

Building Narratives of Experience to Develop Interpersonal Professional Competences

Barbara Fresko, *Beit Berl Academic College, Israel*

barbara@beitberl.ac.il

Lena Rubinstein Reich, *Teacher Education, Malmö University, Sweden*

Lena.Rubinstein-Reich@lut.mah.se

Objectives

Good interpersonal skills are one of the essential requirements for those engaging in helping professions, such as social work, teaching, counselling, and nursing. The helping professional should be someone who has respect for others, is insightful, compassionate, trustworthy, realistically self-confident, and self-disciplined (Strickling, 1998). The abilities to take the perspective of others, to be empathetic to their needs, feelings, and beliefs and to use moral judgement when working with them comprise just some of the necessary skills. Most professional-training programs concentrate on imparting knowledge or developing specific practical skills, but less is done to assist students in developing relevant attitudes and social competences. At best, academic courses in sociology and philosophy are offered in order to develop awareness of social and moral aspects of the students' future professions. Effective methods for nurturing and developing students' interpersonal competences need to be developed.

Our paper presents a project carried out at Malmö University in Sweden, which focused on how students can make use of experiences they have outside higher education in order to develop interpersonal skills such as empathy, perspective taking, and value clarification.¹ Teacher education students, social work students, and university students who were mentoring children at-risk participated in small group seminars over a period of two academic terms (spring 2007 and fall 2007). Methods were developed and applied in which students developed their personal narratives while helping other students to do the same. Students came with their personal experiences that they turn into stories. Through seminar assignments and interaction with others, stories were developed into personal narratives. This activity was expected to lead to self-knowledge and the ability to interpret encounters with others in a pluralist, multicultural society (Conle, 2000).

One idea behind the project was to acknowledge students' non-academic skills and experiences and relate them to professional development, particularly with respect to personal practical knowledge. Within the seminar framework which emphasized life experiences rather than academic achievement, students who did not have the advantage of a strong academic background were given an opportunity to feel equal to the others. Increased feelings of self-worth are expected to have long term consequences such as increasing the likelihood that these students actually complete their studies, enter their profession, and thereby serve as role models for others from similar backgrounds.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the project was inspired by Clandinin and Connelly (1999; 2000; 2006) who have studied teacher knowledge in terms of personal practical knowledge built on what they call "narratives of experience". 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 assumption is that who we are is intricately interwoven with the lives that we live and with the contexts in which we compose them (Clandinin & Huber, 2003). The initiators of the Malmö project felt that this approach could potentially be applied to all helping professionals.

In the Malmö project, learning is viewed as a process based on experiences. The project was accompanied by evaluation whose purpose was to provide formative feedback to project leaders as well as indicate impact on student learning and professional development. Accordingly, evaluation focused on questions related to both implementation and outcomes. The main questions which guided the evaluation were:

1. To what extent do students have life experiences which could serve as the basis for developing personal narratives?
2. How were the ideas of the project actually implemented? Which activities were more effective and which activities were less effective as providing a learning experience for the students?

3. Did the project have an impact on the students' ability to take the perspective of others, on their feelings of empathy for others, and on their self-esteem? What other effects did the project have on the students?

Methods

Participants. Eight groups of students (two groups in teacher education, two groups in social work education, and four groups of student mentors) participated in the project, each with their own faculty group leader. The education groups were the largest with 13 and 15 students respectively, the social work groups had 9 students each, and the mentoring groups were made up of 5 students each. Six comparable control groups (two in education, two in social work, and two mentoring groups) were selected who were participating in seminar sessions unrelated to the project content. Overall the study included 125 students: 61 in the experimental group and 64 in the control group. Both groups were similar with respect to background: 84% were females; the median age was 25; 83% were childless; and 89% had completed secondary education in an academic Swedish high school.

According to the research design both experimental and control groups were to be examined by means of a questionnaire at three different periods throughout the project: at the start, after the first term, and after the second term. Unfortunately, a problem arose with the control groups: some students failed to write their identification number on each questionnaire (which was the means for matching questionnaires) and many others wrote false numbers on a least one of the questionnaires. As a result data could be matched for only a small minority of the students in these groups, leading to the decision to discard them from analyses of repeated measures of project outcomes.

Data collection. Group leaders documented the project seminars and recorded the planning stage for each session, actual implementation, and their reflections on what occurred. In January 2008 after the project was completed, all group leaders were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol and focus groups were conducted with students from the different experimental groups in order to learn about the processes, operation, and outcomes. Additional feedback was gathered by means of questionnaires administered to students at the end of each term.

Outcomes with respect to perspective taking, empathy, and self-esteem were directly measured using two sub-scales (*Perspective Taking* and *Empathic Concern*) of the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (Davis, 1983) and *Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale* (1965). All scales were translated from English into Swedish. As noted above, seminar participants and

control group students completed the questionnaires prior to project implementation, after the first set of seminars, and again at the conclusion of the project. Reliability coefficients were calculated for the pre-test: $\alpha=0.574$ for the 7-item *Perspective Taking Scale*, $\alpha=0.636$ for the 7-item *Empathetic Concern Scale*, and $\alpha=0.870$ for the *Self-Esteem Scale*.

Results

Students' experiences. To what extent do students have the kinds of experiences that could be taken into account and used in the development of personal social/professional narratives? Students were asked to relate to 19 areas of experience that involve interpersonal interaction on a regular basis and to indicate the degree of their experience in each area. Both project participants and control group students reported similar degrees of experience in each area. Most frequently indicated areas (mentioned by about 40% to 90%) were activities involving travel, public service, sales, sports, volunteer work with youth, other volunteer work, baby-sitting, caring for the elderly, and helping at a school or pre-school. Results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main areas of experience reported by students (N=125) – frequency distributions in percentages, means, and standard deviations

<i>Area</i>	<i>No experience at all</i>	<i>Very little experience</i>	<i>A medium amount of experience</i>	<i>Very much experience</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Activities involving travel and adventure	9.6	40.8	32.8	16.8	2.57	0.88
Activity in sports	30.4	29.6	19.2	20.8	2.30	1.12
Public service work in a restaurant, hotel, post office, bank	28.0	30.4	26.4	15.2	2.29	1.04
Salesperson, cashier in a store	41.9	22.6	20.2	15.3	2.09	1.11
Work in a preschool or school	33.1	41.1	21.0	4.8	1.98	0.86
Au pair, babysitting, housekeeping	54.4	24.0	9.6	12.0	1.79	1.04
Volunteer work as a leader in the scouts, sports group, summer camp, the arts	58.9	16.1	13.7	11.3	1.77	1.07
Caring for the elderly	58.5	17.1	16.3	8.1	1.74	1.01
Other volunteer work	56.0	25.6	13.6	4.8	1.67	0.89

Implementation of seminars. In spring 2007 students participated in four small group seminars preceded by an introductory seminar. In the introductory seminar they were assigned

a task to write a story about an incident they had experienced when temporarily working or volunteering. They were requested to select a significant incident in which they themselves were involved together with at least one other person. They were asked to write down the incident, relating the story from their point of view.

During Seminars 1 and 2, students presented their stories. Each story led to discussion and reflection - the other students made comments, 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 one another. He assembled them together and then in front of everybody told off one of the workers. Nobody said anything. Anna decided to speak out although she usually did not talk in large meetings. She said she thought it was wrong to speak to the worker in that way. This caused a lot of discussion in the seminar about why she was the only one to speak up. Another student, Jenny, told a story from her work in a shop. One day a man entered with a watch that he had bought there now demanding a new one since the old one did not work. Jenny immediately saw that it contained water and told him that he must have gotten it wet. He denied this and started to threaten her, throwing the watch at Jenny and yelling at her. He wanted a new watch but did not want to pay for it. Jenny's boss was standing next to her but did not do anything. Jenny asked her afterwards why she did not press the alarm button to call the store guard. "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 she acted very well.

As preparation for Seminar 3, students were asked to rewrite their stories taking somebody else's perspective. Anna rewrote her story putting herself in the shoes of her superior. Jenny rewrote her story from the point of view of the customer.

At this third seminar the students started to retell their stories. After each story everybody wrote their reactions and then the group discussed it. The story-tellers received the others' written responses and were asked to reflect on the following questions:

- 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?

During Seminar 4, the remaining rewritten stories were discussed and a general discussion was conducted in which students summed up their reactions to the seminars.

The remaining four seminars were implemented in fall 2007. Only the two groups of teacher education students and the two groups of social work students participated since the university students who were mentors had finished mentoring at the end of previous year. The content and structure of these four fall seminars were planned in a meeting with student representatives and the seminar leaders. Since the students had found the storytelling and change of perspective very rewarding during the spring term, it was decided to do this again with new stories. Forum-plays and role-plays were also planned for the fall seminars. In addition it was decided to have an exchange of stories between social work students and teacher education students in which they would give each other feedback, providing additional perspectives.

Whereas Seminars 1-4 were implemented in quite a similar manner in all the groups with regard to content and structure, Seminars 5-8 were much more diverse. In the teacher education groups, Seminar 5 was devoted to having each student present a new story. The discussion which followed focused on identifying the professional competences important for a teacher that could be derived from the stories. These competences were summarised in key words or short sentences on the white board. In Seminar 6 the students rewrote their stories from another person's perspective and shared them with others in small groups of students. Again the activity related to professional competences through the analysis of key words. In Seminar 7 the students did forum plays (Byreus, 1996) based on three of the students' stories: each situation was acted out and the other students could interrupt and change the story in the middle. In Seminar 8, role play was carried out in which the plot was set up by the seminar leaders. Roles were assigned and each student got instructions how to play their roles. As a summing up activity, students discussed criteria for assessment of competences in various areas: for example, judgement, self-knowledge, and a capacity for empathy.

In the social work group the seminars were carried out differently. First of all, the seminar leaders switched groups in the second term. In one group the seminars were carried out more similarly to the education seminars, in that students told and re-told new stories and acted them out in forum-plays. Students were less motivated than in the first term and many did not prepare new stories. The final meeting was devoted to an activity related to value clarification that was not directly related to the narratives. In the second social work group, the seminar leader used a new technique for relating to stories and the students did not understand what they were supposed to do. The second seminar for this group was very short because of technical problems. Although forum play was planned around one of the stories for the third meeting, the storyteller did not show up and so the students discussed another topic

that was unrelated to the narratives. In the last seminar the students met in small groups and talked about the stories that were sent to them from the education students. They also discussed the aims of the project and in this way they tried to sum up their experience.

Student reactions. Information obtained from the feedback questionnaire showed that, students in all project groups were quite satisfied with the seminars at the end of the first term. They enjoyed writing their stories and sharing them with others, but they particularly liked hearing the stories prepared by others. They gave very high ratings to group discussions through which they reached a better understanding of the different situations. The atmosphere during the seminars was viewed as supportive and non-judgmental and most claimed they would recommend the seminars to others.

At the end of the second term, significant differences were found to have developed between the way the education students viewed the project and the way it was viewed by the social work students. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean student reactions to the seminars given by education students (N=25) and social work students (N=15) (scale 1-6)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Education</i>		<i>Social Work</i>		<i>t</i> <i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>sd</i>	
I enjoyed writing my own stories for the seminar.	4.42	0.76	2.47	1.25	5.521 .000
I liked to share my stories with others.	4.88	0.52	2.93	1.58	4.643 .000
It was interesting to hear stories prepared by other students.	5.23	0.65	4.07	1.16	4.125 .000
Group discussions helped me better understand different life experiences.	5.12	0.59	4.00	1.07	3.728 .001
I felt tense whenever I came to this seminar.	1.85	1.19	2.87	1.46	-2.436 .020
The atmosphere in class was always supportive and non-judgemental.	5.65	0.63	5.20	0.94	1.852 .072
I did not like getting comments from other students to my stories	1.65	0.85	2.33	1.11	-2.205 .033
The forum-plays helped me to better understand different viewpoints.	4.48	0.75	3.64	1.69	1.570 .142
The concluding discussion about the project made the purpose of the seminars clearer to me.	4.36	1.25	3.00	1.46	3.118 .003
I really do not understand why I have to attend a seminar like this.	1.77	0.99	3.47	2.03	-3.035 .007
I would recommend attending a seminar like this to other students.	4.62	1.10	3.67	1.68	2.192 .034

The education students tended to rate the project higher than did the social work students. On only two items were there no significant differences: both groups equally claimed that the atmosphere in the seminars was supportive and non-judgmental and both groups attributed similar value to the forum-plays in helping them understand different points of view.

Despite the significant differences between the groups there was a similarity in the way they rated the items. For example, relative to themselves, each group gave the same three items the highest ratings: the students claimed that the atmosphere in class was non-judgmental, they found it interesting to hear the stories prepared by the other students, and they claimed that the group discussions helped them better understand the situations depicted in the stories. Moreover, relatively speaking, both groups claimed that they understood the purpose of the seminars and that they would recommend them to other students.

Additional feedback on the seminars was obtained from the discussions that were conducted in the focus-groups. Students in all groups mentioned that they found it particularly interesting to tell their stories from the perspective of another (although they claimed that this was not always easy), and those who participated in forum plays and/or role play noted these activities as fun and enlightening. There was a general agreement that the exchange of stories between the education and social work groups during the second term did not provide them with additional insight, but rather was time-consuming and often frustrating. Education students, whose seminar groups were larger than the others, felt that the groups were too large and that smaller groups would be more effective. They also commented that too much time elapsed between seminar meetings. Social work students felt that the second term did not contribute much to them, either because it was too repetitive of the first term or because it lacked a clear structure. The mentors felt that the seminars should have started earlier on in the school year when they were just beginning to mentor a child. They also thought that there should have been more meetings. Students in all groups commented that sharing stories created a sense of intimacy among the members of the different groups which made it easy to make honest comments and suggestions to their fellow students and to accept the comments and remarks made to them in return.

Impact. Results suggest that this pedagogical approach can have a positive effect on the students. According to the self-reports given by the students on the feedback section of the questionnaire, project activities helped them learn to see and understand situations from the perspective of others, they learned more about themselves, and they learned new things related to their future profession. (See Table 3).

Table 3: Mean self reports of learning given by education students (N=25) and social work students (N=15) (scale 1-6)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>t</i> <i>p</i>
	<i>M</i> <i>sd</i>	<i>Work</i> <i>M</i> <i>sd</i>	
I learned a lot about myself through the seminar activities.	5.04 0.87	4.20 1.08	2.716 .010
I have learned new aspects of my profession-to-be.	4.81 0.94	3.93 1.16	2.631 .012
I learned to see and understand situations from the perspective of others.	5.19 0.85	4.13 1.06	3.510 .001

Reflections written by the students during the first term and comments made in the focus groups provided additional support for project impact. For example:

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

(Student A)

I learned that:

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

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

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

(Student B)

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 greater insight into different ways of thinking, something we will need in the future.

(Student C)

It should be noted that in all of the focus-groups, regardless of whether the participants were studying education, social work, or had been mentors, everyone emphasized that they had learned something valuable from the seminars. The most common remarks related to learning to take another's perspective, learning about the way they act in interaction with others, learning how there are different possible and often viable solutions to any situation, and learning how their own behavior affects others.

The impact of the project was also examined with respect to the perspective taking, empathetic concern, and self esteem measures described in the methods section of this paper. Repeated measures analysis of variance was carried out on each psychological measure for each experimental group. The data are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Means and standard deviations in parentheses by experimental group on measures of empathetic concern, perspective taking and self esteem, by testing time

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Testing</i>	<i>Education</i> (<i>N</i> =20)		<i>Social Work</i> (<i>N</i> =15)		<i>Mentors</i> (<i>N</i> =9)	
		<i>M</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>sd</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>sd</i>
Empathetic concern (scale 1-5)	January 2007	4.15	0.44	4.26	0.43	4.36	0.39
	June 2007	4.34	0.40	4.19	0.38	4.16*	0.32
	December 2007	4.46	0.36	4.30	0.33	-	-
Perspective taking (scale 1-5)	January 2007	3.90	0.36	3.90	0.49	3.82	0.51
	June 2007	3.94	0.38	3.92	0.48	3.62	0.46
	December 2007	4.12*	0.40	4.13	0.47	-	-
Self-esteem (scale 1-6)	January 2007	4.46	0.78	4.71	0.80	4.67	0.40
	June 2007	4.73	0.83	4.51	0.76	4.81	0.51
	December 2007	4.78*	0.84	4.69	0.80	-	-

* $p < 0.05$ for Wilk's Lambda in a test of repeated measures of variance

It appears that the teacher education students improved in perspective taking and self-esteem, social work students made no statistically significant changes, and mentors decreased in empathetic concern. Although not statistically significant, education students improved in empathetic concern, social work students improved in perspective taking, and mentors improved in self-esteem but decreased in perspective taking. It should be noted that for the few control students for whom we could match their different testing results, no significant changes were noted.

Conclusions

The idea behind the Malmo project was to utilize students' experiences from their interactions with others in situations outside the university setting as a platform for the nurturance of social competences. These experiences were expressed as stories which were developed into meaningful narratives of learning with the aid of their peers. The project has demonstrated that this approach can be applied with relative success given that conditions are right and narrative-building activities are structured and coherent. Further experimentation is required. First of all this approach should be tried out with students preparing to enter other helping professions and not just with social work and education students. In the present study most students were female. Thus there is also a need to explore whether narrative building activities are equally suited to students of both genders. Moreover, other ways should be studied in which students can develop their narratives in a manner that makes them relevant for professional development. Additional research of this kind will assist in developing a

repertoire of narrative-building activities which could be used with different student populations and in different settings.

Building personal narratives shows potential as a way of assisting students in the helping professions to develop interpersonal skills that will be required of them in their future occupation. When viewed from a broader perspective, the competences that can be developed through narrative building have universal value and not just professional worth. Perspective taking and moral judgement competences are essential for good citizenship and the development of civic capacity and responsibility. Therefore, by enabling students to build narratives of experience, universities can contribute to the promotion of good citizenship. It should be pointed out that the development of such competences is supported in the Bologna Process as one of the objectives of higher education in Europe.

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