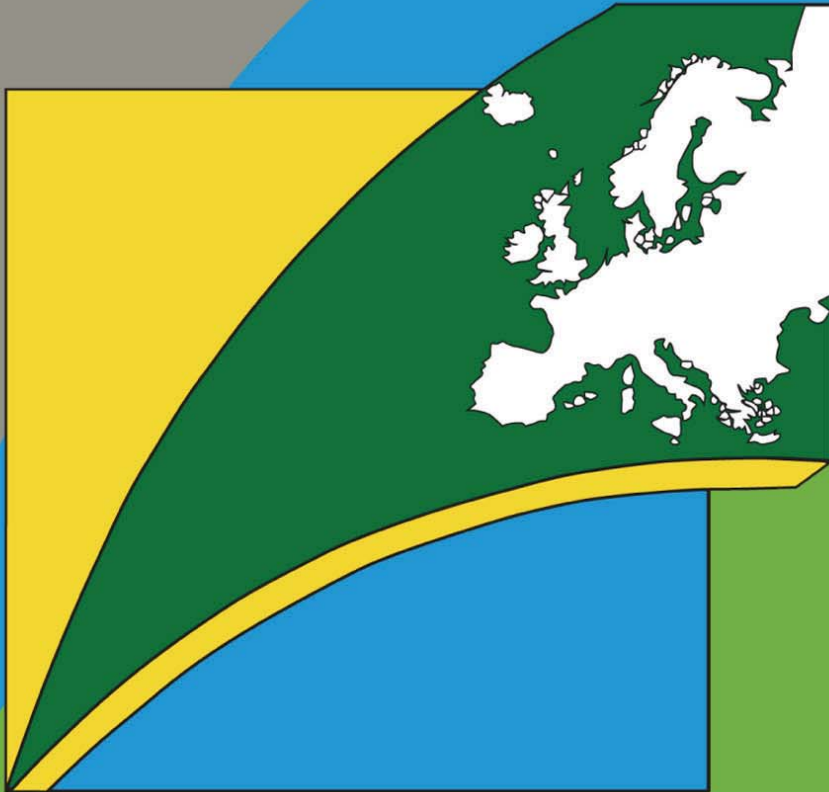


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Contents

Sommaire

Editorial

Eeva Timonen-Kallio & Margaret Gilmore 5

Focus on research and theoretical perspectives/
Focus sur la recherche et les perspectives théorique

Dolores Angela Castelli Dransart & Barbara Weil
*Construire ensemble les prémisses d'une stratégie nationale
suisse de prévention du suicide* 10

Arvid Lone
*Bringing about change a social pedagogic approach:
Milieu Pedagogy versus Milieu Therapy* 23

Eeva Timonen-Kallio
*Residential child care work – professional knowledge,
orientations and methods* 37

Focus on teaching and training in social education/
Focus sur l'enseignement et la formation en éducation spécialisée

Ramona Bernard
*Case Study and Professional Development in the Education of
students at the Child Welfare Program* 52

Adrian Staempfli & Regula Kunz & Eva Tov
*Creating a bridge between theory and practice:
working with key situations* 60

Kristina Hellberg
*Pupils with Asperger's syndrome tell about their time
in school and their diagnosis* 79

Focus on practice in social professions/
Focus sur la pratique dans les professions sociales

Inge Danielsen & Gaby Franger

Social Work Confronting New Right Wing Movements 100

Poloko Ntshwarang

*Sexual abuse in school hostels for the san (Basarwa)
in Botswana: a gap in child protection* 123

Book review/ Livres à vous

Saskia Pfleghard

*Francis Loser: La médiation artistique en travail social.
Enjeux et pratiques en atelier d'expression et de création* 135

Jochen Windheuser

*Angelika Groterath: Soziale Arbeit in Internationalen
Organisationen* 137

Creating a bridge between theory and practice: Working with key situations

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Abstract

This paper describes an innovative approach to integrating theory and practice. Using a co-constructivist perspective, which integrates aspects of Wenger's (1998) Social Theory of Learning such as communities of practice and other reflective practice approaches the authors develop a model of working with key situations. It enables the integration of theory and practice in education and continuing professional development and is based on the understanding that we are used to learning from each other's narratives as a basic human way to pass on knowledge. The learner is guided through a process of reflection, which facilitates the sharing of knowledge across boundaries of Higher Education and practice. It involves theoretical, practical and ethical knowledge which is linked to narratives of situations. These are then assessed on the basis of professional quality standards. Thus, possible best practice, including possible alternative ways to act are developed.

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Key words: integration of theory and practice, reflection, communities of practice, key situations

Introduction

Linking theory and practice is pivotal for professional and academic social work and relevant for social work education and ongoing professional development. The integration of theory and practice can be problematic because *"the case is not 'in the book'"* as Schön (1987, p.5) pointedly put it. In an ever changing social world it is essential that professionals are able to adapt emerging knowledge. Practitioners understand a situation by making sense of the relation between abstract knowledge and the specific situation. Social workers need to evaluate this understanding in the light of values and make decisions about what interventions best meet the needs of their clients. Linking theory and practice in such a way is quintessentially a learning process in the context of developing and innovating professional practice.

We observe that both students and experienced practitioners find it difficult to link theory and practice. The discussion on the professionalisation of social work over the last two decades has focussed on the division of scientific knowledge and professional practice (Moch, 2006; von Spiegel, 2006; Sommerfeld, 2004). Nevertheless, scientific and professional communities have repeated calls for *"professional social work (...) to be based on science"* (Gredig, 2011, 54). In this paper we will address the following questions: How can students and practitioners best link theory and practice and how can they be supported in this process?

We will discuss current literature and research findings on linking theory and practice; then present our model of working with key situations which we will discuss, focussing on theories underpinning the model.

Bridging the gap revisited

Evidence-based practice (EBP) is the most commonly associated model with linking theory and practice. It is founded on the technical-rational model of science and is associated with the risk paradigm (D'Cruz et al. 2009). EBP has been adopted for professional and academic social work (Gray et al. 2009), although it continues to be controversial.

Hüttemann & Sommerfeld (2008) point to varying epistemological foundations and interpretations of EBP. Maynard (2009) raises the issue that research on implementation of the model is *"in its infancy and is riddled with inconsistent use of defi-*

nitions" (Maynard, 2009,p.304).Publication alone, even when suitable access is provided, does not lead to its use in practice (Gray et al. 2009), neither does standardised implementation of evidence in organisational procedures(Trevillion, 2008). Guidelines do little to change practice (Gray et al. 2009).In addition, the implementation of guidelines has led to an association of EBP with bureaucratisation and proceduralisation (Munro, 2011). The over-emphasis on quantitative research leaves little room for professional experience and judgements(Munro 2011, Nevo & Slonim-Nevo 2011)and ignores the reality that social work is a process based on relationships (Collingwood, et al., 2008).

More fundamental epistemological questions with regard to EBP are also posed. The rational decision-making model is fraught with difficulties because rational thinking has been shown to be influenced by a number of biases (Kahneman, 2011; Gray et al., 2009; Trevithick, 2008).Indeed the *"wealth of cognitive science research suggests that the complex decision-making environment"* (Gray et al. 2009, p. 158) of social work needs to be considered in relation to EBP.Another central criticism of EBP is that social work interventions take place in situations that are unique and uncertain and are therefore*"not open to the type of 'scientific' enquiry normally associated with more positivistic, measurement-based understandings of practice"* (Wilson, 2011, p. 3). Therefore a *"fit between a model of rational choice and the realities of social work practice is inadequate (...)"* (van de Luitgaarden, 2009).

While there continues to be a debate about EBP, the need to integrate scientific knowledge and practice remains undisputed. As a way forward D'Cruz et al. (2009) suggest a dualist approach that allows engagement "with a material reality, while also recognizing the multiple (and relative) meanings possible for these material realities" (D'Cruz et al., 2009, p. 82). In this way professionals can interpret specific situations using all available sources of knowledge, including scientific knowledge. They do this in order to understand andweigh up specific and generalisable aspects of the situation.

Therefore, in our model we include all knowledge domains which are relevant to professional social work practice situations as depicted in figure 1.

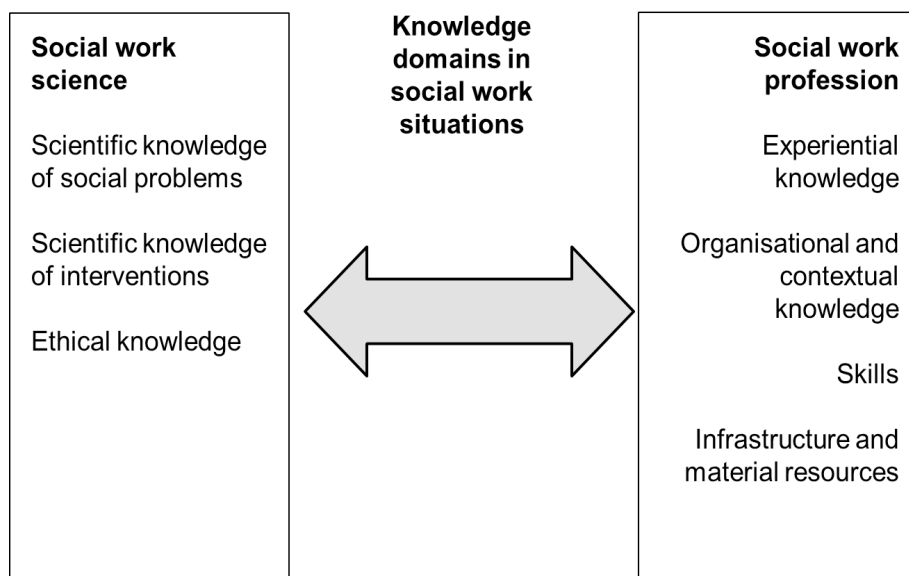


Figure 1. Knowledge domains in social work situations (author's illustration).

Trevithick (2008, p.1216) asserts that "the different forms of knowledge (...) are not in conflict but need to be viewed as complementing each other". Kaiser (2005) refers to the different domains fittingly as resources. Gray & Schubert (2010) argue that linking theory and practice is most effective when all these resources are combined.

The challenge of linking theory and practice affects both novices and experts, but in different ways (Kaiser, 2005; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1987). Newcomers need to internalise knowledge while old-timers need to externalise it. This may be why practice educators feel out of touch with science, while being willing to engage with research (Clapton et al., 2006). Another reason may be, that a direct transfer of scientific knowledge into practice and experiential knowledge is not possible (Sommerfeld 2000), only a transformation. Kaiser (2005) describes three transformation paths: firstly, from explicit to situated knowledge (novices in a subject area), secondly, from situation to situation (experienced practitioners), and lastly, from situation via explicit knowledge to situated knowledge. The latter is useful to reflect on an experienced situation, or if an upcoming situation is so unfamiliar, that a direct transfer from a known situation is not possible. Consequently,

evidence based practice needs to be combined with reflexivity. If not, social work is more likely to fail than to produce best practice (Schnurr, 2005).

Hence, reflective practice is seen as the ideal way to link theory and practice. But while reflection is accepted as being the key to professional practice, the concept of reflection remains ill defined (Wilson, 2011; Jennert, 2008; D'Cruz et al., 2007; Lam et al. 2007) and there is a lack of comprehensive heuristic models for reflection (Jennert, 2008). The literature on reflective practice suggests that reflection needs to include thinking about best available evidence (Knott & Scragg, 2007; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Knecht, 2005), practice (Gray & Schubert 2010; Schön, 1987; Kolb, 1983), emotions (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Knott & Scragg, 2007), learning strategies (Jennert, 2008) and always lead to action (Payne, 2009; Beverley & Worsley, 2007; Fook & Gardner, 2007).

Thus, linking theory and practice is a complex business and remains challenging-not just for novices in education but also for expert professionals and academics. Applying new knowledge in practice is associated with understanding a practice situation, identifying and judging new external knowledge resources, combining principles with experience, designing solutions and applying them to new situations or aligning them with past experiences and lastly, with critically monitoring the strategy used and outcomes achieved (Brown & Rutter, 2010). It is best supported by heuristic reflection models, which help students, professionals and scientists to integrate different forms of knowledge and practice.

We suggest that working with key situations is such an innovative model that fulfils these requirements. A presentation of the model of working with key situations now follows, which describes step by step the process involved. We also explain why these processes are important from a didactical perspective, therefore showing how the model enables students and practitioners to link theory and practice.

Key situations in social work

The roots of the model lie in the work undertaken by Kunz & Tov (2009). They applied a modified “developing a curriculum” (DACUM) procedure (Tippelt & Edle-mann, 2007). A project team consisting of social work practitioners and lecturers analysed the fields of social work and social pedagogy and produced a collection of professional key situations. The resulting 130 situations describe the typical activities that social workers need to be able to manage overall. The developed situa-

tions were structured along the adapted and extended categories of Kaisers' (2005) integrated learning model. The term *key situation* was chosen in reference to *key competency* and *key role*. While most forms of case reflections focus on a client or a client system over a certain period, whereas the focus with key situations shifts to the participating actors within a social or organisational context and with a limited time frame. It involves just the moment in which professionals and service users have to master a specific challenge.

The situations from the collection are now used in practice-theory transformation seminars. They take place parallel to the practice learning experience and stretch over the course of 10 weeks. Students work in groups of about three, because this has been shown to support students' learning (Simpson et al. 2010) and to enable the social negotiation of meaning (Reusser, 2006).

Students work with one chosen key situation, which is based on a situation from practice learning. Starting with experiences is valued by students (Sieminski & Seden, 2011; Simpson et al. 2010) and at the same time values students' experiences (Noble 2001).

This situation is then deconstructed by describing the narrative of the situation with a focus on the actions of the participants. Using narration has been shown to be able to raise complex experiences and placement issues (Noble 2001). Evidence from research on expertise (Gruber & Rehrl, 2003) and cognitive science (Kahne-man, 2011) demonstrates that human decision making and behaviour is strongly influenced by stories. But in order to reflect on the implicit hidden in these narratives, it is important to explicate it (Fisher & Somerton, 2000). That is why the narrative of the situation is then divided into sequences and the situations are re-enacted in role play. Thereby, the students are enabled to bring the inner dialogue of the social worker (thinking) and the emotions of both social worker and client to the surface. This reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) is added to the description.

Then the typical characteristics of these kinds of situations are determined. This forces the students to think about the general and the specific aspects of the situation. It is a first step towards thinking about theories in relation to the situation.

By examining the reflection-in-action, the students then reconstruct the implicit knowledge in the thinking of the social worker. This is then linked with appropriate scientific knowledge, helping to explicate the tacit. In addition, students are encouraged to investigate further relevant knowledge by posing questions such as "Why did the young person in the situation not want to ...?" or "What models of counsel-

ling would help in such a situation?” thus aiming to explain the situation and the behaviour of the people from a theoretical view. Thus, our model of learning is self-directed (Reusser, 2006) and is loosely following an inquiry and problem based approach. This has been seen to be helpful (Pack, 2010; Reusser, 2006). The other resources are also put in writing and added to the whole account.

Following the definition of the quality standards, the students are asked to evaluate their situation and describe alternative interventions. Through the integration of quality standards based on ethical knowledge and values, we enable ethical discourse, which is central to social work practice (IFSW and IASSW, 2004, cited in: Whebi & Straka, 2011).

Throughout this process the students are coached by a lecturer who provides inputs and feedback. They are given a reader to increase their understanding of the model. Support by lecturers has been shown to enhance students' learning (Simpson et al. 2010) and lecturers are able to use strategies to build confidence (Sieminski & Seden, 2011). This is also important when working with situations that contain critical incidents that can trigger uncertainties and anxieties. Educators need to be able to offer emotional containment as well as intellectual stimulation (Fisher & Somerton 2000).

Students and lecturers work on an e-learning platform, on which all the participating students and practitioners can see the on-going work. They can comment on each other's work. The completed situations are published on this platform. This enables their use in other contexts such as practice educators conferences, practice educators training or team discussions. Key situations offer focal points around which the integration of theory and practice can be organised.

This blended learning approach also supports the formation of virtual communities of practice (CoP) and promotes a culture and structure that supports learning (Pack, 2010; Cook-Craig & Yekoutiel 2009). Moore (2008) suggests that online communities provide a venue for connecting communities of learners and practitioners and that the development of virtual CoP in social work education has the potential to transform the social work education process.

A key situation in the end contains the elements as presented in table 1 (*examples in cursive type*):

Table 1. The elements of a key situation.

A **title** from the collection of key situations is chosen - for example "7.3 *Enabling positive experiences*" (Kunz & Tov, 2009) - and the context of the situation is described in brief - *supported housing with young people*

Typical characteristics for this kind of situation are defined - for example "The client does not believe that he or she can achieve something (low self-efficacy)", "The client has prior negative experiences", "The client is afraid to get involved in something", "The social worker enables the client to make positive experiences regarding his or her chosen task and with respect of a trusting professional relationship." (Kunz, et al., 2011). These characteristics summarise what this type of situation is about and are applicable to similar situations.

A **description of a professional situation** is added. In this narrative the context of the situation and the actions are outlined. The description should be as vivid as possible using direct speech and be free of interpretations.

Reconstruction of the reflection-in-action. The situation is split into 4-5 sequences which are then reconstructed in role play and the thinking and emotions of the professional and the assumed emotions of the client are added, resulting in a description of approximately one A4 page.

The various forms of **resources** (scientific, intervention, ethical, practice and organisational knowledge; skills; infrastructure and material resources) are described. The explicit knowledge which may be from books, course material or other sources is first added, its relevance for the situation is explained and specific links are identified.

Quality standards that reflect the knowledge, skills and values are defined. The standards are depicted so that they are valid for other situations under the same title but are specific enough to still be meaningful and not just generalised statements.

A reflective account of the situation is given under the heading **evaluation of the situation**. The actions of the social worker in the situation are reviewed on the basis of the quality standard and alternative intervention possibilities are given.

When specific milestones are reached, for example after the definition of the typical characteristics or after the description of the resources, the students are encouraged to make a learn stop and to reflect on the result of their work so far. As a guiding frame they are encouraged to explore the specific and generalisable elements of their situations. Crucially, they are also asked to reflect on their own learning process. Learn stops are designed to facilitate monitoring their progress and reflection of their learning process.

To summarise, students work in groups on real professional situations from their practice learning experience. Situations are enriched with cognition and emotion and linked with all forms of knowledge. Lastly, on the basis of professional quality aspects the situations are evaluated and alternative interventions are constructed. Students reflect not just on the situation but also on the model of working with key situations and on their learning process.

Having given a brief description of the model and its use in social work education, we would now like to discuss in detail the theories underpinning our model.

Discussion

Social work students are confronted with explicit professional knowledge which they have to cognitively integrate. By doing so they memorise, integrate or construct knowledge by way of accumulation and accommodation (Illeris, 2009) and avoid passive knowledge (Mandl, 1993). If knowledge is memorised in connection to a situation, learners will be more likely to recall this knowledge in similar future situations (Reusser, 2006). On completion of training, novices still mainly have explicit knowledge. With time, this knowledge is replaced by situated knowledge which is achieved through experience and professional reflection (Kaiser, 2005). Finally, expert knowledge is largely based on situated knowledge. That is why experts exchange knowledge through narration of situations and stories. Indeed, fast thinking, which relies heavily on emotional, subconscious processes, is essential for a successful practice in which decisions have to be made under pressure. This explains the fact why expert practitioners find it difficult to explicitly name knowledge. They can only do this if they engage in theory-based reflection and bring to mind internalised knowledge, thus explicating it (Kaiser, 2005). Consequently, linking theory and practice depends on prior knowledge and expertise and can be achieved through differing transformations.

But transformation cannot be understood as individual cognitive-emotional act alone, as it involves a socio-cultural negotiation of meaning. The social construction and conception of the world is supported through cognitive and cultural tools and systems (Reusser, 2006). In Wenger's less often cited "*Social Theory of Learning*" (Wenger, 1998, p.5) the person is viewed as part of the environment in which activity, meaning, cognition, learning and knowledge are bound together and complement each other (Wenger, 1998). This theory is in our mind helpful to explain in more detail the transformation processes at work. Our model is based on a design framework suggested by Wenger (1998), which has been found to be useful in inter-professional continuing professional development (Lees & Meyer, 2011).

Lave & Wenger (1991) argue that only through legitimate, peripheral participation in communities of practice can learning be enabled. Learning needs to be understood in its individual as well as its social dimension. Learning according to Wenger (1998, p.227) is "*first and foremost the ability to negotiate new meanings*" while being actively engaged in CoP. In the following we therefore would like to take a closer look at the negotiation of meaning as a communicative process across boundaries of CoP. It explains how theories can be integrated in a cooperative process of negotiation of meaning in working with key situations.

According to Wenger (1998, p. 53) "*living is a constant process of negotiation of meaning*" which is driven by our need to live a meaningful life. It "*involves the interaction of two constituent processes*" which Wenger (1998, p. 52) calls "*participation and reification*" as shown in figure 2.

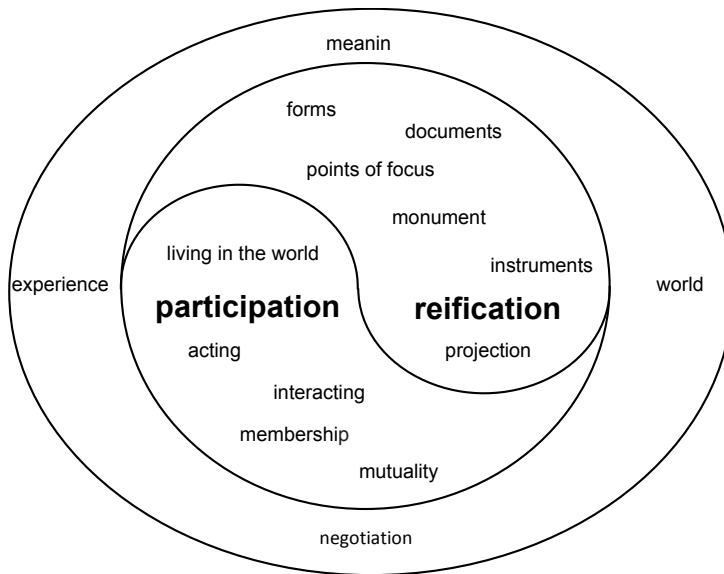


Figure 2. The duality of participation and reification (Wenger, 1998, p. 63).

Participation is a complex process that involves, "doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging" (Wenger, 1998, p.56). Reification on the other hand describes "the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness'. In so doing we create points of focus around which the negotiation of meaning becomes organised" (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). Wenger redefines the term in contrast to its more commonly known use in politics and philosophy, where it is taken for a process with negative connotations². He understands reification as a process and a product that reflects local practice. In organisational settings a large proportion of reifications involved in the local practice come from outside. These can be, for example, in the form of instruments, procedures, or theories. Reification in this case "must be appropriated into a local process in order to become meaningful" (Wenger, 1998, p. 60). While reification can be helpful in the process of understanding it can also stand in the way of a deeper understanding when for example terms are used without clearly knowing their meaning.

2 meaning either "misunderstanding an abstraction as a concrete entity" (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics, 2003) or "to treat as a thing" (The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, 2005).

These theories of learning have direct relevance to the question of how scientific knowledge and practice can be integrated. Theories are models of the real world and as such can be understood as reifications. They can be set in relation to practice in a co-operative process of participation. Thus, Wenger's (1998) perspective helps to understand integration knowledge and practice as a joint process of negotiation of meaning as illustrated in figure 3:

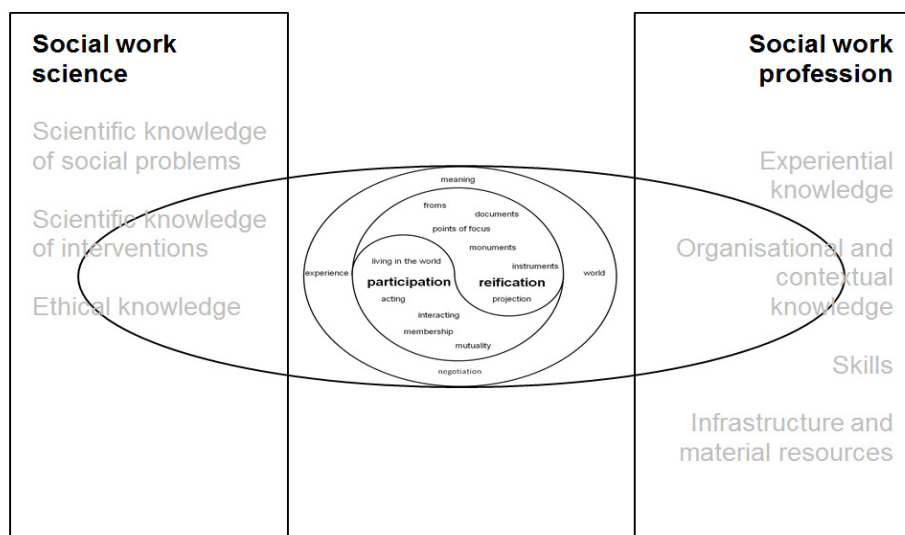


Figure 3. Co-operative knowledge production as negotiation of meaning (authors own illustration).

Participation and reification in a specific community defines that very community and therefore separates it from others. Learning therefore also involves the crossing of boundaries that exist between communities. Wenger (1998, p. 105) argues that there are two kinds of connections, which he refers to as “boundary objects” and “brokering” conducted by people. “The products of reification can cross boundaries and enter different practices” (Wenger, 1998, p. 105) and “people can participate in multiple CoP at once.” Student social workers during their practice learning experience are participating in a CoP in the practice field and in the university. In this process boundary objects - such as documents, books, models, theories - are used by participants who themselves act as brokers (Wenger, 1998). This is illustrated in figure 4:

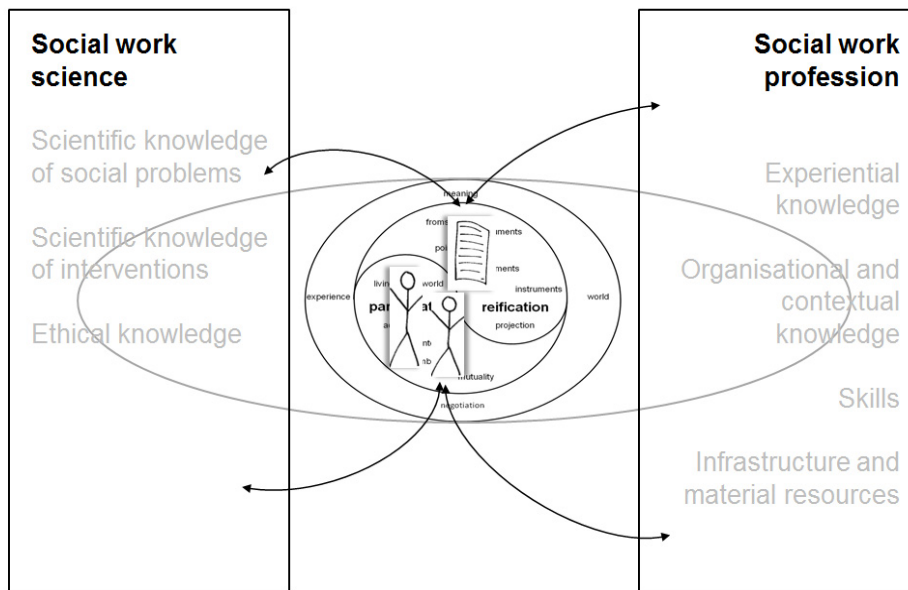


Figure 4. Cooperative knowledge production across boundaries of communities (authors own illustration).

Empirical findings support this theoretical view. Students in practice learning acted as brokers when moving between different communities, introducing elements of one CoP into another, thus enhancing both (Hodge et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Integrating theory and practice is challenging. Principles from constructivist theories and from the Social Theory of Learning can help to understand what needs to be observed. Students and practitioners can be coached through a structured process of working with key situations.

Working with key situations firstly offers a clear process that supports the step by step approach to critical reflection and integration of theory and practice. Thus, it shows how to organise learning across boundaries of university and practice learning organisation. Secondly, practitioners can easily identify relevant situations with

the aid of the title and can use them to inform the negotiation of meaning of their practice. Key situations have the potential to become a way of sharing knowledge and build bridges between the realm of academic and professional social work.

It is envisaged that this model will become a useful tool for both novices and experts wishing to promote the dissemination and development of best practice in social work. More research is needed to establish virtual CoP (Cook-Craig & Yekoutiel 2009). We are currently carrying out evaluations of the quality of reflections and are planning to conduct further research and publications on working with key situations.

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Contents / Sommaire

| | |
|--|-----|
| Editorial Eeva Timonen-Kallio & Margaret Gilmore | 5 |
| Focus on research and theoretical perspectives/ Focus sur la recherche et les perspectives théorique | |
| Dolores Angela Castelli Dransart & Barbara Weil Construire ensemble les prémisses d'une stratégie nationale suisse de prévention du suicide | 10 |
| Arvid Lone Bringing about change a social pedagogic approach: Milieu Pedagogy versus Milieu Therapy | 23 |
| Eeva Timonen-Kallio Residential child care work – professional knowledge, orientations and methods | 37 |
| Focus on teaching and training in social education/ Focus sur l'enseignement et la formation en éducation spécialisée | |
| Ramona Bernard Case Study and Professional Development in the Education of students at the Child Welfare Program | 52 |
| Adrian Staempfli & Regula Kunz & Eva Tov Creating a bridge between theory and practice: working with key situations | 60 |
| Kristina Hellberg Pupils with Asperger's syndrome tell about their time in school and their diagnosis | 79 |
| Focus on practice in social professions/ Focus sur la pratique dans les professions sociales | |
| Inge Danielsen & Gaby Franger Social Work Confronting New Right Wing Movements | 100 |
| Poloko Ntshwarang Sexual abuse in school hostels for the san (Basarwa) in Botswana: a gap in child protection | 123 |
| Book review/ Livres à vous | |
| Saskia Pflughard Francis Loser: <i>La médiation artistique en travail social. Enjeux et pratiques en atelier d'expression et de création</i> | 135 |
| Jochen Windheuser Angelika Groterath: <i>Soziale Arbeit in Internationalen Organisationen</i> | 137 |