

Abstract

The publication describes the practice teaching and the learning research done at Praksis, Unit for Social Work Education and Research in Helsinki, Finland. Praksis realises the long standing dream of passing university teaching to public sector social work environment. Praksis began its operation in the Helsinki Social Services Department's Western Social Service Centre in 2005. It is a joint project between the Helsinki City Social Services Department, the Department of Social Policy at the University of Helsinki and the Heikki Waris Institute, which is now a part of the Centre of Expertise on Social Welfare in Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The publication concentrates on the first years of the project, 2005-2007.

Praksis combines social work practice learning, client work with adults, research and developmental processes. Learning, knowledge production and practical social work advance each other and produce new ways of learning and knowledge as well as analyses on social work. Analyses made on client work at social office and theoretical knowledge concerning social work have been used together in planning the teaching material. The material has been used at social office in training new social workers and in developing processes.

The practice teaching period "Client work skills", which is a part of the Social Work studies at the University of Helsinki, is annually organised at Praksis. The social workers and university instructor in the Praksis project are the practice teachers of the course. During the course, students learn basic elements of social work with adults, interaction skills, social work assessment and methods of documentation in authentic context. Individual psychosocial work is emphasised as a framework.

The students are directed to reflect client work and to locate their own development with the aid of different teaching methods. Teaching proceeds as learning tasks, workshops and small group work, individual guidance as well as self-assessment and peer evaluation, which are in accordance with the client work process. Video taping of client work is also used in teaching. The background theories for learning are constructive learning, situationality and critical reflection.

The purpose of the learning research done at Praksis has been to develop practice teaching. In addition to this, we have wanted to find out what kinds of effects teaching methods and teaching in a real life setting in a

social office have on the students' learning. The learning diaries of students in the 2005 course have been used as material for the research. Etienne Wenger's (1998) social theory of learning has been used as theoretical framework. Learning was examined as a negotiation on the significance of social work skills. The results emphasised the significance of participating in the work of community of practice. The results also emphasised the students' efforts to reach the skills and ideal work methods needed in social work through their own client work. The students formed their own community during the course and their learning was best characterised by mutual commitment and common effort. Learning tasks, that support negotiation of identity and that combine analysing one's own experiences, feedback and support from others as well as reflections on most common discussion emerged as important.

Plenty of student feedback is collected during the course. The students' evaluations of the courses from years 2005-2007 were very good, and partly excellent. The feedback tells that the opinions on social work and clients changed and became more positive. The clients became more human in the students' minds and the students noticed how different the people and life situations that social workers face are. A professional identity became concrete and contemplations on it found new depth.

Key words: Social work, client work, social work skills, practice teaching, practice teachers, students, university teaching, Etienne Wenger, social theory of learning, social office, social work with adults, teaching methods, Helsinki Social Services Department, University of Helsinki