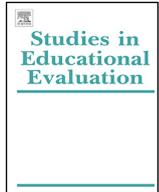




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# Developing narratives as a pedagogical approach to fostering professional interpersonal competences<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined a project aimed at helping students develop professional interpersonal skills. Groups of university students in social work, teacher training, and a student mentoring program for children at-risk participated in seminars where they developed narratives derived from personal experience in interaction with others. The theoretical framework for the project was inspired by the idea of “stories to live by” developed by Clandinin and Connelly. Data for the study were collected from questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. Results indicated that narrative-building activities, when implemented in a structured and consistent manner, can contribute to improving empathy and perspective-taking abilities, developing self-knowledge, and enhancing communication skills.

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Good interpersonal skills and competences are essential for working in the helping professions. Teachers, social workers, health care professionals, and others, who work in constant interaction with clients, the clients' families, and other specialists, should have respect for others, be insightful, compassionate, trustworthy, realistically self-confident, and self-disciplined (Strickling, 1998). The abilities to take the perspective of others, to be empathetic to their needs, feelings, and beliefs and to use moral judgment when working with them comprise just some of the necessary skills.

The Project for Developing Students' Professional Competences carried out at Malmö University has focused on how students can make use of personal life experiences to develop such competences. Teacher education students, social work students, and student mentors in a program to help children at risk, participated in seminars in which they developed narratives derived from personal experience in interaction with others. Narrative-building was expected to lead to self-knowledge and the ability to interpret encounters with others in a multicultural society. The theoretical framework for the project was inspired by Clandinin and Connelly

(1998) who have studied teacher knowledge in terms of personal practical knowledge built on what they call “narratives of experience”. They developed the concept “stories to live by”, which are narratives of experience that are both personal, reflecting a person's life story, and social/professional, reflecting the environment and context in which teachers act. Stories are lived and told, retold, and relived. The assumption is that who we are is intricately interwoven with the lives we live. The initiators of the project felt that a narrative-building approach could potentially be applied in professional training.

Another idea behind the project was to acknowledge students' non-academic skills and experiences and relate them to professional development, particularly with respect to personal practical knowledge. Within the project, which emphasized life experiences rather than academic achievement, students lacking the advantage of a strong academic background were given an opportunity to feel equal to others.

The purpose of the present paper is to describe this project and the evaluation which accompanied it. Two main questions are addressed:

- 1 How did students react to activities of narrative-building and which were perceived as most salient?
- 2 What were the effects of the project on students' professional interpersonal competences?

It should be noted that interpersonal competences and skills are defined differently in different contexts, and include various

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aspects of emotional intelligence (Wloszczak-Szubzda & Jarosz, 2013). In the present study interpersonal competences are defined as self-knowledge (i.e., the ability to recognize one's own emotional states, values, and abilities), empathy (i.e., sensitivity to the emotional states of others together with an attitude toward providing assistance and support), and perspective taking (i.e., the ability to view events through the eyes of all participants). These competences were selected as congruent with the learning goals of the Swedish Bachelor/Master degree programs in education and social work (see Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, 1993).

### Developing interpersonal competences with narratives

The need to develop professional interpersonal competences among students in the helping professions has been written about extensively. For example, in the context of social work education, Waldman, Glover, and King (1999) related to the need to nurture students' capacity for conscious reflexivity, to teach them to value themselves and their ability for making sound judgments, and to help them learn from their experiences. They concluded that social work students need a learning culture which values emotional development alongside intellectual development and that conveys to them that self-knowledge is one key to professional competence. According to Harris (1997), it is imperative to develop self-awareness in students with respect to their cultural background and experiences and how this relates to social work practice. In the context of teacher education Sanger (2008) discussed the need to engage future teachers in a rigorous study of the moral aspects of the teaching profession. Others have related to the multicultural nature of today's schools and the subsequent need to develop intercultural sensitivity among pre-service teachers (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Conle et al., 2000; Hale, Snow-Geron, & Morales, 2008; McVee, 2004). The need to cultivate interpersonal competences and self-awareness is also discussed in the context of medical education (Coulehan, 2005; McMaster, 2007), nursing education (Liimatainen, Poskiparta, Karhila, & Sjogren, 2001; Schwind, Cameron, Franks, Graham, & Robinson, 2012; Urdang, 2010; Wloszczak-Szubzda & Jarosz, 2013), counseling education (Griffith & Frieden, 2000), and service learning (Mitton-Kukner, Nelson, & Desrochers, 2010).

Professional training programs must address the cognitive (knowledge and self-awareness) and attitudinal (empathy) aspects of interpersonal competences as well as the development of relevant behavioral and communication skills (e.g., Perry & Southwell, 2011; Wloszczak-Szubzda & Jarosz, 2013). Academic courses in psychology, sociology, and philosophy are often provided in order to impart knowledge and develop students' awareness of the social and moral aspects of their future profession. Various attempts have been made to instruct with respect to the affective and behavioral domains, and some empirical evidence exists to support the contention that interpersonal competences can actually be learned. For example, both Erera (1997) and Hatcher et al. (1994) found that empathy can be taught, Royal and Baker (2005) showed that moral judgment, perspective-taking, and problem-solving behavior can be enhanced by intervention, and Hale et al. (2008) reported increased empathy, perspective-taking, and self-confidence among teacher in an in-service course.

Examining narratives of experience has been applied in the past to foster interpersonal competences among students entering various helping professions and among those already engaged in those professions (Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Causey et al., 2000; Conle, 2000; Coulehan, 2005; Doecke, Brown, & Loughran, 2000; McVee, 2004). It has also been used in situations of counseling or therapy as a means to promote personal insight and growth

(Bujold, 2004; Taylor, 2006; Ville & Khlal, 2007). Existing empirical data indicates that using narratives in a learning situation can lead to enhanced self-awareness and raised consciousness regarding professional issues in the context of interpersonal encounters (e.g., Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Hale et al., 2008).

The application of narrative-building for the purpose of professional development has taken various forms. Pedagogic practices using narratives emphasize such activities as classroom discussion, sharing in small groups, journaling, cultural autobiographies, and reflection on the narrative building process (Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Causey et al., 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Participatory drama in which the audience can explore different possibilities, solve problems, and propose different scenarios around a situation is another technique that has been employed (Mehto, Kantola, Tiitta, & Kankainen, 2006).

Often narrative activities focus on stories derived from professional experiences in the field (e.g., Conle, 2000). However, autobiographies and "social memoirs" have also been used for narrative development (e.g., Causey et al., 2000). Regardless of the source, narratives are built by telling and retelling stories derived from individuals' experiences with others.

The act of writing down experiences is an important factor in the narrative-building process, as are receiving feedback and discussing the stories with others in a supportive and non-threatening environment (e.g., Braun & Crumpler, 2004; Bujold, 2004; Causey et al., 2000; Ciuffetelli-Parker, 2010; Conle et al., 2000; Doecke et al., 2000; Hale et al., 2008). Joint construction of meaning through discussion enables students to transcend their particular story and to feel identification when listening to others' stories. The narrative emerges over time with repeated writing or telling, often moving from a vague disorganized account to a coherent and insightful view of a situation (McVee, 2004; Ville & Khlal, 2007). This process is facilitated through group discussion.

### Project description

*The Project for Developing Students' Professional Competences* included eight groups of students (two groups in teacher education, two groups in social work education, and four groups of students in a mentoring program for children at-risk) who participated in a series of seminars, each with their own group leader. Groups ranged in size from 5 to 15 participants.

Seminars were carried out during the spring term of one academic year for all groups and continued in the following fall term for the teacher education and social work groups. Overall, the teacher education and social work groups participated in eight seminar sessions and the mentor groups participated in only three seminars. A short description of implementation is provided below.

For teacher education and social work students, participation in seminars was incorporated into their regular study program and was mandatory. Students were given an assignment to come to the first seminar with a personal story they had written down. They were instructed to write a short story about a situation or event they had experienced either recently or in the past that had aroused in them strong feelings, either positive or negative. The story should be about them in relation to one or more others and should have occurred in some context such as work (including temporary work such as summer jobs) or voluntary clubs such as youth clubs, sports clubs, or scouts. During Seminars 1 and 2, each student told his/her story, while the others listened and asked questions or made comments. Group leaders also told a personal story. Students then rewrote the same story from the perspective of someone else in the story and during Seminars 3 and 4 the rewritten stories were presented. Students summarized in writing their choice of perspective in the rewritten story, what happened

in the process of rewriting, and whether the situation could have been handled differently. For example, Anna told of an incident that occurred while working in a factory, and Jenny related a story about an angry customer in the shop where she worked. Group discussions focused on the manner in which the situations were resolved. Anna rewrote her story putting herself in the shoes of her superior at the factory and Jenny rewrote her story from the perspective of the customer.

In the next term, students told new stories in Seminar 5 and retold them in Seminar 6. Discussion focused on how the narratives related to professional behavior. Between Seminars 6 and 7, the education and social work students made an exchange: students in one group e-mailed their stories to students in the other group, received comments on their own story, and sent comments on the other's story. Participatory drama was the focus of Seminar 7. A person's story was presented and he or she became the "director" and appointed the players. Stories were performed twice: initially according to the instructions of the director and secondly in a manner in which group members could stop the performance at any time and make changes. Students also reported on the exchange of stories with the other group.

In Seminar 8 the groups worked differently. Teacher education students discussed criteria for assessing competences defined in the national curriculum for teacher education, such as demonstration of self-knowledge, empathy, and the ability to make judgments. They also engaged in role play around a situation in an educational setting which was devised by the group leader. One social work group devoted the last seminar to a value clarification activity, while the other group discussed the worth of the project. This last group deviated from the common plan for Seminars 5–8, and due to technical reasons and poor attendance, these students had less overall exposure to the narrative-building activities.

Teacher education groups remained essentially the same throughout the duration of the project with respect to both students and seminar leaders. In the social work groups, the two project leaders exchanged groups in the second term in accordance with the regular study program.

From the start, implementation in the mentoring program was planned differently. Mentors were university students volunteering in a well-established local mentoring scheme, who met weekly with a child at-risk. Thus stories relating to experiences with the child and his/her family served as the starting point for narrative-building. The project lasted only one term and included three seminars. In Seminar 1 mentors told their stories, in Seminar 2 stories were retold from the viewpoint of another, and in Seminar 3, mentors reflected on how working with the stories had helped them develop a "strategy for action" and how this strategy could be used in their future profession after completing university studies.

Approximately 20 mentors volunteered to participate in the project, most of whom were students in teaching, social work, and nursing. Since attendance was voluntary and meetings took place late in the day, many student-mentors did not attend regularly.

## Method

Data presented here were collected as part of a larger evaluation study of the project. The research design utilized a mixed-methods approach (see Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2009) in which both qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently. Qualitative data enabled an understanding of processes, operations, and outcomes, while quantitative data focused mainly on measuring project outcomes over time and on providing general feedback on the project. Combining data of different types provided a richer understanding of how participants reacted to the project and of its impact on them.

## Participants

All eight groups of students and their group leaders participated in the study. Overall the study included 61 students and six group leaders. Seminar groups were similar to one another and relatively homogeneous with respect to students' background: 84% were females and 89% had completed secondary education in an academic high school. Teacher education students were in their second term of university study and social work students were in their fourth term when the project began.

## Data collection and procedures

### Interviews and focus groups

At the completion of the project, all group leaders were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews focused on their perceptions of the idea behind the project, their expectations from the project, a description of the seminars (operation, student involvement, and difficulties), their perceptions of project impact on students' professional development, and their own intentions to apply a narrative approach in their teaching in the future. In addition five focus groups were conducted by one of the researchers, each with 5–6 students who volunteered to participate: one focus group for each education and social work seminar group plus one focus group combining participants from all four mentor seminars. Participants in the focus groups discussed the purpose and operation of the seminars, what they liked and did not like about them, and what seminar activities taught them. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and later transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in participants' responses to the project (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Questionnaires

Questionnaires were administered to students at various times throughout project operation. Outcomes with respect to perspective taking, empathy, and self-esteem were directly measured using the *Perspective Taking* and *Empathic Concern* sub-scales of the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (Davis, 1983) and *Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale* (Rosenberg, 1965). In accordance with the original questionnaires, responses scales were 1 – *strongly disagree*–6 – *strongly agree* for *Perspective Taking* and *Empathic Concern*. Typically, responses on *Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale* are on a 4-point scale. However, seminar leaders felt that it was important to enable students to take a neutral stand. Therefore in the present study a 5-point response scale was used which ranged from 1 – *strongly disagree* to 5 – *strongly agree*. Reliability coefficients in this study were:  $\alpha = .724$  for the 7-item *Perspective Taking Scale*,  $\alpha = .650$  for the 7-item *Empathic Concern Scale*, and  $\alpha = .882$  for the 10-item *Self-Esteem Scale*.

The teacher education and social work groups received the questionnaires in three waves: at the start of the project, after the first term, and after the second term. Mentors, who participated in seminars during one term only, received questionnaires at the start and at the end of this term. Results were examined separately for education, social work, and mentor participants using repeated measures of variance.

At the end of each term, participants provided feedback on project operation, as well as subjective assessments of their learning from project activities, by means of questionnaires prepared specifically for this project. These questionnaires contained 11 Likert-type items (response scale 1 – *strongly disagree*–6 – *strongly agree*) and three open-ended questions about what they liked, what they did not like, and what they recommended to change. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the 11 items per project group at the end of

**Table 1**  
Student reactions to seminars, by project group and academic term.<sup>a</sup>

Reactions	Education (N=26)		Social work (N=17)		Mentors (N=10)	
	Term 1	Term 2	Term 1	Term 2	Term 1	Term 2
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
I enjoyed writing my own stories for the seminar.	4.54 (1.10)	4.42 (0.76)	4.29 (1.10)	2.47 (1.25)	4.60 (0.97)	–
I liked sharing my stories with others.	4.85 (1.12)	4.88 (0.52)	4.29 (1.05)	2.93 (1.58)	4.60 (0.84)	–
It was interesting to hear stories told by other students.	5.19 (0.90)	5.23 (0.65)	5.24 (0.97)	4.07 (1.16)	5.50 (0.71)	–
Group discussions helped me better understand different life experiences.	5.15 (0.83)	5.12 (0.59)	5.18 (0.88)	4.00 (1.07)	5.50 (0.71)	–
I felt tense whenever I came to this seminar. <sup>b</sup>	1.76 (1.01)	1.85 (1.19)	–	2.87 (1.46)	1.80 (1.14)	–
The atmosphere in class was always supportive and non-judgmental.	5.58 (0.70)	5.65 (0.63)	4.71 (0.92)	5.20 (0.94)	5.30 (0.82)	–
I really do not understand why I have to attend seminars like this.	2.08 (1.32)	1.77 (0.99)	2.41 (1.66)	3.47 (2.03)	1.40 (0.70)	–
I would recommend attending seminars like this to others.	4.58 (1.36)	4.62 (1.10)	4.06 (1.52)	3.67 (1.68)	5.50 (0.85)	–
I did not like getting comments from others to my stories. <sup>c</sup>		1.65 (0.85)		2.33 (1.11)		–
Participatory drama helped me better understand different viewpoints. <sup>c</sup>		4.48 (0.75)		3.64 (1.69)		–
The concluding discussion made the purpose of the seminars clearer. <sup>c</sup>		4.36 (1.25)		3.00 (1.46)		–

<sup>a</sup> Scale: 1 – strongly disagree–6 – strongly agree.

<sup>b</sup> This item was omitted accidentally on the social work questionnaire.

<sup>c</sup> Item added at the end of the second term only.

each term, and written responses to open-ended questions underwent thematic analysis.

## Results

### Perceptions of project activities and their effectiveness

#### Students' perceptions

Information obtained from the feedback questionnaire (see Table 1) showed that students in all three groups were quite satisfied with the seminars at the end of the first term (with means ranging from 4.06 to 5.58 on a 6-point scale). At the end of the second term, the education students were generally more satisfied than the social work students: high ratings were maintained in the former group while mean scores dropped in the latter group.

Despite these differences there was a similarity in the way students rated the items. Relative to themselves, students in all groups (teacher education, social work education as well as the mentor program) gave the same three items the highest ratings: they claimed that the atmosphere in class was non-judgmental, they found it interesting to hear the stories prepared by others, and they claimed that group discussions helped them better understand the situations depicted in the stories. Moreover, relatively speaking, all groups claimed that they understood the purpose of the seminars and that they would recommend them to other students.

Focus-group discussions provided additional feedback. Students in all groups mentioned that, although this was not always easy, they found it particularly interesting to tell their stories from the perspective of another and those who took part in participatory drama and/or role play noted these activities as fun and enlightening. Some examples of their comments:

"The first story that we wrote about ourselves, maybe we did not have to write it down, but just talk about it. But the one we wrote from the other's point of view – that was very good. You could see the difference between your feelings and the others".

"I liked the role play. I do not like to play in front of people, but it was fun and good experience. It was good to take the other people's perspectives, and see things from other people's point of view".

"It was interesting to hear the stories. On the negative side we were too many. At the same time we did not want to miss any of the stories".

There was a general agreement that the exchange of stories between the teacher education and social work groups during the second term did not provide additional insight and was too time-consuming.

A few students found the activity of telling and retelling stories too personal, and felt uncomfortable sharing their experiences with others. Some students mentioned having difficulty coming up with a "good" story. Some students thought that not all the stories told in the seminars were suitable: some were too neutral, others too simple, and as one teacher education student said: "*Some stories just did not touch me*". They claimed to learn more when a story told of what they perceived as a significant encounter. They also complained that there were too many stories to hear and not always enough time for meaningful discussion. Others felt that too much time elapsed between seminar meetings. Students in all groups commented that sharing stories created a sense of intimacy among the participants which made it easy to speak frankly and also to accept comments from their peers. As one education student said, "*I am very comfortable in this group and I know that if I make a fool of myself, no one will judge me*". Social work students felt that the second term did not contribute much because it was too repetitive of the first term and in the case of one group because it lacked clear structure.

#### Group leaders' perceptions

Faculty leaders of the seminar groups reported similar responses to project activities. They were pleased with the way the students were able to take the role of another when retelling their stories or acting them out and emphasized the importance of relevant and engaging stories for the success of the seminars. They reported that class atmosphere tended to be "warm and friendly" and through the narrative-building activities they could witness the students becoming a cohesive group. As one group leader noted, "*Relating personal experiences brought group members together and created an atmosphere of camaraderie*". On the negative side, they felt that class time was insufficient to enable everyone to participate, sessions were far apart, and group

**Table 2**  
Self-reports of learning, by project group and academic term.<sup>a</sup>

Aspects of learning	Education (N=26)		Social work (N=17)		Mentors (N=10)	
	Term 1	Term 2	Term 1	Term 2	Term 1	Term 2
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
I learned a lot about myself through seminar activities.	4.96 (0.87)	5.04 (0.87)	4.53 (1.46)	4.20 (1.08)	5.30 (0.95)	–
I learned to see and understand situations from the perspective of others.	5.00 (0.80)	5.19 (0.85)	4.24 (1.48)	4.13 (1.06)	5.20 (0.79)	–
I learned new aspects of my future profession.	4.69 (0.97)	4.81 (0.94)	4.12 (0.70)	3.93 (1.16)	5.10 (0.99)	–

<sup>a</sup> Scale: 1 – strongly disagree–6 – strongly agree.

discussions could have been further developed, particularly with respect to connecting the narratives with students’ future professional roles. Leaders in the mentoring groups added that their main regret was that participation in the seminars was voluntary and that too few mentors took part.

*Project outcomes*

Information regarding project outcomes was obtained from both subjective and objective sources. Subjective information included students’ self-reports on feedback questionnaires and in focus group discussions as well as group leaders’ observations as conveyed in the interviews.

As part of the feedback questionnaire, students were asked to rate the extent they learned about themselves, their future profession, and taking the perspective of others. Table 2 presents the results for each group by measurement wave. Results indicate that teacher education students and mentors consistently reported a greater degree of learning (means between 4.69 and 5.30 on a 6-point scale) as compared to social work students (means between 3.93 and 4.53).

Thematic analysis of comments made in the focus groups and in the interviews with group leaders revealed that student learning took place in five areas: self-knowledge, perspective taking and empathy, appreciating the benefits of sharing with peers, communication skills, and the ability to gain knowledge from non-academic experiences.

(1) *Self-knowledge*: Students felt that they acquired a better understanding of their own behavior and how that behavior influences others around them:

“I think about myself and how I influence others – about when I meet someone and if I smile, I will get good feedback” (education student).

“I understood how much I talk and how much I need to control situations” (social work student).

“I discovered that I make prejudgments of people” (social work student).

“It forces a degree of self-insight about how locked up your thoughts often are. It is a way of examining your own mind” (mentor).

Self-knowledge was also noted by the group leaders. For example one group leader said: “*The stories and the responses of the others to the stories made them see themselves in another light*”.

(2) *Perspective taking and empathy*: Both students and seminar leaders frequently talked about the perspective-taking activity and its effect on the students’ awareness and sensitivity to

others. The following are some examples of the students’ comments:

“I learned how people think when they don’t think like me. What is right for me is not necessarily right for others. There are always two sides or more and one needs to respect that others think otherwise” (education student).

“There is always another point of view and as a teacher you have to remember that. When you work with children and their parents, you have to think not just about yourself. You have to think twice. You are different and meet people from other backgrounds” (education student).

“When I communicate with someone I try to think about what the other thinks. I got into an argument and could not get angry because I kept thinking about what he is thinking. I think that this is good” (social work student).

“[I learned] to see different perspectives, to take the time to see things differently” (mentor).

(3) *The benefits of sharing with peers*: The students became cognizant of the advantages of discussing personal experiences with others. They were aware that they were functioning as a support group for each other and highly valued the feedback that they received from their peers.

“It was relieving to hear that others have similar experiences. What I learned is that it is a good thing to tell others when you feel that something is not right” (mentor).

“I saw that you can get strength from small groups and open up to others” (social work student).

“It was good not to feel alone. Those mentors who did not participate lost out on a great experience” (mentor).

(4) *Communication skills*: Several students mentioned that they had improved their ability to organize their thoughts and present them before a group:

“I learned to speak in front of people when I told my story” (education student).

“I learned to write down things and tell them in front of a group . . . We had not been writing before and some of us do not like to speak in front of other people. But you need to do this in your work” (social work student).

Social work students, in particular, also mentioned having improved their ability to listen to others:

I have learned to listen and am more attentive to what others have to say before I interrupt. I listen more carefully

**Table 3**  
Empathetic concern, perspective-taking, and self-esteem, by testing time and project group.<sup>a</sup>

Measure	Testing time	Education (N=20)		Social work (N=15)		Mentors (N=10)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Empathetic concern (scale 1–5)	Pre-test	4.15	0.44	4.26	0.43	4.36	0.39
	After first term	4.34	0.40	4.19	0.38	4.16 <sup>b</sup>	0.32
	After second term	4.46	0.36	4.30	0.33	–	–
Perspective taking (scale 1–5)	Pre-test	3.90	0.36	3.90	0.49	3.82	0.51
	After first term	3.94	0.38	3.92	0.48	3.62	0.46
	After second term	4.12 <sup>b</sup>	0.40	4.13	0.47	–	–
Self-esteem (scale 1–6)	Pre-test	4.46	0.78	4.71	0.80	4.67	0.40
	After first term	4.73	0.83	4.51	0.76	4.81	0.51
	After second term	4.78 <sup>b</sup>	0.84	4.69	0.80	–	–

<sup>a</sup> Scales: 1 – strongly disagree–5 (or 6) – strongly agree.

<sup>b</sup>  $p < 0.05$  for Wilk's Lambda in a test of repeated measures of variance.

and let others speak. This is considerable progress for me. I need to hear my clients.

The seminars taught you how to argue in a calm way. Everyone was talking and listening to each other even though we did not always agree. I have used this in my everyday life. You listen to others better. A conflict might just be a misunderstanding

(5) *Learning from non-academic experiences*: Another outcome was students' awareness that they could gain professional and personal knowledge from their non-academic experiences. As one group leader noted: “[they] learned that things they do outside the university can teach them a lot” and as one student mentor commented: “I think that you can learn something from every person you meet. That thought is something I brought with me to every meeting with my mentor child and I think that I have learned things from her, even though she is only 10 years old”.

Project impact was also examined objectively by means of the perspective taking, empathetic concern, and self-esteem measures described earlier. Repeated measures analysis of variance was carried out on each psychological measure for each experimental group.

From the data in Table 3, it appears that teacher education students improved in perspective-taking and self-esteem, social work students made no statistically significant changes, and mentors decreased in empathetic concern. Although not statistically significant, education students also improved in empathetic concern, social work students improved in perspective-taking, and mentors improved in self-esteem but decreased in perspective-taking.

## Discussion

The main purpose of *The Project for Developing Students' Professional Competences* was to use narrative-building activities to develop interpersonal competences of self-awareness, empathy, and perspective-taking among students who will enter a helping profession at the end of their university studies. Educators generally agree that students preparing to enter helping professions need to develop such competences, but they also acknowledge that development of these competences is not always systematically addressed in university curricula (e.g., Harris, 2002; Urdang, 2010). Therefore an intervention such as the project described here is a welcome initiative.

As pointed out earlier, research shows that interpersonal competences can be improved through guided reflection and practice, and that using narrative-building which entails writing,

rewriting, and group discussion is one way to accomplish the task. Students in the present project engaged in such activities: they wrote and rewrote stories deriving from their personal experience, they told and retold their stories in class, and they discussed these stories with their classmates with respect to different perspectives and alternative outcomes. Group leaders gave reflection tasks to be applied in connection to the stories and group discussion encouraged critical analysis of the situations and an exchange of interpretations. In addition students engaged in less common narrative-building activities, such as participatory drama, role play, and an exchange of stories with others outside their study group.

One of the innovations of this project was the focus on everyday occurrences, rather than on professional or semi-professional situations. Results here show that experiences of this kind can be used to develop narratives which have significant professional implications. However, a consequence of using every day experiences is that the connections between the stories and professional competences may not always be obvious and students require guidance to make these connections explicit. Each group leader made an effort to do this through directed class discussion. Despite their efforts, students rated learning new aspects of their future profession lowest as compared to other areas of learning. Any future application of narrative-building for professional development should consciously include activities to help students make these important connections.

Aspects of implementation differed from group to group. Mentors participated in only three seminars, while the others met in eight seminar meetings. Social work students and teacher education students were at different stages in their professional training. Group leaders changed in the social work groups but remained constant in the teacher education groups. In addition groups differed with respect to size and during the second term one social work group deviated from the original plan of operation. However, despite the variation in implementation, and the subsequent differences among the groups with respect to exposure to narrative-building, the subjective reactions of all students to project activities were actually quite similar. The atmosphere in class was perceived by all as supportive, relaxed, and non-threatening which encouraged them to feel at ease and to be open and frank with their peers. Students particularly liked changing perspectives and retelling their stories from another perspective. Group discussions were viewed as vital to understanding the situations depicted in the stories and perceived as contributing to group cohesion. Participatory drama and role play were considered “fun”, but were less often mentioned as significant learning experiences. The general consensus was that the exchange of stories between groups was unsuccessful.

The activities of the first term were generally viewed as more significant by the education and social work students, probably because it was the first time many of them had looked at themselves in relation to others in an objective and analytical way. However, activities during the second term appeared to have reinforced and enhanced processes initiated through the original telling and retelling activities. Gains made at the end of the second term by the students on the various measures attest to the importance of continued work with narratives over time. Thus reinforcement is necessary and additional activities beyond the basic telling and retelling of stories need to be varied and planned such that they build upon previous ones. For example, the focus of narrative-building could begin with everyday situations and move gradually to more professional encounters. Moreover, the process could be continued by incorporating reflective narrative activities into academic courses in sociology, philosophy, and psychology.

It is interesting to note that although mentors had the least exposure to the narrative-building process, their reactions to the seminars were very positive. Compared to the other groups, they reported the greatest degree of learning from the seminars and were often the group that was the most pleased with seminar experiences. These results possibly derived from the fact that they had built narratives around events that had recently taken place in a meaningful context (i.e., mentoring) and with which they perhaps continued to cope. Lessons learned from seminar discussions and activities were of immediate relevance for them and could be “field tested” in their on-going contact with their mentee. These findings suggest that narratives which have particular significance for students may enhance the cognitive and emotional processes that narrative development sets in motion.

Indeed one of the issues which arose out of the evaluation findings is the quality of the narrative. Both students and group leaders talked about the need to have “good stories”. Further research is needed to determine what makes one story more suitable than another. Is it the way the story is built up and thus catches the listener’s attention, is it the ease with which others can identify with the situation it depicts, or is it how well the content relates to the students’ future profession? Understanding this can help group leaders better define instructions for narrative-writing, assist them in making seminar discussions more meaningful, and enable them to more fully exploit the positive aspects of narrative-building for the professional development of their students.

Of the various groups, teacher education students were quite satisfied with the project and exhibited the greatest degree of change on objective measures. The fact that they received more intensive treatment (as compared to the student mentors) in more structured seminars (as compared to at least one group of social work students) is probably significant. However, other factors may be at play here, most particularly the fact that they began the project at an earlier stage in their professional training. Effective use of narrative-building may need to take into account differential needs of students who are studying different professions and who are at different stages of their professional development.

## Conclusion

Given the duration and intensity of intervention, project goals were achieved to a reasonable degree. Participating students tended to acquire greater self-knowledge and improved their sensitivity to the perspectives of others. Moreover, they learned to share their insights with their peers, they improved their communication skills, and they began to understand how professional growth can be achieved even through the analysis of everyday situations. Nevertheless, both the evaluation and the project were limited in scope. Methodology limitations include a

relatively small sample size, lack of a control group, and lack of follow-up after the seminars terminated. The project itself was limited in so far as participants were essentially teacher education and social work students. Future projects with students and beginning professionals in other areas such as counseling and health care could substantiate the findings presented here and contribute to a greater understanding of the educative potential of narrative-building.

According to [Bullough and Pinnegar \(2000\)](#), narrative-building and analysis are forms of self-study in which participants examine their private experience in order to gain insight and solutions for more public issues while at the same time examining public theory to gain insight and solutions for private trial. The main aim is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and determine. The results of this study indicate that this approach can be applied with relative success in the context of professional development, particularly when it is implemented in a structured and consistent manner, spread over a period of time, and provided at a suitable stage in the professional training program.

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