

Service user participation at the School of Social Work in Lund

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Introduction

During the last 20 years, Service user involvement in teaching has been a central element at the School of Social Work at Lund University. The service users' active involvement in the teaching has grown from being an area that was run by a small group of dedicated teachers at the school, to, with the optional mobilization course as a hub, becoming an institutionalized part of the teaching in several of the education's courses.

Social work is a field characterized by a struggle over what can be considered legitimate knowledge. Academic and professional practical knowledge are often regarded as legitimate knowledge in the educational field of social work. In this context, service users of social work have less opportunity to access and shape the field and its knowledge. An important reason for this is that experience seldom is recognized as sufficiently legitimate knowledge within academic educations, where education, research, and professional qualifications are required. But also, because the role of a service user or a client is defined by experiencing social problems and being dependent on other people's power in social work. The fact that social work's knowledge development and practice maintains unequal power relations, has been a starting point for the work that is done to involve representatives from Service user organizations in the social work education at Lund University.

There are ways to actively work for a change in the positions of power the actors hold in the field. One way is to challenge the roles and positions the actors are given as researchers, teachers, user representatives and students respectively. Within academic studies, these roles can be perceived as relatively fixed and tend to reflect positions that have unequal power, and for which participating actors have specific expectations and demands. By assigning service user representatives other roles within the academy, such as students, lecturers or supervisors, the power relationship between the actor's shifts, through the capital of the new roles. This increases the opportunity to be involved in shaping the field as a field of knowledge.

The Mobilization Course

The mobilization course has played an important role in this work, not only through the inclusion of outside students, but also through the pedagogical development work that has taken place, which has been about creating trust and reducing prejudice between the student groups. The fact that the members of the Service user organizations have developed a trust in the other students and a sense of belonging at the School of Social Work has made

it possible for them to later be recruited to other courses as lecturers or supervisors. It has been important to strive for reciprocity in the relationships to break prejudices that have existed between the members of the Service user organizations and the representatives of the social work profession.

Since 2005, students have been recruited to the Mobilization course from around 50 service user organizations. Some have taken the course without being members of any organization and have then been recruited by former students. Most of the included students lack university qualifications, but it also happens that so-called assignment students have previous university education as experience. The course is a point-giving course of six weeks and has been held on 31 occasions. Approximately 700 Social work students, 25 master's students and 300 students from various Service user organizations have taken the course together. The purpose has been to develop common knowledge and to develop projects in mixed-group partnerships.

Pedagogical approaches to prejudices and contradictions

Participants with such different backgrounds need to gain trust in each other, beyond prejudices and categorizations and this has been a center for the pedagogical development of the course. Students are enrolled in three different course forms; an optional course in the social work program (advanced level); a commission training (basic level); and as a master course (advanced level). The students who are recruited from the service user organizations take the commission course, and to satisfy the requirements found at advanced level, the other students read three extra weeks which include processing theoretical literature on mobilization, inequality, and development work.

One objective has been to shift the focus in social work, from the individual's problems to the importance of community, inclusion, and joint development work. This object shift is important because it mobilizes the students from service user organizations to become actors in a common work of change. The students from service user organizations have previously met social workers in the role of clients or patients, but through the design of the course, boundaries in social work that separate professionals from those who have experience using various social interventions are challenged. It also challenges conventions in higher education about who has access to the teaching. The course structure initially consists of lectures interspersed with the students' own presentations.

The participants' narrative lays the foundation for the mapping of needs that occur in society. Everyone makes a personal presentation at the beginning of the course about "who they are and what is important to them in social work". These presentations have come to be much more personal than what the social work students have been used to from previous courses. The life stories contribute to reducing gaps and a simplified categorization of "the others".

During the future workshop, project ideas are developed which are then developed in the mixed collaborations that form the student groups. An external panel consisting of various influential community representatives such as researchers, politicians, social service managers and donors are giving feedback to the project groups in the end of the courses. The course ends with a written reflection task on the lessons that the collaboration within the course has contributed with. These essay-like reflection tasks are interesting reading about the group processes that occur during the course. The following quote is an example of how a student describes the importance that personal presentations play in challenging prejudices and relating to others as unique subjects.

The presentation did extremely much for cohesion. For me, it felt like once I did the presentation, I felt like accepted. Because the group started out as two separate groups, that the assignment students and the social work students were different. But after they made their presentation, it was as if I suddenly belonged to both groups, at least that's how it felt to me. I felt that the mission students accepted me in a completely different way than they had done before. One of them even told me that from the beginning they thought I was like any other soc girl, young, naive and didn't know what it was like to be under the influence of authority or to be at the bottom of society. That I lived in a host of fine theories and hid behind an academic education. When I then told my story, which this person could recognize in, this person's image of me had completely changed and he had realized that I might even know what I was talking about, even though I was young and academically educated.
(Kristina, Social work student, 23 years old).

The included students come from a variety of backgrounds and during the personal presentations the participants are de-categorized, as individual students and seen as far more complex individuals than the stereotype of a social work student, a former drug user or a psychiatric patient. Sharing personal experiences plays an essential role in breaking down simplistic and binary categorizations.

To ensure that the Service user representatives' participation in teaching does not become an element that reinforces the experience of categorized inequality, it is required that Service user representatives not only become suppliers of life stories, but active co-creators in a joint work of change and in the knowledge development of social work. The mobilization course is an optional course that not all social work students choose, but it enables the recruitment of people from Service user organizations to participate in other courses on the social work program. The mobilization course forms a stable recruitment base which means that students in other semesters can receive teaching and supervision from Service user representatives.

Term 7 Professional social work

“Professional social work” is the last course of the social work education, and it is compulsory. In this course, the students write an intervention plan based on a fictitious case. They identify, justify and intervene to the social problems in the case. In addition, the students must choose a professional role and organization within social work practice. In the intervention plan, the students show how the clients could get help in fixing the problems. The intervention plan's problematizations and efforts must be based on evidence-based social work, which means that research, professional knowledge and Service users' experiences must be an integrated part of the work. The work must also be based on the ethical guidelines that apply to social work, including the guidelines for participation that apply to work with clients.

During the course, students receive group supervision. One of the supervisions that the students are offered is service user supervision where representatives of Service users guide the students in their work with the intervention plan. Each semester there are approx. 20 groups with approx. 7 students. About 10 Service user supervisors handle this task. Some of the Service user supervisors have been working at the course from the beginning since 2008, others have stopped as supervisors and new ones are added gradually. This means that there are both those with longer experience within the group, while new perspectives are added. Over the years, knowledge, experience, and routines around supervision have been developed and improved, which has led to that service user supervision has become an integrated and institutionalized part of the students' work.

There are several reasons why the Mobilization Course is central to the quality of service user supervision on the course. Supervising students requires knowledge of, and trust in, the study environment. After having taken the Mobilization Course, they have knowledge of the education, the study environment, and the students. On the Professional Social Work course, the Service user supervisors are employed as other hourly teachers at the School of Social Work, which expresses a concrete institutional recognition of the relevance of the knowledge they own and of their contribution to the school's education of sociologists.

The participation in the Mobilization Course also means that the individual experiences that the participants – both Service user supervisors and students – bring with them is transformed into a collective knowledge. It is knowledge that goes beyond the participants' own individual experiences and is relevant to the Professional Social Work course. Taking only personal stories and individual stories entails a risk that the experiences are individualized and thus cannot be recognized as legitimate knowledge. On the contrary, there is a risk that both the narrator and the story become objects owned by teachers, researchers and students and only benefit the professionals' knowledge production. If this is the case, the categorizations and inequalities that we wish to avoid, and change are maintained and reinforced.

In the introduction to the course Professional social work, it is emphasized in line with this that it is not the Service user supervisors' personal history and stories that are the starting point for the supervision, but precisely the supervisors' experience and knowledge of holding a specific position in the field of social work. Thereby, they meet the students with a knowledge that is generally relevant to the work with the intervention plan.

Discussion

The Mobilization Course has today become a cornerstone that enables Service user involvement in teaching in various semesters of the education. The starting point for this is a recognition of the inequality that exists in the social position that it means to be a client or Service user. A position that affects the relationship between Service users/clients and social workers, but also Service users and students in education. The mobilization course has actively worked to change given positions and the settings that come with them by challenging the actors' prejudices, categorizations, and roles.

In this context, the institutional support that has made this work possible should not be underestimated. Service user participation in teaching has from the beginning been dependent on time-limited projects and on teachers with a special commitment. But Service user participation in education would not have gained the position in education in Lund that it has today if it had not been for long-term support and interest from the University of Social Sciences' management and teachers. Many colleagues in other European countries use the work in Lund as a model when they develop their own and similar practices based on the opportunities available within their educational system.

A reasonable and critical question is whether this work significantly changes social work's power relations, power structures and knowledge development? Does awareness of power structures, de- and re-categorization processes, distancing from established roles and changed positions in the field lead to lasting structural change? The simple answer is that change is hard and can take time.

But the interaction that takes place in these courses creates an awareness of the importance of gap-mending, and it creates new knowledge for those involved. The mixed-group collaborations constitute a space of opportunity for both service users, teachers and students, where power structures can be questioned and discussed and these discussions can give birth to actions and routines that exemplify what such work can look like. The institutionalization of the Service user perspective in teaching at the School of Social Work has meant that space is prepared for the discussion, and that Service users, teachers and students are involved in these discussions repeatedly, which gives rise to new knowledge and new discussions.

