

published in: Journal plus Education; Vol. XIII (2016); University of Arad.

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## **„Nothing is so theoretical as an astonishingly good practice! “<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The present text was developed within the framework of the evaluation of a practice-oriented study program Social Work. The corresponding Bachelor program at the Baden-Württemberg Cooperative State University, combines studying at the university with a work placement at a social institution. The article deals essentially with three questions: (1) What is the role of practical experience for academic learning? (2) How practical training enables and promotes theory building? (3) What are the consequences for the professional support of the students in their work placements? Starting from very fundamental considerations about the theory-practice relationship this article attempts to develop “rules of thumb” for a successful practice guidance.

### **Keywords:**

competence, study program, internship, work placement, vocational training, tutoring

### **1. The boldness to turn Lewin’s thesis around**

The title of my article sounds provoking: How can someone question, that only a theoretical concept generates successful practice? Obviously it seems overbold to simply reverse the sentence of the famous social psychologist Kurt Lewin (“[...] there is nothing so practical as a good theory.” 1951, 169) and claim the opposite.

Someone who is putting practice at the center of academic learning is arousing great resistance from the educational world. Someone who claims that the best way to achieve awareness is to proceed in an active way evokes the cautious horror of all people who consider the academic way of acquiring knowledge at school and university as the best option to prevent ignorance and banality. Or in the words of Georg Neuweg (2015, 148): “Speech, education and even Western civilization is at stake.”

It seems clear what Kurt Lewin with his emphasis on theory wants to say: Professional action is not a headless act. Surreptitious action without a concept is harmful and ultimately unsuccessful. Theory helps act consciously and purposefully in order to avoid hasty reactions with ultimately negative consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Sonja Kopf for support in the translation of this text.

Why should this thesis be rejected? I would like to show that theory is not the starting point but rather the end point of a more or less successful action. My explanation attempts do not refer to social work specifically, but are of a more universal nature. This affects competent action in general. The practical guidance of students will follow subsequently.

Four levels of action are to be distinguished: technical skills, social interaction, the linguistic level and abstract conclusions. First, however, the concept of "experience" needs to be determined more precisely.

## **2. Uncertain prerequisites, unexpected consequences of the appropriate action**

As a rule, the social worker does not have any prefabricated instructions on how to solve a pending problem. In fact, he/she is constantly confronted with the demand that both his/her knowledge and ability as well as the framework conditions of the situation should be included in his plan of action. What determines his actions if he neither acts according to routine, nor according to the principle of trial and error?

What does the social worker need to act appropriately? Essentially, he/she needs experience in similar situations. "To experience" has to do with immediacy. In order to make experiences one has to be in direct contact with something - touching, feeling, attempting.

Experience has to be distinguished from pure observation or distanced reflection. In such a situation of direct, immediate contact the Social Worker cannot "stay out". Rather, he/she is bound by external influences and his/her own actions. "Having experienced something" therefore means: one has been confronted with, involved in, has shaped something, has reacted to a situation.

The particular thing about everyday situations is that (1) the prerequisites of action are always different and (2) the consequences of one's own action can never be predicted. Thus no fixed rules can be applied in everyday life. Rather, any complex situation must be captured as best as possible and answered accordingly. In this process experience can be instrumental.

"Experience" is therefore a guideline for appropriate action. But what is the difference between "experience" and routine or aimless experimentation? The philosopher Georg Gadamer says: "Every experience that deserves this name foils an expectation" (Gadamer 2010, 362). This means that experience does not originate from routine, nor is it directed at a known, defined goal. On the contrary, we experience something when something unexpected happens, something that we did not expect, something that breaks through both our routine and our plans.

Competent action thus arises from a reflexive processing of unexpected events and such key experiences can be either surprises or disappointments. Such reflexive processes always accompany our actions (Schön 1987). We are not aware of them but they are effectively incorporated into our action control. Through trying to act competently, we constantly develop, test and change hypotheses - without realizing it - and thus adapt our behavior accordingly.

### 3. Technical skills

How we cope in everyday life and how we solve everyday problems without thinking can be most clearly indicated in technical-practical skills.

Have you ever tried to explain to your son via telephone how to tie a cravat knot? What is the difficulty? While we succeed in this action immediately, we cannot put it in words and thus we cannot explain it. The Hungarian philosopher Michael Polanyi has said that "we can know more than we can tell" (Polanyi 1983, 4). He compares the relationship between theory and practice with the relationship between a tool and its use:

A hammer can be described and defined, but the meaning of a hammer can only be grasped by the person who uses it. In the artful ("competent") use of the hammer, the user senses the meaning (value) of what constitutes the hammer as such. By using the hammer, the user's knowledge changes.

So to understand what a hammer is, it is not enough to see a hammer. It would be more helpful to watch how a craftsman is using the hammer. A deeper understanding of what constitutes a hammer arises only when you use it yourself. Through this the user not only alters his knowledge. In addition, he also begins to understand in which situations it can be beneficial to use a hammer (Brown, Collins & Duguid 1989, cited by Neuweg 2004, 160).

Another example:

Please take note of yourself and your reactions when you try to answer the following question: If you are riding a bicycle and you notice that you are tipping over to the left: In which direction do you have to steer in order to not fall over?

Interestingly we usually have to use our body experience to answer this question. Cognitively, only a few people would be able to give a correct answer. So what can be done to keep the balance on the bike? There is little to be done with knowledge alone.

Therefore: Before you place your child on a bicycle, knock (not necessarily) the following rule into it (Neuweg 2015, 31):

"Any inclination angle shall be compensated by a steering movement in the direction of the imbalance which causes a centrifugal force canceling the action of gravity, while the radius of the curve described by the steering motion has to be equal to the square of the speed of travel divided by the angle of inclination."

Of course riding a bicycle is not a professional competence.<sup>2</sup> But physical experience is the beginning of every intellectual development. The Swiss developmental psychologist and knowledge theorist Jean Piaget (1992) was the first who discovered the relationship between elementary motor activities and the development of intellectual skills. By means of experiments with objects, numbers and concepts, children approach logical thinking. The first theories - such as causality - very young children develop through physical activity. Only their own attempts and the successive

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<sup>2</sup> This would be very different in the case of soccer-playing (Dreyfus & Taylor 2015, 166; Moch 2014).

generalization of its results enables them to intellectually capture abstract content such as mass, perspective, object class or transitivity.

The most important thing is that many physical / technical, but also social skills cannot be acquired through instruction. The immediate confrontation with the objects is indispensable for understanding. It is thus the practice that precedes the theory and ultimately makes it possible. The prerequisite for practical reflection is, therefore, one's own practical experience.

#### 4. Social Interaction

Not only in the world of objects theory building practice precedes theory building. Even when designing social relationships we are first and foremost marked by experiences, which are subsequently used to explain behavior and relationships. Thus normally we cannot foresee whether a meeting with another person will be satisfying for us. Also we cannot know in advance, what we have to do or say in order to convince another person or even inspire them.

When we are attracted by something or someone, the concrete action will determine whether and how our aspirations are satisfied and our ideas fulfilled (Joas 1996, 239). Our values and preferences remain abstract, as long as they are not experienced in a concrete way. Most social actions are therefore not target-oriented. The direction of an action often develops only during its course. Only in retrospect it seems to us that pursued the achieved goal from the beginning. Hans Joas (1996, 239) quotes an example of the American philosopher Hubert Dreyfus:

“When a man falls in love, he loves a particular woman, but it is not that particular woman he needed before he fell in love. However, after he is in love, that is after he has found that this particular relationship is gratifying, the need becomes specific as the need for that particular woman, and the man has made a creative discovery about himself.

He has become the sort of person that needs that specific relationship and must view himself as having lacked and needed this relationship all along. In such a creative discovery the world reveals a new order of significance which is neither simply discovered nor arbitrarily chosen.” (Dreyfus 1979, 277)

The fact that the choice of a partner usually does not follow rational laws, but nevertheless ends happily in many instances, is often referred to in scientific literature (for example, Gigerenzer 2007, 65). Our ability to make decisions is based largely on the fact that we are cultural beings who cannot live without trust, imitation, understanding and emotional attachment. Therefore we focus our actions in such a way that in the encounter with other people these values (which are necessary for us) can be applied (Moch 2015a).

Within this framework it is also immediately understandable why the relationship between a social worker and a client cannot be designed according to abstract rules. Although the professional rules and ethics are firmly established, only the actual encounter can resolve which professional approaches ultimately lead to the implementation of professional objectives.

## 5. Concepts and language

While technical skills usually get by without language, social interactions are mostly based on linguistic communication. The closer we get to the field of social work, the more important it tends to be how we communicate with one another.

Using language is a practice. While speaking, we make assumptions, make suggestions, formulate hypotheses, make predictions, describe our actions. We open up the abstract world by using terms and thus we are referring to tangible facts. Through depicting reality linguistically, we form theories. The formation of concepts is the core of every theory. But how do we form and use linguistic concepts, such as – for example - "residential care" or "child welfare". We assume a bundle of experiences that have slowly condensed into a concept in the course of communication.

Dreyfus & Taylor (2015, 85) provide an illustrative example in their latest volume on "Realism":

„As a boy I go with my dog every day to explore the woods yonder. We have to cross a stream, and we both hop across on some conveniently placed rocks. I don't have a word for these; I don't even feel the need one. We just both hop across on our way to the inviting, mysterious woods. Then my older cousin comes to visit, sees the woods and the stream, wants to cross, and asks me if there are any "stepping stones". Because "stone" and "step" are already in my vocabulary, I get at once his meaning. But more, I can answer his question, because I recognize at once that this is the right term for those rocks in the river that help me across. ... These hitherto mute facilitators have entered the linguistic dimension." A concept was formed, which only proved to be "practical" in the course of a described action.

Our everyday language always has its origin in actual experiences. It serves to communicate in social situations. Interaction partners assume from each other that they refer to situations in which they perform (successful) actions. Therefore, the words themselves initially do not have a conceptual character. The new word "stepping stone" first gains its meaning in the context of the real stream crossing and can then be increasingly abstracted in a second step.<sup>3</sup>

This is also how concepts and a specialist language are developed. Stakeholders strive to describe and understand a situation collectively. That is also the subject matter of tutoring at the work placement: It has to be trained how a more or less successful practice can be verbalized to enable communication.

## 7. Forming abstract theory

Some readers may argue that the topics discussed so far have nothing to do with the construction of an exact theory. There are areas after all that can only be developed theoretically. In order to examine this argument as well, I would like to respond briefly with an example from an abstract, purely non-linguistic domain, namely trigonometric mathematics.

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<sup>3</sup> These situational conceptualization goes back to the fact that humans were cultivated in social contexts during their long history of development. With the help of language, people can only communicate with each other via their insights and experiences, if each interaction partner has an idea of how the other person understands the concrete situation in which the term makes sense (Tomasello 2014).

Most of you probably remember the famous “Theorem of Pythagoras”, which might have caused many of you quite a headache at the time. By means of this theorem, the right angle in a triangle can be determined by the sum of the squares of the two sides "a" and "b" which is equal to the square of the hypotenuse "c". This theoretical knowledge has been formulated by Pythagoras about 600 BC.

Early historical research has discovered something interesting (Alsina 2016, 64): The right-angled triangle was already known to Egyptian builders about 1000 years prior. This was validated through inscriptions on a stone from the year 1600 BC which shows the theorem as well as the drawing of the right-angled triangle. The master builders of the pyramids used them as a craftsman's rule.

As experts, they regularly used the theorem quite practically to create right angles of buildings. They had not yet recognized the generality of the theoretical doctrine. However, only a 1000-year practice enabled later teachers, such as Pythagoras and Euclid, to stipulate this universal principle in a theorem (and thus bother pupils until today).

The central conclusion of this digression is that abstract theory formation also requires practice. Only if a theoretical model proves to be relevant in human practice, it gains in importance in teaching and training. As an abstract principle, something can be taught and understood only insofar as it proves to be successful in doing.

## 8. But: What role does theory play still?

If we have convinced ourselves that theory cannot directly guide our actions, what role does it play?

8.1 Theory is always relevant wherever conscious action is taken. Unconscious expectations disappointed and surprised retrospections constantly accompany our actions. In addition, the more we associate a professional claim with our actions, we cannot help but continually consult theories or form new ones. We must not forget, however, that theory and practice are in a complementary, non-hierarchical relationship.

8.2 As soon as we give up the claim that theoretical teaching content must be practice-relevant, we enhance the status of theory as such. Analysis, synthesis, and modeling are then given their own value if they are given room separate from practice in which theoretical statements have their own validity. At the moment when we *express our practical experiences and assumptions linguistically*, we take them to a different level, which can certainly be viewed as a conceptual mirror image of experienced practice.

8.3 In this way, we are able to comment critically on experienced practice. We gain our competence of criticism from the fact that we compare, for example, routines or inadequate behavior, not only with existing theorems, but also with our implicit knowledge. We notice and "know" that something is wrong. This implicit knowledge, however, is nothing more than a not validated theory (Moch 2014).

## 9. Conclusions: „Rules of thumb“ for the work placement tutor

Finally, we return to the practical guidance and the primacy of a reflexive practice. The main aim of the study program is to prepare students for professional practice (Moch 2013), in which they can fulfill their professional duties in a reflexive and critical manner. What is the responsibility of the Professional who instructs the student directly during the work placement?

We have seen that there are no classical methods of teaching ("instructions"), or one-way methods ("goal-oriented") as appropriate means. What remains as intermediary between the tutor and the student? In what way are practical competencies passed on and acquired in study integrated internships? Finally, some "rules of thumb" (Gigerenzer 2007, see also Moch 2015a).

9.1 Students should learn to question their implicit rules of action. The prerequisite for this is that the professional practitioner as a tutor is able to reflect his/her own action. Why did she / he act in a given situation as she / he did? A discourse about this "setting" can clarify whether and to what extent the action in question follows a "rule of thumb" and which conditions have favored it.

In the dialogue about a (jointly experienced) action situation, the tutor explains his / her own reasoning. In doing so, he/she presents his/her assumptions about the situation openly and incorporates them into the joint reflection with the student. The student therefore has the opportunity to query or correct his / her own interpretation both with regard to actions as well as with regard to the institution.

9.2 During work placements events that counteract a routinisation of action sequences should be focused upon. Such situations confront the student with consequences of his / her actions which he / she did not expect or was not prepared for. The confrontation with the unexpected, for example with his/her own reactions to unexpected action sequences intensifies the need for reflection.

The same applies wherever situations are not clear and appropriate interpretations have to be introduced and "tested". Whenever routines are not available, when unforeseen situations force spontaneous action, the focus on "rules of thumb" that guide action is enhanced.

9.3 Students are often confronted with situations in which they doubt the correctness and appropriateness of their actions, but still have to act. In dealing with these situations, it is important that the implicit action-rules, interpretative patterns, assumptions (hopes, fears, beliefs) are detected and discussed with the tutor (and possibly other interns). Professional competence is thus created by making public his/her own implicit rules as well as , opening them for discussion and questioning by others (Schön 1987).

9.4 Reflections on certain practical situations should be made promptly. The less time passes between the event and the common reflection, the more instructive the analysis of the situation. The cooperation between the student and the internship tutor should therefore be organized in a fashion that allows the discussion of shared experiences and interpretations immediately following the situation. This enables documentation as well.

9.5 In distinction to the instruction in a technical profession, practical guidance in social work is characterized by the peculiarity of a "learning cascade": A student (learner) is to be stimulated and encouraged how he/she can promote - on his/her part – the learning processes on the client side

(which in turn are learners). Similar processes therefore take place at different levels. One of the basic skills of the practice guidance is to demonstrate such patterns of action (recognition, participation, reflection), which are also useful for the student in dealing with the clients (Moch & Aparicio 2016).

9.6 However, this recommendation appears to be simpler than its implementation. It is not easy for the tutor to react to inadequate behavioral theories and patterns of the student in such a way that the reflection and learning readiness of the student is promoted.

In order to avoid the cycle of negative feedback and demotivation, the tutor should actively overcome negative, learning-inhibiting patterns of action in the sense of a second-order reflection (Schön 1987, 262-263). The tutor can only fulfill this once he/she is aware not only of the restriction of his/her own behavior patterns and theories, but can also develop alternatives in each given situation: How could I have acted in another way? Since there is no general rule for escaping this inhibiting cycle of criticism and counter-criticism, it is essential in the guidance situation that both sides remain open for possible action alternatives, which then have to prove themselves in practice.

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