

Courses for Changing Attitudes¹

HUSK Oslo Region

Although shame largely held me back somewhat in the beginning, I saw this as an opportunity, where I could use my social work, philosophical and pedagogical education, in addition to the user perspective I had gained. I had been on both sides of the table and thought to have a good point of departure to see possibilities for changes among the parties, with a creative eye (Vanja Dietrichson).²

Program Population

Of the total of 190 participants attending these courses on changing attitudes, 145 were service users, 20 social services providers, 7 researchers, 4 students, and 14 members of the facilitating team from KREM. KREM is a bridge building organization for users. The service users who attended the courses included several long-term recipients of social assistance and others had experienced or were engaged in crime, substance abuse, mental illness and unemployment. The ages of the participants ranged from 14 to 62 years, with most of them between the ages of 30 and 50. The gender balance was virtually identical. Many of the service users had previously been in regular work, but were now outside the workforce for many complex reasons. Most service users were recruited by the staff of the public social service agency that also had responsibility for supporting them after returning from the course.

Program Structure

Located in a remote hotel in a small rural town in Turkey, participants were encouraged over 14 days to explore the local area in small groups by using outings and hikes to share issues with each other. Using a folder to record personal responses to various exercises, participant reflected throughout the course on:

- Personal skills
- Communication issues and techniques
- Narrative method (personal story-writing/telling)
- Reflections on taking personal responsibility, accountability and empowerment
- Exploring values and attitudes

Each course included eleven guides (“supervisors” or “coaches”) who had participated on

¹ Adapted from Tor Slettebø, Elisabeth Brodtkorb, Vanja Dietrichson & Kim Lyhne (2009) *KREMs kurs i endringsmetode. Beskrivelse og evaluering*. Rapport nr. 6. Diakonhjemmet høyskole.

http://brage.bibsys.no/diakon/bitstream/URN:NBN:no-bibsys_brage_10994/1/KREMS%20kurs%20endringsmetode.pdf

² Dietrichson, Vanja og Leni Hemminghytt Rønbeck. 2012. *Når brukere blir prosjektledere – erfaringsrapport fra et HUSK-prosjekt*. Hefte. Skien: KREM.

previous courses in Turkey and helped participants derive learning experiences from various course exercises. The course also provided the leaders of KREM to use the experience as a staff training opportunity in the coaching process, former service user role modeling for current service users. The charismatic course leader had experiences as a service user, she has also a social work education and public administration experience. She has a charismatic style of leadership and use herself and her own experience in the implementation of the courses.

All participants could choose who they wanted to have as a coach. The supervisor's most important task was to conduct mapping conversation at the end of the stay, and where the participants should make a plan for the future. The action plan should be drawn up at the end of the course, when participants had internalized and adapted the content of the course.

The supervisors also had other practical tasks that included showing participants around town, introducing them to various sites, and taking care of the individual participants so that they could feel comfortable and cared for.

Course Content

Speakers Corner – Sharing Service User Perspectives

The self-stigmatization had packed me into the fog of passive hopelessness (Leni Hemminghytt Rønbeck).³

On the first day, a Speakers Corner exercise is used to surface the participants' expectations of the course, including different types of insecurity and frustrations associated with receiving or providing social services, especially given the size of the group with 30+ participants.

Participants were asked to divide into groups of 4-5 and create a list of frustrations and concerns to be shared in the larger group but without identifying the sources. This exercise had a cathartic effect and contributed to a new and positive energy in the group by reducing the intensity of the frustrations and laying the foundation for group communications and bonding. The frustration emerging primarily from the service users can be organized into three categories:

- 1) *Social relationships and sharing life experiences often reflecting low self-esteem, low self-confidence, little control over their quality of life* (e.g. "I am sick and tired of the way that Norwegians define you on the basis of the job you have, especially when you are unemployed"; "I'm sick and tired of having it bad"; "I am sick and tired of waking up in the morning and not feeling that I am alive").
- 2) *Interactions with government social service agencies often reflecting a sense of powerlessness and dependency, lack of privacy, and lack of human rights* (e.g. "I am sick and tired of trying to manipulate the system to survive in everyday life"; "I am sick and tired of the government sending my case summary around to many different agencies"; "I'm sick and tired of being dependent on the system").

³ Rønbeck, Leni Hemminghytt. 2012. Fra brukeralibi til prosjektleder – tanker om det likeverdige samarbeidet i HUSK. I *Brukermedvirkning. Likeverd og anerkjennelse*. Red. Anne Grete Jenssen og Inger Marii Tronvoll. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

- 3) *Employment, economy, and housing* (e.g. "I am sick and tired of employers that set us aside by ignoring our life experiences": "I'm sick and tired of being poor and trying to live on a minimum wage"; "I am sick and tired of packing my moving my belongings from one rental to another").

Participants frustrations was mainly related to how they perceived their social situation and the lack of quality of life, a difficult relationship with public bodies and how it felt to be out of work and consequently dealing with the difficulties related to a bad economy. The statements of service users overlapped one another because of the many years of absence from the labor market, leading to low social standing, reduced opportunities for participation in social life, and consistently negative experiences dealing with governmental social services.

Assessing Personal Competence

In efforts to identify the individual's personal skills, participants were handed out a list of 67 personal competencies (e.g., the ability to listen, expressing human warmth, demonstrating ingenuity, creative will and creativity, decisiveness, ability to be humble, ability to give and receive personal feedback, ability to handle conflicts, self-control, sense of justice, giving recognition to others, humor, cooperation). Based on the list, participants were divided into groups and given the following tasks: 1) identify ten strong skill, 2) identify five skills needing improvement, and 3) identify ways to strengthen skills. The report of one group included the following example of a contributor:

For my part I stated that I'm good at listening, admit my own weaknesses, that that I am creative, and show care and concern for others. But I would like to develop the ability to express myself in an understandable way. We also discovered something we were not aware of before, among other things, that we are responsible and have the ability to personal liability. It was an eye-opening experience. We need to stop being the way others want us to be, and have more faith in ourselves. We also found that we need to challenge ourselves on the ability to trust others.”

This approach to identifying competencies provided a counterweight to the focus on frustrations and problems by becoming aware of one's own life experience and the potential for expanding one's personal competence. In the group processes the participants discovered aspects of themselves that might otherwise be difficult to find when you are by yourself. By discovering their own expertise and responsibility for their own change, they felt that they were "in the same boat" and not alone with the problems they experienced, leading to a growing sense of empowerment and self-discovery.

Communication

A central theme of the course was to understand how communications can open and close processes. Another exercise involved the use of metaphors as illustrated in the comments of one of the participants who received a great deal of positive feedback for his courage to share:

I'll try to share some metaphors about how it is for me to be here. Being in the same boat is used many times. Maybe we're in the same boat, but our nets and lines are different. They are fuzzy and have many nodules. Each one of us has either more or fewer nodules that we are trying to fix up in. Sometimes we do not dare to approach the knots once because we are afraid to tangle even more. And those who will help us, how on earth can

they help us fix up our tangled? It's hard, it's a real challenge, but whether we have one or more nodules to resolve before we can cast out and reel in fish again, we are here to help. It is important to take the right actions to solve our tangles. So far so good.

Fictional story-telling was the foundation of another exercise. People create meaning in their lives through the stories they tell about themselves. Using fantasy figures, metaphors and symbols, you get a kind of distance from your own life and history, while at the same time activating and challenging the imagination. The idea is that the deeper meaning of symbols may open for new and more meaningful direction in life. This narrative methodology was an important part of the entire course where all participants were challenged to write a brief fairy tale about their life using the following guidelines?

- One can choose which part and period of life they want to write about.
- Participants shall describe the "journey" in their own lives - a short or a long period.
- The fairy tale starts out in a traditional manner with: "Once upon a time ..." and shall be written in the 3rd person - not 1st person – in order to create the necessary distance or get a bird's eye perspective of one's own life.
- Focus is on obstacles and experiences, and it is important that these are described with metaphors (e.g. Hans walked and walked and inside the dark forest, he met a huge bushy smelly troll and....)
- It is important that the writer is the hero of the fairy tale
- The story should have a happy ending

Several participants were convinced that they would not be able to write a fairy tale. But from the moment it was announced, everyone went into some kind of process. Looking backward in their own lives, a range of questions emerged: "is there anything in my life that's worth writing about?" "while I have experienced many problems, which ones should I include?", "what really is a metaphor?". For some it was painful to reflect upon and select a problem or trauma. For example:

I was absolutely sure I was not going to write a fairy tale, but this was working in my head and suddenly, it came to me and I sat down and wrote 11 pages – hand written – in one bite! I ordinarily would have had severe pain in the arms and shoulders by writing so much, but I was absolutely fine afterwards.

When the participants were asked to read their stories to the group (only as a voluntary act), the fairy tales elicited emotional responses in an environment where the service users, researchers, educators, students and practitioners were all equal. We often needed to take a break because we all were weeping. This exercise helped to promote group bonding regardless of the different roles and statuses of the participants. It also included the option of contributing to a published collection of the fairy tales.

Developing an action plan

One of the goals of the course, in addition to strengthening one's own self-esteem and be aware of their own abilities, was to draw up an Action Plan (e.g. long term goal of being independent of government support with an opportunity to return to work). For many, it was a challenge to break out of the status quo, and some may feel that the system is working against them when it came to

getting ahead in life, perhaps especially because of the limited opportunities and rights as well as lack of information.

The content of the Action Plan varied by individual participants, as the plan will be particularly suitable for him/her. The mapping process was new to many. The primary question was related to the future wishes and dreams of each participant related to employment, how they could achieve them, and what kind of help would be needed to build upon each participant's expertise derived through life experiences.

Summary

The evaluation session on the last day encouraged participants to reflect on the expectations / motivation and challenges that they had identified earlier. Most had experienced a process of getting closer to what they wanted of develop during the course. Many indicated that they had received new energy and that they looked forward to coming home. They also wanted some kind of follow up. No one was afraid of returning to their ordinary life. The atmosphere at the course was inclusive, and each participant was invited to participate in activities, but there were also participants who reported that they at times had felt outside the community. Not all tasks were followed up systematically, for example, the work of the working folders.

The goal of the courses is that participants (through theory, reflection and awareness) should explore and develop their own accountability and experience the empowerment and autonomy in a way that helps to move the individual closer to the labor market. In addition, the goal is to increase the competence so that participants will be more able to contribute positively to their own change and development.

The intensity of this course creates important group dynamics and processes. Located in a foreign country (Turkey) also amplifies the impact of the experience of service users, service practitioners, students and academics working together to develop a common understanding of what is needed to achieve a better relationship and cooperation, both at the individual and on the system level. This outcome can lay the foundation for the development of service improvement that benefits both the individual and society.

Service providers and users are given the opportunity to develop a common understanding of each other's experiences and perspectives, meeting the person "behind the mask" and exploring the process of redefining relationships in social service settings. Everyone has skills, personal qualities and personal experiences. In addition, the researchers and educators who participated had the additional task of documenting the processes that occur in the group. They acquired a better understanding of all these processes by participating themselves.

I've got into myself before, at least tried, many times, it's just that the Shame was always so great, I was so small, the feeling of powerlessness came. (...) I decided nevertheless to take the chance, because the experience of respect and equality was great. They talked to me, not down to me. The shame was less. They looked at me when I spoke, they did not interrupt me, they let me take time to say what I wanted to convey, and everybody gave of themselves. What I said was not swept under the carpet. Come Shame and Fear, I stood in it. This gave me a kick, it was tough, and my body reacted, I had a feeling of being stuffed with cockroaches that are trying to get out through my skin, however, no one looked down on me. I was driven by not feeling inferior, insignificant. I

am something. It matters what I say (Heidi Elén Halvorsen.)⁴

Another personal reflection is captured in the following poem:

Home from Turkey with myself in the luggage.

Inspired, happy and optimistic.

In group therapy.

Tells about my experiences – I am shining!

I am my own power!

They are shocked.

⁴ Halvorsen, Heidi Elén. 2011. Hvor er bruksanvisningen? I *Bruker. Brukermedvirkning. Bruker med virkning. Tverrfaglig samarbeid. Partnerskap. En brukermedvirkningsprosess i HUSK*. (red.) Tor Slettebø, Elisabeth Brodtkorb og Hilde Dalen. Rapport. Skien: KREM. http://www.krem-norge.no/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/HUSK_brukermedvirkning_52s.pdf