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# STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MULTI-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION IN A MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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## Abstract

Learning by Developing (LbD) model is based on studying in real working life projects. These projects form an integral part of the students' competence development at Laurea University of Applied Sciences. LbD model provides renewable expertise to all actors.

In the autumn of 2013, 16 students of the Bachelor Degree Programmes in Nursing and Social Services took part in a state-funded mental health and substance abuse development project called "Mental Well-being in Vantaa project" as a part of their studies. The students' experiences of the project work were collected using a feedback questionnaire. Thematic analysis was used as a method in interpreting the results.

The chance to act as developers in this genuine development project supported the students' professional competence development. By working in a project environment, the students improved their interaction and cooperation skills and were able to benefit from the knowledge of various professional groups. Multi-professional collaboration gave the students more knowledge and experience of mental health services in the city of Vantaa and provided a way to achieve concrete development skills.

All students benefitted from the multi-professional collaboration in the project. The LbD model helped to strengthen the students' abilities to respond to future challenges in developing customer-oriented mental health services. Integration of multi-professional project work into the study units produced new expertise, skills and innovations for all participants.

Keywords: project work, learning experiences, Learning by Developing (LbD) model, multi-professional collaboration.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Learning by Developing (LbD) model by Laurea University of Applied Sciences, is based on cooperation with working life. Learning takes place in real development projects which form a basis for the development of the student's professional competences. LbD model creates renewable expertise for all participating actors. All actors participate as equals, producing new competences and personal, professional growth in their varying roles and responsibilities. The characteristics of the LbD model are authenticity, partnership, experiential nature, creativity and research oriented approach. [1], [2], [3], [4]

In order for the multi-professional collaboration, there is a need for defining the questions of responsibility, agreeing on flexible roles, finding practices for creating common knowledge and learning how to interact and work in a team. The success of these factors can be considered also as a challenge of the multi-professional work. The assimilation how to work multi-professionally is proved to be most efficient during multi-professional studies and internships. Multi-professional collaboration requires recognition of a need for a customer-oriented approach and a willingness to work together. [5], [6], [7], [8]

As a pedagogical solution, LbD-model opens the possibility for a multi-professional collaboration between working life, students and teachers from different professions. In the autumn of 2013, 16 students of the Nursing and Social Services programmes of Laurea University of Applied Sciences were given the chance to develop their expertise and participate in the development of mental health and substance abuse services in the city of Vantaa, in a project called "Mental well-being in Vantaa". The project was a part of the "Key to mind"-entity in "Kaste"-project by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. For the Social Services students the studies were a part of Social Influence and Social

Ethics or Responsible Leadership study units and for the Nursing students a part of the Welfare Services in Mental Health Care study unit.

## 2 THE LEARNING PROCESS OF THE PROJECT WORK

Bringing study units and project work together creates the students the chance to learn multi-professional working practices in addition to the goals set for the study unit. Getting to know the skills and knowledge of different professional groups was seen as a possibility to promote one's own learning and skills to work in a multi-professional working environment, as well as expanding respect and appreciation towards other professional groups.

The project collaboration offered the students possibility to get to know and genuinely learn about the mental health and substance abuse service system and the services it supply. In addition, the students had a great chance to participate in developing the services and meet peer counselors, who gave the students valuable knowledge about how the services work and which parts of them still require development. The multi-professional collaboration helped the students to share the professional knowledge they already dedicated and to hear other professions' views on the matter on developing the services.

The goal for the years 2013-14 of the "Mental well-being in Vantaa" project was to promote mental well-being and to develop the mental-health and substance abuse services to match the needs of the service users better. One of the sub goals was to coordinate the plan of the mental health and substance abuse services programme. The students' multi-professional learning tasks were connected to this part of development work.

At the beginning of the work the students were divided into groups of 4-6 students with students from both programmes, Social Services and Nursing. First, the students were introduced into the Mental Well-being in Vantaa and Key to Mind projects as well as into a survey made in the city of Vantaa on arranging mental health and substance abuse services (N=166). The students analyzed the content by classifying the answers to themes and developing these themes into new ideas. The students classified the answers according to themes rising from recent mental health recommendations. Before starting the actual work the students had to make a plan on how to proceed in their work.

The students got acquainted with researches related to the developing ideas and formed a short theoretical background based on the studies. The completed developing ideas were presented in a local mental health association, where service users gave their comments on how to develop the ideas further. The students gave their final reports for the project to utilize.

The students' project work was instructed, supported and made possible by two lecturers of Laurea University of Applied Sciences and the project coordinator of the Mental Well-being in Vantaa project. The work of the groups was instructed through meetings with each group, through a common meeting in the middle of the project as well as through e-mail discussions on the themes of the analysis. The groups worked independently and were responsible for their own schedules and division of work.

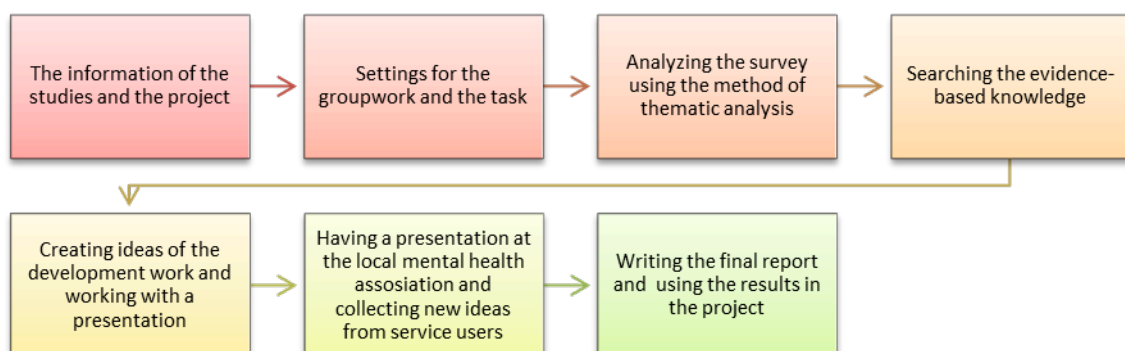


Fig. 1: The process of the project work

### **3 THE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF MULTI-PROFESSIONAL COLLABORATION**

After the study period the 15 students answered a feedback-questionnaire. The questionnaire included six questions evaluating the suitability of project work as a part of the study unit as well as the development of professional skills during the project. In addition the utility of the learning experience and the significance of the multi-professional collaboration at this stage of studies were charted. Two of the questions were based on the Likert scale with five options, where number one marked "strongly disagree" and number five "strongly agree". The students also had the chance to give their ideas on how to develop project work. The answers of students from different study programmes were not separated.

The students agreed the learning experience from the multi-professional project work was very useful. The average of the feedback was 4,07. The answers to the claim "Multi-professional collaboration is important at this stage of studying" had an average of 4,6. The students either "strongly agree" (N=9) or "agree" (N=6).

According to the feedback the students felt project work suited well into the study units. The project work offered the possibility to get acquainted with the mental health and substance abuse services in Vantaa and the students felt they had become genuine contact into working life instead of just sitting in the lectures. The students could influence to social problems in the society by working in a multi-professional collaboration. Multi-professional collaboration sparked discussion and working on the development task required ethical consideration and approach from the groups.

Through the multi-professional collaboration the students received professional knowledge of other branches skills and way of thinking. According to the feedback different ideas enriched the students' own way of thinking. The project work developed group-working skills, research skills, presentation skills as well as patience and adaptation into common activity. A student put in bluntly: "To know how to take into account the knowledge of other branches and to work together in a way that brings out one's own skills/knowledge while also listening to others".

Half of the students wished more time to work together. Agreeing on the schedules was difficult due to the overlapping studies since there was not enough common time for the project work in the timetable. Some students hoped more clearly instructions for the project work or clear tasks for each group. Some students wrote there was nothing to develop in the project work.

### **4 CONCLUSIONS**

From the Mental well-being in Vantaa –project's point of view the most useful aspect of the project was the qualitative analysis done by the students for the answers of the enquiry. The students' developing ideas, based on the themes of the analysis, were fresh and gave an "outside-opinion" on how to develop the services. The Mental well-being in Vantaa project was based on the principles of the Kaste-project, one of which was strengthening the position of the client. Strengthening the position of the client was concretized in the project as the members of the mental health association felt their opinions were valuable when the students presented them their ideas in a meeting. The students had the possibility to bring out the possible lack of quality in the services and to learn how to give reasons for them based on the research data available. This is an important skill for the experts of the future which will also be useful for the whole social and healthcare area, not only for the project work.

The challenges of the project were giving the students' the instructions clearly enough, as well as holding on to the orderliness of the project. Developing actual interventions was not possible in such a small-scale collaboration as this. The students had the possibility to participate in a small part of planning, developing, realizing and evaluating the mental-health and substance abuse services. The collaboration between Laurea University of Applied Sciences and the project was successful and the networking with the students also means networking with the future colleagues.

The project work in Mental Well-being in Vantaa –project, based on the LbD model connected the skills and knowledge, and their development, of the student from Social Services and Nursing programmes and offered a reasonable way to collaborate in a development project. Defining the areas that need development, agreeing on the tasks in advance as well as dividing the leadership responsibility created a good basis for the project collaboration. Through the real development tasks the students engaged themselves highly in the multi-professional collaboration. The project

collaboration offered a possibility for interaction and intercourse between the university of applied sciences, the service users, and the actors of working life.

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