

Final Report

Summary

This is the final report about an international project which involved making a film about service user involvement and gap-mending methods in social work education. We wanted to share examples of good practice and to inspire teachers from all over Europe to increase their collaboration with service user organizations in social work education. The film was shown at the EASSW conference in Milan 2015, It was made by the PowerUs network, which is committed to co-production and which has a focus on the people who receive social work practice and support, and is dedicated to including service users and their resources and experiences as important and equal knowledge in the joint learning processes. The film shows gap-mending practices in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and the UK. Since the film was shown at the EASSW conference in Milan, many teachers from European countries have approached members of the PowerUs network to learn more about gap-mending methods because they want to implement these in their countries. The PowerUs network has concluded that EASSW has been a powerful partner in giving service users a voice in discussions about social work education.

Rationale and purpose of the project

In 2014 the current president of EASSW – Sue Lawrence – approached the PowerUs network for collaboration and with the suggestion that PowerUs would make a short movie that would be shown in the EASSW conference in Milan 2016. We were thrilled about this opportunity and applied for funding from the EASSW. The purpose of the project reported here has been to make a film about service user involvement and gap-mending methods in Social Work practice from several European countries. We wanted to share examples of good practice and to inspire teachers from all over Europe to increase their collaboration with service user organizations in social work education. The film was shown in the EASSW conference in Milan 2015.

Approximately 700 participants from over 40 countries attended as the film introduced the conference.

PowerUs consists of teachers and researchers from schools of social work and representatives from service user organizations in seven European countries (www.powerus.se). Two main strategies has been developed within the network – a strategy that has been developed in the UK of mainstreaming service user (and carer) participation in all aspects and stages of social work education, and a strategy that has been developed in Scandinavia of developing joint courses for social work students and students from service user organizations. Both these strategies are presented in the film.

The gap-mending concept is an analytical tool that helps teachers, researchers, students and service users to reflect upon what, in their practices, increases, maintains or mends gaps between policies, services and professionals – and of course - service users and students. Gaps exist in a context. Contextual knowledge is essential in gap-mending reflections, as well as a good understanding of existing gaps. Gaps can be maintained because of prejudices based on social work's categorization of people, because of language barriers, because of institutional hierarchies and the roles we have created for people within them. They can also exist because of lack of knowledge. Multiple perspectives on different social issues offer a more complex picture. A step in this direction can be the power of narrative when people become a part of writing their own history, and stating what they think should be seen as the problems.

Within the network of PowerUs, there has been a focus on the people who receives services in social work practice, and a dedication to including their resources and experiences as important and equally valued knowledge in the joint learning processes. The gaps between social work professionals (teachers, researchers on one hand and practitioners on the other) and the users of services can be significant, and a lot of efforts have gone into understanding how language barriers and power differences can be overcome. In the film this is explored and communicated.

Description of the process of implementation

A journalist student from Lund University (Lisa Blidnert) made the film in collaboration with teachers from Lund University. She spent several days in Lund to get familiar with the concept of gap-mending and the teaching strategies developed there. In Lund she also met teachers from Denmark and South Africa. After having filmed students and teachers in Lund, she travelled to Lillehammer for a couple of days to film their practice. Finally she went to London and met with students and teachers from London (South bank University, and Brunel University London, and members from the service user organisation, Shaping our Lives) and from Durham University College. She made the film cutting in collaboration with PowerUs members. The final version is a 13 minutes long film that can be seen on Youtube:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QExM_aA2Mus

The film shows that co-production of knowledge is possible when service users and social work students interact on mutual and equal grounds. It also shows that this is possible in different countries. One important issue, which is discussed in the film, is how gaps can vary between

different contexts, and how it is always important to reflect upon what encourages or challenges these gaps.

The different activities has occurred in the following order:

Activities of the project	
Spring 2014	Sue Lawrence suggested that PowerUs should make a movie for the EASSW conference in Milan
Autumn 2015	PowerUs was granted EASSW funding. Teachers from Lund contacted a journalist student and made a plan in collaboration with other PowerUs teachers.
February 2015	Lisa Blidnert spent a week filming students and teachers from Lund, Copenhagen and South Africa, in Lund.
March 2015	Lisa Blidnert travelled to Lillehammer, Norway to film and interview students and teachers from social work and from service user organisations.
April 2015	Lisa Blidnert travelled to London to film and interview students and teachers from Durham New College, from South Bank University and Brunel University London, as well as service users from Shaping Our Lives
May 2015	The film was put together
July 2015	The film introduced the EASSW Milan conference.

A discussion of outcomes and/or feedback to the project

After the film was shown in the EASSW conference in Milan, PowerUs members had many opportunities to talk to teachers from all over Europe. The PowerUs members tried to be more

visible by wearing “Mend the gap”-T-shirts, which made them easy to find. Many of the viewers said that they kept thinking about whether, and how such a practice would be possible in their own countries. Since this moment, PowerUs has had many requests from teachers in other countries to join the PowerUs network. This has led to new meetings between PowerUs members and those who want to start a gap-mending practice, for instance, in the Netherlands, Belgium and France. The EASSW organisation has written a Memorandum of intent that will be signed by PowerUs and by EASSW for future collaboration with the aim of encouraging service user participation in the schools of social work connected to EASSW. This will include joint efforts in the planned conference in Paris 2017.

The project has also meant that participants from PowerUs can see themselves in a bigger perspective than their local practice, and that they together can contribute to a discussion about a necessary change in social work practice and education. The film was introduced in the Milan conference by a service user from Sweden (Malin Widerlöv). She made a short presentation, thanking the EASSW for giving service users such a privileged platform. She was also active in other presentations during the conference. Within the PowerUs network, we discussed the difficulties of funding service user participation in conferences like EASSW, and we also talked about the importance of preparing and funding participation of service users in the conference in Paris 2017.

The film “Mend The Gap – A challenge for social work education” was first shown in Milan, but has since been used in other settings such as other international and national conferences and within social work education settings. It has been a good starting point of discussions about gaps that exist in social work practice and how they can be overcome.

Conclusions

The PowerUs network has concluded that EASSW has been a powerful and helpful partner in giving service users a voice in discussions about social work education. The many conversations and encouraging contacts that we have had during and since the Milan conference, show the awareness of a need to include service users in transforming the services. When groups that do not usually collaborate develop projects and knowledge together, a curious and humble attitude towards “the other” is called for. Many of the adjustments that has been made over the years in the practices of the PowerUs network, has been done because of an increased understanding of how the activities should best be framed, so that the lasting result will actually lead to mended gaps in society. The academic role of the teacher, or the researcher in such interactive processes is challenging and rewarding, but differs from more traditional approaches. Working with gap-

mending methods can never be seen as quick fixes or mere techniques. Such work takes a lot of dedication to the change process – a process that has to be given the time and resources that are required for sustainable change. To include service users in the development of practice and of research also awakes some ethical questions. Issues of power and ownership must be discussed and involvement should not be tokenistic, but meaningful to all parties. This must be stressed if the inclusion of service users becomes more common in other schools of EASSW. The PowerUs network was established as a Leonardo-project financed by the EU. After the initial finances stopped the network has kept growing and is active in developing both research and new educational programmes. This makes the collaboration with a strong organization like the EASSW even more important. It is important that the promising work with involving service users in the social work courses can be sustained and developed further. We hope that the growing partnership with the EASSW will be an important frame for developing the gap-mending principles further.

We have learned that in some countries, like the Netherlands, so called “peer teachers”, or “experts by experience”, are already collaborating in social work education in different ways. In other countries social work education is much more expert oriented, and teachers tells us that they would not know whether service user organisations exists in their countries. It has been very useful to get more insights and new contacts through the opportunity to show the film in the EASSW conference.

Lund 2016-03-29

Cecilia Heule

International coordinator of PowerUs

The final report should be sent by email to: applications@eassw.org