

ID 005: Work Integrated Learning through R&D Projects: A Case Study of Student Participation in an Integration R&D Project between Uddevalla Municipality and University West, Sweden

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Abstract

This paper offers a proposal for a new practice theoretical approach to the research agenda. It discusses some of the existing practice theoretical approaches as well as indicates what we believe should be the future focus of practice theoretical research within work and learning. The paper furthermore discusses how we could combine a subject and a relational focus on leadership practice. A pragmatic approach to leaders' learning is discussed as a potential future research approach that could allow us to alternate and shift between a *leadership-in-practice* perspective and a *leaders-practicing* perspective. In conclusion, some of the implications of such a methodical focus are discussed for both leaders and organizations. First, we will take a closer look at the different understandings of learning. It is discussed how these understandings have shaped our approach to work. This paper presents an example of how the concept of Work Integrated Learning (WiL) is practically integrated into two R&D projects at University West (UW) in Sweden. WiL is the overarching profile at UW, both in terms of research and education.

The empirical component focuses on the R&D projects that actively include and integrate undergraduate and graduate students from various disciplines, to work together with researchers and experts in civil society. The R&D projects are concerned with what knowledge is needed and how integration worker competences are induced and worked with to support integration of immigrants into society when a variety of governmentally supported activities have emerged. The project involves different professional groups with different knowledge domains, and the challenges the project are scrutinising are multi-faceted as well.

To address the challenges of the projects, we identified a need to involve the knowledge, methods, terminology and expertise from different disciplines, as well as from various professions and sectors. The project design is based on the co-production of knowledge where all actors jointly contribute to each other's development. We work in an inter-sectoral and interdisciplinary manner, where everyone contributes to the project, making the performance of the project an arena for innovation, collaboration and public benefit. The results and insights we develop will be of importance for education of municipal staff, as well as for the development of integration activities and the professionals involved. In addition, the results will contribute to the development of theories and knowledge that are important for both the profession-specific knowledge domains.

We work with joint seminars, workshops and R & D circles and through the exchange of ideas, reflective conduct and active participation. The students, researchers and professionals can thereby gain knowledge and experience that reaches beyond the conventional in-class education. This paper analyses how WiL can develop working styles that enhance learning and improve academic quality in higher education.

Introduction

University West, located on the west coast of Sweden, has a national task to develop the research profile of Work Integrated Learning (WIL). This research is carried out as part of our vital research centre LINA (Learning in and for a New Working Life), of which the authors of this paper are members. The research is done in collaboration with partners in civil society to develop knowledge, skills and working styles that are based upon mutual interests. (University West, 2017).

This paper presents one such example of a research and development project collaboration. The overall aim of this R&D project is to improve the health status among newly arrived (refugee) immigrants, through integration efforts by relevant actors in Uddevalla municipality. For this purpose, the integration office in the municipality collaborates with the researchers (the authors) at University West. This paper illustrates how the concept of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is practically integrated into the R&D project.

The empirical component of this paper focuses on how the R&D project is used to actively integrate students from various disciplines, as well as the public professional stakeholders, into a practical experience of how to develop and use knowledge- skills in a learning process. For this purpose, various combined research- and knowledge creating activities are conducted by the students and staff, with the support from the responsible researchers. Hence, this paper focuses on the development of knowledge, skills among students and professional staff included in the project.

Integration and health status among refugee immigrants in Sweden

The "Health-promoting integration project" discussed in this paper is an on-going research and development project conducted by University West in close collaboration with Uddevalla municipality. The project focuses on improvement of health in relation to integration work, through various professional stakeholders within the municipality.

Sweden has for many decades employed a generous migration policy. The migration flow to Sweden has, however, changed over time. After WWII, Sweden received a large flow of labour migrants in the 50's and 60's. With a more strict Swedish migration policy applied in the 70's, the labour migration flow was drastically reduced. In the 80's, the migration flow changed character and became more oriented towards refugee migrants. A large group of refugees came as a result of the Iran-Iraq war. In the 1990's another large wave of refugees came to Sweden, fleeing the war on the Balkans. Other large refugee groups that have come to Sweden in recent decades include people from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Somalia. With the war in Syria, Sweden again received a large flow of refugees. In fact, during 2015, more than 160.000 refugees came to Sweden, by far the largest number of refugee immigrants in Europe in relation to the population size of the country (SCB 2016).

Even if Sweden in 2016 decided to apply a more strict migration policy, the country today still has a very large number of newly arrived refugee immigrants that are to be integrated into the Swedish society. After receiving a resident permit in Sweden, it is largely the responsibility of the municipalities to fund and organise language training, housing, school, adult education, health care for the immigrants.

Upon arrival in Sweden, the refugee migrant seeks asylum. During the process period of applying and (if accepted) receiving a resident permit, the migrant stays at specifically designated accommodation places organised by the national Swedish migration board. When the migrant has received a resident permit he/she

is allowed to move to any location of their choice in Sweden. Many immigrants find their own accommodation with help from relatives and friends. This means that many newly arrived migrants seek to move to the larger cities, as these are more attractive in terms of family/cultural connections.

However, in many cases, the migration board assist with accommodation to designated municipalities in Sweden. The allocation (municipality) is decided by the migration board, and all municipalities are required to accept a certain number of immigrants every year. For doing so, the municipality receive a fixed amount of funding from the state (Migration Board) during a period of two years to cater for the additional cost involved in organising the establishment for the migrant. Thereafter, all eventual costs related to assist with the establishment of the migrants is to be covered by the municipality (Migrationsverket, 2017).

Refugee migrants in Uddevalla Municipality

Uddevalla municipality is a rather “typical” medium sized town in Sweden with a total population of around 55.000 inhabitants. The municipality estimate that the current net population increase of around 700 people in 2016, will continue at the same level for the next 10 years. The absolute majority of this population increase consist of newly arrived refugee immigrants. These migrants are partly coming to Uddevalla as a designated location decided by the Swedish Migration Board.

However, statistics indicate that Uddevalla municipality also seems to be a regionally comparatively popular destination for settlement among these newly arrived immigrant groups (Uddevalla Municipality, 2017). Furthermore, empirical data collected by the project indicate that the majority of these people have migrated from Middle East (primarily Syria, but also from Afghanistan, Iraq, Eritrea and Somalia). Many of these migrants have traumatic experiences, with relatives being killed, homes destroyed and families separated. Furthermore, and slightly different from previous migration waves of refugees coming to Sweden, a substantial part of this recent migrant group have a comparatively low an education level, ranging from non-schooling to secondary level.

Hence, the task to integrate this heterogeneous migrant group into the local society reveal several complex challenges for the municipality. The municipality shall assist in providing accommodation, language skills, education, health care support and employments, all with the overall goal to integrate this population group into the society. This is naturally a complex and difficult task that requires knowledge and skills of professional staff within and between the municipalities’ different departments.

Health promoting integration work in Sweden

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of physical, mental and social well-being. According to this definition, health is understood not only as the absence of disease or powerlessness, but as a resource that actively strengthens the individual's capacity. Research indicates that an individual's state of health depends on a variety of factors, often out of the area of health care and care. Both WHO and the EU therefore recommend that a health perspective is integrated into all policy areas of integration. This means that health is not seen as a separate issue, but rather as a transversal perspective that needs to penetrate efforts, approaches and regulations into all areas of integration work.

Poor health status among refugees is partly linked to experiences in the home country, and the move to a new unknown country and culture. Research shows that health status can be improved if proper support is given, for example by strengthening the social network and providing structural support for the individual during the

establishment into the new society. Hence, to provide efficient integration work requires good cooperation between the professional stakeholders involved.

Also in Sweden, the health status among newly arrive immigrant groups is distinctly poorer compared to the majority of the population. With a large migration flow to Sweden in recent years, this dividing trend have expanded, and will become even more evident in the years to come. Hence, there is a large consensus among public servants and the newly arrived immigrants concerning the need to develop efforts, increase knowledge and find ways to achieve both enhanced cooperation between the actors to improve integrative health efforts (Socialstyrelsen, 2010).

To support integration of immigrants into society, a variety of publicly supported activities have emerged in Sweden, aimed to facilitate immigrants' sense of belonging.

Also, there might be health issues that most likely are needed to take into consideration when refugees move to another country. That can for example be more hand-on needs to have access to health care, psychologist or physiotherapist. Equally important is the access and understanding of accurate information about the establishment process, and the refugees knowledge and understanding of their responsibilities and rights.

When it comes to integration work, some municipalities have begun pushing for adopting aspects of health and well-being in the integration work with immigrants. The R&D project used in this paper is one such example.

Poor health status is naturally influenced by several different factors. Some factors, are difficult to improve, while other factors that affect our health conditions in terms of living environment, work, education, financial conditions and social networks can be changed to the better. Furthermore, practical experience and previous reports show that there is a connection between poor health and long establishment time among immigrants. In order to reduce this so-called health loss among newly arrived immigrants, all parts of health promotion needs to be lifted in the establishment process. (Socialstyrelsen, 2010).

A divided community is characterized by exclusion. To become integrated into the society is not the least relevant in the contemporary Swedish society, characterized by increasing social differentiation and increased individualization. One important aspect is to provide opportunities for people's participation in different social communities, which creates conditions for an increased open and mutually inclusive society. An open society is characterized by including all individuals in education, housing, labour market, as well as consumers. If the individual is excluded from a subsystem, such as the labour market, the opportunity to participate in other areas is also reduced.

In both political discussions, educational evaluations and research contexts, questions about the role of society in the inclusion and education of people with foreign descent is being increasingly debated. This applies not least to integration work in social services, schools and in many other contexts where people often encounter immigrant people who may experience themselves excluded from society.

A work integrated learning approach

This paper discusses the concept and implementation of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as a multidisciplinary approach used to develop knowledge and skills among relevant stakeholders to enhance health promoting efforts for newly arrived immigrants in a Swedish municipality.

Our conceptual approach of WIL is formed within a socio-cultural perspective that enhances the individual professional stakeholders learning within different place and professional contexts of collaboration. Our WIL approach is hence to strengthen these contexts of professional praxis, to explore experiences and develop new knowledge and skills among the stakeholders. Professional contexts of collaboration consists of (or are created) groups of professional staff that share a joint task or common interest, which create and develop knowledge and skills through interaction. Within the common context, the participants have a mutual overall goal, towards which they can use their different experiences and knowledge to learn from each other (Lave & Wenger, 1999; Wenger et al, 2002; Arthur, 2016).

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is in this perspective used as an umbrella term that describe relations and interests in assessment practices, across a range of academic disciplines that integrate formal learning and workplace concerns. Moreover, for us it is a research area, and as such it focuses on learning and knowledge relating to work that bridge between learning and the application of knowledge. Olsson (2004) regard WIL as a perspective from where one can scrutinize how knowledge is developed and applied in practice.

It is worth underlining that the position between work and education implied in WIL is not restricted to labour work placement. Instead, there are many different practices along a continuum from more theoretical to more practical forms that are of interest in WIL, for example NGOs. However in relation to the workplace, the intention in this study is to scrutinize and reflect on experiences and to develop and refine conceptual understandings. These are combined and integrated in activities in institutions, work, academic studies and formal and informal learning.

We focus on issues related to how professionals at municipal level can develop knowledge and skills according to the work with helping immigrants to integrate into the society. This involves issues of how professional, institutional, historical and cultural boundaries are challenged and changed, and the interplay with understandings of what constitutes professional knowledge and skilled behaviour in integration work. For this purpose, the study is of a multidisciplinary character. A team of researchers with specialization in public health science is engaged, as well as a cultural geographer with specialization in migration and segregation patterns. Two pedagogical researchers are also engaged, one with specialization on integration work and one have inter-professional and inter-institutional cooperation as a specialty.

In this paper, we present and discuss the WIL process used by university students coming from different fields of study, as well as professional municipal staff who as stakeholders in the development of health promotion for newly arrived immigrants to Uddevalla municipality. A large focus of the project is devoted to organise public staff (main stakeholders) from various department into workshops and R&D seminars. In these sessions, stakeholders with different professions work together to identify challenges and solutions that reaches beyond the traditional sectoral structures.

Students learning process through WIL

WIL is a fundamental integrated approach in the R&D project. As such we actively included students in various educational/research activities. As one component of the project, we advertised positions as student project co-workers. The idea with a student co-worker is to provide an opportunity for the students to work with a R&D project that is related to their field of study. The student is to work approximately 15 percent of full-time, given a proper salary for the work. A total of 10 students were in this way recruited from the International Programme

for Politics and Economics (IPPE) at University West.

The students should through this work activity receive knowledge concerning public administrative work related to integration, and also obtain practical skills of collecting and compiling empirical data. In this particular case, one of the criteria for being selected as a student co-worker included the capability to fluently speak Swedish, and have knowledge of language and culture of at least one of the main languages that was prominent among the immigrants groups in Uddevalla municipality.

The students conducted interviews, using an in-depth questionnaire consisting of more than 70 questions. Each interview took about 45 minutes and the respondents could, with assistance from the student co-worker, answer in his or her mother language. Since the target group was primarily newly arrived immigrants, the interviews were conducted in connection with the municipal educational centres, established to cater for newly arrived migrants with a residence permit to learn Swedish language and culture.

In total, about 120 responses were collected and filed into a project data base. This material was thereafter used for information and analyses for the coming workshops and R&D seminar with the professional stakeholders.

Furthermore, the project was presented at different under-graduate and post-graduate programmes, where students were given the opportunity to participate in the project by writing their thesis work within the framework of the project. A total of eight students from different programmes joined, including the fields of social pedagogics, political science and public health. This made it possible to study different phenomena from different theoretical perspectives, all of which were of great importance to the project. Through the project, the students gained access to empirical settings where they could do observational studies, document analyses and interviews with both professionals from different departments and people who had immigrated to Sweden.

The students and the four senior researchers met for joint multidisciplinary workshops approximately every three weeks, where challenges, theoretical perspectives, analytical methods and preliminary results were presented and discussed. In part, it can be seen as a form of group supervision, but it meant, in particular, that the students were allowed to explain and motivate their own opinions and decisions for others who were interested in the same phenomenon but coming from different educational fields. Explaining what was taken “for granted” was an eye-opener for everyone. At the same time, the workshops meant that everyone was learning from each other, just by meeting different knowledge domains, theories, etc. This can be seen as a metal case where everyone learns from each other.

When the different theses were completed and examined, the project arranged a seminar at the municipality to which all the professionals, politicians and media were invited. Each student had about 45 minutes to present his or her study, and all participants also had the opportunity to ask questions. It turned out to be highly appreciated by everyone, and a lot of developing discussions occurred when different professional groups, politicians and professionals met and the students' studies received attention and laid the foundation for exciting discussions about what their studies meant for departments development. At the same time, this was an occasion where the students who were presumptuous workers showed their knowledge of presumptive employers.

Professional knowledge through WIL

In relation to the project goals, a focus group is naturally the professionals who work with integration issues at different departments in the municipality. The project aims to use and develop these stakeholder's knowledge, competence and experiences as to provide new ideas and proposals for how the municipality's health promoting work with newly arrived immigrants could be improved.

In this project, we decided to bring professionals from different departments within the municipality together so that they could meet and work together to identify the challenges and possibilities to develop municipal activities related to health promoting integration work. By bringing together professionals from different departments and disciplines, we actively worked together in workshops and seminar to overcome sectoral boundaries that conventionally exists in the public sector. Furthermore, we actively engaged the professionals to jointly discuss and identify challenges and solutions using their shared competences and experiences.

We used different challenging complex "themes" as a starting point for each workshop and seminar. These "themes" were selected based on previous research finding, and more primarily the results obtain from the responses of the questionnaire collected by the student co-workers. During the sessions, the municipal professionals for example discussed cohesive challenges of health status, primary care, school and adult education, housing, belonging and exclusion, and language and cultural barriers.

This is still an on-going part of the project. During the latter part of 2017, the project are bringing together more than 30 participants in 2 workshops and 3 R&D seminars. The participants work in multi-disciplinary groups, and present and discuss different topics of interest in a concluding seminar session at each workshop. All information is collected from the groups, and the entire sessions are filmed as to keep record of the results discussed.

By developing multi-sectoral preventive work and activities, the project strive to reach a goal where the people working in the municipality can identify the need, and provide the most suitable support, to newly arrived immigrants. In so doing, the immigrants can receive correct support early on to enhance the integration process, and thereby reduce the factors causing poor health situations.

Concluding comments

The competence of staff working with immigrants must be sufficient to draw attention to signs and signals from the target group, which is a matter of competence. How professional knowledge is developed and mediated in integration work is a central issue in this study. One can, like (Thăng, 2004) argue that knowledge is personal, but also manifested and shared between people in activities. These activities are however not context-less; on the contrary, context is here understood as an integral aspect of practices and activity systems that becomes an identifiable whole which one can act within. As such, there are, as Säljö (2010) puts, no neutral context, they are always situated and can only be understood within the activity system they are a part of. It is in the interaction between human and context we create and use intellectual/linguistic and material/technical resources.

Our conceptual multi-disciplinary approach of WIL is formed within a socio-cultural perspective that enhances the individual professional stakeholders learning and creation of knowledge within different place and professional contexts of collaboration. We mean that all inclusion work should be conducted from a process-

oriented participatory perspective where each professional is seen as an important actor for the joint development of knowledge.

In this project, the focus is on issues related to how professionals at municipal level can develop knowledge and skills to assist immigrants to integrate into the society. This involves issues of how professional, institutional, historical and cultural boundaries are challenged and changed, and the interplay with understandings of what constitutes professional knowledge and skilled behaviour in integration work.

During the work process, the participants have reflected upon the need to find new ways to enhance integration into the local society. By working together over departmental- and disciplinary borders, they have widened the knowledge base, and received a more open and broad understanding of the challenges involved, and thereby also possible solutions.

Even if this project is still on going, the researchers can already see that the professional municipal participants seek new solutions that reaches beyond the traditional sectoral structures.

The involvement of students into an on-going research project, have given them practical oriented multidisciplinary oriented knowledge and skills, reaching beyond the traditional classroom education. To independently, under supervision, make interviews and questionnaires have given the students experiences of methods of data collection and analysis, conducted in a real situation involving the actual people concerned. Also when doing thesis work within their respective fields of study, the multidisciplinary approach with supervision and research seminars including supervisors and students from various fields, have enhanced the thesis and students understanding of complexity and applicability of study results in the real world. Furthermore, by connecting students with professional stakeholders and local politicians, they have gained knowledge, experiences and networks that most likely will benefit the students' future career on the labour market.

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