Creating practise based knowledge for knowledge based practice

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Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of knowledge production in today's social work practice. We'll present our thoughts about knowledge based social work. These thoughts are based partly on results from a number of experiments with knowledge production and communication conducted at the social educator's workplaces. The Evaluation Center at Aarhus has worked as consultant on these projects.

We want to discuss the following questions: What does an 'improved knowledge culture' within social work mean? And, by what means can this be achieved?

A joint project between the associations of the employers and the practitioners

Social educators from ten workplaces in three counties in Denmark have for about a year - from 2001 to 2002 - participated in a project about knowledge production and communication. The aim of this multi-site project was to create and experiment with different ways of 'strengthening the knowledge culture' within social educational work.
The project came into being as a collaboration between the National Federation of Social Educators (SL) and the Association of County Councils in Denmark. Yet another work place of social educators from the county of Aarhus is presently working on a quality improvement project, which is also based on funding from these two organizations. Despite their differences, these two associations have an agreement about the aim of these projects.

Eleven Danish experiments of knowledge production and communication:

The participating workplaces are different in size and they work with different target groups.

Still, the challenges and lessons to be learned from these eleven projects are comparable, and we believe count for other fields of social work as well.

The tasks of the experiments have been 1) to produce reliable knowledge, 2) to produce dialogues with the outside world, and 3) to produce local quality improvement. In other words, the experiments have been about how to obtain knowledge based practice within social educational work.

What is knowledge based practice?

The steps towards a knowledge based practice consists of a number of processes. Documentation, or the processes of knowledge production cannot stand alone. Knowledge based practice within social work can be presented as a triangle.

The triangle of knowledge based practice:

Knowledge production

Quality improvement processes

Process of communication
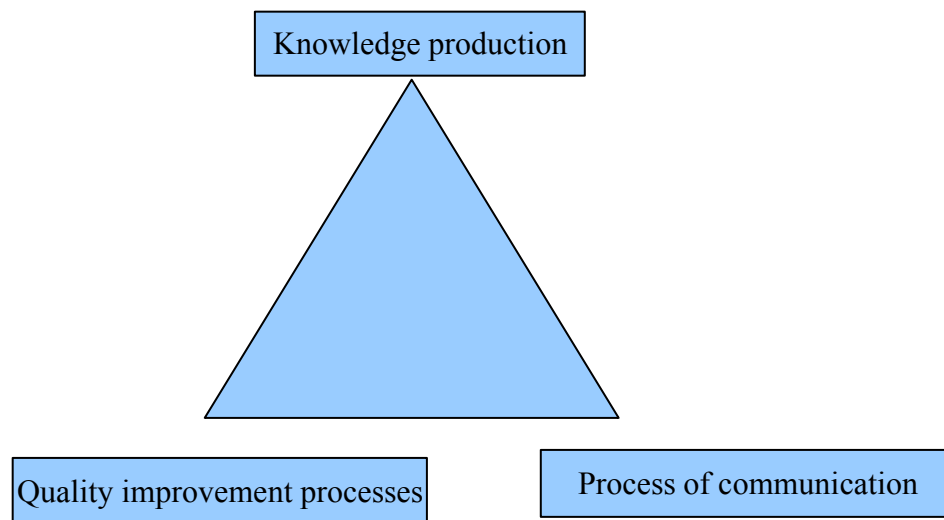
The processes of knowledge production are intertwined with processes of communication and quality improvement. Let us look at the components of the triangle.

Focus on practice
First of all, it is of importance that the social work practice is described. The focus on practice is not always present in today's efforts of documentation. In several of the experiments focus have been on the program logic of the workplace - that is on a description of the interplay

between the practitioners' actions, the output, and the overall objective of the workplace. Thorough descriptions of the actions the social educators carry out increase the potential for learning: If only the outcome of social work is described and documented, you may know - or think you know - what the results achieved with the users were. To be able to learn from this knowledge - and to communicate this knowledge to others - you need a description of the actual actions of the social workers, and the possible connection between action and outcome. Therefore, knowledge of a workplace's outcome has to be combined with knowledge of the specific practice - that is knowledge of whether or not we actually do what we think we do.

1. Processes of knowledge production

When can we speak about knowledge? Knowledge is produced when information is transformed, so that it can provide answers to relevant questions. At many workplaces a lot of information - especially about the users - is collected every day, in writing, by photographs or by other means. But information has to be structured, analyzed, and transformed in order to become knowledge. The knowledge production consists of several processes from focusing the task to the final conclusion. The keyword of the lesson to be learned from the experiments is limitation through all the processes.

At one institution, where they work with severely physically and mentally handicapped, the staff recorded a wide variety of their educational practices and the results hereof. The social educators did not know how to analyse this amount of data. Therefore, they decided for a limited period of one month to record the wakening process of just one of the residents at the institution. The analysis of these thirty descriptions provided the staff with knowledge on their own practice and the reactions of the resident in question. In addition, the analysis made the staff ask new questions about their work practice.

The experiments show that the process of analysis can be a difficult hurdle to overcome. It has often happened that, after a while, one practitioner has ended up doing the analysis by herself, and has prepared it for presentation.

2. Processes of communication

Within much social work there is need of knowledge for the use of very different stakeholders: colleagues from the same or other institutions, the user and the user's relatives, the public in general, administrators and politicians.
Communication processes can be connected to all stages of the knowledge production. The descriptions of the program logic of a workplace may provide an important outset for internal and external dialogues.

One of the participating workplaces, a day care center for mentally and physically disabled adults, invited the social workers from the residential institutions of their users to listen to their discussions about the program logic of the day care center. By the time the social educators of the day care centre had analysed descriptions concerning a few critical cases, the colleagues from the residential institutions were again invited. The results were presented and discussed in this forum. In this way, knowledge production became connected to communication and quality improvement.

During the project period, the social educators were taught writing, information technology, and oral presentation. The experiments show that there is a need for practice in both written and oral communication, and that support from consultants and the like can be fruitful. In the project, forums for communication and dialogues were created through, among other things, seminars. The very fact that people were asked to present a paper often incited the completion of the analysis.

3. Quality improvement processes
Development of the work practice, of the user, or of the organization can be connected to all stages of the knowledge production.
Quality improvement can be gained even as practice is described and knowledge production is planned. This may improve the common understanding among colleagues.
In some of the experiments, the social educators involved the users in the data collection by interviewing them. The interviews lead to new insights and dialogues with the users and had an immediate positive effect on the users.

Moreover, as data is analyzed, dialogues with colleagues or with the outside world, can lead to quality improvement, as, in the process, new questions can be asked. At several of the seminars in the project opponents were invited in order to enrich the discussions.

Results

The processes of systematic knowledge production, communication and quality improvement demand new roles and new qualifications of today's social workers. The social worker or some of the social workers have to be able to:

- Work systematically with methods of knowledge production

- Analyse by qualitative and quantitative methods
- Coordinate projects
- Communicate orally, in writing, and by information technology

The processes towards knowledge based practice also put demands on the organisational structures of the workplaces. The experiments show that there is need of:

- Resources, including time
- Leadership, control of the processes
- Ownership among practitioners
- Forums for communication and dialogue

Discussion

The work towards a strengthened knowledge culture leads to new roles among the social workers. How are these roles best defined and organized. Some qualifications should be found at the workplace, and some can be placed outside or in connection to a network of workplaces.

How does the workplace obtain the capacity to manage the processes of knowledge based practice: What type of organization ensures that relevant knowledge is produced, that it is communicated in the right form in the relevant forums, and that new insights are put into use.

Conclusion

The three components of the triangle of knowledge based practice are connected in several ways. It is important for the learning potential that knowledge is produced on practice as well as outcomes.

The results show that knowledge based practice has consequences for the practitioners and the organization. Ideally, each workplace should have a knowledge management strategy which fits the need for knowledge at that specific workplace *and* the knowledge culture that is there beforehand.

Literature and links

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