

Dialogue meetings as an arena for collaboration and reflection among researchers and practitioners in a pre-study of a welfare technology testbed

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Abstract

The research question of the article is to explore whether the method dialogue meetings could be relevant for collaboration reflective learning among researchers and practitioners when welfare technology should be implemented in municipalities, or not. A testbed was planned to be implemented in a retirement home in a Swedish municipality, and the practitioners worked with a pre-study of that testbed. The aim of the article is to describe the collaboration and dialogue between the researchers and the practitioners in the dialogue meetings, and to reflect upon the potential of dialogue meetings as an arena for democratic collaboration and reflection among researchers and practitioners. The research methodology approach is participatory action research with mixed methods (dialogue meetings, focus groups, participant observations). During the dialogue meetings, the researchers learned more about the use of traditional research methods, and the practitioners learned more about how they could improve their use of the methods in order to facilitate change processes in their organization. Dialogue meetings could be relevant for reflective learning among researchers and practitioners in different organizational contexts, as a method to promote bridging the gap between practice and research in a democratic way; create inter-professional collaboration and reflection, and contribute to work change processes and sense-making.

Keywords: Welfare technology, testbed, implementation, dialogue meetings, reflection, participatory action research.

1. Introduction

A collaboration study was initiated in spring 2019 with five researchers working in the research project “eTeam for welfare technology – organization, implementation and use of welfare technology in municipality health care”, and two practitioners from the Care Administration in a Swedish municipality. Many municipalities have problems with lack of resources and relevant knowledge of implementation and use of welfare technology. The overall aim of the project was then to support Swedish municipalities when welfare technology should be implemented and used. The two practitioners mentioned in this article worked as organization developers.

The practitioners worked with an ongoing pre-study for a future implementation of a testbed at a dementia department in an existing retirement home. The results of the pre-study were intended to be used as part of their application for development funding for the testbed. Different work methods and welfare technologies should be tested in the testbed before implementation in the whole care organization. The pre-study included dialogue and anchoring of the future testbed with representatives from industry, focus groups with future

clients and their relatives, and development of models and methods for organizational development. One part of the pre-study was a so-called insight study with interviews, observations/shadowing and workshops, mainly with personnel who participated in the pre-study of the testbed, such as assistant nurses and unit managers. One nurse also participated in the insight study. In the insight study, the practitioners mainly focused on administrative processes, meeting arenas, physical environment, communication, and information transmission. The insight study started with a workshop for the personnel who participated in the pre-study. The results of the workshops highlighted several areas of concern where ideas on how to make their work more effective and patient safe emerged. The persons attending the workshop then decided together which ideas and suggestions they were going to focus on. After the first workshop, interviews and observations/shadowing were used as methods, and the insight study ended with a second workshop.

The practitioners asked the researchers to evaluate the relevance of their use of methods in the insight study, as methods that could be used when testing and implementing new technologies and organization of the work in the future testbed. The aim of the collaboration study was thus to develop democratic collaboration and reflection processes among researchers and practitioners regarding their experiences from the insight study.

The researchers were interested in collaborating with the practitioners in order to support their further testing and implementation of welfare technology, in accordance with the aim of their project. They suggested the use of focus groups with personnel who had participated in the practitioners methods, and to discuss the results of the focus groups in dialogue meetings. Dialogue meetings were supposed to support democratic collaboration and reflection processes in order to promote mutual learning for both practitioners and researchers. From the researchers' perspective, it was interesting to learn more about how the practitioners use traditional research methods such as interviews and participative observations, and if the use could be improved. They were also interested in the relevance of their use of methods for the pre-study, compared with research methods that researchers traditionally use. Which were the differences between using scientific research methods and more practical ones? Could the researchers and practitioners learn from each other in order to improve their use of methods in different contexts?

The research question of the article is to understand if the method dialogue meetings could be relevant for collaborative and reflective learning among researchers and practitioners when welfare technology should be implemented in municipalities. The aim of the article is to describe the collaboration and dialogue between the researchers and the practitioners in the dialogue meetings, and to reflect upon the potential of dialogue meetings as an arena for democratic collaboration and reflection among researchers and practitioners.

2. Theoretical and practical background of the dialogue meetings

The dialogue meetings developed and used in this study were inspired by earlier theoretical and practical work. Within the theory field of organizational learning, several researchers emphasize the role of social processes in transforming individual learning into organizational learning (Argyris & Schön 1996; Senge 1990). Reflection activities need to take place in collective learning settings where people have space and time to reflect on their work (ibid.). Reflection plays an important role as the driving force of organizational learning (Høystrup 2004). Reading and writing are methods that could be used to trigger reflection (Hammarén 1995; Göransson, Hammarén & Ennals 2006).

Reflection is essential for promoting development-oriented learning, compared with adaptive learning, according to Ellström (2001). Svensson and Åberg (2001) differentiate between “surface learning” and “development-oriented learning”, as Argyris and Schön (1996) also refer to “single-loop learning” in difference from “double-loop learning”. Development-oriented learning, double-loop learning, or creative learning, encourages a tentative, critical analysis and a readiness for change. Development-oriented learning could take place in project groups for development and work changes (Grundén 2004). Argyris, Putnam and McLain Smith (1985) use the concept “communities of inquiries” in order to describe collective forms of development-oriented learning. Learning and doing are often seen as two sides of the same coin; Dewey (1999) and Schön (1983) mean that reflection upon action is an important aspect of learning processes in organizations.

Reflection meetings were developed by Grundén (2004) and used as a method for learning and reflection for the practitioners in the project County Academy at the County Administration in Sweden. An internal organization for the administration of in-house education was developed in the project. The project group consisted of both researchers and practitioners. The reflection meeting were used for some internal meetings in the project group where the participants in the reflection meetings were only one of the researchers (who had a passive role during the meetings) and all practitioners who also participated in the traditional project meetings.

The traditional project meetings had agendas, and the discussion during these meetings were much characterized by the practitioners traditional working roles such as systems such developers, engineering e.g. and was technically oriented. The reflection meetings on the other hand, became a freer arena for problem setting, analysis, reflection and evaluation. There were no pre-defined agendas for the meetings. The informal discussions often focused on different psychosocial aspects of the project, also highly important for the project, but not articulated in the traditional project meetings of the County Academy which more focused on technically oriented aspects. The reflection meetings became a very important arena for reflection and learning for the practitioners as a complement to the traditional project meetings.

Group discussions and reflections could contribute to sense-making, “making sense”, from a community of practice perspective (Lave & Wenger 1991), in the same way as the process of sense-making is related to IT-adaption, according to Henfridsson (1999). Sense-making probably contributes to creating motivation and a sense of meaning of the problems that are discussed, and could facilitate creative thinking and problem solving. In the social interaction between individuals, effective communication based on cooperation and development of a shared reference frame should be obtained in the sense-making process (Thiry 2001; Weick 1995).

Reflection discussions could be organized in different ways at the workplace. Study circles, e.g., could be a relevant pedagogical approach for learning together in a community of practice, according to Lave and Wenger (1991). Study circles could support productive reflections at work, while emphasizing the social collective aspects of reflection; people reflecting together at the workplace (Boud et al 2006). Study circles have a long tradition in the Swedish popular movement (closely connected to the development of democracy, trade unions and the Social Democracy Party in Sweden) and have frequently been used by educational associations (Erikson & Holmer 1991). Study circles have also been used, often as a complement to other change activities (ibid). A study circle usually consists of a smaller group with a study leader, who is more of a co-ordinator than a teacher. A study circle often

has a generally formulated study subject, and the participants can decide what aspects of the subject they want to study more thoroughly.

Perby (1995) uses the term “research circles” for collaboration and reflection circles with researchers and practitioners. Högdin and Kjellman (2014) stress the background of research circles in participatory action research and participant-oriented research. According to the results of their study, using research circles as a method contributed to change processes in the social work of professionals; created a knowledge process of more awareness of important aspects of the work, and enhanced inter-professional collaboration. However, trust between professionals is crucial in order to establish fruitful dialogue meetings with democratic reflections and knowledge exchange (Evetts 2006), since trust functions as a foundation for an open atmosphere in a community of practice (Chen, Fan & Tsai 2014; Hashim & Tan 2009).

In this study, dialogue meetings were used as a democratic arena for collaboration and reflection among researchers and practitioners in order to contribute to bridging the gap between theory and practice and lead to an increased understanding of their respective work contexts and professional knowledge. The dialogue meetings were also supposed to contribute to better use of methods in the future testbed.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological approach

The overall aim of the project “eTeam for welfare technology – organization, implementation and use of welfare technology in municipality health care”, is to support Swedish municipalities when welfare technology should be implemented and used. Our research approach in the project is participatory action research, in order to contribute to practical problems in real situations (Rapoport, 1970; Reason & Bradbury, 2007). In participatory action research in organizations close collaboration between the researchers and practitioners are important. The close collaboration stimulate learning among the parties. Dialogue meetings with researchers and practitioners is seen as a method in our participative action research, that could stimulate reflection and learning about methods that could be used when welfare technology is implemented. A difference between dialogue meetings and reflection meetings (Grunden, 2004) (described in “4. Theoretical and practical background of the dialogue meetings”), is the fact that the reflection meetings supported learning and reflection processes for the practitioners in the County Academy project group, while the dialogue meetings will support learning and reflection processes among the researchers and the practitioners in the project group.

Participatory action research is often grounded in strong ethics, such as emancipatory values (Wood & Govender, 2013). Democratic values is applied to our dialogue meetings, thus collaboration and reflection between all participants, both practitioners and researchers, without any power relation (Reason & McArdle, 2004). The researchers participate in the meetings in the same way as the practitioners, in a democratic peer relationship, and they are supposed to learn from each other (Ghaye, et al, 2008). While many of the original forms of action research espoused participation, power was often held tightly by researchers. However, more recent developments place emphasis on authentic participation and a full integration of action and reflection and on increased collaboration between all those involved in the inquiry project. In this way the knowledge developed in the inquiry process is directly relevant to the issues being studied. Thus participatory action research is conducted by, with and for people, rather than research on people.

3.2 Activities in the participatory action research

Two dialogue meetings were held in the collaboration project with the practitioners. The researchers participated as complete participants in the dialogue meetings (Waddington 2004). Documents and reports written by the researchers, were distributed to the participants of the dialogue meetings before the meetings were held. The dialogue meetings were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the researchers.

We used mixed methods in our participatory action research approach. Mixed methods may allow a team to discuss, reflect and discuss with each other, using different perspectives (Sendall, et. al. 2018). The methods used in our project are dialogue meetings, focus groups and participant observations.

Focus groups (Wibeck 2007) was used as a relevant research method in order to gather knowledge about the participants' experiences and thoughts from participating interviews, observations/shadowing and/or workshops held by the practitioners. During the focus groups the researchers' roles were participant-as-observers (Waddington 2004).

Three focus group meetings were held in May 2019 with assistant nurses and unit managers from the Care Administration who had previously participated in interviews, observations and/or workshops held by the practitioners in the pre-study. They were asked by the practitioners or their managers if they wanted to participate in the focus groups that the researchers were going to create. The discussions in the focus groups should focus on their experiences from participating in the interviews, observations and/or workshops.

Before the focus groups met, the participants were informed both orally and in a written document (approved by the Ethical Review Authority in Sweden), and they had to sign a consent form where they ensured that they wanted to participate in the focus group. The consent forms were then archived.

Each focus group consisted of homogenous professions such as assistant nurses or unit managers, and each focus group had two to four participants (either assistant nurses or unit managers), and two researchers. The participants were ensured that their responses would be anonymous. Therefore, no nurse could participate in the focus groups, as the practitioners had only interviewed one nurse.

During the focus group meetings, the participants discussed their experiences both before, during and after the interviews, observations and/or workshops. The participants seemed to be interested in participating in the discussions with their colleagues during the focus group meetings, but the unit managers seemed to be more accustomed to discussing their experiences compared with the assistant nurses. The discussions during all focus group meetings were recorded, transcribed and analyzed (using content analysis) by the researchers. A report with the results and analysis were distributed to the participants of the second dialogue meeting in advance. During the dialogue meeting the report was discussed. The results and analysis of the dialogue meeting are described in the next section.

The researchers also made participant observations of two workshops (as part of the participatory action research), held by the practitioners with personnel participating in their pre-study. During the observations the researchers' roles were participant-as-observers (Waddington 2004). The results of the participant observations were also reported to the practitioners in the report.

4. The collaboration and reflections among the researchers and practitioners

4.1. The dialogue meetings

Soon after the first contacts between the researchers and the practitioners a dialogue meeting was scheduled. Before the first meeting the researchers sent a proposal of the collaboration study to the practitioners to be discussed at the meeting. In the proposal, the researchers described an ambition to develop mutual learning processes between the researchers and the practitioners, focusing on the experiences from the insight study. The researchers suggested that it would be relevant to use focus groups in order to study the experiences of the personnel that had participated in the interviews, observations/shadowing and workshops in the insight study. The researchers also suggested that it could be relevant to use participative observations of the workshops in the insight study.

The dialogue meetings were recorded, transcribed and analyzed, and the results were reported to the practitioners before the next dialogue meeting, in order to promote reflections during the next meeting.

The first dialogue meeting between researchers and practitioners was held in March 2019 in the municipal building. The aim of the meeting was to discuss and plan the collaboration study. During the meeting the practitioners described their pre-study in detail, and the collaboration study was discussed. The study proposal was adopted, and it was decided to hold a new dialogue meeting after the researchers had conducted the focus group meetings. One of the researchers had already made participative observations at the two workshops that were held in January and March and reported back to the practitioners.

After the focus group meetings and observations were done, the researchers wrote a preliminary report with the results to be discussed at the second dialogue meeting. During the second dialogue meeting, in June 2019, the researchers and practitioners together discussed and reflected upon the results in the preliminary report. The discussion was recorded and transcribed and the main points of the discussion are presented in this article under the “Section 2.3. Lessons learned from the second dialogue meeting”. The final report of the collaboration study also contained these main points from the discussion. The practitioners used that report as an enclosure to their application for research funding for the future testbed.

4.2 Lessons learned from the second dialogue meeting

This section describes the main aspects of the discussions and reflections among the researchers and practitioners during the second dialogue meeting.

4.2.1 Use of methods

Voluntary participation and anonymity

Methods such as interviews and participative observations could be used in slightly different ways depending on whether they are used as research methods in a research study or as part of development work in an organization. If the methods are used as a part of development work, they are often treated in the same way as ordinary work which means that routines are specified and not voluntary, in which case voluntarily participation is not used. It seems however important that the participants in interviews and observations are informed whether participation is voluntary or not, and the motives behind.

If the methods are used in research studies, established research praxis is followed, which normally means voluntary participation in interviews and observations.

It also seems important that the use of methods in development work in organizations is as transparent as possible, so that the participants in interviews and observations know whether they will be anonymous or not, and how the results will be. Anonymity in research studies is very important with regard to integrity, since research results are often publicly published in, e.g., journals. It is common to interview the personnel about their work routines when the work process is mapped, and it is not always necessary to anonymize the results. The important thing is to be transparent about how the results will be used.

Selection of respondents

The selection of respondents for an interview or observation can affect the results. If only respondents that are easy to ask are chosen (convenient selection), there is a risk that they are biased in some way, e.g., only positive respondents or respondents with the same experiences. In the beginning of the insight study, temporary employees were not supposed to be observed, but after a while they were nevertheless included, and their views on the work became a very relevant part of the results, as a complement to the views of the other employees.

Information before interviews/observations/workshops

It was seen as very important that prospective participants in interviews/focus groups/observations/workshops receive relevant information in advance about the aim and implications of their participation. Relevant information in advance can reduce anxiety and potentially contribute to more positive attitudes to participating, according to the focus groups. Some of the assistant nurses that were observed had not been personally informed about their participation, but only read it in their digital calendars. Perhaps they were not completely comfortable to participate, but participated anyway, in order to show that they did their job well. The discussions at the dialogue meetings concluded that it was important that the prospective participants were personally asked well in advance about their participation, and most preferably by the practitioners instead of the managers.

Interviews and focus groups

The practitioners interviewed assistant nurses working both at the testbed department and at other departments, in order to compare their work situations. The assistant nurses that worked at the testbed department have had more previous contact with the practitioners in discussions about the testbed, and they seemed to be more accustomed to interview situations compared to the assistant nurses from the other departments. The researchers had the same experiences from the discussions in the focus groups. The practitioners stressed that it is not common to involve all personnel, e.g., assistant nurses, which would be affected by a change. Focus groups can be an alternative to interviews if the respondents are not used to being interviewed, in order to create a safer environment for the participants. If the respondents already know some of the other participants, that also helps to create a safer environment.

The practitioners reported that some of the interviews with the respondents took more time than planned, perhaps because they already knew each other. The discussions became long and open, and came to focus on complicated aspects of the work, but were difficult to end, which could be due to the fact that the practitioners were untrained in the beginning. The documentation from the interviews contributed to a better understanding of how they could improve their interview techniques.

The practitioners mentioned a cultural aspect that could have affected the interviews and focus groups with the assistant nurses, namely the fact that it seems that they did not really trust that their work situations would improve as a result of changes in the work. Many

previous changes have instead led to a work situation with less personnel and an increased work load for the remaining personnel. The assistant nurses also mean that they have little ability to influence their work situations, which could potentially contribute to a lack of interest to participate in interviews focus groups.

The managers stressed that they have less time today, compared to before, and that they are more stressed; aspects which could contribute to stopping proposals from the employees to improve their work situations, with arguments such as, e.g., lack of money.

Observations

The observation studies that the practitioners made were not supposed to be pure participant observations, but the practitioners mentioned that it was difficult to judge whether they should assist a client who needed help, or just observe. In many such cases they could not refrain from assisting. The practitioners also mentioned that it was difficult to know what to document during the observations.

It is more common in research studies that the researchers do not know the persons that they are going to observe, which could make it easier for the observer to behave in a more “neutral” or passive way. It is important that both practitioners and researchers inform the persons that they are going to study about their roles and what they will focus on during their observations, and how the results will be used. The personnel that were observed by the practitioners were aware that the observations focused on how they worked, without evaluating their performance of the work. The observed personnel seemed to be more relaxed when the observers took a more active part in the work. They also wanted to describe their perspectives on the work, e.g., aspects of the work that need to be improved. According to the practitioners, observations of personnel is a very good way of paying attention to them and contribute to increasing their engagement in the work.

In order to document observations in a relevant manner, important aspects to focus on during the observations could be identified in advance and used as a template for the documentation protocol. Interviews and videos could also be used as a complement to observations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). The practitioners took notes and photos with their mobile phones for their documentation. They also reflected on the fact that it would have been easier to observe if they had chosen fewer aspects to focus on.

The practitioners suggested that it would have been relevant with a follow-up discussion with the observed personnel directly after the observation, in order to address questions and aspects that there was not enough time to discuss during the observation. The observers did, however, visit the personnel some time after the observations in order to ask some follow-up questions and discuss possible improvements in work routines. When the observers visited the personnel after another two weeks, the personnel seemed to have reflected on the improvement suggestions and were more willing to change their work routines.

Follow-up of interviews and observations

To follow-up on the results of the interviews and observations, the practitioners made a compilation of different focus areas (also with quotes). The focus areas were written on post-it notes that were displayed on big screens in the testbed department, and were also discussed with the personnel in a meeting.

The results from the interviews and observations were also presented (using a PowerPoint presentation) and discussed with the personnel in a work meeting.

Other methods for changing work practices in organizations

The practitioners meant that the assistant nurses could also make observations as part of

changing work. The researchers suggested that a template could be developed for such observations, and discussed in focus groups before used. Conducting their own observations could contribute to making the assistant nurses feel more included in the development work.

The practitioners have also started to make *personas* of, e.g., assistant nurses, clients, relatives and managers, to be used in work change processes in order to get relevant pictures of the different groups. Such personas could be discussed in, e.g., workshops with the personnel.

4.2.2. Participation in work change processes

Participation in work change processes seemed to be very important for anchoring new routines among the personnel. Some experiences from the pre-study were that the personnel became more positive to changes and more interested in proposing changes if they participated in interviews, observations and/or discussions. They seemed to have a need to first express some negative aspects of their work today and then propose constructive changes that could help to improve the situation. Their proposals contributed to an understanding that there are more alternatives to change than just reduce the number of personnel.

The practitioners organized visits to exhibitions of welfare technology for the pre-study participants which affected their interest in the coming changes. The practitioners also organized workshops where the personnel participated in making prototypes for a planning system, which also contributed to their positive attitudes.

4.2.3. Conclusions from the pre-study

The main conclusion from the pre-study was that there is a large need for digital structures and planning support in the organization the personnel mainly receive information about, e.g., planning of the work, via personal communication. This leads to a lot of additional work when, e.g., introducing temporary employees to the work. A large part of the personal communication between the assistant nurses and the nurses could also be facilitated by a better planning system. A better support and planning system could contribute to a better work situation for the personnel, with, e.g., less stress. It could also contribute to better information to the practitioners. Most municipalities in Sweden seem to have a lack of structure and planning support in their care organizations.

5. Conclusions

The dialogue meetings served as an arena for collaboration, analysis and reflection. The arena encouraged processes of learning and reflection among the researchers and the practitioners, based on their perspectives on the collaborative work when the testbed should be implemented. Dialogue meetings is thus an arena for practitioners to understand themselves and their work better. The dialogue meetings also served as an arena for bridging the gap between theory and practice. The dialogues during the meetings were democratic; there were no formal chairs of the meetings and the knowledge and understanding of both the researchers and practitioners were seen as important. The researchers and practitioners participated in the dialogues in an equal way.

For each dialogue meeting, a written document functioned as a basis for the discussions and reflections. A written proposal of the collaboration study was sent to the practitioners before the first meeting, and a report with results from the focus groups (written by the researchers), was sent to the practitioners before the second meeting. These documents seem to have facilitated the discussions and reflections during the dialogue meetings.

During the meetings the researchers discussed and reflected more upon the use of traditional research methods in an organizational context, and the practitioners discussed and reflected more upon whether they could improve their use of methods in order to achieve a more efficient change process in their organization. Knowledge was socially constructed and created in a local situation.

Dialogue meetings could be relevant for participative and reflective learning among researchers and practitioners in different organizational contexts, as a method to promote bridging the gap between practice and research in a democratic way; create inter-professional collaboration and reflection, and contribute to work change processes and sense-making.

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