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Storytelling and Reflection in the Knowledgeing Work-Shop

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Stories Enhancing Skills



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Introduction

This article introduces the principle behind the pilot project 'Stories Enhancing Skills' within the Leonardo da Vinci Program. The pilot project is based on knowledge and methodology developed in a Norwegian thesis (Erstad 2005). The Knowledgeing Work-Shop is here used as a tool to emphasize and analyze the experience based knowledge of social workers. The thesis enters into a tradition of practical knowledge that can be traced back to Aristotle and antiquity.

Focussing on narratives and reflection on experience, the Knowledgeing Work-Shop will be introduced and tested out as a method offered to social workers within upgrade and further education in Spain and the Nordic countries, with plans to expand the program to Estonia as well. The project will be supervised by external evaluation.

In social work it is necessary to strive for methods based on standardised, theoretical knowledge. Professional work should build on methods with documented effect. It is, however, crucial to take both the social workers and the users own experiences into account in order to meet the changing situations of everyday life. The social worker must develop his/her ability to make judgements in an environment where various forms of knowledge are parts of a whole. This is the kind of competence that the Knowledgeing Work-Shop is concerned with.

The Story as a Source of Knowledge

Throughout our history and various cultures storytelling has been a source of knowledge and understanding. One could say that the story is a primitive form that has accompanied the human race for as long as we know. Nergård (2000) discusses, with reference to the Sami traditions of reindeer husbandry, the oral narrative as a storage for knowledge and preparation for social practice.

In reindeer husbandry, stories of the terrain have a central place. Nergård claims that such stories maintain knowledge that herders cannot manage without. Generations of knowledge about and experiences with the terrain are stored in these narratives. Knowledge that is made available to new generations through stories related to specific places in the terrain in which they move. Not only do stories take care of experiences, they contribute to 'create' the terrain or to make it emerge as a terrain for reindeer husbandry.

The stories are local and linked to specific areas. Thus they create places in the terrain, places that would not have existed in people's consciousness without the stories. They could be stories about an unsafe area or an area with good or bad grass. In this way they constitute certain awareness about a specific place or area. Such stories can be named guides or guardians along the journey.

Nergård's description of stories of the terrain and their function, captures, in my opinion, the essence of experience based practical knowledge. Landscape, terrain and place are words with

many associations that can be used as metaphors both in social work and in child welfare. The obvious differences between reindeer husbandry and child welfare is not a subject here.

This introduction about reindeer husbandry is of course more applicable to Norwegian conditions than to Spanish ones, but the significance of stories as a source of transferring knowledge is probably well known within craft tradition. One could, for example, focus on old stories about the production of grapes in Spain, the methods and the phase of the moon's influence on the pruning of grapes. From here originate the skill and knowledge about the terrain, and stamps of quality in production.

The Knowledgeing Work-Shop as a Place of Reflection

In my thesis I use stories from practical situations as an entry to the social workers' understanding and experience based knowledge. Together with a group of social workers from municipal child welfare I have worked at developing a methodical approach to emphasize experiential knowledge. As a tool for this we have established a meeting-place, or what we call a Knowledgeing Work-Shop. During six one-day meetings over a period of eighteen months we have discussed in which way we can adapt and produce what we call experiential knowledge, that is, knowledge in action or practical knowledge.

Dilemmas and problem situations have functioned as an entry into central areas of the project. Social workers have told their stories, which then have been reflected on in the group, and I have put them in writing, first as simple texts which later have been adapted into essays where I have used contributions from philosophy, ethics and literature in order to discuss themes that have emerged from the stories. This makes the basis for further common reflections. In addition we have used films and other artistic means as a more indirect input.

In my project I use the approach to practical knowledge that is discussed in Janic (1996) where he presents the tradition from Aristotle.

The questions I raise from the narrative, based on this frame of concept, are first of all what kind of judgement was made in the concrete situation. This is the time to freeze and focus on a crucial situation in the story. What was it that the social worker saw and understood, and how did this manifest itself in action. What did the social worker actually say or do? It is often necessary to return to this several times for sufficient amplification.

This leads to a clarification of what the social worker actually saw as the concrete situation and how it was framed. What was in the foreground, what can be sensed in the background, and what can be imagined outside the picture?

By reorganizing the foreground and the background a multiplicity of the situation emerges, which opens up to many possibilities of interpretation. This gives room for reflection that can open up and widen the perspective. Later we can ask the question of what emerge as important interpretations and thus lead us further in direction of understanding.

What emerge as important, and what is not. What is similar in the different stories and what is different in the almost identical stories? What analogies emerge and how can this lead us to a deeper understanding of the basic structures.

The process of emphasizing practical knowledge can partly be described as the path inwards to reveal the implicit or fundamental principles. The insight gained through reflection can be used to shape and reshape examples that are more or less indicative in their form. This is the path out to the exemplifying.

In an attempt to capture the central idea of the Knowledgeing Work-Shop, we could say that continuous reflection such as alternating between storytelling and modified reproduction of the stories is the fundamental concept. Stories and modified reproductions form the basic pattern, which can be recreated into different forms. The prism might serve as a metaphor here. Instead of pursuing rigid logical reasoning, we circle around the themes of the story. The Knowledgeing Work-Shop then becomes like a prism where one and the same ray of light is broken into different directions that exceed professional traditions, which is how the essay can be described (Meyer 1995).

By using the prism as a metaphor, the visual power is emphasized. If we instead look for a metaphor for the sense of hearing, a musical workshop might be a better analogy for the dynamics and the reciprocity in the Knowledgeing Work-Shop. Here it is more important to listen attentively to stories and reflections in order to more easily notice harmonies, resonances and dissonances.

Requirements for Attentiveness: An Example.

In my work at the Knowledgeing Work-Shop I experienced that my own ability to listen was challenged. I was the one who wrote down the stories, and my task was to transform the oral narrative into a written text that we could continue to work on. A straightforward task, I thought, but, as it turned out, there were several reactions.

Many of the participants said that they recognized the story, but it felt strange to read it. As one of them commented: 'when I tell my story, I can still feel the atmosphere and picture the visual impression from the various situations. There is more richness in the story than words can explain. The story is much more my own when I tell it myself than when I read it. When I told the story, it came from me, but when I read it, it comes towards me.'

Transforming material from oral dialect from north Norway to official language turned out to be a challenge as well, mainly because of distinctions in the meaning content that I was unable to catch. But the strongest reactions came when the participants saw their own personal formulations in print. 'The story seems so plain or naïve', was one comment, as if she doubted whether her story could have any professional value. However, as I adapted the stories through theoretical reflections and wrote the essays, their opinion changed: 'How do you get so much out of these stories?'

During the process they became interested in the parallel between reproduction and journal writing, and how difficult it can be to comprehend what people think:

We who are professionals usually have no problems expressing ourselves, but not everyone finds it easy to put their thoughts and feelings about a situation into words. Approaching strangers with your problems can be a challenge, and I often think about

how difficult it is to take notes. Is it right? Is this precisely what he or she meant? The intention, of course, is to let people read it and see if they agree, but that is the intention. Things are happening so fast that there is not much time to follow up.

One of the participants commented that when we as social workers have this kind of reactions to our own stories, how is it then for clients to see their lives in print, described in words and phrases that are different from what they themselves would have used? The journal forms the basis for the case presentation to the county administration and when the case is turned over to the authorities, much can be at stake. Here is one example:

This is a case of voluntary transfer of custody. The report states that mother experiences herself to be an unfit mother. She wants this statement removed, in addition she demands an apology from the child welfare authorities. Her problem was not that she was unfit as a mother, but she was too worn out to take care of the child. She cannot let go of the thought of what is stated in her papers.

This is an example of how language can define, explain or stigmatise. For a mother to signal that she is too worn out to take care of her child is a responsible act and justifies a transfer of custody. It is something quite different, or even the opposite, than feeling like (or being), an unfit mother. Of course we don't know exactly what she said or how she said it, but we do know that her intention was different from what was written down. And it is not difficult to imagine that being described as too worn out is easier to live with than being characterized as an unfit mother. Had the social worker been more sensitive and cooperative in her dialogue with mother in terms of formulations, this would have contributed to a compromise regarding the transfer of custody, and formed the basis for cooperation to the good of the child. The mother would then – in her own and in other people's eyes – be a person who has taken the consequences of being too tired to give her child sufficient care, and her dignity would be intact. In other words: this is about how mother experiences herself to be judged and seen by the authorities.

As we have seen, consideration and a keen eye for subtle distinctions can make a crucial difference between personal wisdom and what I will call negligence. It does not necessarily have anything to do with unwillingness or lack of ethics. But if we do not develop enough sensitivity or attentiveness in our relation to the client, all the formal knowledge in the world will not help.

Child Welfare needs a Supply of Stories of the Terrain.

Modern child welfare is founded on a complex basis of knowledge, and an increasing spectre of methods and initiatives have become available. Thus the challenge facing practical activity is to understand what kind of knowledge and approach are applicable to the terrain in question.

It is in concrete situations that theoretical knowledge which gives reasons for what and why, and skills that show how, merge with experiential knowledge in a form that is flexible and capable of judging when to do what.

Child welfare activity is socio-practical, and must therefore carry on a dialogue with the child, the family and various networks, in order to understand the distinctive character of the place, and what is required. In order to carry out judgemental power or use wise discretion, child welfare needs a supply of stories to choose from in order to recognise and differentiate between places, both literary and metaphorically. Such forms of understanding for what approach to use, can also be characterised as contextual child welfare (Saus 2003) or variable knowledge in action (Lykkeslet 2003).

These narratives of the terrain must be further developed in order to appear as something more than a single social worker's experience, and they need a written storage place. In my thesis some of these stories are discussed in depth. In order to gain insight into the variable character of the work, a supply of stories is required. Through studies of different situations diversity will emerge.

This diversity can sharpen the eye for distinctions. Thus it is possible through contrasting stories to observe how seemingly similar situations nevertheless contain differences, and we are able to discuss the way in which also 'the competent eye', to use Jakob Meløs term, continuously must be open and alert in order to avoid a blind spot (Meløe 1979).

NOU 2000:12 about child welfare, discusses similar challenges. It is stated here that professional judgement is necessary. At the same time it is pointed out that there are problems connected to any use of judgement. "When professional judgment is employed in cases of child welfare, it may contribute to limitation as well as an opening in the decision-making process." In my opinion, it is this limitation that can be prevented by narratives and reflection.

Child welfare needs stories of wise judgements that can lead the way through a terrain filled with tension and difficulties. Such stories have the function of a guardian that can provide security and hold promise of a path through rugged terrain. The same is true for stories of dilemmas and oppositions within child welfare, where narratives in part can disclose paths to take care of difficulties or to leave the dilemma open to further reflection.

It is also important to focus on stories about why one did not see or understand what happened in a situation, with misjudgement as a result. Here, it is precisely the change, or turn of the story that leads to a different understanding. The experience is understood and defined in a new way. These are stories that both open up new paths to the practice of the terrain, and demonstrate what must be taken into account and considered when travelling in rugged landscape.

It is important that stories of the terrain are short and concise so that they can easily be fetched out in a busy life, like the following example:

This foster mother persuaded mother to take direct contact with the child's doctor and teacher in order to get information about her child. Mother is critical to most things, and in this way the foster mother avoids being a mediator. Mother can then argue with the teacher or the doctor. At the same time, mother gets an opportunity to carry out parts of her role as a mother and participate in raising her child.

This example contains much more than what appears from the short sentences. In order to make practical use of narratives as a support in one's own work, the social worker must also relate the story to his or her own experience, make conscious use of associations and look for concealed patterns.

According to Molander (1993) texts are more or less open, and understanding is created in the space between the content and the reader. The advantage of written narratives is that they have a wider range than internal, oral stories. If the narratives are seen as texts and knowledge along the way, they can contribute to the writing of a diversity of stories and reflections where the relation between rules and exceptions are crystallized as well.

Thus the narratives can be discussed and used to develop practice further. They can be used as examples to learn from, and, not least, to help sharpen the eye for the specific in the situation. The experienced person will recognize wisdom, while the inexperienced might need more guidelines to show the depth of what the examples impart.

The nursing profession, for one, has been working on developing example models that are instructive in their forms. In my opinion, the instructive part is important, but not sufficient, and it might even conceal important distinctions.

The material from the Knowledgeing Work-Shop contains several stories about great shifts of understanding. This refers to a new understanding derived from dialogues with family and network, making their experiential knowledge valid as well. What previously remained in the background or out of sight now becomes the focus.

One of the stories can be described almost as a paradigm shift in the view on any hidden resources within the family network. What becomes apparent in the reflections is that the change also contributes to emphasize new recognition as the only correct. The understanding encloses the new, as it were, and prevents distinctions.

Other times the focus is wider, as with the social worker that sees in a flash that the other person's definition of the situation is quite different from her own:

I was visiting a mother, and her little boy was at home as well. We were sitting on the couch talking. He told me about his grandmother, who had left him in a café. I was listening to his story, until mother abruptly told him not to talk to 'that woman'. 'Remember', she said, 'she writes down everything you say. Your grandmother might suffer'. So I sat there thinking how naïve and stupid I had been, believing that they trusted me.

This example does not give any instructions of how to act, but it is a hint of the complexity and dilemmas connected to the functions of help and control.

Practice within child welfare is full of complex situations that can be seen as various forms of dilemmas. One of the good things with the Knowledgeing Work-Shop, according to one of the participants, is that dilemmas are unfolded and left hanging. They are not questions looking

for solutions. On the contrary, they are problems to be studied in depth and elucidated from many angles. It is important not to think solutions only, but just leave the problems hanging. We need such reminders about the ambiguity and the ethical sides to this work.

The other type of narrative that is important to emphasize, is thus stories of dilemmas that are open in form and invite to further reflection and discussion.

Qualitative Analyses; Underlying Tensions

So far I have been true to the form of practical knowledge and tried to point out paths in the landscape, but the material also opens up to qualitative analysis of special themes. I would like to focus on some central findings.

The participants of the Knowledgeing Work-Shop have all been working within a child welfare system that systematically has concentrated on developing practice. The main focus has been on continuous advice, further education and project organizing in order to implement user influence. They are concerned with network and forms of communication that can contribute to a more equal balance of power.

This shows new thinking and directions that can be seen as a reaction to a long tradition where the professional is defined as the expert, a tradition which emphasizes psychological knowledge and diagnosis, and where, to put it bluntly, the professional is the one and only that possesses knowledge.

The material from the Knowledgeing Work-Shop shows that values such as participation and resource-orientation have been established as a way of thinking, and influence daily practice. At the same time, at a deeper level, one is still stuck in basic beliefs from earlier traditions. When unexpected implications from a changed practice arise, the experience is uneasiness and a feeling of dilemma. How well does this new perspective really fit into child welfare? Where is the limit? When are different ways of understanding relevant? This is the kind of borderline cases that have been focused on as dilemmas in the Knowledgeing Work-Shop.

In these stories, it is particularly the value of participation that is at risk, and the underlying question concerns the relation between protection and responsibility or competence. In reflections over a story concerning cooperation with mother after transfer of custody, the new perspective is challenged by a psychological interpretation of mother. Several workers might think that this is a mother with psychological problems, a mother who herself is in need of care. Is it then a justifiable demand that mother takes part in the process of her child's transfer to a foster home and expect her to be capable of taking a stand on this? Perhaps the social worker is doing more damage to the mother, and exposes her to something she does not quite see the consequences of and closes her mind to.

In contrast to this is the view that every human should have the opportunity to make a choice, the way resource oriented thinking indicates. The challenge to the social worker is not to judge who can be made responsible and who cannot, but to carry on a dialogue in such a manner that the other person seems to have a choice.

Dilemmas and narratives are primarily linked to relations on the individual level, while the structural framework, marginalization and poverty forms an obscure background. Such dilemmas are hardly ever discussed.

In the transition between new and old practice, there is a challenge to what I call the basic self-understanding regarding the view on knowledge and competence. Who is really the right person to understand the child's needs, some people ask. This is a question that can really fuel the debate – in a group that otherwise is quite unanimous.

From my position as a researcher, and in the tradition of practice philosophy, I believe that child welfare not only needs a variety of stories and examples, it also needs new metaphors. Metaphors that take care of valuable aspects of tradition, and at the same time open up to other ways of developing the role of the professional. In the process of building such metaphors, there is a lot to gain from old sources of wisdom, which I have discussed in my thesis.

Final Comments on the Leonardo Project.

My intention with this article has been to communicate experiences from the Knowledgeing Work-Shop as a method of research in a Norwegian project. The themes presented by the social workers can easily be recognized in Nordic discussions on child welfare, where themes such as user participation and the role of the professional have been focused on. In other countries these themes might be more peripheral in relation to local challenges within child welfare.

The Norwegian research methods used in The Knowledgeing Work-Shop will now be adapted to education methods that are being tested in different parts of Europe. The pilot project is expected to meet a series of challenges, at the same time as it contains interesting possibilities.

In the pilot project, the Knowledgeing Work-Shop will be tested as an education method for groups of social workers from participating countries. Each group has its own advisor, but it is the social workers themselves who are responsible for working on written reflections on their own experiences and thus produce experiential knowledge. Such reflections in the form of essays may constitute a personal challenge, but many will also find it liberating because it makes room for distinctions. Experiences from master programs using the essay in this tradition (Bech-Karlsen 2003) are positive, and so is my experience as an advisor in other types of writing processes. Nevertheless, the fundament will always be the social worker's own motivation and desire to work on their practical experiences.

One aspect of the Knowledgeing Work-Shop is that the social workers share their experiences with each other. Some will perhaps be reluctant to reveal dilemmas or situations that were not successfully treated. The analysis, however, shows that the personal may indeed embody the essence of dilemmas common in practical work. A contract based on professional secrecy and cooperation will nevertheless form the basic foundation for developing confidence and openness within the group.

The purpose of my thesis is to investigate the social workers' own understanding of their practice through dialogue. In retrospect the analysis showed what had been focussed on and

what was beyond attention. When learning is the object, the advisor must draw attention to themes that can be a supplement to the social workers' reflections and contribute to expand comprehension.

As a researcher and advisor I have worked on my own experiences (Erstad 1990, 1998) and with reflection groups (Erstad 1991, Erstad and Saus 1997). The pilot project will employ experienced and highly qualified advisors, but training is nevertheless required when it comes to the characteristics of the Knowledgeing Work-Shop. A separate training program will be available for this group.

Josefson (1991, 1998) discusses, with reference to Aristotle, how literature and other art forms can throw light on basic human themes and enrich professional understanding. There is an analogy between the artist's eye for the unique and the social workers' judging competence, where the ability to recognize and make distinctions is vital. In Spain, the process of making this relevant on the basis of Spanish literature and traditions is now under way.

The pilot project has a European and an international dimension that provide interesting possibilities for exchange of experience across the borders and for the study of similarities and differences in practical work. The purpose then, is not to compare, but to develop an understanding for how practice is rooted both in traditions, culture, structural framework and professional forms of understanding.