Inquiry-Based Learning in Social Work

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Research-led teaching is designed to give students the opportunity to engage with their learning process and develop the skills needed to build their professional identity through active participation in the scientific cognitive process. Here in particular, social workers need *research-oriented behavior*, hermeneutic competencies and reflexivity in order to master the imminent requirements of case comprehension and case processing in a professional way.

13.1 Research-led Teaching – Central Aspects

From a *subject-scientific* perspective, learning is understood to be a social, subjectively justified action, embedded in the respective social relations. Learning processes are therefore not extrinsically available and, at best, can be supported by others. Perceived action problems that are to be overcome in order to secure or expand the individual capacity to act represent the starting points of learning processes (Holzkamp 1995). Elaborating on this, Joachim Ludwig (2014) assumes that, in addition to learning processes, research activities also begin with the perception of current action problems and – in the event that this is accompanied by the development of knowledge – ideally results in an expansion in

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social participation. He therefore argues in favor of designing a "teaching in the format of research" (Ludwig 2014, p. 12), in which the teaching content can be linked with students' action problems in order to develop behavior-influencing questions, in the course of which students can participate in scientific cognitive processes.

According to Wolfgang Fichten and Hilbert Meyer (2014), student research is only realized if the collection and evaluation of the data has been done in a methodologically controlled manner in accordance with scientific standards. Learning processes that are intended to go beyond a mechanical practice of data collection and evaluation require consistent reference to the subject, as well as critical engagement with the researchers' (own) research practice (Fichten and Meyer 2014). Against this background, the present article will summarize, as *research-led teaching*, all of the teaching settings that seek to link research and teaching, and that invite students to actively engage in the process of generating scientific knowledge. The range extends from courses in which it is possible to integrate student learning (and research) questions into the discursive debate on epistemological foundations and research methodologies to the formats of students' direct involvement in real research projects, for example within the context of teaching research projects.

Research-led teaching should, in principle, address all students, not just those who see their future career path in science. By critically considering and applying specialist and methodical knowledge, it is possible to acquire key occupational qualifications. The focus will be on skills required for method-based action – for the analysis and critical classification of the resulting findings – in each case with the goal of being able to form one's own position, including in relationship with the professional community. Reflecting on one's (own) cognitive process simultaneously promotes conscious responsibility for one's own learning processes. For the introductory phase of the course of study, Ludwig (2012) emphasizes the goal of accompanying students from the learning culture that characterizes school into the scientific research culture as well as of introducing them to the specific subject culture. Associated therewith is the challenge that students learn to differentiate between everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge in the future, and ideally be able to use both forms of knowledge productively.

13.2 Social Work – Reflexivity and Hermeneutic Competence as Central Developmental Goals

The central task of the bachelor's degree in social work is to prepare students for very heterogeneous and complex fields of work, which are characterized by ambiguity and inconsistency. The professional actors face the challenge of having to grasp the specific problems of the addressees of social work in a differentiated and contextualized manner and to open up scientifically justified options for action on the basis of a professional working alliance (Oevermann 2013).

Despite available planning strategies and methods of action, social workers cannot handle life praxes that have become critical in a standardized way if they wish to be

professionally active. Rather, they must fundamentally consider each individual case unto itself, but also grasp that case in terms of its situatedness in the social milieu in order to be able to make appropriate recommendations for action in accordance with the specific life praxis. At the same time, they are called upon to tolerate recurrent antinomies and uncertainties, and to process these by relating them to one another (Oevermann 2013; Becker-Lenz and Müller-Hermann 2013). The development of a professional identity therefore requires a highly reflective approach to the knowledge acquired (Dewe and Otto 2012) and also includes the capacity for critical reflection on existing power structures and embeddedness in the form of societal disciplinary measures (Oevermann 2013).

At its core, professional action in social work practice is based on a complex process of *understanding the case* based on the inductive-deductive interplay of a case analysis; over the course of this analysis – however it may be organized – processes for providing assistance must be kept dynamic. Those who are professionally active must therefore always reassure themselves of the appropriateness of the options once selected. Both the primary case information and the subsequent (self-)reflection process about the course of the case are based on the same professional approach, as outlined by Ulrich Oevermann (ibid.).

Thus it is initially an issue of recognizing and understanding the idiosyncrasy, the agents' inherent, subjective horizons of meaning. It is only in the next step, the reconstruction of the case structure, that the challenge becomes to identify the generalizable patterns hidden within it and to make them accessible to methodologically motivated processing, while recognizing the realized inner logic. The necessary central capability can be understood as a capacity for self-reflection and enables the specific relation of scientific knowledge and professional action strategy in socio-pedagogical practice (Schmidt-Wenzel 2012). Consequently, the practice alone can become the venue for professional activity that must constantly be rearranged.

13.3   Research-Led Teaching in the Study of Social Work – An Overview

Although research in social work has a long tradition (Miethe and Schneider 2010), Thomas Rauschenbach and Werner Thole (1998) critically scrutinized the research culture of social pedagogy in 1998. They call for stronger profiling as well as a scholarly debate on research in the subject as well as for supportive basic conditions for expanding research, with an eye towards the relevance of research to formation, stabilization and recognition as a scientific discipline. In the meantime, a social-pedagogical research landscape has established itself. It has a variety of research approaches (Schefold 2012), as well as a lively discourse on its own research practice, which grapples with the requirements for social-pedagogical issues, for example (Oelerich and Otto 2011). These developments have and still do influence the academic education for the professional field of social work.

Thus, research-led teaching has long since played a role in shaping higher education instruction for degree programs in social work and is echoed in various teaching formats. *Teaching research projects*, which allow students to work on research questions

independently by incorporating their previously acquired knowledge and methodological knowledge, are very popular. They are supervised in this learning and research process by instructors. The structure and configuration of the project's contents are very heterogeneous (e.g. Schimpf and Göbel 2015; Pichler 2009; Schmitt 2007). However, *internships* are also used to carry out student research projects, which are then flanked by research-methodological seminars (e.g. Griesenhop and Hanses 2005). *Research workshops*, on the other hand, are places where students should be supported with mutual critical exchanges, especially during data analysis (e.g. Reim and Riemann 1997). In addition to these teaching formats, which allow students to conduct research themselves, there are courses in which students grapple with the research methodology of research projects that have already been carried out in critical-reflective discussions (e.g. Riemann 2010).

Three essential goals are pursued when incorporating social-pedagogical research in the study of social work, according to Gisela Jakob (2005). Firstly, students become familiar with relevant research methods that will enable them to critically classify future scientific studies in terms of their cognitive value. Secondly, collaboration in (student) research projects allows students to become familiar with and take on the role of researcher, and to thereby reflect on potential correlations between their own biographical experience and their subjective actions in the research process. Thirdly, by implementing qualitative-reconstructive research methods in particular, students can further develop their capacities for analysis and self-reflection, which are important competencies for future professional practice in the field of social work. Here, this must not result in a shortened transfer of research methods to action methods. At issue instead is preserving the open, self-reflective mode of knowing developed over the course of qualitative research for future professional practice (ibid.).

The focus on qualitative-reconstructive research methods in the study of social work (Jakob 2005; Kricheldorff 2010) is due, inter alia, to the tenets and principles of these methods. In the tradition of qualitative research, complex life situations must be grasped from the perspective of those who have been researched in order to subsequently reconstruct the subjective contexts in the course of the assessment and analysis, taking into account their social interconnection. In teaching research projects in which qualitative research methods are applied, students already have direct access to potentially unfamiliar living environments within the context of their data collection. This insight can mean a broadening of perspectives for them with reference to the existing diversity of social reality. The reconstruction and analysis of those living environments is done from a reflective distance within the context of the assessment (Hanses 2012). The dominance of qualitative research methods in the study of social work is also reflected in the literature, which presents examples of teaching formats utilizing research-led teaching (e.g. Schimpf and Göbel 2015; Schmitt 2007; Griesenhop and Hanses 2005).

In addition to the generally emphasized importance of action and reflective competencies, Ingrid Miehte and Johannes Steher (2007) stress that participation in teaching research projects fosters the independence of students, who (must) plan and perform the research process autonomously. While freely selecting the research question may be

perceived as especially inspiring and supports the development of an intractable research attitude, commissioned research is faced with the challenge that the differing interests of clients, researchers and subjects must be taken into consideration in the research design (ibid.). In research-led teaching settings, instructors should primarily function as advisors who support students, especially when faced with difficult situations, so that errors and problems can be perceived as possible learning approaches.

13.4   Practical Example: Core Format of Research-led Teaching in the Bachelor's Degree Program in Social Work at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam

A comprehensive concept for research-led teaching was developed at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam (FH Potsdam) for the bachelor's degree program in social work, which allows all students to approach the subject matter being learned from an explorative perspective throughout the entire course of studies in teaching formats that are anchored in the curriculum. All students take part in the two-semester workshop at the beginning of their academic studies. In the fourth semester, students complete a supervised internship. In the last two semesters of study, they choose between an instructor project and a student project.

13.4.1   Core Format of Workshop

Since the winter semester of 1996/1997, the two-semester workshop has been implemented as a mode of a structured degree program phase in the module system for the degree program in social work at FH Potsdam, and thereby connects three foundational perspectives that can scarcely be discussed independently of one another. For the sake of clarity, however, this separation is temporarily carried out here.

Firstly, the module supports student socialization in the general *research and learning culture at an institution of higher learning*, which, as a rule, clearly stands out among previous learning experiences within the context of the institutional acquisition of knowledge. The group, which meets once a week for a full day (known as the "workshop day"), forms at the start of the semester based on the individual decision in favor of one of six available framework topics.

The core goal in the second concern of the workshop module is to allow students direct access to the *subject culture of social work*. How does one speak in theory and how does one speak in practice about the societal problems inherent in social work? How does one behave and with what professional justifications? Where do those who practice the profession see themselves?

And thus the third concern of the workshop module has already been formulated: *direct work with the subject matter in a research-led teaching mode*. After a theoretical and methodical introduction, students work on a self-chosen issue. They approach the subject

matter in an interest-led exploratory movement and test their methodological and subject-related knowledge for the first time. Students not infrequently come up against unexpected obstacles in research practice and are confronted with the current limits of their own abilities in the course thereof as well. A central teaching task of instructors is to help students learn to acknowledge failures and wrong turns as unavoidable, even logical stages on the way to occupational professionalism and that these can be used as opportunities for development.

13.4.2 Core Format of Internship

The fourth semester is the practical semester within the degree program in social work. Students must go about finding an internship placement that is suitable for their (learning) interests early in the process. "University day" takes place once a week, during which students leave their institutions to participate in supervision classes and practical supervision seminars in alternation. Both courses complement one another as spaces for exchanging opinions with other students, as a podium for clarifying current problems in which – committed to its original intention – the focus of supervision is on advising in case-specific action problems and the involvement of the individual.

Practical supervision seminars, on the other hand, seek to clarify structural and subject-related methodological questions. During these consultations, the student practice projects in particular are on the horizon. This is because students are required to initiate, carry out and, ultimately, evaluate an action or a research project. Students can freely select the topic and method for these projects, however. If the focus of these research projects is on empirically researching a subject from the current field of practice, action projects deal more significantly with the implementation of concrete project ideas in the respective institution, for example organizing an exhibit, a theme day, etc., while the research orientation is only indirect.

13.4.3 Core Format of an Instructor/Student Project

At the end of their studies, students have the opportunity to pursue their current learning and research interests for two semesters. The theory-practice module offers two different modes for this, which allow a possible tie-in to students' interests, to some extent to varying degrees. On the one hand, there is the chance to carry out what is known as a "student project" in relative autonomy, in collaboration with other students. On the other hand, it is possible to work on an "instructor project," which, as the name already suggests, is based on the notion of a corresponding initiative of the respective instructor.

We will first outline the model for the student project here; the model allows self-determined learning in accordance with one's own interests like no other didactic concept in the course of studies so far. Thus, within the context of the student projects, which start

in the fifth semester, it is possible to engage intensively with a topic identified as a problem in a student working group and work on that topic from a scientific perspective. In this context, students work independently with a free time schedule and with minimal instructor support, which becomes an issue when an actual need for advising arises. As a general rule, such needs are of a methodological or conceptual nature.

Within the context of so-called instructor projects, students become part of a scholarly cognitive process under the guidance of an instructor, said project either focusing on an action problem that must be solved in practice, or that pursues a specific research question within the context of empirical social research. In contrast to the student projects, there is a significantly more intensive collaboration between students and instructors in the case of the instructor project, since both are directly involved in the same working process, working cooperatively on a single project.

The findings and benefits of the work and research processes completed in the course of the student or instructor projects are presented for discussion at the end of the sixth semester both in the form of detailed written reports, and in the form of presentations that are often accessible to the entire university (e.g. as exhibitions or at conferences that are based on the project).

13.5   Conclusion

The exemplary depiction of teaching formats and the mediation contexts on which they are based show that research-led teaching has the potential to allow students to be exposed to knowledge that is oriented towards their interests right at the start of their studies. A series of general requirements both for the basic conditions and for the agents involved can be formulated for the design of these teaching settings. In principle, all of those involved, both instructors and students, face the challenge of engaging in an open, uncertain learning and research process. While the students actively contribute to the project, formulate their questions and ideas, and work autonomously on the jointly coordinated steps in the research team, it is the task of the instructors to assist the students and tolerate their potential self-will, and not prematurely provide their own expertise and methodological knowledge (cf., for example, Miethe and Stehr 2007).

The presented teaching formats from FH Potsdam provide all of these creative spaces and give students the opportunity to participate in scientific cognitive processes via a reflective engagement with relevant bodies of knowledge and research methods, thereby creating the foundation for the development of their own professional identity. Against this backdrop, the formats for research-led teaching in the bachelor's degree program in social work that are established in the curriculum actually serve an orienting function, even for other disciplines. Utilizing this potential, including in the sense of interdisciplinary work has currently led to the idea at FH Potsdam of allowing students in various disciplines to conduct research on a current social problem that they select themselves over the course of the first and second semester.

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