Theme: Collaboration and Communities in Teaching and Professional Practice

"Online peer-to-peer counseling as a new collaborative format in studying social work"

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1   Walking the talk of lifelong learning – the context

The Bologna Process in higher education emphasizes opportunities for lifelong learning. The online social work degree program "BASA-online", offered jointly by a collective of higher education institutes across Germany, provides such opportunities. Students who have relevant work experience in the realm of social work but lack a formal degree or training can enroll in the program, study alongside their job in a combination of online modules and face-to-face tuition and obtain a bachelor degree in social work.

A flexible study format is an important step in creating lifelong learning opportunities. However, offering flexibility in time and place does not leverage the special potential of students who combine academic studies with work experience. In addition to flexibility, the educational design needs to carefully integrate the work experience of the students, enrich their practice and enable the students to reflect critically on their day-to-day practice (Bäcker et al.2011). Ideally, the educational design should foster links between academic and professional discourse as well as links between the academic community and the professional community (Arnold et al. 2011).

The paper at hand describes and analyses an innovative educational design that is implemented within the study program [1] with the aim of interweaving theoretical knowledge and practical work experience. It features a new format for online collaborative learning: peer-to -peer counseling online.

2   Integrating work experience with academic theory – the module

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[1] The design has been elaborated and refined using the results of the research project USuS (Study Trajectories and Study Success in Bologna Programs), funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Germany (BMBF) for 3 years. This long-term empirical study combines quantitative and qualitative elements to generate ideas for improving the study programs under investigation.

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The study program "BASA-online" in general and the online module under investigation in particular follows the concept of the "reflective practitioner" (Schön 1983) and the idea of "communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). The relevant work experience of the students is used as a starting point to explore and expand associated social work theories. In an iterative process of action and reflection theoretical concepts are contextualized and students are enabled to reflect upon their professional practice with a critical distance, fostered by academic perspectives. In addition, the student community as such is regarded as a learning resource for all. With a communities of practice perspective in mind, the module is designed with attention to the three structural elements of a community of practice: the *domain,* the academic and professional body of knowledge for social work, is to be constantly refined, building upon the shared work experience, thus relating it to *practice* and creating a network of relationships among students and lecturers, striving for mutual benefit in a learning *community*.

The online module "Scientific Theory- Practice-Transfer" (STPT) runs over four semesters in the second half of the program. Students work in small groups on authentic tasks that correspond to different aspects of their future professional role as social workers. Tasks are formulated openly so that students are left with a lot of choice and autonomy as to how to realize them. However, for every task it is necessary to transfer and combine academic involvement with job experience.

In two semesters the method of "peer-to-peer counseling" is suggested to work on the tasks. For this method students use a special peer-to-peer counseling platform (www.kollegiale-beratung.net) in addition to their classic learning management system.

3   Peer-to-peer counseling online – a new collaborative format

"Peer-to-peer counseling", also known as "peer group supervision" (Tietze 2008) or shorter as "peer counseling" (Spangler 2005) is an established counseling method that works without an external counselor, leader, supervisor or expert (Langenkamp 2011). Groups of 5-7 colleagues or peers get together to discuss and resolve professional issues and challenges,

in a clearly structured, nearly scripted procedure, in addition or as a substitute for clinical supervision ("Heilsbronn model" [2]).

This procedure, initially developed for face-to-face meetings, has been transferred to the virtual realm and an online platform has been developed that guides people through the ten steps of the counseling process (www.kollegiale-beratung.net). It is used by professionals in the social field where funds for external supervision often are not available or cannot be organized quickly enough. The online platform, however, can be used instantly and flexible as communication here is asynchronous.

Within the module students are asked to discuss a challenging case from their professional practice (and later a role conflict stemming from their own learning trajectory), using the online platform and following the set procedure. They potentially benefit on three levels: (1) results from the counseling process, (2) coming to know a tool that is used in the professional community and will be available to them beyond the time of the study program, (3) already mixing with the professional community at the time of the study program as students are free to chose group composition beyond the student community.

Assessment takes place via an e-portfolio that students may also decide to use for job applications and beyond, documenting their individual lifelong learning.

4   Challenges and pitfalls – a critical reflection

The educational design has been implemented twice by now, with the last student cohort completing the module in summer 2012. Observations during the process as well as evaluation data show that in general the design is well accepted by students and the intended objectives of integrating academic knowledge and students' work experience are realized[3]. However, various challenges and pitfalls have emerged that need to be addressed to further refine the educational design. They can be subsumed under three different headlines: (1) "one more tool"-phenomenon, (2) shift of control, (3) assessment paradox. For each item, students' perspectives as well as the instructors' perspectives will be discussed and initial ideas for improvement outlined.

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[2] For details cf. https://www.kollegiale-beratung.net/p365354134_406.html   (02.11.2011, in German)

[3] Evaluation data can be found at www.kollegiale-beratung.net

(1) '*one more tool'-phenomenon*

Using the specialized peer counseling platform implies introducing 'yet another tool' into the study program. With e-portfolios as assessment also the portfolio software Mahara is offered as another collaboration tool. For instructors resp. educational designers to choose the adequate "digital habitat" (Wenger et al. 2009) presents a constant challenge (Arnold et al. 2011) and the interplay between the platforms has to be well communicated to the students in order to prevent misunderstandings and extra work for both sides. The students adopted the peer counseling platform surprisingly quickly. Its ease of use and the clear spatial metaphor ("private counseling rooms", "public conference rooms", etc.) seemed to have contributed to the quick adoption. Also the possibility to invite non-studying colleagues appeared to have accelerated the platform's acceptance as 'yet another tool'. Student perception of the e-portfolio software in the fourth term, however, turned out to be much more varied. Presently, earlier introduction into the study program is been discussed to smoothen the transition in the STPT module.

(2) *shift of control*

The peer counseling process itself takes place in a private, protected counseling room. As a consequence, with flourishing counseling processes on the way as well as with processes that do not take off, instructors have no means to judge the situation. The early e-learning motto "from the sage on the stage to the guide at the side" is implemented here at its best. For instructors,' initially, this can be a strange experience and feels at times like a *loss* of control rather than a *shift* of control. For students as well, there is no way to get an overall impression of the community's status. To enhance transparency for all participants in the second implementation round an announcement area was introduced where counseling teams announced the topic of their cases, their timelines and the participants. Of course this has to be done carefully in order to guarantee privacy to the cases themselves. The increased transparency as to what is going on in the community seemed to be appreciated by students and instructors alike.

(3) *assessment paradox*

The most challenging aspect with the innovative educational design turned out to be the assessment. The peer counseling processes obviously cannot be graded; this would be a

contradiction in terms. Instead, students' assignment for grading was to build up an e-portfolio, documenting and reflecting upon their insights of the three semesters of the STPT module. Students thus had to acquire basic skills in e-portfolio work. Considering the usefulness of e-portfolio skills for lifelong learning, this was an additional benefit of the module but students' perception varied as regards the ease of acquiring the necessary skills and the future usefulness. The majority of e-portfolios handed in showed a high degree of skills acquired and acknowledged its usefulness. For the instructors, assessing the e-portfolios also provided a challenge. Pre-defined rubrics for grading were difficult and time-consuming to apply. In addition, the inherent tension of giving students autonomy in their way to realize the tasks to then apply a set, fine-grained rubric for grading remained. Thus, for the second implementation, it is discussed to involve students in the development of the rubric to prevent "defensive reflection" (Häcker 2005) and align the shift of control more strongly with the system of grading.

5   Conclusions

In the study program described, peer-to-peer counseling as an innovative collaborative format in a learning community has proved to be an adequate educational design for students with relevant work experience and professional lives alongside with their studies. Increased autonomy as well as the interweaving of academic and professional community has been greatly appreciated by students and instructors alike. In particular, the highly structured procedure for the peer counseling process was regarded as very useful. Further refinement of the educational design should look at the following issues in more detail: how to integrate best the various online platforms used and when to introduce a new one, how to grant a shift of control to students but still provide transparency for all participants about what is going on and – perhaps most importantly – how to involve students in assessment criteria. This way, the educational design would not only walk the talk of lifelong learning but also of a true shift in learning cultures.

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