A mind for learning:
Merging education, practice
and research in social work

Edgar Marthinsen[1]

Abstract: Social work practice is increasingly subject to scrutiny: from politicians and tax payers want to see value for money and from social work recipients who want respect as well as services that are appropriate and responsive to need. These pressures, together with educational changes across Europe, place emphasis on evidence-based social work practice. This paper gives questions the foundations of evidence-based practice and makes the case for an approach that interconnects reflexive practice with the principles of the learning organization. By such an approach practitioners may engage in generating knowledge rather than simply applying less relevant knowledge generated elsewhere.

Key words: evidence-based practice; the learning organization; reflexive practice.

Introduction

This text[1] is situated in two major discourses of relevance to social work. One concerns the development of comparative and similar education programs throughout the world. The other concerns the role of science and the 'scientification' of the political world which legitimises public spending by claiming that practice is evidence based. Both discourses are involved in a power struggle between epistemological paradigms: one being a phenomenology supporting ideas of communitarianism, the other being set against a neo-liberal, atomistic new-positivism (Taylor, 1994). These paradigms will not be elaborated in this article, but I will illustrate how a 'mind for learning' may be dependent on a learning organization with certain qualities and tools that enable the organizational structure to extract knowledge from practice.

1. Associate Professor.
Address for correspondence: Dept. of Social Work and Health Science, NTNU, 7491 Trondhem, Norway. edgar.marthinsen@svt.ntnu.no

Education and research

European countries are working to implement the Bologna declaration of 1999, and must realign their formal education system to comply with the pattern of a three year bachelor, followed by a two year masters and a three year doctorate. This system incorporates a performance points system which enables students to move between different countries and still build an education approved in all countries. Social work has not everywhere been a mainstream academic subject , its main concern being professional training. Now, as a part of this changing education system and with a growing concern for research in practice, the discipline must adjust to academic measures and rules of merit. To meet the Bologna standards, three and four year courses have to be fitted into the bachelor, master and doctorate system. Thus, the new bachelor degree should transcend professional training and also prepare students for academic careers.

In some countries like Norway and Sweden, social work has a long academic tradition. Postgraduate studies in Norway date back to 1974, and the Swedish doctoral programmes have already resulted in more than 25 professors in many different institutions throughout the country. Finland also has a strong academic tradition in social work and is perhaps the first to institutionalize research into practice. Nonetheless, the Scandinavian countries, like others in Europe, have to adjust to the bachelor-master-doctorate system.

Many of the former Eastern bloc countries developed studies in social work during the early transition period, and are now moving fast into the Bologna system. Many of their teachers are now in doctoral programs and working to become accredited as professors so that they themselves can offer post graduate programs as well as research programs. The bachelor curriculum has to include the elements required for graduation from a master program, as there are as yet no specific masters programmes available. Thus bachelor level courses must include more than would normally be the case at this level on scientific method, history of science and philosophy. This enables bachelor students to develop a mind for research and research minded practice. Together with a growing interest in research based practice on a political level, we can see a merging of the formerly separate fields of social work: education, research, and practice.

Politics and values

In today's Europe, social work has been granted a major role in civil societies as they strive for social cohesion and sustainable social environments. Social policy and welfare, although controversial subjects, have become more important in the EU than many would have expected. An aging population, changes in family structure, a large proportion of adults being excluded from the labour market, and many asylum seekers and refugees dependent on public aid are factors which create fears of the emergence of an 'underclass' of the poor (Bauman, 1998; Giddens, 1998). Social work operates mostly with other public services to re-establish people within the workforce, and is given the responsibility for job creation and the rehabilitation and qualification of jobseekers. The task is to empower poor people and turn them into productive citizens. But social work is also involved in securing minimum incomes for the poor to reduce dependency, and plays a controlling role on behalf of society. This means operating on behalf of taxpayers, and under the scrutiny of a public for whom many welfare policies and practices seem controversial. The increasing cost of welfare systems put a heavy load on taxpayers and requires strategies to legitimise and account for spending. Efficiency plays an important role in legitimating spending, and this forces services to evaluate practice and to respond to criticism of disfunctionality and oppressiveness in public institutions.

There is not only a need to become more scientific in developing efficient practices, but also to be able to respond to the democratic voice of the citizen as the user of services. Social work is a discipline that aims at re-establishing people within the social sphere where they may once again experience themselves as recognized and respected. The need for respect and decency seem to overshadow past objectives which were concerned with the meeting of basic human needs. As a result, the focus of public discourse is now on symbolic capital and symbolic burdens. This requires social work to engage in a wider life-politics rather than just engage in traditional questions of welfare. Since values tend to trump evidence, the question of legitimacy is not easily solved by asking for a more research-based practice. This often raises questions of values and politics. Is social work to have the task of taking care of and disciplining the individual or is it to empower the citizen, work to change the social environment and the attitude of others – for example, to work for a more inclusive job market (see: O'Brien & Penna, 1998; Leonard, 1997; Jordan, 2000)?

However the issues are attacked, social work has to respond to the question of professionalism, scientification and the need for its actions to be politically and socially approved. Within this setting of politics and epistemology, social work has to integrate the search for good practice with research and education. Achieving this integration is a new challenge to social workers as well as teachers and researchers.

Social work's response to the challenge of change

In relation to the growing discourse on evidence based research and practice, I have launched the concept of 'a mind for learning'. A mind for learning is to me a synthesis of the idea of 'mind for research'[2] with the more established idea of 'the learning organization'. The reason for doing this is to reach an understanding of practice that does not leave the practitioner as a slave of science, but creates a space for knowledge-making in practice. My suggestion is that by developing a mind for learning, one has to master experience and theory at all levels. By levels, I here refer to levels of knowledge and experience. The young and inexperienced or the new person entering a field of knowledge, is at a *low level*. That means that their background is to a large extent taught knowledge, not experienced in relation to practice.

In order to master experience and theory, the agent in a field of knowledge needs to know how knowledge in the field is developed, and how to interpret the knowledge produced so that he or she is able to reconstruct a critical view of the flow of experience in everyday life. Thus students as well as the practitioner need skills in knowledge production - in the epistemology of the field - to be able to operate at a *higher level*.

In this paper I will try to situate the idea of a 'mind for learning' in the present discourse on evidence-based work. By relating the ideas of (a) evidence based practice with discourses on (b) reflexive practices and (c) learning organizations, I will try to develop an understanding of how research as well as practice can respond to the growing interest in making services more scientific. I argue that the reforms must be based on major changes in practice in fields like social work, not only by learning how to read and implement research – as the evidence school seems to intend. The problem for non-scientific services will not be solved by more focus on research; we must consider how practice can focus on knowledge-making itself and how this can be done reliably and validly. I will argue that this perspective will have consequences for teaching as well as the management of services.

From tacit to evidence-based knowledge

To some extent the idea of a research-minded practice and the related concept of evidence-based work, may be regarded as political rhetoric in support of the persistent idea of more efficient and cost effective services. There is an ongoing debate within the field and with the related fields such as the economic and political, about the content and operationalization of the concepts[3]. In the Nordic debate, critics have blamed the evidence school for

defending new-positivism (Mansson, 2003). This is due to the hegemonic position given to randomized control trial designs (RCT) as the only valid approach. The arguments used in the debates may profit from a more sober look at recent history.

For many years now, we have seen the rise and firm establishment of an approach which we may identify with a focus on qualitative research and critical reflexive sociology. The concept of tacit knowledge has been important in developing a scientific approach to practice, and to bridging the gap between research and practice. The focus on experiential learning, reflection and change surfaced in the social sciences with Schön and his colleagues in the early 1980s. I see this movement as a revival of phenomenology, more than a new science. Schön himself brought phenomenology into the study of organizations and practice with the result that a field formerly much dominated by the idea of technical rationality, gradually came more and more under the influence of the discourse on social construction of meaning (e.g. Kuhn, 1962) 1996; Berger & Luckman, 1967; Foucault, 1966). Some of the concepts, such as tacit knowledge, helped bridge the gap between research and practice, but may also have led to new myths about knowledge and an over-rating of practice- or experience-led theory, without the necessary critical examination of the truth of its claims. Reflexive sociology is itself a rejection of the positivist critique, but it does not necessarily condemn large surveys and data produced quantitatively[4]. While Giddens may represent the sociologist's contemplation of late modernity, Bourdieu and his followers use a wide variety of designs, including large surveys, to capture the practical sense of the agent's response to the system or *habitus* of their social fields (e.g. Bourdieu, 1992; 1998; 2000). The idea of a symbolic capital developed by Bourdieu has proved very useful to social work research, and Marthinsen (2003) developed a corresponding concept of symbolic burdens. Symbolic burdens may to some extent replace the idea of social problems, especially when you consider the burdens related to a late modern society like today's Europe.

One does not have to dichotomize reflexive practices and research-oriented practice – one may work towards a synthesis. One of the identifying traits of positivism was the idea that an objective science based on empirical evidence could circumvent the problems caused by socially and politically biased interpretations of the world (Parsons, 1949). Positivism as an ideology contributed to the position of the natural scientist as the person with the closest relationship to truth, and this became symbolic social capital not only in the hard sciences, but in relation to society as a whole. Scientification was given rhetorical power. The critique of positivism relied heavily on phenomenology as it was based on the social construction of reality. You cannot forget biased values or even set out to remove them from any language

– not even the language of the positivist. Revealing the power play in politics as well as science has been one of the major tasks of a critical science.

Following the critique of technical rationality, came the rise of the strong user – the inclusion of user experience as a feedback to organizations is now the rule. To the professional, the risk of doing wrong must be confronted with a strong focus on ethics. This implies a hierarchy of values, where the value of regarding the service users need for acknowledgement and respect is seen as more important than following the rule book in service delivery. To some extent this is a revival of the conclusion of the Nuremberg decisions after the Second World War (Arendt, 1978). McBeath and Webb (2002) have contributed to the discourse on reflexive practices with the suggestion that social workers need to develop virtues and inner qualities that will work to enable the realization of the good life (eudemonia) of the client. The virtuous social worker should apply intellectual and practical justice, reflection, perception, judgement, bravery, prudence, liberality and temperance. McBeath and Webb support an interpretative practice and research where the dialogue with the user is highly valued.

While the idea of virtues, the acknowledgement of ethics and tacit knowledge may support the practitioner in building up confidence in acceptable practices, these factors may also allow for continuing practices that have no effect. Best practice is not just what is subjectively valued by users, but practices that enable services to meet social and individual needs in acknowledged ways. A very strong focus on the individual experience of practices does not amount to an argument to generalize such experience to the design of the service as a whole. Many resources are probably spent on bad practices. One should not underestimate the need for data on service efficiency in order to develop a more scientific social work practice. There is a need for more advanced systems of management to assist communication. Systems are needed that support quality control of social work, unlike most systems in use which only count clients and serve bureaucratic needs. Social work research based quality assurance systems would enhance the legitimacy of practices. There is a need for systematic evaluation to be used in relation to the management of services on a large scale, and a more developed mind for research and learning may support this development.

The concept of evidence based practice originated within the field of medicine. Sackett focused on two major tasks for evidence based work. One was the need for the practitioner to reflect on his/her own practices. Second, these practices had to be regarded in relation to the best available knowledge in the field. To be able to access the knowledge in the field one had to develop databases where research was available on a grand scale. We have several databases developing today, and these are partly run by organizations like the Cocraine Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration, the latter a database

including social work, the first focusing on medicine. The UK parastatal organisation SCIE manages one of the largest research databases including social work. The ongoing quarrel over research quality seems to have spurred the conflict on method, resulting in the accusations about the rise of a new positivism[5]. This is due to the disagreement about what methods researchers have used developing knowledge (Taylor & White, 2002). The most highly valued method being RCT, randomized controlled trials, qualitative research being devalued, or discredited as unscientific and not eligible for presentation in the databases.

With the rise of new-positivism, there is a tendency for some to discredit practitioners experience (Sheldon & Macdonald, 1999). This double discarding sanctifies the researcher again, leaving the practitioner with the job of finding the best practices on the net – preferably with a manual to download where he/she may tick the right boxes and leave work at the end of the day knowing that all is rightly done. Maybe this is where we should return to the idea of the learning organization?

A reintroduction of the learning organization

Learning organizations were introduced by Senge (1990) as:

> organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (Senge 1990:3)

Watkins and Marsick (1993) argued that the learning organization:

> … was characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles.

The idea is opposed to positivism by its focus on the processes which advance understanding rather than on the attainment of defined goals. Learning organizations expect their people to develop a culture of critique and learning, and thus becomes dependent on a mind for learning as social capital within the organization. To Schön and his colleagues, the fall of the myth about the stable state was an important paradigm shift. Modernism, or rather positivism as a central trait within modernism, was built upon the myth of the stable state. Perceiving the state as a set of institutions in

continuous process of transformation turned this idea around. The idea was that if organizations were regarded as systems in continuous transformation, they could be more easily developed if agents were aware of their own actions (Schön, 1973).

The concept of a learning organization, arises from the critique of positivism. More precisely, available knowledge based on scientific research is always from the past. The situation you are facing is very seldom identical with the research available. The problems with which one is confronted are often complex and their solution requires improvisation. Manuals may mislead you into overlooking the client's needs. The language which carries our knowledge, needs to be interpreted and reinterpreted as we go along. The approach will diffuse into practice rather than being implemented as a developed concept. You apply some of what you have understood, but not all of it. Reason is not technical but relational – you relate to time and place, and to people who acknowledge you and your views. Identifying what is right or best practice, is more like seeking a social space where one can find comfort, rather than applying the best available scientific evidence (Claezon, 1989). A mind for learning should enable the learning organization, and is not about enhancing the learning capacity of the worker. The point of the learning organization is to spend some of its energy on critical reflection on the forces shaping one's mind and decisions. The idea of 'double loop learning' is central to the learning organization, meaning that one does not only reflect upon feedback on practice in everyday life (the consequences observed influence action strategies), but also question the wider historical and time frames for the institution one works within (the governing variables). Just as we are influenced by structure (the time of our lives, the culture and how we are socialized in it) in creating our own life trajectory (this is also true for service users), so we are influenced by structure in developing professional knowledge. A mind for learning, must focus on how our meaning is created and influenced by different forces. In fact it is as much an epistemological turn as it is a shift from ontology. This critical self-reflection as a developing process of the agent, is also a central point with Giddens in his understanding of the relationship between agency and structure. Critical self reflection is a virtue for all agents in late modern society and enables each one of us to manoeuvre through the many choices that must be made in the market of every day life. It is not only about the self as such, but also how we make choices within available knowledge to help us structure our lives. Satka (1999) has used the term 'street level intellectual' to illustrate how social workers have to position themselves within a frame of life politics (Giddens, 1991). It is the responsibility of the intellectual to share knowledge about society with the others (Said, 1994).

How reflexion and critique may be enhanced

As it was first introduced, the learning organization was very much an alternative view on how human capital may be developed through democratic organizations. However, this shift of worldviews did not change the way experience was organized so as to learn from practice. When simple computerized databases were introduced in the early 1990s we tried to implement the technology in social work, especially within child protection (Clifford, Marthinsen & Samuelsen, 1996). At first we had it in mind to gather from practice information about work with clients, but inspired by the cooperation we had with David Thorpe and his colleagues at Lancaster University in England, we started to cooperate with practitioners directly, and had them load their own data. Child protection in Norway at that time really had difficulties serving all referred families and children in due time, but the services did not have reliable monitoring systems to follow the work with clients – all systems were focused on managerial tasks, bureaucratic routines and economy. We set out to study and monitor the work in everyday practice, from morning to the end of day, all week and for months. This enabled us for the first time to transcend the cognitive task of the worker and the managers, and support with knowledge on practice. All client-related actions were monitored and categorized according to how social workers named and framed their practice. About 20 social workers registered more than 6000 actions on almost 500 clients in 6 months. The research revealed how a few of the clients (families) took a disproportionate share of the workers resources. A closer look at this data enabled us to identify these as cases where social workers had to respond to crisis and undertake unplanned work. This led to the postponement of scheduled work, and then to chaos and stress. Management had all their interest focused on the intake of new clients, actions that did not really take much time, but had much cognitive and organizational focus. Presenting the statistics to the office and interpreting the data with the workers and management, led to a new insight that enabled them to reorganize the work. They became aware of patterns of work that were not efficient, and were able to change their routines and practices. Much more attention was given to follow up of clients, and to how the social work with families turned out in relation to care plans. Replication of the study in other services, and with different tasks, showed that the pattern of work practice were revealed after six weeks. More data just confirmed the pattern. The logic of this seems to be related to the work performed: it is the same all over, all year, and with a stable population. Change occurs when there is a major shift in the environment. For example, when second loop learning has taken place and the system changes.

A major discovery from working with this kind of data, was that

management had to focus on social work, not just on the spending of money and the flow of clients thorough the system. They needed information that allowed them to review every case in relation to all cases. To obtain this, systematic evaluation became a part of the care planning. Junior managers reviewed every workers case load, sometimes in team meetings, but also on a personal level at least twice a year. Thus the managers were able to review how resources were spent and how they as a service were best able to succeed with child protection work.

Research on intake and follow up work with new clients, revealed very poor recording practices: it was difficult to extract knowledge producing information from files and case records. An action research project was introduced to develop a 'professional text'[6] that allowed the work with children and families to be followed from day one to closing the case. The systems that were developed are now in use in all child protection services in the city of Trondheim. All cases start with a referral and proceed to an investigation. The investigation may lead to the closing of the case or to a care plan. Work with the care plan is carried out as usual, but the social worker does not write a case record as before where everything that was done was written in chronological order. The memos from workers are saved until the evaluation or a new review of the case. After the evaluation, the social worker should write a professional review of how the case has developed according to the goals set in the care plan, and other important unforeseen events. This text goes into the case record and becomes the data against which the manager may review all the cases in that team. This produces a much shorter case record, with information that is more meaningful than the memos of every day work. When a new case worker takes over she can read a case record that gives the key information without having to filter through piles of information on the case.

The example mentioned here is just one of many under development, that profit from the easily accessible and user-friendly computerized systems made possible by new technology, but is not dependent on the technology. The work of the manager is a vital part of the human/machine system, and the social worker has to be able to write a reasonably good text based on her ability to make professional judgements. It is the combination of humans and machines that enables a learning organization. Managers may do a much better job if they have some basic insight into scientific methods, and know how to extract and validate data from their information systems. This may be done with support from researchers and the knowledge produced may be used for education purposes in college as well as to other practitioners. The system with the professional text allows the services to focus on what works as well as what does not work. The quality of data will be vital if this systematic work with experience is to count as evidence based practice, but it allows for the research to be carried out across all services, and not only by expensive one-off research projects. Instead of implementing research, research becomes a system of feedback within the learning organization. This may be

supplemented by comparison with other relevant knowledge production, but is a quite different process from relying on manuals and consulting international databases with limited relevance to specific offices in specific countries.

Concluding remarks

In my experience, for social workers to develop a mind for learning they need the ability to appreciate their work in terms of relevant theoretical concepts. Knowledge can become textual by understanding the world through conceptualization. Social workers need some basic insight into the paradigmatic struggles - struggles that have informed and formed their minds. They have to reconsider, relearn and develop alternative understandings of the world. They also need to take part in the conceptualization of the practices they carry out, and concepts have to be remade and reinterpreted time after time. A minimum level of research skills must be available to them. New workers have to be encouraged to apply some of the same learning processes as veterans. The world has to be rediscovered by every individual – if they have not previously learned to work with a mind for research or with a mind for learning, the workplace must be responsible for drawing these concepts to the attention of new associates. Some of these processes are as relevant to clients as to workers themselves. The professional text should include the narratives of the parents and children as well as the social workers, and families should have a copy of their file. Service users may be invited to participate in focus groups to reflect on services, or the social workers and researchers may conduct focus group interviews and individual interviews when time and resources allow for a more thorough evaluation. The information gathered may force the social worker to become virtuous in practice as well as in theory. Small services can develop advanced research on their own, but if they can work methodologically, their information is likely to be more reliable and representative. Research institutions (such as universities or colleges) can develop a close relationship with practice by formalizing cooperation on knowledge development. This may allow for an exchange of human capital among the institutions and a true merging of practice, education and research. None of these actions, however, will ever compensate for a real lack of resources. Neither will services be able to solve political problems like poverty or inequalities produced by unfair or discriminatory practices in society. That is why one has to have a look at the governing variables as well as the action strategies of every day life. In the case of social work, the mind for learning has also to include a mind for politics.

Notes

1. This text is a rewriting of a lecture held in Magdeburg April 2004, at a conference on the development of research and education in social work in Europe.
2. You may take a test to check out how research minded you are at: http://www. resmind.swap.ac.uk/. The web page author writes:

   '… practitioners, social work educators, external assessors and students were consulted about their views on the constituent elements of Research Mindedness. The following elements were identified:
   - a faculty for critical reflection informed by knowledge and research;
   - an ability to use research to inform practice which counters unfair discrimination, racism, poverty, disadvantage and injustice, consistent with core social work values;
   - an understanding of the process of research and the use of research to theorise from practice.'
3. A good introduction to the English discourse on evidence based practice and research is given in two special editions of Social Work and Social Sciences Review Vol. 10 (1-2) 2002
4. See Giddens (1991) Bourdieu and Waquant (1992), and Bourdieu (1998). Giddens and Bourdieu both regard themselves as representatives of reflexive sociology and may be said to have very homologous worldviews
5. For an introduction to this debate see *Social Work & Social Sciences Review* Volume 10 (1 and 2), republished in book form as Bilson (2005)
6. This work is presented in English in a lecture held at Lancaster University. You may read it at http://www.svt.ntnu.no/ish/edgar.marthinsen/LECT121198.htm.

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