

Narrativity and multimodality in social work: designing the ‘future positive’

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Abstract

Narrativity inspires re-professionalization of *social work* and might be a way of framing new competencies and professions in social work. Interviews and role-playing online simulations serve as per formative arenas to explore individual and group development scenarios. Multimodality and modern digital devices vitalize practical research and social and cultural exchange.

Introduction: narrativity and multimodality in social work

For professionals in social work narratives as starting points for interventions are quite evident. Narratives are the natural habitat for social professionals. Narrativity is a conceptual framework in social studies for configurational ways of exploring and expressing the internal world (Van Haaster, 2006). Narratives are being used in performative social science (Jones, 2006) and qualitative research. In social work (Hogeschool Utrecht, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, Hogeschool Rotterdam, Hogeschool Inholland, the Netherlands) narrative experiments resulted in portraits of clients and social professionals, in a database of social stories and in new ways of presenting interview materials. At the same time narrative techniques and theories are integrated in experiments with role-playing games. Multi-user online simulations in social work are a further development in a long tradition of role-playing, storytelling and case-studies. In online role-playing games we challenge dynamic discourses of static narratives (plots, scenarios, story texts) and constructed narratives (interpretations, dialogues, interactions) by the players of the game. Narrativity in the field of simulations and games however has to be carefully described and defined. Scenarios and social problems can be conceived in realistic game settings that are safe and controllable for experimenting and learning. Role-playing games challenge creativity and artistic performance by combining arts and humanities. Storytelling evokes whole brain thinking (Herrmann, 1996) and holistic representations of life experiences in seeking the best combination of image, text, utterance, sound, movement and audiovisual effects. We are discovering new possibilities of effective learning-by-doing and new ways of coaching through narrativity and multimodality. In narrative approaches of applied social research the main objective is to explore narrative materials and narrative techniques through multimodality in attempt to co-construct knowledge about the social practice.

Major changes in present day social work include market and economic logic and strategies of private market management (van Ewijk, 2006). In order to establish an increasing awareness of responsibility for one's own life, for others and for a livable neighborhood, social work partners (government - institutions - professionals) search for less interventionist and decentralized approaches (van Ewijk et al., 2007). The overall aim is to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness in social work through a greater accountability to citizens. Clients of social work are granted more freedom of choice between public and private providers of social services, which results in a competitive and entrepreneurial public sector. These political and socio-cultural developments demand a re-professionalization of social services (Duyvendak et al., 2007).

Investigating and defining the possibilities and uses of narratives in social work practice might be a way of reframing competences and professions of social work. Narrativity can be helpful to analyze professionalism, ethics, etc., but further research and development of methodological techniques and instruments are necessary. Social professionals are challenged to take the shape of listening and intensify field research in order to know where and how they can be of better service to their clients and to cope with their changing needs. They must be constantly working together with citizens, organizations and local authorities in collectively writing neighborhood scripts for change and development.

Narrative approaches in role-playing games offer possibilities for what is called social design. Social professionals are used to 'read' the life stories of individuals and groups in order to search for 'loose ends' and options for change and development. Social workers design achievable scenarios for improvement of social bias, life conditions, rehabilitation and community work. Narrativity and multimodality enable new ways of exploring differences between the 'story world' and the real world that could enhance dialogue and opportunities for care, therapy, change and development. The story world reveals how people attribute meaning to real life experiences and how people think of their personal history, how they see their present life and their dreams, hopes and expectations for the future. Multimodality through interactive media offers the possibility to combine different tools, media and platforms and to participate actively, through the Internet, in sharing and exchanging ideas of how the future can be designed.

Narrative professionalism acknowledges ambiguity in many dimensions of professional practice: in policy, in tasks and assignments, in interaction and interplay, in function and performance criteria. The polyphony of interpretations of those aspects troubles good understanding of the contribution of different actors in the context of social work. Narrative methodology in the construction of scenarios for multi-user online simulations opens new horizons for the development of the body of knowledge of arts and humanities and of social work methodology. Narrativity and multimodality can support mutual understanding of actors in social work and can be helpful in finding consensus in doing the right thing and in doing it right. Generating and transforming everyday knowledge and tacit knowledge via narrativity and multimodality are modern ways of innovating social professions to cope with actual demands and with the ever changing and dynamic professional context.

Social design: story world meets real world

Social work professionals are constantly trained to reflect on character perspective in contexts of social problems and social development. Narrativity, in particular in role-playing games and simulations, can explore conflicts of ethics and personal or professional dilemmas. Though narrativity has always been in the heart of social work practice, modern multimedia and multimodal ICT environments broaden the narrative approaches (see also: Dettori et al., 2006). New paradigms in social work methodology lead towards a revitalization of social work through cooperative and participatory ways of problem solving and focalization on empowerment (Baart, 2001; van Unen, 2003; van Ewijk, 2006). Hence it is imperative to find consensus and practical and durable solutions for conflicts through dialogue and understanding in difficult situations. Narrative approaches can be helpful in this respect. Narratives that are gathered in databases and made available through digital media can serve for representative stakeholders in support of problem analyzing and the understanding of different cultural and social perspectives and behavior. Story worlds that are based on real life experiences can be discussed and remodeled according to changing circumstances. In stories it is easy and

safe to experiment with characters, options, décor and rules. Once we acknowledge alternatives in a story world, change in the real world might seem more reachable. Experiences that are captured in digital stories can be analyzed with more objectivity and greater dissociation. Digital stories can act as narrative metaphors to engage people and professionals in exploring multiple perspectives towards solution-driven progress. In social sciences and social work there is a growing interest in narrative as research tool for the exploration of social contexts. Social professionals use the media, social stories and interviews as the basic information gathering tool of the social sciences (Denzin, 2001). The Internet and other modern digital media offer a tremendous variety of multimodal compositions of information (text, language, speech, utterance, image, gesture, movement) for social practice research.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) have shown us that environments can be read as semi-otic landscapes. The same may be applicable to personal digital stories and stories about social backgrounds and communities. In each situation objects, nature and cultural artifacts can be read as stories, by the intermediary of imagination, verbalization, attribution and sense making and meaning giving explanations. The exchange of interpretations can reveal similarities and conflicts that are useful in dialogues about change and development. Narrative representations of experiences, objectives and hopes for the future can be helpful to design the future in positive ways. Even narratives that contain negative or destructive visions and conducts might as such be starting points for constructive social work in order to transform them into legitimate future development. Social work is interested in the uncertainty and doubts within unfinished stories, 'small, local narratives' (as opposed to 'grand narratives', Lyotard, 1984). Many social problems show conflicts in truth seeking personal beliefs and quests in 'petits récits'. In each person's life the individual story world meets real life and sometimes it can be a painful confrontation.

Social work stories contain patterns of events that are structured by human problems and attempts to prevent or to resolve them. Following Piaget (1954), social constructionists argue that people construct their experiences from reality through mental activity, resulting in stories about their history, present and future. Through stories the real world can be mirrored in the imagination of the individual, group or community. Stories can be seen as structuring mechanisms for personal and social development, but also as media for practical social experiments and for collaborative learning (Dettori et al., 2006). Stories are meant to create knowledge through the transformation of experience and can thus be seen as an important source for social sciences. With stories, woven into role-playing online simulations and computer games, we can extend the array of experiences for learning. Digital storytelling, role-playing games and simulations can be appropriate in situations that are not feasible for text-based reasoning and arguments. Social interaction in role-playing games challenge and change existing fragments of beliefs, which is highly significant for social learning and for experiments of constructional collaborative learning (Dettori et al., 2006).

Ambiguity and unanswered questions

The professional world of social work is filled with ambiguity and unanswered questions. The intention of professionals is or should be to unconditionally accept the 'not knowing', to acknowledge uncertainty as source for dialogue and progressive development. The pursuit of unquestionable and practice based evidence needs not to be the one and only objective. One of the main tasks of social workers is to investigate backgrounds and conditions in problematic social situations. Doubtful and problematic beliefs are in the heart of social work and can be explored by narrative approaches. By

examining ambiguity and unanswered questions with an open mind, social professionals are more likely to understand and support people in their quest for personal development, in spite of any informational gaps, contradictions and conflicts. The explorative nature of this type of work asks constantly for creative thinking in order to find tailor-made solutions. It is a well known fact that arts-based experiments can help to find new ways in this respect.

Creative research methods across various disciplines of arts and humanities can generate new effective ways of localized data mining. For communication, methods and strategies this could lead to eclectic combinations of knowledge and techniques from linguistics, anthropology, arts theory and social sciences. Traditionally the interview is the most appropriate way for exploring situations and contexts. As Denzin (2001) states, the interview has been the basic gathering tool of the social sciences and in particular in the present 'cinematic-interview society' human services professionals and social researchers increasingly use the reflective gaze of multi media representations of world models and life experiences. The interview becomes a performance-based, dramaturgical communication channel between interviewee and audience. New generations, growing up with the clip world of MTV, YouTube and with fresh textual images of MSN and SMS come up with different performative ways of communication, where various layers of dissimilar meanings between text, speech and image often are limited to the space and time of moment, medium and context. Nevertheless, these modern cinematic performances can be used as rich openings to dialogue, exchange and informal learning.

Bourdieu (1993) has taught us to look at interview techniques from different points of view. The interview can be seen as an experiment for expressive codes in language, speech and symbols. Interviewers should be attentive to the pitfall where interviewee and interviewer feel submitted to the regime of the questionnaire. Interviews can obstruct a free expression of ideas and thoughts when the focalization is more on the topic list instead of on exploring genuine experiences of the subject of/in the interview. Bourdieu speaks of a 'réflexivité réflexe', the immediate capacity to critically observe what is happening during dialogic conversations and interviews. This can be considered as part of the core competences of social professionals and practice researchers. For the interviewer it may take not only an adventurous attitude, but also a sincere confidence in the expertise and specific abilities of the interviewee and to be open for tangential thinking (Jones, 2006). Tangential thinking in social work may ask professionals to pursue seemingly irrelevant topics of thoughts, just in order to keep pace with clients or groups, until you feel that you have found just that information necessary. Much like creative processes, social research through interviewing is about being present, following intuition, leaving and exploring boundaries, uncovering unknown areas. Professionalism in social work requires nevertheless a sound balance between tangential thinking and disciplined action in guiding the interviewee through the exploration of life experiences. The posture of an active listener demands to investigate stories in interviews with additional questions and to respond to meaningful utterances, silences, gestures, images, proverbs, symbols and metaphors (Denzin, 2001). Thus the interview can be read as a layered, multi-textual performance that can be submitted to sincere and critical appraisal towards understanding social and individual contexts. We do not want to consider such an interview performance as revealing truth or as being true. Instead we ask ourselves whether it allows us look differently, to argue from other perspectives. As Denzin (2001) states: the interview shows its subtle pedagogy in bringing forth an understanding of the world by being itself a world-like object of interpretation.

Lo-tech and hi-tech crowd sourcing

Crowd sourcing, a buzzword from open innovation concepts in software development and marketing, transposed to social work could mean activating and stimulating people to take up tasks and responsibilities that used to belong to institutions and social professionals. Crowd sourcing not only involves traditional volunteer jobs in social care and community development, but also brings back as much autonomy as possible in the hands of individuals and their social networks. Decentralization of influence and authority to local social management and professionals is being pushed further to direct actors in the context of care and social development. In attempts to determine new formulas of services that match with present day needs social work seeks collaborative ways of care and community development between experts, therapists, social professionals and citizens. Outsourcing social work can be successful in the assumption that the opinion and participation of direct actors, bound by a certain social problem and context, can be very effective and essential in the achievement of sustainable results. Crowd sourcing fits perfectly in a world where people have increasing access to social networking via Internet and to information and ideas for help and learning on the web. Actor generated social support is an example of the co-creation of knowledge and open community innovation and can restore ownership and can establish meaningful and helpful liaisons between people that need help and people that can provide it.

One of the ubiquitous assignments of social work professionals is to support people in exploring their environment and to help them transliterate (this means to transpose thoughts in words or texts into a different 'language' like images, music, dance, film) their life world, story world and dream world into speech, language, text, image and sound (Palmer, 2004). In order to understand clients and groups, social workers are concerned with how mind styles are represented in different types of narratives about life, experience and personal or group development. For better understanding of social contexts, professionals reflect on the triangular relationship between life world (experience), story world (representation) and dream world (reflection). The life world exposes how people behave, how they communicate and how they live. In the story world people give words and images to personal experiences and reveal their awareness of context, view on others and relation between the experienced self and the environment. The dream world is about sense making and builds hopes and prospects for the future. To enlarge the scope of options and perspectives, social professionals look at the different reference worlds of their clients in conversations, in interviews, in stories and through observations.

Nowadays a variety of lo-tech and hi-tech media is available to examine contexts, e.g. through written and oral narratives, by historic or contextual reconstruction, with the help of interactive devices and graphic representations (both communicative and artistic or expressive), via role-playing simulations and traditional play or (online) games. By integrating specific combinations of lo-tech and hi-tech media in communication strategies it becomes possible to focalize on certain perspectives and to analyze interconnection, interplay and interdependency between different actors in social problems. The multimodality of media (old and new) enables to choose the right communication channel in each situation and to adapt content to context and awareness. Multi media in particular offer potential to blend the interactive nature of discussion with the reflective nature of different modes of representation into collaborative proceedings of knowledge and reasonable solutions. Social work can transform a borough or municipality into a multimodal virtual space, where people meet, discuss, share and exchange stories, images, ideas. Consensus-based collaborative social work can easily be facilitated by using multimodality and many projects of recent community development in the

Netherlands prove that different organizations, local government, citizens, corporations and social professionals can be brought together successfully to exchange community-based ideas of how a local situations can be improved and to give information about processes of development. Models of simulation and virtual reality can be used for experimental design of physical projects of city development, but also to strengthen human engagement with the world. Social work has discovered the use of narrative as an information technology tool for learning and social design. Communities and municipalities can be seen as 'narrative learning environments' (Dettori et al., 2006), whether they are technology-enhanced or technology-mediated. It goes without saying that in any given situation it is important to be realistic and to ask whether there is an added value in using multimodality and technology to realize collaborative community development. In many situations traditional non-technological communication has proved to be valuable and effective and must therefore not be replaced. For scenario development generic tools of computer and Internet are available, but also specifically designed software. In virtual cities like Digidam and Cyberdam (www.cyberdam.nl) specific scenarios can be built to experiment with role-playing games. Social professionals and students can train their skills in a safe and controllable virtual environment through events (stories), vital dilemmas and the enrolment of tasks and interaction. In real life human rationality works as rubber bands that keep you in your comfortable position and that bounces back ideas that are too wild or too weird. Virtual learning environments offer possibilities to experiment with unconventional thoughts in order to widen boundaries and to break through mental patterns, to come up with new options that will not show within the safety rules of real life.

Role-playing games are based on realistic scenarios that start off with an event, a story, containing objects, persons, organizations in an orchestration of interactions, assignments and collaboration. Multi-user online role-playing simulations and games are fun and have a strong appeal on entertainment, interaction and competitiveness between players. Apart from that the combination of text, sound, image, photo, film and effects draw on whole brain thinking and evoke different styles of learning. On the condition that simulations and games are built on relevant and realistic stories, they can be of significant meaning for practice research and knowledge construction in a research - development - innovation sequence. Narrativity and multimodality are essential to collaborative community development, but further investigation is necessary to produce scientifically tested instruments and methodology for practical research in social work.

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