy when a social enterprise dares to invest.’ My experience and fear of disappointment made it painful to dream. I also know that people might need therapeutic support and that it takes time to heal as a person. If we’d had more time we could have reflected over our different experiences afterwards. It was a good thing for me to have a timetable to follow without having to draw it up myself./.../ Throughout the course my difficult experiences have been given a berth”

However, what has been striking when we have observed the needs of the service user students above, has been that social work students have also requested support and encouragement as the course covers uncharted territory for them as well as for the representatives of service user organisations. We have seen the importance of creatively seeking pedagogical forms of strengthening the self-confidence of social work students and their belief in social work – especially with the thought that during the course many classmates come into contact with those who have been disappointed by and insulted by social authorities.

The course discussed has also involved learning experiences for us teachers, not least personal. One of us has summarised it in this way:

“ I have been faced with the not insubstantial challenge of in a short time building confidence within people whose experiences have many times borne witness to exactly the problem of being able to trust others and the difficulty of having belief in others as well as themselves. To gain an insight into people’s struggle, a struggle that basically is about being treated and viewed in the same way as everybody else, not only evokes anger over the discriminatory organisation of society, but also awakes a strong desire and will to change, not only for these specific individuals but also for the groups that they represent. During the course, I have shared human tragedies that testify to outsidership without boundaries and I have also partly come to know these people who have against all odds reclaimed power over their lives, won victories and been strengthened by adversity. It has been very enriching to be able to share in this practical and concrete work with empowerment and to be able to have seen close up how people grow and develop.” (Ottengrim 2006).

About preparing for the unexpected

We perceive that this kind of course is a groundbreaking example that in a radical way shows new ways of shifting perspectives and allowing the students to confront their own prejudices and challenge their abilities. Such a course can also give unexpected insights and encouragement to a group of people who up until now have been far removed from higher education. We have learnt a lot from the two courses that have been held and it feels urgent that the experiences impact on other schools in Sweden. Therefore, we want to stimulate more initiatives and bring service user participation onto the pedagogical agenda in a tangible way. In this way we can therefore contribute to more conscious and aware social workers.

In an attempt to further spread knowledge we have therefore turned to some other schools of social work in Sweden and offer a forum for discussions with local actors such as teachers, students and service user organisations. To participate in this way in IASSW's conference is another way of allowing the project to be exposed to social workers, researchers and teachers within social work. Of course there exist alternative ways of working with service user participation within social work education and we look forward to deeper discussions over how these can be formulated.

One thing one can be sure of before the start of each course is that courses with students from so many different walks of life will be unpredictable. At the start of every course situations involving participants arise that must be dealt with. However, if such events are dealt with in a proper way they offer a possibility for reflection and learning that cannot be learnt through reading. Courses of this type represent, like the participants themselves, society in general. This diversity can be seen as an engine and source of inspiration for new ways of thinking. During the course interfaces that cover a number of organisations are created and new projects and ideas are born. It has therefore been a dynamic and inspirational platform, not at least for us

teachers and the course has developed in ways that we could never have predicted in the beginning.

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