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## **Developing professional competences through building narratives of life experiences**

Paper presented at the Ninth European Conference Citizenship Education in Society,  
24<sup>th</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> May 2007, Montpellier, France

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## **Introduction**

The ability to make judgements and communication skills are some of the descriptors of qualifications that signify completion of higher education within the Bologna process. Within the teaching profession considerable changes have occurred including greater emphasis on social dimensions and relational competence. Adult citizenship education should be part of higher education and promote equality, justice, respect for others and democratic participation for which the above-mentioned abilities and skills are prerequisites. Within higher education there is a need to develop both methods to achieve these competences and skills and ways to assess if students have reached these objectives.

This paper will present an ongoing Research and Development project at Malmö University in Sweden. The project focuses on how students can make use of experiences they acquire outside ordinary higher education in order to develop important professional interpersonal skills such as empathy, perspective taking and value clarification. These experiences could derive from temporarily working as assistants in schools, caretakers for children or the elderly, mentors/tutors, leisure time or sports leaders or being active in organizations such as youth clubs. Within the project, teacher education students, social work students and student mentors in the mentoring programme Näktergalen are participating in small group seminars over a period of two terms, four during spring 2007 and four during fall 2007. In these seminars, methods are being developed and applied in which students develop their personal narratives while helping others students do the same. Students come with their personal experiences that they will turn into some kind of story. Through seminar activities and interaction with others in the group, each story will be developed into a personal narrative.

The idea behind the project is to acknowledge students' non-academic skills and experiences and relate them to professional development, particularly with respect to personal practical knowledge. Moreover, within the seminar framework which emphasizes life experiences rather than academic achievement, students who do not have the advantage of a strong academic background will have the opportunity to feel equal to others. Increased feelings of self-worth can increase the likelihood that they actually complete their studies and enter the workforce, thereby serving as role models for others from similar backgrounds to enter higher education. This activity is expected to lead to self-knowledge as well as an ability to interpret encounters with others in a pluralist, multicultural society (Conle, 2000).

The project is being funded by the Swedish Agency for Networks and Cooperation in Higher Education.

In this paper the theoretical framework and methods of the project will be presented as well as initial data on the kinds of experiences students bring with them and some notes on the operation of the seminars during Spring 2007.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of the project is inspired by the Canadian researchers Clandinin and Connelly (1999; 2000; 2006; Keats-Whelan et al., 2001) who have studied teacher knowledge in terms of "personal practical knowledge" built on what they call "narratives of experience". With reference to others, among them Bateson, they have developed the concept "stories to live by", which are narratives of experience that are both personal, reflecting a person's life story, and social/professional, reflecting the environment and context in which teachers act. Connelly and Clandinin (1999) use a metaphor "professional knowledge landscape", which is both intellectual and moral and based on a diversity of people, places and relations between them. The contexts in which teachers live and work both shape and influence their stories. Stories are lived and told, retold, and relived (Keats-Whelan et al., 2001). "The notion of a story to live by is a way to understand how we can see teachers as living storied lives on storied landscapes both past and present." Who we are is intricately interwoven with the lives that we live and with the contexts in which we compose them (Clandinin & Huber, 2003, p. 4).

We view learning as a process based on experiences (Kolb, 1984). Our idea is to make more explicit use of the experiences that students encounter with children and grown-ups while working or being active in different organizations. Through group seminars, students will develop "stories to live by" from their "narratives of experience" that will help them develop their professional self and interpersonal skills. The group of students is important for developing the stories. As Clandinin and Connelly write in a different context that is applicable here: "Walking along with participants, trying to hear their stories, trying to tell our own stories, and then trying, with them, to understand the interconnected web of stories, might make it possible to gain some sense of interwoven narratives." (1998, p. 161)

### **Methods**

The project is accompanied by evaluation whose purpose is to provide feedback to project leaders as well as give some indication of the project's impact on student learning and

professional development. Accordingly, the evaluation focuses on questions related to both project implementation and project outcomes.

*Participants.* Six groups composed of 10-12 students each (two groups in teacher education, two groups in social work education, and two groups of student mentors) are participating in the project, each with their own faculty group leader. For every experimental group a comparable control group has been selected who is participating in seminar sessions unrelated to the project content. Overall there are 105 students, 66 in the experimental group and 44 in the control group. There were no significant differences between seminar participants and control group students. Of the 105 students 87% were females. Ages ranged from 20 to 51 years old (the mean is 27, the median is 25, and the standard deviation is 6.8). 82% have no children and the others have between 1 to 4 children.

*Data collection.* Group leaders are documenting the seminars. In their documentation they are writing about the planning stage for each session, actual implementation, and their reflections on what occurs. At the conclusion of the project all group leaders will be interviewed and focus groups with students who participated in the seminars will be conducted. Both activities are intended to reveal the processes experienced and to gather feedback on project operation. Additional feedback concerning the project will be gathered through a questionnaire administered to all student participants at the end of each term.

Moreover information on project outcomes will be obtained using questionnaires measuring perspective taking and self esteem. All seminar participants and control group students completed the questionnaires in February 2007 (at the start of project implementation) and will do so again in January 2008 (at the conclusion of the project). Seminar participants will also complete the questionnaires in May 2007 after the first set of seminars. The questionnaire administered in February 2007 also included questions pertaining to both demographic traits of the participants and the extent of their previous experiences in various areas.

### **Students' experiences**

Seminar participants and control group students were similar with respect to their previous types of experiences. The questionnaire contained 19 areas of experiences that the students were asked to respond to on a 4-point scale with regard to the amount of the experience they have in each area. These 19 areas were selected on the basis of a previous study in which students in higher education were asked about their previous experiences using open-ended

questions. In Table 1 the kind of and amount of previous experiences the students have are presented.

Table 1. Kind and amount of experiences students report (N=105)

Area	No experience at all	Very little experience	A medium amount of experience	Very much experience	Mean	SD
1. Work in a preschool or school	35.2	40.0	20.0	4.8	<b>1.94</b>	<b>.86</b>
2. Work in health care services	74.0	12.5	6.7	6.7	<b>1.46</b>	<b>.89</b>
3. Caring for the elderly	55.3	17.5	18.4	8.7	<b>1.81</b>	<b>1.03</b>
4. Social work as a contact person, personal assistant, etc.	64.4	20.2	5.8	9.6	<b>1.61</b>	<b>.97</b>
5. Administrative office work	53.3	27.6	16.2	2.9	<b>1.69</b>	<b>.85</b>
6. Public service work in a restaurant, hotel, post office, bank	24.8	29.5	27.6	18.1	<b>2.39</b>	<b>1.05</b>
7. Work in industry, carpentry, factory work, construction	70.5	15.2	8.6	5.7	<b>1.50</b>	<b>.88</b>
8. Small business owner	91.4	2.9	3.8	1.9	<b>1.16</b>	<b>.57</b>
9. Managerial experience	69.2	18.3	10.6	1.9	<b>1.45</b>	<b>.76</b>
10. Salesperson, cashier in a store	41.3	20.2	22.1	16.3	<b>2.13</b>	<b>1.13</b>
11. Au pair, babysitting, housekeeping	55.2	22.9	9.5	12.4	<b>1.79</b>	<b>1.05</b>
12. Mentoring/tutoring	72.4	9.5	11.4	6.7	<b>1.52</b>	<b>.94</b>
13. Voluntary work as a leader in the scouts, sports group, summer camp, the arts	59.6	12.5	15.4	12.5	<b>1.81</b>	<b>1.07</b>
14. Voluntary organizational work in public and private organizations (on the board, in committees, labour unions)	66.3	16.3	11.5	5.8	<b>1.57</b>	<b>.91</b>
15. Other volunteer work	54.3	26.7	14.3	4.8	<b>1.70</b>	<b>.89</b>
16. Activity in cultural activities and the arts	73.3	15.2	5.7	5.7	<b>1.44</b>	<b>.84</b>
17. Activity in sports	33.3	30.5	18.1	18.1	<b>2.21</b>	<b>1.10</b>
18. Client of medical and health services	90.5	7.6	1.9	0.0	<b>1.11</b>	<b>.38</b>
19. Activities involving travel and adventure	10.5	40.0	31.4	18.1	<b>2.57</b>	<b>.91</b>

Everyone mentioned at least two areas in which they had some experience. They all thus seem to have experiences that can be taken into account and used in the development of personal narratives. Around 75% have some experience from public service work like in a

restaurant, hotel, post office or bank; 18% have very much experience of this kind. Around 25% have a medium amount or very much experience in volunteer work as a leader in the scouts, a sports group, summer camp, etc.

### **Small group seminars**

During the spring term of 2007 the students are participating in four small group seminars preceded by an introductory seminar. In the introductory seminar the students were given a task to write a story about an incident they had experienced when they were temporarily working, for example as caretakers for children or the elderly, mentors/tutors, leisure time or sports leaders or being active in organizations such as youth clubs. They were requested to select an incident where they themselves were involved together with one or more other persons (children or grown-ups), an incident that somehow made an impact on them either positive or negative. It could include a dilemma. The students were asked to write a story around the incident with them as the "I" in the story.

During Seminars 1 and 2 the students presented their stories one by one. Each story led to discussion and reflections where the other students commented on the story, brought in their own experiences and related to their future profession. Anna, for example, a student in her second year of teacher education told about an incident which occurred when she was working in a factory, where one of her superiors thought the staff needed to learn how to communicate with each other. He called everybody to a large meeting and then in front of everybody told off one of the co-workers. Nobody said anything but then Anna decided to talk although she never used to raise her voice in a large meeting. She said she thought it was wrong to talk about him in the way the superior did. This caused a lot of discussion in the seminar why she was the only one to raise her voice. Another student, Jenny, told a story from her work in a watch and clock shop. One day a man entered with a watch that he had bought in the shop and now wanted to get a new one since the old one did not work. Jenny immediately saw that it contained water and told him that he must have had it in water. He denied this and started to behave in a very threatening manner, throwing the watch at Jenny and yelling at her. He asked for a new watch but did not want to pay for it. Jenny's boss was standing next her but did not do anything, and Jenny asked afterwards why she did not press the alarm button so the store guard would come. "Well", the boss said, "I would have set the alarm if he had hit you." In the discussion afterwards several students were impressed by the way Jenny had handled the situation, and agreed that it was done very professionally.

As preparation for the third seminar the students were asked to rewrite their story taking somebody else's perspective with "I" being another person. Anna rewrote her story and put herself in the shoes of the superior. Jenny rewrote her story from the point of view of the customer.

At this third seminar the students started to retell their story one by one. After the presentation of each story everybody received a response sheet and wrote how they reacted to the story. Then there was a group discussion around the story told. It was interesting to see when listening to Jenny and the discussion that suddenly one could to some extent understand the perspective of the customer who entered the shop and wanted a new watch. At the end of the seminar the story-teller received the others' written responses and then they were asked to think about and write down:

- Why did you choose to write from that particular person's perspective?
- What happened in the process of rewriting the story?
- What "new" thing did you discover by rewriting their story?

The fourth and final seminar this Spring term will take place at the end of May and will cover the remaining rewritten stories and also evaluation of the Spring seminars. It is too early to determine what the students have gained from the activity and the seminars, but it seems that they have got insights concerning perspective taking. At the end of the third seminar in one of the teacher education groups the students wrote some spontaneous reflections:

*These occasions have really been good. One is able to put oneself in the thoughts and values of others and the character/persons in the stories as well. It provides us with a greater insight into different ways of thinking, something we will need in the future.*

*(student A written reflections)*

*It has been a really interesting task to "change perspective". Sometimes one could hear the story writer in "the other", sometimes less. I thought it was difficult when I rewrote my story, not to let "the other" be coloured by my own views and thoughts.*

*(Student B written reflections)*

*I have learned from these seminars*

*- that it is important to listen and try to see things from another perspective than one's own.*

*- that when somebody acts in a way that is unpleasant, difficult to understand, one can often find a hidden explanation.*

*- that people that are colliding might have a similar goal although the ways/means might differ.*

*(Student C written reflections)*

In May we will start planning the four seminars that will follow in the fall of 2007. The idea is how to further make use of the stories the students have written and rewritten. Students

from the different groups in the project will be asked to participate in the planning process of the fall seminars.

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