

4. Conclusion: Empowering Service Users and Innovative Learning Settings with Long-Term Effects

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This book introduced several examples of courses with the gap-mending approach in social work education in six European countries. The context, the concept, the implementation and the evaluation of these courses vary partly from case to case. However, the central common element of these courses is that service users actively take part as co-partners and valuable contributors in these courses. This goes beyond respecting service users as a person with their own experience and knowledge. The partnership between service users and students of social work constitutes a core element of the different implementations of the gap-mending approach developed at the University in Lund. The gap-mending approach is based on the concept of user involvement, which has a strong relevance both in the International Federation of Social Workers and in the individual countries. The examples of courses described in this book emphasise the fact that the concept of user involvement is not a tokenistic involvement or a rhetorical expression, but rather one that has been successfully implemented. One crucial element of the evaluations demonstrates how important the knowledge and experience of both service users and students of social work is to increase fruitful developments of projects with a high impact on social practices. A process of a reciprocal and deeper understanding of both service users' and social work students' perspectives started with these courses. Consequently, this has an influence on the future of both service users and students of social work. Furthermore, the examples contribute to the development and better understanding of social work.

The following conclusion highlights some key issues and main elements through all specified courses and mentions some differences too. Thereby, it

connects these findings to the theoretical background of user involvement and outlines future perspectives.

From an Explorative Learning Process to a Concept of Innovative Projects for Social Challenges

Learning and teaching within a gap-mending approach includes learning settings where service users and students of social work meet. In this context, they learn about theoretical concepts and how to develop a project to resolve social challenges. The number of participants and the duration of each course vary depending on the needs of the participants, of social institutions and the framework of the universities and the context of the courses. However, in all pedagogical concepts of the courses presented in this book, the knowledge and experience of the service users are considered as important as those of the students of social work. Furthermore, in all chapters it is common that the participants of the courses and the lecturers have a high commitment to meet on the same level as far as possible. They pay attention to different attitudes, which means for example that they need to be able to and are willing to listen. Regarding this learning process, the authors in this book made similar theoretical reflections:

The authors of Chapter 3.3 mentioned the learning concept of “partnership” (Thompson 2003) and participation as being an “active ingredient in effective partnership working” (Thompson 2003). Accordingly, the authors of Chapter 3.2 base their courses on a cooperative learning process. The emotional aspect is highlighted in Chapter 3.1, where the authors refer to the research study of the development of students’ empathy in medical education. The results show the importance that students do not only acquire a theoretical knowledge about their patient but need to be touched emotionally by meetings with the patients and subsequently have to reflect these experiences. In Chapter 3.4, the concept of “creativity” in social work education (Burgess/Lawrence 2007; Eadie/Lymbery 2007) is mentioned. In this learning concept, different perspectives and experiences are included in the learning process in order to encourage thinking “outside the box” (Burgess/Lawrence 2007: 2), which facilitates the achievement of effective and good practice in social work.

In sum, it can be said that these learning concepts promote good practice in social work by emphasising the importance of personal experience, hands-on, explorative learning and by presenting different perspectives on social

challenges. The explorative learning concept is especially elaborated and established in international social work courses (e.g. community-based participatory model by Fischer and Grettenberger (2015)). This concept attaches great importance to including awareness, practice skill development and enhanced competence regarding global and intercultural issues.

Furthermore, an important element of the learning process is that the participation in the courses is voluntary and that both service users and students of social work are as much as possible outside their typical role.

This is a challenge and all authors underline the important function of the lecturer as supporter, moderator and intervener, which requires a non-classical and academic role of lecturer. With regard to this, the authors of Chapter 3.2 give the useful advice to pay attention to avoid prejudice, such as the notion that service users are not able to take criticism or that students of social work are always helpers. If these attitudes or tensions generated by previous negative experience manifest themselves in the working groups, the lecturer needs to recognise them and intervene. This implies good social competence and a high work load for the lecturers, but also for the students themselves.

A central element in each course, mostly at the beginning, is to have enough time to get to know each other as human beings. Different methods of becoming acquainted with each other are described in each chapter.

In the courses in Sweden and Norway, both service users and students of social work get ECTS-credits if they meet all requirements for passing the courses. To obtain permission to get ECTS-credits for service users is a major challenge in most countries. In England, for instance, where user involvement is compulsory in social work education, the authors make a major effort to award ECTS-credits to service users. However, already the fact that they are able to participate in academic courses at universities is appreciated by most service users because it boosts their self-esteem. This is underlined clearly by the evaluations of Norway and Sweden.

The above mentioned elements of gap-mending courses will contribute to creating conditions in which service users and students of social work are on a level playing field.

Kristiansen and Heule prefer the participation of service users with different backgrounds and from different service user organisations, which is helpful for developing concepts of projects with a variety of perspectives.

Developing concepts for innovative projects is another key element of courses with a gap-mending approach. It is important that the project is based on a social challenge. In most courses, the service users and students of social

work choose the issues and develop the project on their own, but there are some exceptions. In Germany, the students and the lecturers of social work choose and develop challenging topics and issues, which are then discussed with selected service users before the start of the two-day seminar. In other cases, the issues are proposed by social services. In an English Family Centre, this was initiated because of an existing barrier between service users and students of social work. Courses in Denmark, for instance, are also initiated by social services and political authorities.

The prevailing element of all courses is a strong motivation of students and service users due to the development of and participation in projects. In Sweden, the project concepts are evaluated by a jury with representatives from the political authorities, social services, user organisations and the audience. After this public event, the students and lecturers evaluate the feedback.

Also courses from other countries present similar products at the end of the courses, e.g. a film or a workshop. Especially in Denmark, an innovation camp took place with 60 participants from user organisations, practitioners, local government authorities, private service providers and participants of the gap-mending course. The findings and proposals of the gap-mending course were presented and discussed together on an equal level.

From Involving Services Users to Decreasing Social Inequality

In Sweden or Norway, the concept of user involvement is established in social work education through internships, through invitations of service users to visit classes or through visiting social services and projects, for instance. However, these occasions do not necessarily give the opportunity for a reciprocal understanding of both service users and social workers, which is essential for achieving long-term effects (cf. Chapter 3.2) or improving critical thinking on a socio-political level (cf. Chapters 3.1 and 3.3). In order to achieve this, it is crucial to study and work on a project together during a longer period of time and not only during selective moments or individual days (cf. Chapters 3.1-3.4). A theoretical and socio-political overview is clarified particularly in Chapter 3.1 and Chapter 3.3. They point to a link between the gap-mending courses and the redistribution of power in social work practices. Both contributions clearly underline how courses with a gap-mending approach are able to deal with social conditions of inequality more intensely, to mobilise service users and to start developing long-term solutions for social problems.

User involvement is an approach that is more common in English-speaking countries. However, in Switzerland, the contact with service users during the education of social work is very important, even if it does not run under the name of “user involvement”. In Germany, the education of social work has a longer academic tradition than in Switzerland, which makes it harder for Germany to introduce courses with user involvement. Both countries have implemented courses with a gap-mending approach in their existing modules with some adaptations such as a short period of time during which service users and students of social work learn and work together (cf. Chapters 3.5 and 3.6).

The terminology “service users” explained in the introduction of this book is used by all authors. In an interdisciplinary context, the short term “users” is more appropriate, as it is argued in Chapter 3.4. In courses, the service users are called students from service user organisations, external students or just students in order to underline the equal position of all participants in the courses.

It is important to reflect about the terminology of “user involvement” or “service user” to be aware of the implicit, language-related concepts and their limits (cf. Chapter 2). The examples of the courses show that it is important to clarify the terminology in order to eliminate social inequality. Thereby, service users are given the opportunity to be on eye level with the students of social work as much as possible and to work and study together as equal partners during a course that lasts several weeks.

Most of the universities dispose of a large network of user organisations for recruiting service user students. In countries such as Germany and Switzerland, where there are not many user organisations, the recruitment of service users for a course is a great challenge. Service user organisations in Norway, Sweden or England are more common and often run by the service users themselves. Nevertheless, there are groups who are not represented by service user organisations and who are not included enough in endeavours of user involvement (cf. Chapter 3.1) or are not eligible for benefit (cf. Chapter 3.3). For these groups, further efforts and developments of user involvement are required.

In Germany and Switzerland, user organisations are more present in the field of psychology and health care than in the field of social work. Furthermore, the service user organisations are often managed by professionals, as for instance the service user organisations “Surprise” and “EX-IN”. The con-

cept of a user-led “organisation” is more common in the numerous self-help groups. A self-help group is commonly considered as less proactive concerning social change and it is by definition a group and not an organisation.

Evaluations: Research-Based and Practice-Based Impact

There is a high demand for results from evaluations of gap-mending courses to evidence their impact on service users, students of social work and on the practice of social work.

The courses presented in this book were assessed both through research-based and practice-based evaluations. The methods of evaluation were questionnaires, group discussions, discussions and written reflections about learning effects, which were conducted with students of social work and students of service user organisations. The notable results and some challenges of gap-mending courses are described in each chapter and constitute a first evaluation of courses with a gap-mending approach within one volume.

With the long experience of gap-mending courses at the Lund University, these courses demonstrate in a unique way their impact on social work practice: Service users founded new service user organisations. They also elaborated concepts in gap-mending courses, which received funding so that they could subsequently be implemented and applied in social work practice. The service users were invited as guest lecturers or tutors to courses or as participants to national and international congresses of social work.

The first evaluation of long-term effects was conducted by the Norwegian authors (cf. Chapter 3.2). They used the method of retrospective interviews of service users in group discussions. Thus, they found a long-term effect, which they discussed under five headlines: 1) an experience of involvement, 2) an awareness of labelling, 3) an increase in self-confidence and the empowerment of role-changing, 4) the importance of gaining the understanding and cooperation of each other, and 5) increasing values such as being part of a community or obtaining self-respect.

Another positive practice-based outcome of each course is based on the fact that they are continually developed and implemented and that there is great demand for such courses.

The above mentioned research and practice-based evaluations of gap-mending courses provide answers to the four crucial questions by Schön (2016: 31):

- How should one proceed with these efforts?
- Which methods produce the most favourable outcomes?
- What does it mean to be in a user role? Is it a stigma or an improvement?
- How does this enhanced knowledge affect students' work and attitudes once they become social workers?

Additionally, the mentioned evaluations of courses with a gap-mending approach can be classified, with certain restrictions, into Schön's very appropriate categories for evaluating user involvement in social work, education and practice. (Schön 2016: 31):

- outcome-focused research on methods and levels of user participation
- users' perceptions of the quality of these activities
- the effect of these activities on a user's quality of life.

It can thus be concluded that the contributions of all authors of this book counteract the "lack of evidence based knowledge" (Schön 2016: 31) of user involvement in social work, education and practice.

However, there is a great need for further research-based and practice-based evaluations especially to evidence long-term outcomes of gap-mending courses by service users and students of social work. The authors of this book emphasise this demand for future research as well.

In conclusion, all authors have shown how courses with a gap-mending approach achieve empowerment among socially excluded groups and promote learning processes in different socio-political contexts as well as varying framework of universities. These courses reveal the views and needs of both service users and social workers and provide meeting points and platforms, where both groups can develop innovative projects in the field of social work. There are different stages of development of these courses, which is at the same time a promising outlook towards a continuing and increasing advancement of the gap-mending approach.

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