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Teaching practice research through partnerships with field educators, social work communities and university

Introduction

Continuous changes in society require social work to develop skills in critically reflective practices (e.g. Fook, 2002) and innovative knowledge communities (Paavola et al., 2004). There is an increasing need to theoretically and practically understand how new knowledge and practices are created and how social workers can be aware of local and global forces affecting service users in different organisations (Harrikari & Rauhala, 2019). Therefore practice-based research focused on the challenges of social work is essential.

In this chapter based on empirical data, we illustrate how practice research is taught in partnerships with field educators and social work communities and discuss the great significance it has for social work. We use the practice research module of the University of Helsinki as a case example (see chapter Tapola-Haapala & co in this book). During the practice research module, MSW students conduct practice research projects for work communities in social work. The themes of the practice research studies are identified from the challenges social workers and their teams encounter in their work. The field educators, who are usually social workers, mentor the research processes in the work community. The module gives MSW students a chance to work as practice researchers and to learn to integrate practice and research in real-world settings.

Our research questions are the following. Firstly, we examine what motivates the field educators with their communities to be involved in teaching practice research, particularly how practice research topics are identified, how field educators value the research findings made by the social work students in their practice research course and how the research results are utilised in social work practice. We analyse this in the framework of innovative knowledge communities (Paavola et al., 2004). Secondly, we explore how the learning trajectories of the MSW students are enhanced by the field educators through the practice research process. Thirdly, we analyse the important elements in the partnership between the university and social work communities in order to improve the practice research module to benefit every actor.

We conceptualise practice research partnerships between the university, social work students and social work communities or teams as a form of dialogical learning (Hakkarainen, 2008). Field educators are members of their work communities and mentoring the research process is seen rather as a collective process than an individual one. We are interested in a more collective viewpoint than the traditional individual learning process of a student and a one-to-one relationship between the field educator and the student. We see social work as a part of social systems in liquid networking, also outside institutional settings (Harrikari & Rauhala, 2019, p.182), which challenges to reconceptualise learning and knowledge creation.

Previous studies related to teaching practice research through partnerships

Given the collaborative nature of a practice research process, previous research related to teaching practice-based research acknowledges the importance of academic practice partnerships as teaching platforms (Joubert et al., 2017; Fouché, 2015; Joubert & Hocking, 2015; Joubert, 2006). These interactive partnerships enable mutual engagement linking both academic context and social work practice (Joubert, 2006; Joubert & Hocking, 2015; Fouché, 2015). Such collaborations emphasise reciprocal respect (Auslander & Rosanne, 2016) and aim to foster sustained change and long-term benefits for all those involved (Fouché, 2015). As mentors of practice research processes, field educators have a crucial role in practice research partnerships that we aim to illustrate in this article.

There is a growing number of studies that focus on practice research learning experiences of social work students and related collaborations (Natland et al., 2016; Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016; Joubert et al., 2017; Auslander & Rosanne, 2016; Kääriäinen et al., 2018). However, less emphasis has been placed on practitioners' and community partners' experiences of practice research teaching collaborations, particularly, practice research projects that are conducted by student researchers. Natland et al. (2016) remind how experiential learning for practice research requires supportive instructors who facilitate students' learning processes in work communities. In many cases, the instructors (also referred to as coordinators or mentors) are focused on the academia. However, the authors stress that increased involvement with social work agency representatives would benefit both research and the learning process (ibid.). This study aims to provide insights on possibilities and challenges for practice research partnerships by focusing on agency-based field educators' perspectives on a student-led practice research process.

Theoretical ideas

Although experiential learning is supported in literature on learning, in a survey of social work education of undergraduate and postgraduate master's level students in the United Kingdom, MacIntyre and Paul (2013) found that most research education was delivered in nonexperiential ways. Experiential learning requires supportive and approachable instructors as well as a classroom environment that promotes active learning.

According to Paavola et al. (2004) (figure 1) learning has been traditionally seen as an individual cognitive process and they use the 'metaphor knowledge acquisition' metaphor to describe that notion (Sfard, 1998). In this notion, the mind is a kind of a container of knowledge, and learning is seen as dependent of the capacity of an individual mind. In contrast, researchers who are interested in learning as a social process, see learning as a process of participation in various cultural practices and shared learning activities (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Wenger, 1998). Paavola et al. (2004) discuss the participation metaphor. In this thinking, the process of knowing is more important than the products of learning. A third metaphor is the knowledge creation metaphor. In innovative knowledge communities, learning is broadly defined as including knowledge, ideas, practices, and material or conceptual artefacts. Innovation in learning and knowledge creation are results of interaction among different forms of knowledge or between knowledge and other activities. There are three models of innovative knowledge communities that come from different cultural and theoretical backgrounds that have important commonalities: they are CHAT by Yrjö Engeström (1997), and the models of knowledge building by Carl Bereiter (2002) and Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi (1987).

In all the models, it is discussed how innovative communities are and should be organised to facilitate advancement of practice and knowledge creation. The core element in learning is to deliberate knowledge creation. It is fundamentally a social process in which new ideas emerge between people rather than within people; knowledge creation uses both tacit and explicit knowledge and artefacts (Paavola et al., 2004). Expanding knowledge resources is an advanced skill in the knowledge society.

Figure 1. Towards a triological approach to learning in innovative knowledge organisations (Paavola et al., 2004).

According to Etienne Wenger's (1998) analysis, learning is seen as a social process with four dimensions: (1) building identity, (2) creating significance, (3) participating in community and (4) practice. When participating in the practice research process, the students work on all these dimensions and the learning processes of the work communities can be seen to do the same. Wenger writes about learning trajectories, through which a newcomer becomes a member of the community. In narrow terms, this means that the student becomes a member of the practice research's commissioning community through the shared learning process; in broader terms, the student becomes a part of the social work community. In innovative knowledge communities, all of these social learning processes are used, but these communities differ from traditional practice communities in that they have a conscious objective to create knowledge, and practice research is one example of this.

Inviting the student and starting the process of practice research can be conceptualised as innovative knowledge organisation (Paavola et al., 2004; Muukkonen et al., 2012; Satka et al., 2016): social work teams formulise research questions from their needs, they mentor the practice research process and they utilise the results of the practice research in order to develop their own work. Some of the work communities are involved in the thematic program of Praxis and they order the study

connected to that theme, for example poverty in the metropolitan region of Helsinki. We conceptualise the practice research process in a way that through it, the knowledge cooperation of practice communities can ideally be strengthened. At the same time, it socialises the students to continuous transformative learning, where they act in “the arena of community learning” and where they can together create knowledge that renews social work.

On the organisational level, practice-based research instruction also expects that the learning organisation will facilitate student learning processes (MacIntyre & Paul, 2013; Maschi et al., 2013). In this way, organisations can be viewed not only as “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998), but as innovative knowledge communities (Paavola et al., 2004) within which learning takes place in a manner where new knowledge is consciously created. Such innovative knowledge communities can support research capacity-building networks that involve academics and practitioners in order to identify shared interests and commitments to research-informed practice (Orme & Powell, 2007). After all, we live in a network society. Castels believes that the new organisational forms in information society are based on networks (Castels, 2000, pp.151-152). The new forms of organisations are self-generating networks, virtual organisations (Handy, 1995), collaborative communities (Heckscher & Adler, 2006), and evolving and open business ecosystems (West & Wood, 2013). Consequently, the ontological view of organisations is more one of becoming than one of being (Jakubik, 2018).

The context of the study

The context of our empirical study is the metropolitan region of Helsinki, Finland. In 2000, the Heikki Waris Institute (2015) was established as a collaboration between the University of Helsinki and the City of Helsinki’s Department of Social Services. The collaboration now includes social service departments in municipalities surrounding Helsinki that share the same goal: to transform the working culture of social work and related fields by developing and sharing knowledge derived from practice. For this we have established permanent co-developmental partnerships with social service organisations that are actively involved in social work education via the Metropolitan Praxis Network (2015), and the work of practitioners and academics have become part of the core activity of the Heikki Waris Institute itself. Therefore, present teaching and learning efforts are targeted to our students as well as to the active advancement of knowledge in the partnering social service organisations, such as welfare agencies, hospitals, care institutions, and non-governmental

organisations (Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016, p.86). Praxis activities rely on collaborative development, research and joint learning by practitioners, service users, students and researchers. Teaching client work skills and professional competence in the discipline of social work of the University of Helsinki, as well as students' practice research projects, are a central part of the Praxis activities.

The Praxis component of the BSW and MSW programmes includes the social work practice-based learning offered to social work students completing their internships or field practicums. Praxis means a practice where knowing and action are combined. It is similar to Freire's notion of praxis, where it expands to both action and reflection: mere action for the sake of action is not enough, rather it should be introduced to awareness and dialogue. This requires the process of naming, in which notions are given genuine names that describe the world. (Freire, 2005, pp.95–96.)

Praxis is used by educators to describe a recurring passage through a cyclical process of experiential learning, such as the cycle developed and popularised by David A. Kolb (1984). The roots of Kolb's thinking are in North American pragmatism (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1997). Praxis can be described as a form of critical thinking and critical reflection about action or shared experiences (Pierson & Thomas, 2002, p.361). It can also be viewed as a cyclical progression from doing an action and considering the impact of the action to then analysing the results of the action by reflecting upon it and altering – as well as revising – the conceptions and planning that result from the reflection. The last phase is to implement plans through further actions. This design creates a cycle that includes educational settings, learners, and the educational facilitator, as well as learning-centered work communities (Satka et al., 2016).

Praxis is not only an arena for practical teaching. The fundamental idea since 2003 has been to combine teaching, client work, research and development into processes which enrich one another (Yliruka, 2006; Hinkka et al., 2009). Praxis work strives to bring self-evidences and unquestioned practices into conscious reflection (also Morley & O'Connor, 2016). Jarzabkowski, Balogun, and Seidl (2007) define praxis as “situated, socially accomplished flows of activity that strategically are consequential for the direction and survival of the group, organisation or industry”.

In this article we examine the practice research module (see [chapter xx](#), in which the module is illustrated), which is part of the Praxis work and which have been developed and realized in cooperation with the Swedish-language counterpart organisation of the Heikki Waris Institute, the

Matilda Wrede Institute. The participants include field educators as mentors of the study process, as well as the so called PraxisActors in the municipalities, two each from Helsinki, Espoo and Vantaa and two from the Helsinki University Hospital, three university teachers and the students. The whole Praxis network is coordinated by the Praxis-coordinator working in the Centre of Excellence, Socca.

Municipalities of the metropolitan area of Helsinki have been active in directing practice research towards common themes from different points of view, such as poverty in the metropolitan area or transgenerational disadvantage. In this way, the information produced is easier to utilise in the strategic development of social work. On the other hand, there has also been the intention in research to allow work communities to bring forth so called “weak signals”, meaning for instance a new societal phenomenon, which has not yet been researched. Connecting practice research to the strategic development of municipalities has been the wish of social work management. Managers have been very committed to the Praxis work. Communication between the municipal management, the university and Socca’s Heikki Waris Institute has been ensured by regularly organising meetings with the Praxis steering network.

Data collection and analysis

The experiences of field educators from the practice research module were collected during the spring of 2016 (N14) (Hytti, 2017) and 2018 (N16) by phone interviews (16–49 minutes) by two researchers. The thematic interviews included 16 questions about the practice research module, collaboration with the university, and consequences from the research process and results. The interviews were recorded and submitted to an outsourced transcriber for transcription. The respondents were diverse representatives of the Praxis network from social work organisations and from the social work field in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The practical experience of the field educators was between one to five guidances. This chapter only includes quotes from the 2018 data. The data was analysed with theory-guided content analysis methods (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018). We removed the identifiers for the quotes to ensure the anonymity of the respondents.

Practice research as a means of creating an innovative knowledge community

The practice research module enables goal-oriented agency for work communities in social work knowledge production and enables training new students in the field. Next, we describe how the work community's agency is demonstrated in choosing the subjects for practice research and in utilising the results in developing their organisation into an innovative knowledge community.

Choosing the subject for practice research

The organisations participating in the practice research course are asked to submit their suggestions for topics for the practice research to the university. The PraxisActors of the organisations collect and compile the ideas from the work communities and manage negotiations with the management of their own organisation. When collecting the ideas, the communities search for themes that suit the municipal strategy as well as themes rising from the work community's own needs.

Some organisations knew the student researcher beforehand, and the subject was planned together with the student. Some students work as substitute social workers in their own communities, in which case negotiations about the research topic are a part of the regular interaction.

Using the research results

The representatives from the social work organisations said that the results from the practice research were significant and they were directly utilised in the work community's work or even in regional development work. A noteworthy fact is that all respondents said this, but that may be due to the fact that the phone interviews were conducted mostly with field educators who happened to have positive experiences with the practice research process.

“The research contained matters, which were required to carry out some changes. And this change was highly criticised when it was made, at least at first. And this research showed matters, that supported the fact that this change was made. So then at least we used it as justification.”

Practitioners disseminate sometimes practice research reports to other agencies that could benefit from the findings. An interviewer said they had sent the students' research results to a regional supervisory official. The response from there was that the work is good and can be utilised on a

broader scale. Simultaneously, students were made aware of the feedback about the significance of the work.

Sometimes the practice research processes also revealed the work communities' reluctance towards development work, which was evident in them not wanting to participate in practice research interviews and the work community's shared learning and development process. Another interpretation is that the hurry and strain experienced in social work (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2016; 2019), reduces social workers' interest in participating in developing their work. As a result of the practice research, the work community received critical feedback about their own development.

“Our response rate remained very low and we have had discussions about that. And it was given as an instruction, or even as an order, that it is a work task ... we have had a feedback discussion in our team, because I was quite shocked. We have talked about this for years, that it was not easy to find researchers for this theme, that why was the response rate so low. Our supervisors took it quite well that they did not prepare their work teams well enough.”

Thinking about how the results can be utilised was a task given to the organisations as well. This is connected to creating structures which support using the research results. Structures have been created in Praxis municipalities, which organise for instance discussion events where research is presented. In some areas, research results are regularly presented to managerial groups. Students present their practice research in a seminar, which is a part of the studies at the university. In addition to the seminar, the students present their research projects in the commissioning organisation's work communities, meetings or other events with both managers and local residents present. The presentations of the research resulted in developmental discussions in the work communities.

“We organised a work group for everyone, welcoming them to listen to these results ... the students came here in person ... to present their poster and to explain and discuss. I think there were five of us there or something, but we had a good discussion, especially since it was a work group concentrated on developing work, communal work and regional work, we could grasp the themes and got some theory to support our own work. Students are refreshing, because we get to consider things in a more theoretical way for a change.”

How learning trajectories of university students are enhanced by field educators

Next, we explore how the learning trajectories of the master's degree students are enhanced by the field educators through the practice research process. The students' learning trajectories (Wenger, 1998), according to the social theory of learning, are built through identity work, participating in a community, creating meaning, and learning by doing. Next, we examine these areas in the practice research module.

Learning by doing

During the practice research course, students conduct research for an organisation based on a question that has risen from practical work. In 2017, the students conducted the research alone or in groups of two or three. Social work communities find it important to support the students in conducting the research. During the research process, members of the work communities supported the students in their growth as social work experts and researchers, for example by reserving the time to have discussions about conducting the research. The students and the research were also assisted by helping with receiving research permissions, work tools and spaces, and collecting the data by arranging participants and even interpreters:

“Yeah, they came all the time, they presented the research plan a couple of times and we went through the questions, they sent a list of questions, and we went through, we met to discuss it, but then we commented on the questions, how they would be directed correctly. At least I think we tried well to receive them and we had good discussions... I think it was lovely that they came to do it, that we got students to do it. I hope they felt themselves that they were well received and that they got the support they needed from us.”

Much like in the above quote, the interviewed field educators had a very positive view of the support they provided to the students. It is however important to note, that while discussing the same subject, students have described shortcomings in interaction and the effects of the hurry of work communities on the provided support ([Tapola-Haapala et al. Chapter](#)). The practice research is conducted on a strict schedule within four months, which means the work community should take special care in receiving the student in the community.

Building meanings

Practice research students can be seen to build meanings connected to the work community in their research process. The results of the practice research often comment on the work community's actions, they shape understandings, and produce materials to help consider the notions and experiences of the community. Simultaneously, the student is a part of this meanings process and a part of the community, and thus learn themselves.

Identity work

The field educators considered the practice research process to have a significant role for students in developing as researchers, growing as social workers and understanding practical client work. The practice research course is important for the identity work processes of students and there is hope that it strengthens research orientation after graduation as well (see also Auslander & Rosanne, 2016, p.67). One interviewee defined the desired identity for a social worker as having a research approach to work.

"I think it has an extremely big significance, because in practice research, many aspects required in social work expertise are summed up... And if we think about the professional work a social worker does, it is a type of research where they, together with the client, examine the client's situation, analyse it and then evaluate it and implement... So I think practice research ... has the potential to underline these skills required for a social work professional, how the research orientation is the approach to one's own client work."

Participation in the community

For work communities, practice research provides opportunities to network with students and invite them into their social work communities. For students, the research provides opportunities to acquaint themselves with different social work sectors, the situations of service users and for a moment become a member of a work community. Overall, the practice research was seen as a very significant medium for students to integrate into the professional social work community. When their expertise increases and they develop, students might possibly work as practice research instructors in the future. The growth environment of an innovative knowledge community produces research-minded practitioners (Austin, Dal Santo, & Lee, 2012; Evans, Hardy, & Shaw, 2010, pp.81–83; Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016, p.97).

Some students are already members of a work community and they conduct their research for their own community. This allows the student to have a new type of experience in participating in the community through a dual role. Conducting practice research in one's own work community implants practice research and the operating culture of an innovative work community into the work community.

Partnership between academia and social work communities

Next we analyse important elements in the partnership between the university and social work communities in order to improve the practice research module to benefit every party. For the practice research process, it is crucial to have partnerships between the different parties. For example Natland et al. (2016, p. 49) emphasise interaction between university representatives and practitioners that supports strengthening resources in which they “interact in order to identify both shared interests and commitments to research-informed practice”.

When examining partnerships between the university and social work practice, the first thing that arises are the different roles of the actors which the representatives of the work communities describe in their speech. The primary role of *university representatives* seems to be creating structure for the course and providing information on this to the work community. Even small matters that the university has thought about beforehand, like a structured template for the research ideas, were thankfully paid attention to.

At the university, the framework for the practice research process is affected by the terms set by the university context. One of these has to do with the issue of how limited study points are used. The grounds set by the university do not always receive praise from the work communities. One frequently asked question about practice research teaching internationally is whether the students should contribute by completing a small task connected to the research process of a larger research project or conduct their own research where they can see and be a part of a whole project and thus also might commit to the project more. At the University of Helsinki, the latter has been chosen. This decision combined with the relatively low study credit amount (10 credits, approximately 270 hours of work) results in quite narrow research data and a tight schedule for students. Though the work community representatives discussed the ways they utilise the research results, the small scale

of these practice research studies also has effect on the experiences of some workplace representatives in using the research results:

“There should be more research. As I said, it should have maybe more interviews and in that way the results could be stronger. So, after that it could be used more, I think I’d say that.”

In connection to conveying information, the role of the *students* as intermediators between the university and the work communities comes forth. When the student and work community have found each other, the assumption in the course is that the practicalities of the course will mostly be shared through the students.

“We didn’t have to get too much information. I received it from the student, the one we had, they sent information via email with everything that is connected to this and what is the goal of this. Somehow, I feel that it was enough for me. I didn’t have to be in contact with the university in any way during the practice research. And I can say that it sufficed.”

During the research process, different actors work on the same research, though they may not all work actively in direct interaction with each other. The following respondent describes this process in their own work community:

“Our practice research which is done in our unit. First the student sends it to me and I read it and check if everything is alright with it. And then they of course receive from their own university instructor the important notices, that is it a work, does it fulfil the requirements.”

Most of the workplace representatives bring forth – especially if the course is already familiar from previous years – how active contact with the university during the practice research process does not feel necessary. Some respondents, however, discuss if the interaction between the university and the practice could be closer for instance at the end of the practice research process, when the students’ research is already finished or almost finished. At this stage the module contains the final seminars, where the students present their research results. The work community representatives that offered the research idea also have the opportunity to participate in these seminars. An important question is how the discussions at this phase could in the best possible way support the use of the research results.

Epilogue

In this chapter we have described how practice research teaching in cooperation with social work communities is not “just” implementing a course, but diverse cooperation and developing social work with many layers. We have examined what this collaboration looks like from the perspectives of field educators and their work communities. Teaching practice research is a mutual task to train social work students to the field, but it also offers support for work communities to constantly develop. Work communities are active agents when they formulate questions for their work and seek a student’s work for this. Partnership with the university generates trust that the research is conducted according to academic criteria. The work communities use the results in developing their own work and impact. With their expertise, both the university and the social work practitioners from the work communities educate the students as part of the professional community and expertise of social work. However, at the same time this learning process is mutual and reciprocal.

The clear roles of the different agents are essential in the partnership. Each actor brings their own perspective and expertise to the process and takes care of the tasks they are responsible for in the process. The role of the university representatives is to structure the module’s schedules and other baselines and to inform the work communities of these. This framework created at the university can also raise critique from the work communities, which raises the question of whether the work communities have the opportunity to participate in negotiations about the framework of the course. One critical issue in the process and the interaction connected to it can be how to act if there is confusion about the roles of different agents or if their views on the research and the sought direction of it are very different. Overall the nature of the interaction between the university and the work communities is a source of confusion for some work community representatives. Many have felt that there is no need for active interaction. However, some have considered that it might be good to have more interaction, for example by having the university representatives be more active towards the work community. The question of increasing interaction is also connected to the stage when the research results are ready: what would interactive processes be like that would ideally move the results forward?

All in all, the results bring forth the significance of cooperative relations for the success of practice research projects. A confidential and reciprocal relationship promotes the learning processes of both the student and the field educator and supports utilising the research results in the organisation. Our results also illustrate that the practice research module is a good way to strengthen knowledge partnership and agency in social work. At the same time, it socialises students to a constant and

renewing thinking of learning where they act on the arena of shared learning and create knowledge that renews social work together.

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