Teaching practice research through fieldwork placements
Critical factors for successful trialogical learning processes

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Introduction

Since 2008 there has been a practice research module in social work studies at the University of Helsinki. It lasts around five months and strives to reinforce research-minded practice in social work practice and academia (see also Chapter 18 in this volume, which discusses the same module). This module, which is in the Master's degree studies, follows a trialogical approach to learning (e.g. Paavola et al., 2011) and integrates skills and knowledge from the students' previous studies. Adopting analytical thinking and different research approaches is essential in university teaching (Healey & Jenkins, 2009; Zamorski, 2002). The goal of the module is for the students to learn competencies for research-based knowledge production in collaboration with working life.

The teaching in social work practice research at the University of Helsinki and its network cooperation with municipalities and organisations is considered interesting on an international scale (Webber et al., 2016; Austin & Isokuortti, 2016). The interest is in the collaborative networks and the knowledge communities being able to change professional practices using the research knowledge generated in this cooperation. The innovative forces spring from the collaborative action of the university staff, the practitioners, the students – the future practitioners – and the service users. There is also a societal demand for this expertise and renewed knowledge produced together. Simultaneously, participation in the action transforms the previously bureaucratic operational culture of social services into a dynamic, innovative knowledge community (see Rosengren, Lindqvist & Julkunen, 2014; Uggerhøj, 2014b). This change is one of the requirements for strengthening research-minded social work. Another requirement is that academically educated social workers, together with their work communities, are ready to learn and build such research-based practices where clients and novices in the field have an equal opportunity to put forward their own fresh perspectives on what is happening in the development work.

In this chapter we describe and analyse the implementation of practice research teaching in cooperation with work communities. We are interested in *what critical factors should be taken into account when students carry out their practice research in work communities.* First we examine the pedagogical basis of the practice research module, trialogical learning and how the module is built around it. After this we describe the practical implementation of the module. The article continues with an analysis of critical factors connected to the practice research process. We examine these

with references to previously published research and texts about the module as well as our own experiences as long-term teachers of practice research.

From research-based teaching to research-minded working-life studies

There have been different types of definitions and notions about the relation between teaching and research in university settings (Healey & Jenkins, 2009). Primarily the teaching is based on researched knowledge and research directs the teaching. There is also strong evidence that when students themselves are involved in research projects and they can practise research skills and can learn by doing, they learn the best (e.g. Jiang & Roberts, 2011; Visser-Wijnveen et al., 2010). Skills in using research-based knowledge are important. Research has however shown that social workers do not read a sufficient amount of research or, in fact, read it at all – nor do they use it in their work, and they may have difficulties in explaining their work analytically (e.g. Forte, 2014; Munro, 1998; Osmond & O'Connor, 2004). It seems as though research has only a small connection with professional practice (see Teater, 2017).

The practice research module was born from a need to produce competencies and information to help develop social work practices, as the results from academic research diverged into narrower and narrower subjects at the end of the 1990s. Simultaneously, the need for diversity in professional expertise and knowledge grew as more complex phenomena and a need for support increased (Satka et al., 2016c). In the practice research module, the basis of research and development is the need for knowledge and cause for worry that arise from the clients or practitioners. Through the module, the university representatives were involved in building a participatory knowledge production culture for clients and practitioners (Kääriäinen et al., 2016; Satka et al., 2005). Teaching practice research to Master of Social Work (MSW) students in collaboration with working life was convenient because without research-minded practitioners the ideas of practice research would have been difficult to promote.

Developments in social work practice research in Finland have strong ties to simultaneously initiated international discussions about collective knowledge production that takes clients into account (e.g. Austin & Isokuortti, 2016; Julkunen, 2011; Uggerhøj, 2014a; Webber et al., 2016). Practice research has consciously strived to stay outside the comfort zone between the academic world and practice and study the recognised issues with scientific methods while preserving contact with practitioners and clients. The results are always sent to the practitioners for evaluation and thus we can learn how cooperation can work even better in the future (see Saurama & Julkunen, 2012; Saurama, 2016).

Trialogical learning as an approach

Trialogical learning is a broadly used pedagogical approach that strives to create new knowledge in working-life contexts (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005; Paavola et al., 2011; Paavola, Engeström & Hakkarainen, 2012). Sami Paavola and Kai Hakkarainen (2005) build their trialogical approach to learning based on Carl Bereiter's (2002) theory of knowledge building, on Yrjö Engeström's (2004) theory of expansive learning and on Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi's (1995) model of creating knowledge. The trialogical approach to learning and expertise contains three central areas of learning, with learning as (1) an individual process of gaining knowledge, (2) participation and growth as a member of a practice community's action, and (3) conscious knowledge production (Hakkarainen, 2008; Paavola et al., 2011). The model criticises the notion that learning is merely an individual and cognitive process. Instead it emphasises the social nature of investigative learning and expertise. The model also criticises the thought that learning is merely the transfer of knowledge or education. The trialogical approach to learning is communal learning where the actions are organised around developing areas that are created, shaped and shared together. Thus learning is about creating knowledge. It is essential that in addition to mere individual learning or social interaction, there is a conscious and intentional emphasis on objects or artefacts that are developed together and shaped in the learning process (Hakkarainen, 2008; Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003).

The trialogical approach to learning was developed as a part of a collaborative project with educational technology (e.g. Lakkala et al., 2009), where the interest was in practices for shared and long-term knowledge production. This project generated the need to develop principles for the trialogical approach to learning (Paavola et al., 2012). There are six principles in the trialogical approach to learning (Paavola et al., 2011, p. 239), which, in brief, are as follows:

1. The activities are organised around shared objects.
2. The action supports individual and collective agency with the shared objects.
3. There is emphasis on combining different forms of knowledge and reflection in analysing objects.
4. Long-term working processes are promoted.
5. Transfer of knowledge between different types of knowledge practices, communities and institutions is supported.
6. Different tools that support shared working are utilised.

The trialogical approach to learning has been tested in practice in different types of teaching projects (e.g. Kääriäinen, 2012; Lakkala et al., 2015; Muukkonen-van der Meer, 2011; Tammeorg et al., 2019). Experiences of learning according to this approach have been positive, though there are also critical views. The support structures of learning become more important, because

collective practices of knowledge production are not always simple and easy from a student's point of view. Some students are able to use their learning while others are frustrated, because they cannot grasp both the assignment and the complex network (Kääriäinen, 2012; Muukkonen-van der Meer, 2011). Priit Tammeorg et al. (2019) reveal that the trialogical model of learning strengthened teamwork practices and it was felt to be a beneficial and supportive learning process, but it was also felt to be more time-consuming. Planning the work required more time and the significance of scheduling was emphasised. The trialogical model of learning worked best with students who already had earlier study experience and competencies, such as students studying in their final year before starting working life (Tammeorg et al., 2019). Similar observations have been made for the practice research module (Kääriäinen, 2012).

Trialogical learning as a pedagogical model in the practice research module

In Finland, receiving the qualification to become an authorised social worker ordinarily requires a Master's degree in social work. In social work studies at the University of Helsinki, matters connected directly to the practical skills required in social work are studied in the working-life courses in both the Bachelor's and Master's degree stages. Research competencies are learned in different research method courses and in the practice research module, which connects issues from both professional practices and research. The module consists of 10 study credits, worth approximately 270 hours of work altogether, and it lasts for around 5 months. The module used to consist of 15 credits and, as explained later in this article, even then students felt that the module was heavy, considering the number of credits. For instance, on this issue, planning the module clashes with the frames set by the university context and the limited amount of study credits available in the social work degrees.

The learning goals of the module are that after completing it, the student knows how to plan, execute and report about social work practice research in cooperation with a social work community. Finding and committing work communities to this academic cooperation is made possible due to persistent networking (e.g. Kääriäinen et al., 2016). The objective is also that the student can have discussions about the phenomenon at the centre of their research and can evaluate the needs and opportunities for developing social work practices through their research. Another objective is that the student learns the basics of collaborative development and can utilise this in their own professional practices by using a dialogical approach to work (University of Helsinki, 2018).

The pedagogy of the social work practice research module has been developed according to the trialogical approach to learning (Kääriäinen, 2012; Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016a). Shared

development goals and cooperation with the work communities as well as dialogical activities are the central learning areas in practice research teaching. The implementation also makes use of the internet. The students and university teachers have a common online learning platform for sharing information. The websites of the centres of excellence on social welfare (see SOCCA, 2018; FSKC, 2018) are used to publish information and results from the module.

The module consists of three consecutive stages: (1) the planning stage, (2) analysing practices and (3) the final seminar, where the completed studies are presented, analysed and reflected on collectively with the students, instructors and working-life representatives. The students also present their research results to the work community where they did their research.

The planning stage and the whole module start with an open seminar for all the participating parties, where actual themes in social work practice, research and society are discussed. In recent years, the themes discussed in the seminar have been directed more concretely at themes connected to executing the practice research process, as per student requests. This has been necessary because some students have expressed that the seminar's ambitious content emphasising the remarkability of practice research has increased pressure and insecurity about their own future research process. The seminar used to be a forum for the work communities wishing to participate in the practice research to present and offer their research ideas to students. Now the research ideas from work communities, municipalities and organisations, are collected in an online learning environment before the seminar for the students to see. The seminar gives an opportunity for the students and work community representatives to discuss them in person. During the seminar, some practice research work done the previous year is presented, so that the participants can gain an understanding of the nature of the research process and can hear examples of knowledge that has been produced with practice research. After the seminar, the students and work communities agree on starting the research projects. Currently there is an increasing number of practice research projects conducted by students working in pairs or small groups, but practice research done individually is still possible.

Content teaching provided by the university supports writing the research plan and conducting the research. This teaching is currently executed in the online learning environment via lectures and other materials addressing practice research. In addition to this, each student belongs to a group led by a teacher, where matters connected to conducting practice research are discussed. If needed, the teacher also provides personal guidance. The students compose the research plan with guidance from the university teacher and the work community representatives. Most research requires applying for research permission from the work organisation.

In the research stage, the students spend around two to three months collecting and analysing data according to their research plan, compose reports about their research and briefly present their results in a poster. The module ends with seminars open to all the parties. Here the students present their practice research and the research is discussed. Some of the posters and research reports are published on the websites of the centres of excellence on social welfare.

The following table presents a summary of the social work practice research module and the consecutive stages following the principles of trialogical learning (see Table 19.1).

In the trialogical approach to learning, both collaborative action around objects decided on together as well as individual learning and participation are emphasised. In the social work practice research module, the students can participate in authentic work situations by analysing challenging issues, or areas in need of clarification connected to work, together with different actors. Simultaneously, the whole work community can examine their own work from new perspectives. During the practice research module, the university teachers are responsible for securing the continuation of the students' research process by making principles clear and giving the students guidance. The students are responsible for advancing the research process in cooperation with the work community.

The objectives of the module require the students to be able to work independently, show courage and creativity, show responsibility in moving the research forward, and have the skills to combine and utilise what they have learned before. This is connected to strengthening the student's metacognitive skills (Hakkarainen, Lonka & Lipponen, 2004; Tuononen, Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017), which include developing understanding of the thoughts of oneself and others, and knowledge of oneself as a thinker, learner and actor in different situations. Metacognitive skills also include skills in self-evaluation, which are needed in planning, directing and evaluating work, especially in problematic situations (Hakkarainen et al., 2004). Supporting the student's individual learning process is done in guidance sessions between the teacher and student group and, if needed, in private guidance sessions. The module lasts many months and it encourages the students to process and develop knowledge in collaboration with others. A work community that is committed to the process motivates the students to try their best and even exceed their own expectations (Satka, Kääriäinen, Yliruka & Nousiainen, 2016b, p. 28). These factors build the grounds for achieving good research and learning results.

Critical factors

In this chapter we discuss the factors we have identified to be essential for the success of the practice research process when teaching practice research in cooperation with work communities.

We have not produced new empirical data for this chapter, rather our analysis is based on previous research and other published texts on the practice research module at the University of Helsinki and on our own experiences as teachers of the module.

Entering the work community

Entering the work community is a significant factor in conducting practice research. We have observed (Satka et al., 2016b, p. 30), that long-lasting cooperation with the same workplace makes it easier to carry out the practice research process. When there is sufficient information about the practice research, it is easier for the different parties to trust each other. The students have said that it is important that the work community is familiar with the practice research module and that it values the research knowledge produced in the practice research. If the research topic is considered meaningful in the work community and the results are looked forward to, this supports the student in working as a researcher (Kääriäinen et al., 2018, p. 12).

It is not always easy to enter into the work community. This could be due to the work community having a strong assumption that the student will work independently or that the community is not familiar with the idea of cooperative dialogue in practice research (Kääriäinen, 2012, pp. 99, 105). Often workplaces are more familiar with internships, another form of a practice module included in social work studies. The work community may find the role of a practice researcher strange, as it is different from the role of an intern, and the student may be directed into doing the tasks of a traditional intern (Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016a, p. 94).

Building the work environment in such a way that conducting research is possible – for instance by reorganising workstations – is important. If a student has to work alone often and is separated from the work community, this weakens the possibilities of cooperation (Satka et al., 2016b, p. 28). Some students may also wish to work on the research from home. Differences in practice research data bring variation to the students' work methods: some students may interview social workers or clients in the community, whereas others may receive previously collected data to analyse (e.g. Satka et al., 2016b, p. 29). This affects how strongly the whole community – or only the one specific representative – is involved in the process in practice.

In the practice research process it is important for the students to receive support from the work community. In practice, the support has meant, for instance, flexible interaction with a named representative from the work community, introduction to the work and encouragement and feedback on the research. This also includes concrete actions to promote collecting the data, for instance by searching for interviewees and by reserving a space to conduct the interviews. If the student interviews the practitioners, it is naturally essential that the practitioners are interested in participating in the interviews. This sort of support, however, is not always available, and students

have also described experiences with absent workplace representatives and being left alone as the practice research process progressed (Kääriäinen et al., 2018, p. 12). If the work community members are busy, they are not able to guide the student (e.g. Kääriäinen et al., 2018, p. 12; Satka et al., 2016b, p. 29). The students have also described frustrations when encountering exhausted workers (Kääriäinen, 2012, p. 100).

Conducting practice research in work communities requires certain skills – for instance skills in reflection and listening – and interest from both the work community and the student (Satka et al., 2016b, p. 29). The successful formation of cooperation is affected both by the work community's preparedness to receive the student and the student's courage and initiative (Hytti, 2017, p. 31). It is a strongly reciprocal, interactional process.

The student and expectations from the work community

Work communities value practice research and thus they often have many types of expectations for the practice research done by students. Satka et al. (2016b, p. 28) say that this encourages and motivates students to exceed their expectations and use all their knowledge and skills in the work. Executing practice research often requires developing creative problem-solving skills (Satka et al., 2016b, p. 28). On the other hand, the expectations of the work community can also generate excessive pressure for the students and realising the expectations within the module does not necessarily seem realistic for the student or university representative. One challenge in practice research is in defining the research, since the work community's wishes for the scope of the research may be incompatible with the available time and amount of study credits in the module (Kääriäinen et al., 2018, pp. 12–13). If the work community has excessive expectations and is disappointed with the definition of the research question the students have formed with their academic supervisor, the students need to negotiate to find an agreement (Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016a, pp. 91–92).

When the practice research is in its final stages or finished, ideally the process continues with a reflection on the research results and considering how to use them. For students, the experience that their practice research is truly beneficial to the work community and that it is appreciated is often significant (e.g. Satka et al., 2016b, p. 31). Lack of time at the workplace may however affect how the work community supports the students in examining the practical relevance of the practice research results (Satka et al., 2016b, p. 31). This may cause insecurity in students in how their research results will be received in the work community (Kääriäinen et al., 2018, p. 12). If the research does not seem to interest anyone in the work community, the student is the one who must activate the community (Kääriäinen et al., 2018, p. 13). If a student conducts the research in their own work community where they work as a social worker, presenting the results in their own

community may feel especially daunting. On the other hand, genuinely utilising the results in developing the work can also be seen to be easy in these cases, because the researchers themselves are closely involved in implementing this (Kääriäinen et al., 2018, pp. 13–14).

In some organisations there are established practices for how the results of the practice research are presented and utilised. This may give the student security that their practice research will be noted. For example, in the city of Espoo there are regular groups for social work research organised for social workers, social advisers and students, where students can present their research on the social work field in the city and where the research results are discussed together. In municipalities the results of practice research are even passed on to supervisor meetings and managerial groups (Hytti, 2017, p. 41).

Students' understanding of practice research and its significance as a part of their studies

The students' commitment to the practice research process is naturally also affected by their general attitude towards the module and their understanding of why it is included in their social work degree. The students often feel they have learned a lot during the module, but they also give feedback on the amount of work the module requires and express feeling stress due to the working schedule of the module (e.g. Hytti, 2017, p. 29). The amount of work done in the module is felt to be too much for the study credits received (Satka et al., 2016b, p. 31). The practitioners guiding the practice research have also discussed challenges caused by the schedule (Hytti, 2017, p. 3).

The students' learning experiences do not necessarily completely correspond with the module's theoretical and pedagogical framework. The students' experiences of learning during the course are often primarily connected to individual learning, such as skills in conducting research, and they do not necessarily discuss the shared learning of a broader community, which is in principle a characteristic of practice research (Kääriäinen et al., 2018, p. 14). Even after participating in the course, some students have expressed confusion about what practice research actually means (e.g. Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016a, p. 94). Sometimes students have challenges with understanding what makes their research specifically practice research. These challenges may be prominent if interaction with the work community feels distant.

At the start of the practice research process, it is important to discuss with the students the scientific and philosophical fundamentals of practice research: without sufficient understanding of the basis of practice research, there is a risk of the module becoming merely one practice course for empirical social work research among others. For these themes to be discussed with the students, the scientific and philosophical framework of practice research must be clear to the teachers. Alternatively, an analysis of different practice research frameworks and understandings can provide the students a base to relate their own research projects to. If the epistemological bases of practice research remain

unclear, there is a risk that the students will begin to use the concept of practice research as if it were commonly shared, though it is actually very complex (Tapola-Haapala, 2015, p. 168). This means that practice research becomes a stamp for any type of research conducted in a practical context.

On the other hand, it is also possible to think that the objective of the practice research module should not be the students' ability to define what practice research is, but that the students become research-minded practitioners using and conducting research from many types of origins (e.g. Satka, Kääriäinen & Yliruka, 2016a).

Ethical questions in practice research

In practice research it is important to consider ethical questions from the start of the process carefully and continuously (e.g. Julkunen, 2011, p. 72). Most practice research conducted by the students is such that it requires research permission from the organisation where the research is conducted. The permission process causes some insecurity in the students, because they cannot affect how quickly the permission is granted after submitting the request (e.g. Hytti, 2017, p. 30). It is beneficial if the work community has already considered aspects connected to research permissions when forming the research idea. It is also essential that the student, university instructor and workplace instructor are all aware of the practices and requirements connected to research permissions, so that the student can formulate the appropriate research permission application and its appendices promptly. This is supported by interaction between those responsible for research permissions in different organisations and university teachers.

In practice research processes that bring together different actors, there is a need for identifying and negotiating the roles of these actors (Julkunen & Uggerhøj, 2016, pp. 7–8). Sometimes confusion with the roles may produce difficult ethical questions. The students may, for instance, feel that the work community has a clear view of what the research results should be. Often in these cases a student may feel that there is a wish for the results to show the positive consequences of the researched activity, and not the negative.

Practice research is not neutral and may reveal matters that are taboo in the work community or that, according to some, should not be openly examined. A student who conducted their practice research in a hierarchical international NGO received positive feedback from the respondents and from the closest supervisor who directed the work. The leader of the organisation on the other hand gave the student a lot of criticism and ordered them to make big changes and remove parts of the research report. After negotiating with their university instructor, the student removed what the leader had requested in the final report sent to the work community, but at the university they reported the ethically challenging parts of the research process as well. The student ended up in the

difficult situation, because they were working in an unfamiliar culture and language environment. Because of this, opportunities to negotiate the situation with the work community were insufficient and the dialogical negotiation principle included in practice research was not realised.

Satka et al. (2016a, p. 96) reveal an interesting example of an ethical dilemma where there were tensions between the employees and the management in a work community, and a representative of middle management asked the student for information about the views presented by the practitioners in the interviews. The situation was solved with the help of the university. One requirement for a successful and ethically sound practice research process is that the students have received sufficient ethical competencies and that they have the courage to adhere to ethical principles even in difficult interactions. The university representatives must support the students if ethical dilemmas arise.

It is also essential to pay attention to ethically robust research reporting and its characteristics in the practice research context. If the research is aimed at a distinct local work community, the anonymity of the respondents, for instance the practitioners, may be more vulnerable than in other research settings. Therefore it is important that the student has a reflective attitude when conducting the reports for the research. An ideal in practice research has often been that the organisations would appear with their own names in the reports, because this has been considered to support utilising the research results in developing practices. However, in practice the views of the work communities about this as well as the publicity of the research reports differ greatly. Matters connected to reporting and publicity also require shared, situational negotiation processes.

Conclusion

Based on our examination, the following factors are central in successful implementation of the practice research process and they should be taken into consideration when planning the implementation of a practice research module:

1. The principles of practice research are collectively shared between the university and workplace representatives as well as the students. The process requires good skills in listening and reflection from all parties. The participants should be able to discuss the principles of practice research openly and adapt them to concrete situations. These principles are connected to the scope of the practice research and other implementation methods, the characteristics of practice research and the module, and ethical commitments such as what participation in the process requires from the different parties.

2. Information relevant to the practice research module is easily available to all parties. Here the role of the university as an informer is emphasised. If the teachers and workplace

representatives have information about the research permission practices of different organisations, this helps them to support students in the research permission process.

3. It is essential that the research project is felt to be genuinely meaningful in the work community and the results of the research are seen as potentially beneficial in developing practices.

4. The students are encouraged to experiment with different types of creative methods and solutions to problems in different stages of the process. The students may also need encouragement that they can complete the research process and use the competencies they have acquired during their social work studies. This implies that the requirements for the student are reasonable, for instance in regard to the amount of study credits received from the module. Knowing that the results can be utilised in practice often motivates the students, but it may still be useful for the university teachers to remind all parties that the research is part of the students' studies and not professional research.

5. During the process, the students require support and encouragement from both the work community and the university teachers. Because the schedule is very tight, one essential factor is that the students can discuss questions with the workplace representative soon after the questions have arisen. When shaping the research idea, it is important that the work community is aware of the types of support they should offer the students and how this will be realised in practice.

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Table 19.1 The practice research module's stages, process and schedule

Stages and schedule	Participants	Principles of trialogical learning
Publishing the research ideas presented by the work communities to the students and the open seminar for all parties Making agreements about the research projects *September*	Students and student groups Work communities University teachers	*Organising around shared objects*
Writing the research plan Online learning materials (formerly lectures) and group guidance that support	Students and student groups Work communities University teachers	*Strengthening the collective agency of individuals and communities* *Developing shared objects*

Stages and schedule	Participants	Principles of trialogical learning
conducting practice research *September–October*		
Group guidance continues Collecting data for the practice research Writing the research report and poster and receiving comments Reflection on one's own work and research process, writing a reflective paper *October–December or January*	Students and student groups Work communities University teachers	*Shared development and negotiation around the shared objects*
Practice research seminars where the research is presented Evaluating the module and the research processes together *December or January*	Students and student groups Work communities University teachers	*Collective developments based on the new information*
Finalising the research reports and posters and possibly publishing them Sending the research results to the work communities Evaluating the research process and results Developing the module based on feedback *January–February*	Students and student groups Work communities University teachers	*Developing innovative ideas*