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Teaching Innovations in Social Work Education

Maria Wolmesjö

Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to discuss how the use of creative methods can support students to become aware of global social challenges and give opportunity to reflect on sustainable solutions in relation to different social contexts. Further on, the aim is to discuss preconditions needed. The method used is Future workshop, which is combined with other creative methods as storytelling, scenario, painting, drama, reflective thinking, etc. Data is gathered, from a Swedish perspective during 20 years of being a social worker, lecturer and researcher in social work and national and international collaboration. Results shows, by using different creative methods in education and research, students are allowed to “think outside the box” and new perspectives on common challenges and solutions can be identified. This chapter intends to contribute to a discussion of preconditions needed for using creative methods and multidisciplinary collaboration in the social work programme. The conclusion is working with creative methods needs lecturers who have knowledge of different methods, flexibility to choose between those and confidence in the students to find new solutions. The biggest challenge is not the students, it’s often other colleagues. Support from the managerial level is therefore crucial when introducing creative teaching methods in social work education.

Keywords: creative teaching methods, collaboration, social work, sustainability, user participation

1. Introduction

As part of their daily work, social workers have to handle several and often severe ethical dilemmas, regardless if they work with children, youths or adults in different social-exposed positions or situations. This is significant for social workers and shared internationally. There is a high awareness of several social problems which are too complex to handle by a single actor, which highlight the need of a global collaboration [1]. During the social work education, students need to develop and increase an awareness of the global social challenges, learn about different methods and gain knowledge of various tools to find new and sustainable solutions for social challenges. They also need to gain experience on how to collaborate across borders internationally with other social workers, interdisciplinarily and multi-professionally with other actors who can challenge their own perspective.

Being a lecturer in social work and meeting engaged social work students, you have a pedagogic responsibility to find educational methods which will prepare students to handle different ethical dilemmas and keep the inspiration and the belief in that “everything is possible”, as you often have as a young student. The more complex a problem is, the higher is the need of looking at it from different

perspectives. It is important to advance society via the classroom [2], and an openness of new innovative models will enrich the knowledge. This is something which can be difficult to do on your own. To be able to find sustainable solutions on complex global social challenges, there is a need of inter- and transdisciplinary and interprofessional collaboration as well as including users' perspective.

As a young lecturer in social work education in Sweden, I started to use different creative methods (as painting, lyrics, drama, interactive lectures built on specific scenarios, etc.) in different courses in the social work programme. From the beginning this was based on a personal interest, without having any formal education of specific creative teaching methods [3]. I noticed students appreciated the opportunity to use what they called nonacademic methods to understand the theory and practice from a new holistic perspective. Several years later, when I came in contact with creative methods as teaching methods in general and Future workshop [4] in particular, this strengthened me to further develop the methods and different techniques I have started to use. From experiences in education, including implementing user participation in the social work programme [5], I now also use creative methods and art-based research in my research to develop project ideas, gather empirical data and implement the result [6, 7].

The aim of this chapter is to critically analyze and discuss how the use of creative methods can support students to become aware of global social challenges and give the opportunity to reflect on similar and diverse sustainable solutions in relation to different social contexts. Further on, the aim is to discuss what preconditions are needed. Empirical data used in this chapter is gained from own experiences (i.e. of being a manager, lecturer, director of studies, head of department and researcher during a period of more than 20 years) in social work at different universities in Sweden. Data is gathered from different courses and from various research studies. Being a reader of this chapter, regardless if you are a student, lecturer, researcher, professional social worker, user representative or someone else engaged in social work education, you are invited to share some of my experiences in this field.

2. Creative methods: what, why and how?

What can be defined as a creative teaching method and what knowledge can creative methods contribute with to help students understand theory and practice in general and global social challenges and solutions in particular, in social work education? Why should we use these methods in social work education and research? If, and when, how can it be done in practice and what preconditions are needed?

Former research has pointed out creative teaching methods promote meaningfulness, motivation, inspiration, engagement and interaction between students. Student confidence is supported, and they are empowered to come up with new ideas to solve problems and reflect on a theory and practice as a "whole" [8]. Creativity can make a difference at micro, meso and macro levels by giving voice to people [9, 10], promoting the role of art and developing communication [11] and exploring options for sustainable living [12].

The creative teaching methods, which are presented in this chapter, are inspired by a method called Future workshop [4], which is described briefly below. This has then been developed and combined with other creative methods as storytelling, scenario, painting, drama, reflective thinking, etc. Data presented below is gathered, from a Swedish perspective during a period of more than 20 years of being a social worker and lecturer in social work and from doing social work research in different international collaboration projects in different countries. Empirical examples presented are chosen from different studies.

2.1 Future workshop

One of the methods I have been inspired of and developed further is based on Future workshops [4, 13]. Future workshop is a method or technique, which was created during the 1970s by Robert Jungk (1913–1994) to enable participants to develop new ideas and solutions of social problems and suggestions on what the future should look like. It is built on the participants, their experiences, ideas and contribution to develop common action plans for social changes. It is raised from the idea of all persons having an equal value and individual responsibility. Structure of the Future workshop consists of four different phases: a critique, a visionary, an implementation and an evaluation phase. Framed by a hard structure and rules, different techniques are used to accommodate creativity and make it possible for the participants to “think outside the box”. The method of Future workshop itself supports you as a leader to encourage participant commitment, even though hard work is required to plan, prepare and carry out the workshop through all the different phases. How this can be used in practice in different settings is explained further down.

3. Social work education: from a Swedish perspective

The social work programme in Sweden [14] consists of 3.5 years, divided into seven semesters, six on bachelor level and one semester on advanced/master level. During the fifth semester, students, during supervision from practitioners and lecturers, will have the opportunity to gain experiences from the practical field of social work by spending time at one or several social work placements. During the last semester, there are some optional courses at advanced level. Even though there is a national curriculum of the programme, there are options for each university and its lecturer providing the social work programme, to form the separate courses of curriculum. This structure gives several opportunities to use creative teaching methods in different courses at various levels.

Demands on efficiency and cost-benefits have increased in general, which make the discussion of how to handle ethical dilemmas even more important. In Sweden, which is a small country who has been known for its universal welfare policy, in general, cutdowns in public services and support, for example, have led to changes in eldercare and care of persons with disabilities and increased the need of family support [15–17].

Important values as a professional in social work, from a Swedish perspective, is independency, autonomy and the possibility for users to choose the services provided as well as the persons or organization who should be the main care giver. User perspective and participation of those who is in need of the services and support offered is an important value even for managers [18, 19]. These values have affected the social work programme as well, and specific courses have been developed where creative teaching methods are used and users/user representatives are taking part [20].

4. Creative teaching methods: some examples

4.1 Storytelling and role play

When working at Linnaeus University in Växjö from 1996 to 2012, I had the opportunity to be responsible of international courses where students from different countries and with different disciplinary backgrounds wanted to gain knowledge in social welfare in general and social work with older people and persons with

disabilities in particular. Creative methods, as individual storytelling, were created based on fictive cases—formed by students gathering data from their own country. These cases then were used to enable students to communicate and share experiences of global challenges. Based on students' told stories, role play was used, where students had the opportunity to “change identities” and ask each other questions and gain knowledge on what it would be like to be exposed to different social challenges and live in other countries than the one they were used to. Together, students then had to find common solution on how to handle challenges and ethical dilemmas.

It was a good experience to take the role of the user or a relative. Even thou most of us are becoming to be social workers, we realized we often forgot to ask the user and the relatives of their opinions. (student).

Being able to compare similarities and dissimilarities of preconditions in different countries, they gained knowledge of common global challenges and were able to find out different ways of solutions. Since students were depending on each other's different language and cultural skills to find out information from different countries, they also had the opportunity to practice international collaboration.

By using creative methods, it has been easier to gain new perspectives, better understand other cultures and find some friend during the way. (student).

Here, I would like to point out there is no *right* or *best* way to solve similar problems. Preconditions vary in different countries, and students became aware of this by reflecting from different perspectives/roles together.

4.2 Visualizing social challenges and reflecting on solutions

Another experience where different creative teaching methods were used is from a former Nordic-Baltic collaboration where 37 students from 5 different universities took part in an international course on human rights and public health [1]. In a creative workshop, students from different countries were asked to rank the grand social challenges they thought were important to prioritize in a near future. Important challenges were environmental and climate change issues as earthquakes, floods, water pollutions, increased high temperature, etc., which can cause large-scale social challenges as lack of housing, increased illnesses, poverty, hunger, etc. Other social challenges, which were discussed, were the increasing of life expectancy and, as a result of this, a larger amount of older people in need of care, compared to the amount of people in caregiving ages. Further examples of global social challenges were migration, trafficking, begging, alcohol and drug policies and the rapid technological development. Gender equalities were discussed, both in informal relations and in labour. An example of a gender equality issue, important for students, was abortion, if it should be allowed or not and who is the one responsible to decide if it should be carried through or not.

Many serious questions were discussed in a good atmosphere. This was supportive to understand similar social problems needs to be handle in different ways regarding to the cultural context. (student).

By using creative methods and letting students in mixed groups (with representatives from different countries and disciplines), use flipboard and pencils to draw

a picture on how they viewed these challenges, students got the possibility to deal with severe global challenges and visualize a common picture. From this picture, they were asked to reflect on what is needed to be changed and create a common vision. By allowing students to use their imagination and develop a fantasy or a vision of *best world ever*, they started a process, which enables them to formulate goals on what is needed to be done and how to prioritize. This made it possible to continue the work and create ideas for concrete action plans. In their exam papers, they then were obligated to compare at least two different countries and discuss similarities and differences and share the knowledge they have gained from the international collaboration. Below are some of the comments from students examining the course:

We have work hard in the study program but had a great time doing it! (student).

I have attained knowledge of certain areas I have not had earlier. (student).

4.3 Cre-active workshops

In an ongoing study on value-based eldercare in India and Sweden [21], I had the opportunity to conduct a lecture built on a creative workshop in India (2019). Almost 30 students, lecturers, managers, professionals and user representatives from India and Sweden attended the workshop. After introduction and presentations, the first step was to brainstorm on what they thought is the biggest challenges in eldercare from different perspectives. Participants took responsibility of writing their ideas down on post-it notes, which then were put directly on the wall. By using creative methods, it was possible to give voice to students, who should not have shared their experiences in a group like this otherwise. Participants were then gathered in a small group for discussion, clustering and prioritizing. By letting participants move around and do a “walkie-talkie” by reading and talking about what other groups had presented on post-it notes placed on the wall, a large amount of challenges, clusters and prioritizes were exposed and shared by all participants in a small amount of time.

I liked your teaching methods, they allowed us to share knowledge and express our experiences on more equal terms, regardless if you are a professor, a professional or a student. (student).

After locating the challenges, and having created a common picture of the most important challenges, participants were asked to sit down. Second step was different pictures of creative thinking (i.e. using daily ordinary product in creative unusual ways) were shown to inspire participants to use their imagination and be creative focusing on what it will look like when eldercare is the best way ever, when everything is possible. My experience from meeting several groups in different contexts is to enable people to think creative thoughts, they need to be in a positive state of mind. By using small exercises (e.g. think of something, which make you smile, come up with ideas on how to use an ordinary thing in an unusual way, share a creative idea with the person next to you), you can change your ability to be more creative. What happens in a room when you allow people to use their fantasy, my experience is they start to think about the possibilities instead of the hindrances, which they often do otherwise. There are creative solutions even of the hindrances they have defined just minutes ago!

You have released so much positive energy in the room, I hope we are able to take care of this and further the processes. (professional).

Third step was letting the group close their eyes in a cre-active pause and reflect on their visions and prioritize what was the most important thing to start working with. Based on their own engagement, they then were able to, if wanted, create a network and sign up for continuing work with the ideas they have suggested. My experience is most of what has been suggested as a vision in creative workshops like this has been possible to transform into action plans!

I am impressed of the ideas we have come up with and the processes, which have been started in a very small amount of time (professor).

To summarize, results shows when using different creative methods in education and research, students and/or other participants are allowed to “think outside the box”. New perspectives on common global challenges and innovative and sustainable solutions can be identified and developed.

5. Critical analysis and discussion

Above, I have shared some of my experiences of working with creative methods in social work education and research. This chapter also intends to contribute to a discussion of preconditions needed for using creative methods and multidisciplinary collaboration in the social work programme. For every lecture or different parts of a research project, there is a need of preparation and planning for a beginning, a middle and an ending where different creative methods can be used to broaden students’ perspective as well as give lecturers new insights! Depending on the size of the group, the room (size, location, furniture), time limits, material available and of course the aim you have with the lecture or your research project, there are different creative methods you can chose between. Below, I present a “model” of four steps, which can be used as a guide to create your own cre-active toolbox. For each step I discuss on, from my experiences, what preconditions are needed, or at least wanted, written from a Swedish perspective. This of course can differ according to the experience you already have gained, the students you will work together with and in what context the cre-active toolbox is going to be used.

5.1 The cre-active toolbox

The word *cre-active* is invented and used to underline, working with creativity is active work, which demands a lot of brain gym. The good news is cre-activity can be trained and further developed!

5.1.1 The preparation

The *hard work* of using creative methods in social work education and research actually starts before meeting the students and other persons invited to take part in a creative teaching method. Being well prepared enables you as a lecturer/researcher to choose between different techniques in your cre-active toolbox, which you have brought into the classroom or research field. What about the students you are going to meet? How many are they? What are their expectations? How can they be prepared for taking part in creative teaching methods? Is it optional to participate?

One of the most important preconditions to be aware of, even before introducing creative methods to students, is attitudes of colleagues and managers towards using creative teaching methods in the social work programme. In what courses will this be introduced, how, when and by whom? How will the use of creative methods in one course affect the other courses? Perhaps, there is a need of education on different methods, building relations with copartners and international colleagues before even meeting the students. Having support by your manager is substantial.

One experience I have is it is good to prepare students and other participants on what they are going to take part of. A special invitation will make them feel welcome and make it easier for you to introduce a new way of working. Other preconditions are having confidence in using different creative methods as a lecturer/research leader. I suggest to start by using material and techniques you feel familiar with and build your cre-active toolbox by adding new “tool” one by one. Choose a material and exercises you like to work with and know how to use; if it is new for you—practice before you will use it!

5.1.2 *The beginning*

When I start a lecture or when I meet new people in other situations, I start to shake my students’ hand (or great them with bowing, depending on the culture). This still surprises many of my students. What I try to do is creating a positive climate and building a relation with those who will participate and have chosen to take part and enter the room. This can be done in different ways, how this is done of course depends on who you are as a person. The next step is letting students (and other participants) present themselves into each other. Depending if it is a group of people who are used to work together or not, I give them different tasks or exercises to work with (as speed date, interviews, a single question to ask someone else, etc.) Asking the students of their expectations of taking part of a lecture, using creative teaching methods, will support them to take responsibility of what knowledge to gain during the specific lecture.

Preconditions to be aware of can be related to the group you are going to meet, how many students are there, what do you know about them, what course are they in, what about accessibility to the facility and the room you are going to use, how to put the furniture, what available technical devices are required, etc. (i.e. is it possible to do what you want to do?). One of the most important preconditions of enabling students and other participants to be creative is making them comfortable and secure.

5.1.3 *The middle*

During a lecture or in different parts of a research project, working with creative methods can be confusing. You have started a process, without knowing what the result will look like. For some persons this can be very stressful. Even though I have chosen to point out there is activity involved in the cre-active process, I want to highlight reflection time is an important part of this activity process. Time to reload and get new energy is as important as being “body and brain cre-active”; therefore creative pauses need to be incorporated in the process.

By adding different exercises and a sense of humor, you can make people in general feel better, be more effective and enjoy what they are doing. We know from earlier research that humor at work can make us stay healthier, become more open and creative and decrease the risk of stress and burnout. Even our memory and ability to learn is affected by pleasure. According to earlier research, we can improve every skill with 30 percent in a month if it is fun [22].

One of the preconditions to make a creative process work is to believe in the power of people and have trust in what they can achieve when giving the possibilities. Before asking people to engage and create visions, etc., it is good to decide and let participants know what the purpose using a certain creative method is. My experience is you as a lecturer/research leader have to create a “safe environment” for people so they will allow themselves to be innovative.

5.1.4 The ending

By using creative methods where students have been active and created different materials, which also can be exposed directly and part of the common documentation, you can get an evaluation, just by looking around in the room. Asking students and other participants to reflect and make a single comment of what knowledge they have gained and how they will use this in the future will give another perspective of the evaluation.

One of the preconditions when using creative methods is you have to be aware if there is a time limit. You want to end the lecture when students and other participants feel they “understand” the result of the creative activities they have taken part of. You want them to see that they have come up with more creative and innovative ideas and gained other results than they are used to, when using traditional methods.

Working with creative methods is fun, but it is also demanding; you have to stay alert and be flexible to adjust the methods needed according to the situation. Having the possibility to work with a colleague or copartner through different creative teaching methods is then recommended.

6. Conclusion

The conclusion is working with creative teaching methods needs certain preconditions at different levels: organizational, structural and individual. Working with creative activity means you have to be brave and have trust in other people—they might come up with something new you never thought of by yourself!

- Lecturers need to have knowledge of different methods, flexibility to choose between those and confidence in the students/participants.
- The biggest challenge when implementing creative methods in social work education and research is not the students, but other colleagues. Support from management/head of department is therefore crucial.
- Students should get an opportunity to try different creative models, focusing not only on *what*, *how* and *when* to do social work but also on *how* to do this.
- In general, collaboration with representatives from user organizations and professional social workers from different fields and their collaborative partners as well as national and international collaboration between different social work programmes needs to be further developed.
- New information and communication technology (i.e. smart phones, social media, artificial intelligence, etc.) needs to be developed and used in collaboration with persons from other disciplines and profession to add new and develop innovative solution on common global social challenges.

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