Nurturing Professional Interpersonal Competences Using Narratives Derived from Personal Experience

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Good interpersonal skills are essential for teachers as well as for other helping professionals. Teachers who work in constant interaction with children, parents, and coworkers, like other professionals whose work entails intense interpersonal contact, should have respect for others, be 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. With this in mind a project carried out at Malmö University in Sweden which engaged teacher education students, social work students, and student mentors in developing narratives from experiences they have outside higher education.\(^3\) Narrative-building was expected to lead to self-knowledge and the ability to interpret encounters with others in a multicultural society. The theoretical framework for the project was inspired by Clandinin and Connelly (1998) who have studied teacher knowledge in terms of personal practical knowledge built on what they call "narratives of experience".

Another 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 project, which emphasized life experiences rather than academic achievement, students lacking the advantage of a strong academic background were given an opportunity to feel equal to others. Increased feelings of self-worth were expected to increase the likelihood that these students actually complete their studies and enter their profession, thereby serving as role models for others from similar backgrounds.

The Malmö project was implemented during two academic terms: spring and fall 2007, during which students participated in a series of seminars. It was accompanied by evaluation which provided formative feedback to project leaders and examined its impact on

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student learning and professional development. The focus of the present paper will be project implementation, reactions of the students to the narrative building process, and the impact of the project on their interpersonal competences.

**Developing interpersonal competences with narratives**

The need to develop interpersonal competences, reflective thinking, and self-knowledge among students in the helping professions has been written about extensively. For example in the context of teacher education, Sanger (2008), has discussed the need to engage teacher education students in a rigorous study of the moral aspects of their future work. Others have related to the multicultural nature of today's schools and the subsequent need to develop intercultural sensitivity among pre-service teachers (e.g., Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Conle, 2000; Hale, Snow-Gerono, & Morales, 2008; McVee, 2004; Melnick & Zeichner, 1995). The need to nurture students' capacity for conscious reflexivity, to teach them to value themselves and their ability for making sound judgments, and to help them learn from their experiences has also been mentioned in the context of social work (e.g., Waldman, Glover & King, 1999), counseling (e.g., Griffith & Frieden, 2000), nursing (e.g., Liimataninen, Poskiparta, Karhila & Sjogren, 2001.), and medicine (McMaster, 2007). The consensus is that that students studying these various professions need a learning culture which values emotional development alongside intellectual development and connects self-knowledge to professional competence.

Despite these needs, most professional-training programs concentrate on imparting knowledge or developing specific practical skills. Less is done to assist students in developing relevant attitudes and social competences. Academic courses in sociology and philosophy are often provided in order to develop students' awareness of the social and moral aspects of their future profession, but little is done to actually train them to develop relevant interpersonal skills. In this respect, the Malmö project aspired to fill a gap in the conventional training programs for teachers and social workers.

The research literature shows that narrative inquiry has been applied by others for nurturing interpersonal competences and reflective abilities among students entering helping professions (e.g., Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Conle, 2000; McVee, 2004; Rushton, 2004) and among those already engaged in those professions (e.g., Doecke, Brown, & Loughran, 2000; McMaster, 2007), as well in situations of counseling or therapy as a means to promote personal insight and growth (e.g., Bujold, 2004; White, 2006; Ville & Khlat, 2007). Expected
outcomes of this approach include improved ability to reflect on experience, greater self-efficacy and greater self-knowledge (e.g., Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Causey et al., 2000; Conle, 2000; Doecke et al., 2000; Hale et al., 2008; McVee 2004).

Narrative inquiry for the purpose of professional development has taken various forms. Pedagogic practices which utilize personal narratives emphasize such activities as classroom discussion, sharing in small groups, journaling, cultural autobiographies, and reflection on the narrative building process (Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Causey et al, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Participatory drama in which the audience can explore different possibilities, solve problems, and propose different scenarios around a situation is another technique that has been used (Mehto, Kantola, Tiitta, & Kankainen, 2006).

Receiving feedback and discussing the stories with others in a supportive environment is considered an important aspect of narrative development (Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Bujold, 2004; Causey et al., 2000; Conle, 2000; Doecke et al., 2000: Hale et al., 2008). Joint construction of meaning through discussion enables students to transcend their particular story and to feel identification when listening to others’ stories (Doecke et al., 2000; White, 2006).

The Malmö project represents a specific attempt to utilize narratives in order to nurture interpersonal competences in future helping professionals. Results from this project can further our understanding of the effects of this approach. Two questions are addressed in this paper:

1. How were the ideas of the Malmö project actually implemented? Which activities were more effective and which activities were less effective in providing a learning experience for students?

2. What changes took place in students as a result of the project?

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. Comparable control groups were selected who were participating in seminar sessions unrelated to 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. Teacher
education students were in their second term and social work students were in their fourth term when the project began.

Data collection. Group leaders documented the project seminars, recording the planning stage for each session, actual implementation, and reflections on what occurred. They were also interviewed and five focus groups were conducted with their students in order to learn about project processes, operation, and outcomes. Additional feedback was gathered by means of questionnaires administered to students at the end of each term.

Changes in 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), which were translated from English into Swedish. Seminar participants and control group students in teacher education and social work completed the questionnaires prior to project implementation, after the first set of seminars, and again at the conclusion of the project. Mentors, who only participated in the spring term, received questionnaires at the start and end of this term. Some students in the control group failed to write their identification number on each questionnaire and others wrote false numbers on at least one questionnaire. Consequently, data could be matched for very few control students, leading to the decision to discard them from data analyses.

Results

Implementation. In spring 2007 students participated in four small group seminars (in the case of the mentors only three seminars were held). Prior to the first 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 and relate it 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 teacher education told about an incident which occurred while working in a factory. One of her superiors thought the staff needed to learn 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, 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, and yelling. 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. The discussion afterwards focused on the way Jenny had handled the situation.

In 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 perspective of the customer. In Seminars 3 and 4, the students retold 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 why they chose a particular perspective, what happened in the rewriting of the story, and if they had discovered anything new by rewriting their story. A general discussion was conducted at the end of Seminar 4 in which students summed up their reactions to the seminars.

The remaining four seminars were implemented in fall 2007. Only the teacher education students and the social work students participated since the mentors had finished mentoring at the end of the previous year. The content and structure of these four fall seminars were planned in a meeting with student representatives and seminar leaders.

Whereas Seminars 1-4 were implemented similarly manner in all groups, Seminars 5-8 were 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, which were summarised in key words or short sentences on the board. In Seminar 6 students rewrote their stories from another person's perspective and shared them with others in small groups. Again the activity related to professional competences through the analysis of key words. Between Seminars 6 and 7, students exchanged stories with the social work students through email. Based on some of the students’ stories, the students did forum plays in Seminar 7 in which situations were acted out and the other students could interrupt and change them at any time. In Seminar 8, role play was carried out around a situation designed by the seminar leaders, in which every student received a role. As a summing up activity, students discussed criteria for assessment of teacher competences with respect to judgement, self-knowledge, and empathy.
In the social work group seminar leaders switched groups in the second term. In one group the Seminars 5-7 were similar to those in teacher education without the work with key words: students told and re-told new stories and acted them out in forum-plays. However, Seminar 8 was devoted to a value-clarification activity, not directly related to any specific narrative. In the second social work group, the seminar leader tried a therapeutic technique for relating to stories that tended to confuse the students. Due to technical problems the second seminar was very short, although a few students managed to tell their new story. Although planned, forum play did not take place in the third meeting, since the storyteller did not come. Instead students discussed another topic 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 tried to sum up their experience.

Students' 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.

At the end of the second term, significant differences developed between how the education students and the social work students viewed the project. Results are presented in Table 1.

The education students were generally more satisfied with the project than the social work students. However, despite significant differences between the groups there was a similarity in the way they rated the items. 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 others, and they claimed that 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. Items were similarly ranked by the Naktergalen mentors at the end of the first term.
Table 1:
Reactions to the seminars, education (N=25) and social work students (N=15) (scale 1-6)

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

Focus-groups discussions provided additional feedback. 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 general agreement that the exchange of stories between the education and social work groups during the second term did not provide additional insight, but rather was time-consuming and often frustrating. A few students found the activity of telling and retelling stories too personal and felt uncomfortable sharing their experiences with others and some students mentioned having difficulty coming up with a "good" story.

Students in groups of 13-15 felt that smaller groups would be more effective. They also commented that too much time elapsed between seminar meetings. Students in all groups commented that sharing stories created a sense of intimacy among the members of the groups which made it easy to make honest comments and suggestions and accept the comments and remarks made to them in return. 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 clear structure.

**Project outcomes.** Students were asked to rate their learning on the feedback questionnaire. Table 2 presents the results for each group as reported at the end of their participation. The data indicates that teacher education students and mentors reported a greater degree of learning as compared to social work students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Education (N=25)</th>
<th>Social work (N=15)</th>
<th>Mentors (N=10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned a lot about myself through the seminar activities.</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have learned new aspects of my profession-to-be.</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>3.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned to see and understand situations from the perspective of others.</td>
<td>5.19</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments made in the focus groups also indicated what students felt they had gained by participating in the narrative-building activities. Learning took place with respect to five areas: self-knowledge, interpersonal competences, groupwork, communication skills, learning from non-academic experiences.

1. **Self-knowledge.** Students felt that through taking another's perspective, they got a better understanding of their own behavior and how that behavior influences others around them. For example:

"I think that I got a better picture of how and why I react in different situations, and how I could act differently." (teacher education student)

"I think about myself and how I influence others. About when I meet someone and if I smile, I will get good feedback." (teacher education student)

"It gave me a deeper understanding of how I am thinking and behaving. It also gave me tools to do something about it." (social work student)

"I understood how much I talk and how much I need to control situations." (social work student)

"I discovered that I make prejudgments of people." (social work student)

"It forces a degree of self-insight about how locked up your thoughts often are. It is a way of examining your own mind." (mentor)
2. Interpersonal competences. Most prominent among the interpersonal competences mentioned by the students were the ability to listen to others, empathy, and perspective-taking. Nearly all students related to these skills. Many of them told that the insights that they acquired from the seminars have carried over into their personal life.

"There is always another point of view or perspective and as a teacher you have to remember that. When you work with children and their parents, you always have to think not just about yourself. You have to think twice. You are different and meet people from other backgrounds." (teacher education student)

"It has strengthened my empathy. When I communicate with someone I try to think about what the other thinks. I got into an argument and could not get angry because I kept thinking about what he is thinking. I think that this is good." (social work student)

"I learned] to see different perspectives, to take the time to see things differently." (mentor)

3. Benefits of group work. Not only did the seminar groups become intimate and cohesive units, but the students themselves became aware of the advantages of discussing personal experiences with others. They were aware that they were functioning as a support group for each other and highly valued the feedback that they received from their peers. In the words of one mentor: "It was relieving to hear that others have similar experiences. What I learned is that it is a good thing to tell others when you feel that something is not right."

4. Communication skills. Two students mentioned that they had improved their ability to organize their thoughts and present them to a group:

"I learned to speak in front of people when I told my story." (teacher education student)

"I learned to write down things and tell them in front of a group...We had not been writing before and some of us do not like to speak in front of other people. But you need to do this in your work." (social work student)

5. Learning from non-academic experiences. Another learning outcome was students’ awareness that they could gain professional and personal knowledge from their non-academic experiences.

"I think that you can learn something from every person you meet. That thought is something I brought with me to every meeting with my mentor child and I think that I have learned things from her, even though she is only 10 years old." (mentor)
Project impact was also examined by means of the perspective taking, empathetic concern, and self esteem measures described above. Repeated measures analysis of variance was carried out on each psychological measure for each experimental group. The data are presented in Table 3.

Table 3:
Means (M) and standard deviations (SD) by experimental group on measures of empathetic concern, perspective taking and self esteem, by testing time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Testing time</th>
<th>Education (N=20)</th>
<th>Social Work (N=15)</th>
<th>Mentors (N=9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic concern</td>
<td>January 2007</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 2007</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>4.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 2007</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective taking</td>
<td>January 2007</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 2007</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>3.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 2007</td>
<td>4.12*</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>January 2007</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 2007</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>December 2007</td>
<td>4.78*</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>4.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

It appears that 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 also 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 testing results, no significant changes were noted.

Conclusions
Students in the Malmö project wrote and told a story deriving from a personal experience, rewrote and retold it from the perspective of another, discussed together different perspectives and alternative outcomes, and enacted stories in forum plays. Despite the variation in implementation, the reactions of all students were quite similar. They particularly liked changing perspectives, but they also liked telling their own stories and hearing others' stories. Group discussions were viewed as vital to helping them understand situations and seminar activities taught them about how they act in interaction with others. In short, project goals which related to self-knowledge and the ability to interpret encounters with others were
achieved. It can be concluded that narrative-building can be a useful professional development tool.

Of the various groups, teacher education students were most satisfied with the project and exhibited the greatest degree of change on measures of empathy, perspective-taking, and self-esteem. The fact that they received more intensive treatment (as compared to mentors) in more structured seminars (as compared to social work students) probably accounts for this result. However, other factors may be at play here, most particularly the fact that they began the project earlier on in their professional training. Perhaps narrative inquiry has more dramatic effects when working with students who have only just begun their studies. Clearly more research is needed to understand how to effectively use narrative inquiry in professional development.

References


