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People with experience of long-term drug use and homelessness teaching with us: experts by experience participation in university social work education

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ABSTRACT

Participation of experts by experience in university social work education is an important shaping factor for future social workers. This article presents two-year long experience in lecturing together with people who have had experience with long-term drug use, homelessness and have a lot of experience with being in a role of social work clients as well. The aim of the presented approach is to recognize their experience, opinions, and attitudes as an important source of knowledge in social work. Based on the research outcomes, the authors discuss topics such as: the role of experts, empowerment, breaking the stereotypes and ethical issues related to experts' participation. They conclude with practical recommendations.

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Introduction

In this article, we offer our experience and the findings that we gained during the preparation and implementation of the two-year-long project on service users' participation in social work education. Specifically, this involved the master's level course Critical Social Work at the Faculty of Social Studies, where we the authors both work. In the fall of 2016, we began to cooperate with three experts who have long-term experience of using illegal drugs as well as long-term experience of being clients of social work and other helping professions. Along with these experts, we subsequently conducted a total of three seminars, which were attended by 24 students of social work.

In the fall of 2017, 22 students participated in the course, and we cooperated with four experts, who have experience with various forms of homelessness.

Both years, at the first two seminars, the time was devoted mainly to experts, who had the opportunity to talk about their experiences. At the third seminar, groups of students presented recommendations for system changes, or projects to help solve some of the problems that the experts spoke about at the previous lessons. After the presentation of each group's proposal, a discussion followed where the students received immediate feedback from the experts, teachers, and each other.

It was important for us to evaluate the experience of all those involved, particularly so that we could understand what could be perceived as successful in our participatory teaching and worth preserving; similarly, what would be considered as non-functioning or inappropriate, thus, in need of change. Therefore, the question for the research that we have conducted alongside with our teaching was ‘What are the limits and the benefits of expert by experience involvement in social work education in the particular course as perceived by all participants?’

In this article, we present the results of this research and related recommendations for social work education. We assume that how and by whom the problems of the client’s life situations are defined are points that social workers intensely learn about, especially during their studies and their subsequent professional training. For this reason, we consider it important to connect the studies with practical learning through participation. However, this cannot be mediated only by teachers or external lecturers who are more often employees rather than service users, but rather more directly by people who are experts precisely because of their personal experience in the role of a client of social work. In other words, not to teach ‘about participation’ but rather ‘through participation’ This experience also gives us the opportunity to reflect on how the participation of people with experience change our view of social work and contribute to the change of educational curricula.

Why use the participation of experts in teaching?

Our main starting point for the involvement of experts in teaching is the situation described by postmodernists as a crisis of knowledge in social work; that is, a lack of understanding of social problems based on the experience of the people who are directly affected by the situation (Payne, 2005; Rossiter, 2000). And also, as a crisis of identity which is related to the uneven distribution of power. These crises raise crucial questions such as: Where does knowledge come from in social work? and Which authorities determine what the source of professional knowledge is in social work? (Rossiter, 2000). The participatory approach has thus been used as a suitable tool for reflection and changing the sources of knowledge and distribution of power among teachers, experts, and students during the course of study.

This points to the idea that particularly the clients themselves are an important source of this knowledge, which is often neglected, not only in education. For this reason, it is not only teachers or social workers, but also the clients who could and should ‘teach’ us about the sources of imbalance, as well as the sources of support, and thus possibly define what the ‘problem’ is in their life situation and to propose a solution.

According to Kemshall and Littlechild (2000), workers may seek to justify their reluctance to surrender their position of the expert as a result of the prejudice and stigmatization that is based on the assumption that clients are not able to adequately formulate or defend their opinions and ideas. Likewise, Warren (2007) states that workers tend towards a ‘know-best’ approach. By contrast, in our approach, we are influenced by postmodern and critical social work which critically examine what has become an ‘undisputed part’ of our knowledge of the situation of clients (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999; Fook, 2002).

Participation in social work education

Participation, or the ‘meaningful involvement’ (Webber & Robinson, 2012; Robinson & Webber, 2013) of service users in the teaching of social workers, is gradually becoming a topical and debated theme, even on the international level. Proof of this can be, for example, the publication of two special issues of this journal on the involvement of service users. The establishment of this theme is also evidenced by the creation of the Special Interest Group within the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA, 2017), which has regularly begun to meet at annual conferences. For example, these authors provide wider insight to involving service users in teaching: Brown and Young (2008); Molyneux and Irvine (2004), and Humphreys (2005).

Also, in the Czech Republic, the service user participation is becoming a discussed issue in the social work field. However, the service user involvement is not widely reflected in the curricula. Or to be more precise, the concept of participation is becoming more important, but direct involvement of service users in the education itself is not common. The Czech social work education system consists of bachelor, masters and postgraduate programs, including courses where students take part in social work practice or people from practice give lectures and seminars at the university. Nonetheless, these people are mostly professional social workers, rarely people who would share their own service user experience. By discussing our teaching experiences and research results we would like to contribute to the important debate on this topic on the local as well as international level. Findings from the first year of the teaching with experts by experience we have presented in the article published by the Czech professional journal (Frišaufová & Geregová, 2018). In this article, we aim to take the debate one step forward by discussing and comparing the results from the first and second year.

In relation to participation in social work, the term ‘taking part’ is the most frequently used expression (Healy, 2000; Warren, 2007). We understand participation similarly to Adams (2008), as a form of engagement that influences decision-making and future directions. Participation and meaningful engagement or involvement are here understood as synonyms.

In our two-year project, we strived to fully engage and to avoid tokenism. Tokenism, described, for example, by Hart (1992), Kemshall and Littlechild (2000), Adams (2008), and others, means mere ‘symbolic engagement’ in which service users do not have any meaningful possibility to influence the processes that affect them. This form of engagement may thus be frustrating.

We have tried to openly and clearly declare the degree and form of participation, so that the students and experts would know how they would be involved (in seminars, the feedback to projects, focus groups (FG)) and where their involvement could lead (impact on students, research and articles, development of future lessons at the department). It was important for us that all who were involved understood that their participation could lead to some change. We also believe that this experience could influence their further involvement and empowerment in a positive way.

Before we conclude this chapter, we would like to briefly address the issue of terminology. Many terms are used in regard to the involvement of people with experience. In participative practice, we often encounter the exclusion of the word

‘client,’ as being potentially stigmatizing or paternalistic, and in many cases replace it with the term ‘service user’. However, this concept may also be perceived as inappropriate in that it may reduce the experience of the person only to experience with social services (Sen, McClelland, & Jowett, 2016).

For this reason, among others, we prefer the term ‘person with experience’ or ‘expert by experience’ (McLaughlin, 2009; Videmšek, 2017). In our conception, these refer to the fact that the person is an expert—their knowledge is essential to social work, and, at the same time, their expertise is based on practical and personal experience. In the case of this study, it involved experience with, for example, drug use, sex work, or homelessness. However, their experience, in addition to many other life roles, also concerns the roles of the client of various helping professions.

Methodology

As was already mentioned, we would like to continue with teaching together with experts by experience. In order to develop good participatory practice, it was important to evaluate our experiences and learn about the benefits and limits of our approach. Therefore, in both years we have conducted research, asking ‘What are the limits and the benefits of expert by experience involvement in social work education in the particular course as perceived by all participants?’ Our idea about the evaluation of our experience is the closest to the principles of participative action research. One of its crucial characteristics is its focus on social change, that is, change of the problem under consideration (Gojová, 2014), or change of one’s own practice (McNiff, 2013). By involving experts in teaching, we have the ambition to contribute to the development of this approach in the Czech environment as well, and to change and improve our own practice in the future. During the realization of the research, the participants knew that their participation in it had a real impact on the form of the teaching of the subject. This is because we use the research findings in preparing the involvement of the experts in the teaching of the courses of subsequent years. The participants were also familiarized with the research results.

Another characteristic of participatory action research, which was also important for us, is the emphasis on the participation of all those involved. In our case, all the students and experts were approached in both years about participating in the research. Participants were not being in the position of passive ‘subjects’ of exploration but were given the opportunity to engage actively and to influence the course of the research (Aldridge, 2016; McNiff, 2013). Both years, after the end of the regular lessons, there were focus groups held that were attended by all the experts and most of the students. In 2016, there were two groups with a total of 17 students (out of 24 enrolled in the course) and one group with three experts. In 2017, there were four groups with a total of 13 students (out of 22 enrolled in the course) and two groups of four experts. There were seven students in the year 2016, and nine students in 2017 who decided not to attend the focus groups. This is important to see as a possible limit of the research, since the students who did not attend the focus groups could be for instance those with negative opinions about the project but did not want to share them in front of others. However, at the end of the last seminar, we had a discussion during which all the students and experts gave feedback on the course of events during the seminars,

including recommendations. These opinions we wrote down as field notes and analyzed as data. Of course, this did not solve the problem of difficult access the negative opinions completely. But at least it gave us the opportunity to receive some feedback from each participant of the course.

The participants' opinions could be investigated through individual interviews; nonetheless, we chose focus group technique because, unlike individual interviews, the focus group makes it possible to create data through interaction among the participants themselves (Morgan, 2001), which was very important for us. It is also appropriate for discussing recommendations, which was our aim as well (Padgett, 2017). During the focus groups, participants often explained their views and attitudes in response to the statements of others. At the beginning of the focus groups, we invited the participants to comment on how they evaluated their experience of the seminars shared with the experts, what they would recommend to us to retain in the future running of these seminars, and what, on the contrary, to change in them. The interviews during the focus groups were semi-structured and due to the relatively low number of participants in each group, we had a very good opportunity to follow-up the various sub-themes that had emerged in the discussion, such as the perception of the term 'expert by experience', surprising moments during the seminars, etc.

The first year we cooperated with three experts, Romana, Tomas, and Marek, who have long-term experience of using illegal drugs, specifically methamphetamine and heroin. The second year we cooperated with four experts: Michal, Jana, Petr, and Zuzana. Except for Zuzana, all three experts had previous experiences with rooflessness, which means they were using overnight low threshold shelters or 'living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters' (European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), 2018). Michal is an elder man who is currently living in a rented apartment. Jana is the mother of a 5-year-old son. She has experience also with housing shelter for mothers with children, where she was not allowed to live with her husband. Currently, she is living in an apartment without a rental agreement. Petr is a Roma, with a history of imprisonment, currently living in a rented flat with other tenants without a rental agreement. Zuzana is a 15-year-old student living in an asylum home for youth.

In the first year, the experts were selected based on our previous collaboration at a conference to which they were invited as experts by experience. In the second year, we contacted the experts based on recommendations from two organizations as well as on our own practice as social workers.

Both years, we met with the experts at the beginning of the semester and discussed with them our reasons for involving experts by experience in the course. We also gave brief information about the context of social work education at the department. Then we asked the experts about their opinions, what from their experiences they would like to share with the students and which topics they find important to be discussed at the seminars. Based on this discussion we planned the content and schedule of the seminars. We also had a meeting before each seminar and made a more detailed plan for the course of the seminar and the form of everyone's participation. After each seminar, we also spent time on a brief evaluation as well as a plan for the next meeting. We consider it very important that within this debriefing we also had the opportunity to find out how the experts were feeling, and if necessary, we could deal with topics or

experiences that may have been difficult or unpleasant for them for some reason. We could also examine those points that seemed to be very effective and how to use them again. The notes from these discussions are also part of the analyzed data.

As all the participants of the study were assured anonymity, the names of the experts have been changed. Their participation was voluntary and, in the case of students, their decision as to participate or not, did not have any effect on the evaluation of their mark for the course. For their participation in the seminars and focus groups, all the experts received remuneration, which was paid from the funds earmarked for this research.

Results

In the following section, we present the research outcomes which are based on the analysis and interpretation of the data from the focus groups and field notes. All focus groups had been recorded and transcribed. During the analysis, we worked with the verbatim transcriptions, together with our field notes. First, we were reading the whole text several times, searching for the main themes that appeared in the participants' statements. Second, we were doing more detail analysis by coding categories within each theme. Third, in accordance with our research question, we interpreted the categories in terms of how the participants subjectively assessed their experience from the seminars and benefits as well as limitations of the involvement of the experts. In the analysis, we were looking at research participants' subjective interpretations of what they perceived as limits and benefits. Based on this analysis, we concluded recommendations for our practice.

The main themes and categories are following: Perception of the designation 'expert by experience' (experts as colleagues, peers/mentors, experts who have specific experience, experts' own interpretations of their role). Prejudices and stereotypes (based on ignorance, based on lack of personal experience, based on professional literature, breaking down stereotypes by a personal meeting with experts). New sources of knowledge and experience (knowledge about drug use and homelessness, professional help for drug users and homeless people, personal growth and development). Participation and empowerment (learning participation through participation, experts' empowerment through involvement in teaching). All themes are in more detail discussed in the following paragraphs.

The designation 'expert by experience'

In the research, we firstly focused on how the students perceived the guests in the seminars as experts, and what it meant for them. We were also interested in how the experts themselves came to terms with being identified in this way. It is important to note that the designation of 'expert by experience' was introduced into the teaching by us, the teachers. In the first year, this was mainly due to the participative starting points described in the introduction to this article. In the second year, it was also because of the positive response that this designation inspired in the students.

One of the criteria that students used to understand the role of the expert in both years was that they considered them to be our colleagues. Even from our point of view, we can also point out that it was our intention to consider the experts as colleagues, to

accentuate our equal status, regardless of, for example, the level of education or teaching experience. The students did not know in advance that the people who would come to the class were people with their own experience; even in the syllabus of the subject, the description of the specific seminars stated only that there would be participation by an ‘expert in the field’. Students reflected that the designation of expert prevented the creation of a negative image in advance:

If you had talked about the arrival of former homeless people or clients, there really would be a stigma. When we knew that experts would come, we knew that they would be people in the first place and that their experience was secondary. If you had said that clients would arrive, we’d know that someone with some kind of problem was coming. (student R, FG_S1_2017)

If we knew that homeless people would come, we would have some kind of preconception of who was coming, the kind of characteristics they could have. [...] The fact that we expected experts in the field, we did not form our impression of them until the actual experience of meeting them. (student T, FG_S3_2017)

In the student evaluations, there were four ideas as to how the signification of expert was perceived: a) as colleagues, closer in equality to the teacher, b) as peers/mentors, equivalent to themselves (i.e. the students), c) as experts, because they have specific experience and d) as a signification that prevents stigmatization. Students practically experienced what it means to accept the client as an ‘expert in their own life’:

I liked the fact that it was not a “freak show”. The people who came here were drug users, but it is actually them who are experts in their own lives, so let’s take them as equal partners also in teaching. (student M, FG_S2_2016)

Students stated several other benefits of the term ‘expert by experience’:

I often encounter the idea that we are the experts who have the education and knowledge and should help these clients. Here I really appreciated the reversal of those roles, where they are the ones who have the knowledge and experience, and basically, they should be the ones who teach us something. So, I think that the term expert is perfectly fitting. (student K, FG_S1_2016)

The experts themselves, however, described in both years that it was not easy for them to identify with this designation. In preparation for the seminars and in their subsequent evaluations within the focus groups, we jointly discussed what designation might be more appropriate. In the statements made by the experts, the word expert was perceived as too *posh* or *superior*, for example. For this reason, experts Jana and Michal (2017) suggested the word ‘consultant’ as more appropriate. We were also explaining what lead us to select this word (emphasizing the equal role, preventing stigmatization, not limiting their life experience to the role of client, drug user, or homeless person, etc.), after that the experts agreed that the label is well-founded. They also pointed out that choosing the right word is perhaps more important to us than to them, because it is we the teachers who talk about them in the third person, therefore, consider more carefully what designation to use.

New sources of knowledge and experience

In literature, we find that the involvement of service users in teaching is of great importance, because, among other things, these people are an essential source of knowledge. And in terms of the participatory approach and action research, it is necessary to perceive this experience as equivalent to other sources of knowledge (Videmšek, 2017). In our research, the students also appreciated the meeting with the experts as being of benefit, due to the new knowledge they gained from them specifically. This knowledge was related both to the area of drug use (in the first year) and homelessness (in the second year), and the knowledge related to the system of services for drug users or homeless people.

Another crucial area was knowledge that they consider to be important in terms of their professional as well as personal development. Finally, the students' assessments revealed the topic of recognizing their own prejudices and stereotypes, which, according to their statements, stemmed mainly from their ignorance or lack of personal experience, but which are also sometimes supported in professional literature or in teaching. The opportunity to meet with the experts thus made it possible to challenge these stereotypes precisely because of the mediation of viewpoints on these difficult life situations by those who are directly concerned.

Some of the new knowledge that students gained included a deeper understanding of the life situation of drug users and homeless people, and the advantages and disadvantages of setting up services for them. The experts spoke about which of the institutions or their aspects they perceived as supportive and, on the contrary, which ones were a source of further problems or stigma. It should be said that in their estimation, especially the institutionalized in-patient treatment did not work very well. For example, as the key points of their recovery process, the experts stated that it was their own decision to fundamentally change their lives, to which they needed time to mature, informal sources of support, or professional support, but not support based on abstinence. It is this discrepancy between professional help, which is focused on abstinence and the pathologizing of drug use, in comparison to personal development, which the students considered to be one of the important findings.

Some students expressed what sounded almost like shock or disillusionment when finding out that the system of assistance has completely different functions and effects in the experience of the experts than the students thought.

I was probably most surprised when he (the expert) said he learned at his first treatment to cook meth. I've always imagined that it is really great at the rehab center, like when you go with a broken arm and the doctor simply treats you. [...] Why then should these people go there?! (student C, FG_S1_2016)

I was surprised when he said that he was in rehab for the first time at the age of fifteen, and then after that all that his classmates called him crazy, and nobody wanted to talk to him.' (student M, FG_S2_2016)

To understand what it all means to be a homeless person and to expand the knowledge of homelessness, it was essential that we worked with the ETHOS typology (2018) during the seminars. It was possible during the seminars to put into context the experts' experience of life in various conditions, into the various forms of homelessness. In this

context, many students spoke about the importance of expanding awareness of what all could be considered a homeless situation: 'It was a huge shock to me that someone who is 15 may already have experience with homelessness!' (student Z, FG_S4_2017)

Familiarization with the life experience of the experts and placing them in the context of the ETHOS typology (2018) was often also described as a confrontation with one's own stereotypes about who a homeless person is, that is, who all can be threatened with this situation and what the risks are.

Until now, I have considered the homeless person as someone who I meet at the station. The idea that someone who is living in a flat still can be in a certain form of homelessness (e.g. in hygienically inadequate housing, or without a rental agreement) has never crossed my mind before. (student S, FG_S4_2017)

Prejudices and stereotypes

In accord with the literature on the involvement of people with experience in teaching (e.g. Sen et al., 2016), we in this study also encountered the growing awareness and breaking of various stereotypes. The students noticed their stereotypes in connection to, for instance, media imagery. Another way that we can identify in the student evaluations is to disrupt stereotypes by sharing the personal experience of individual experts.

When you read it in a book, you cannot imagine it, but when a person tells you how it really is—and I always thought that [...] when a junkie wants to stop, that he must do it through some kind of treatment. Never in my life have I heard that he could quit by himself. (student F, FG_S2_2016)

In connection with this statement, it is interesting to note that this student was suggesting that some stereotypes (e.g. that a person cannot stop using drugs without professional help) are actually reinforced by professional literature.

Another student pointed out, that becoming familiarized with the story of a particular person can help in breaking stereotypes even in the people around you.

It helped me, even in my personal life, to think differently about homeless people. When I would speak to somebody [...] about social issues, it helped me get some facts that I could use to oppose those who have a somewhat narrower opinion. (student S, FG_S2_2017)

Similarly, another student stated that hearing the personal experience of homeless people has allowed her to look more critically at the various disinformation about this target group that appears in the media.

Several students also expressly appreciated that the choice of experts was among the ranks of drug-users and homeless people. This is because the students considered them to be burdened by many prejudices, due to which even social work students might tend to avoid them, thus not be able to overcome their prejudices; not even they themselves thought beforehand that they would want to work with this target group. Romana, one of the experts, added that in order to break down prejudice on both sides, it is crucial for the encounter to take place in another context, that is, not within the roles of worker/trainee and client. Instead, the context of students and experts in an academic environment is much more supportive for creating an equal relationship than, for example, in social services.

I think it's a different situation for them from one where they would meet with a client in the context of an internship in the service environment [...] They will, in fact, be in touch with the particular person, but it's just that the situation will be set in a context that has a variety of limitations. (expert Romana, 2017)

The confrontation with their own prejudices was very often described by students as the most important benefit; it was often a kind of realization with a *'wow effect'* where they finally *'got it'*.

The breaking of stereotypes also took place with the experts, for example, through empowerment. For expert Romana, it was important to share her experience, because she believed that this could contribute to a wider change in how the system of support is set, and not only for drug users. 'The people we talked to here today are the future of social work. This is very important to me, because the way they will have things set up when they leave school is the way they will shape social work.' (expert Romana, 2016)

For experts Petr, Tomas and Romana, who were of similar age to the students, the experience of participating in teaching prompted them to realize that they could also study at university one day, if they wanted to. It made them feel that university is not an 'unattainable place' and opened up new possibilities to think about: 'I realized that it would not be easy, but that the possibility of me studying here really exists' (expert Petr, 2016). The empowerment of the experts was connected, firstly, with the knowledge of the new environment of the university and, secondly, with the awareness that experience with drugs or homelessness will not disqualify them. On the contrary, it can be an important life experience.

Discussion

The main question of our research was: 'What are the limits and the benefits of expert by experience involvement in social work education in the particular course as perceived by all participants?'. In this part, we discuss what we have learned in the past two years, what we see as successful and will be used in the further development of the subject, and what we will do differently based on the gained experience. We will also discuss the possible limitations of the involvement of the experts by experience in teaching.

By involving experts by experience to the seminars we helped to challenge some of the stereotypes. At the same time, we need to consider it is possible that we created some new stereotypical images or reinforced some prejudices. All chosen experts were highly motivated to participate in preparations of the seminars, to share their experiences and to discuss with students. Mostly they were talking about their former rather than present experiences (e.g. drug use, treatment, living on the street). This gave us the opportunity to understand their life situation from new perspectives. On the other hand, we could potentially confirm the problematic idea that there are the 'good clients', those 'who are trying', or those 'who are not to blame' and thus 'worth the help'. And some which are not, because they are for example 'not motivated to change'.

It seemed to me that those people were motivated. I had never wanted to work with this target group, but now that I've seen them here, I see that there are people who also want to change their life. (student L, FG_S2_2016)

In both years, the students stated that the experts involved in the teaching did not look like what their past would suggest. In future semesters of the course, we consider it important to emphasize that someone may look completely different within a few years, months, or even weeks. That it is a temporary situation, or a phase in life that can change even if no one expects it. Or as expert Michal said in irony, when praised for doing very well by one of the students: 'I wish you had met me some years ago'. Suggesting that back then she would not think about him this way. Last but not least it is also important to work with the 'look' as a part of the stereotype.

In order to prevent stereotypical perceptions, we chose to designate the term 'expert in the field' (expert by experience) to allow the students to see what respecting the client as an 'expert in his or her own life' really means, as they learn throughout their studies, especially in the Client-centered approach. Student stated:

Throughout our studies, we say that the clients are experts in their own lives, but the meaning has become eroded and misses the sense of the situation. Although we are constantly using the term, we don't really identify with it, but I think that through this course, we have come to the realization what it really means! (student N, FG_S2_2016)

Another point that we consider important to emphasize is the need of more intense preparation of the students and experts for their participation. In the first year, we placed more emphasis on preparing experts and program of the seminars. The students then pointed out that it was necessary to prepare the students themselves for the meetings with the experts, in order to prevent, for example, the stigmatization of the experts due to the way that students expressed themselves: 'We came across numerous situations during the discussions where it seemed to us that another student said something pejorative or insulting.' From the position of the teachers, it proved useful in this context to conduct a debriefing session with the experts after every lesson where we spoke about how the lesson had gone for them. More opportunities to discuss it were during the focus groups (for experts and students). We see a necessity of warning both experts and students about potential stigma and prejudice in advance. And create an opportunity to talk about it if someone felt offended or not comfortable. Either with the teachers, or more openly at the seminar. This better understanding is an important part of the learning process.

We have also learned, that this type of teaching is better to implement in smaller groups; in our experience, 20 students is too many. A large group is more difficult to activate; there is less time for inquiries, etc. By contrast, a setback of small groups is that if the experts would be divided into more groups (each in one group of students); thus, students would learn only part of the essential information from the expert, as with each session there is a different story. However, both the experts and the students suggested that they would prefer to work in smaller groups at least part of the time. The main reason was to have the chance to understand the experts' situation, experiences and opinions deeper. Another drawback was that the typical 90-minute seminar length was too short and created pressure near the end of lessons. It was more difficult for us, the teachers, to intervene in the already flowing discussions between students and experts as the lesson was nearing the end; furthermore, we still needed time for organizational information and formally ending the lesson with some brief conclusion. As such, the lesson often went beyond the scheduled time. The solution could be to

double-block or prolong the time of the lesson. In any case, it is important that there is enough time for continuity and regularity, because some issues ripen with time, at which point it becomes possible to ask follow-up questions, react, etc. By contrast, what proved to function well was working with the space, where we, our students and the experts sat in a circle or semi-circle of chairs without tables, thus creating greater dynamics.

The immediate feedback on the student projects, which were presented on the basis of the findings gained from the experts was very important. This interaction was rated best in both years. The experts were very intrigued by the projects, as well as the suggestions made by the students, which resulted in lively discussions at and after the seminars. In both years, experts were giving feedback to each project and explaining their opinions. The most interesting feedbacks according to the students were the situations when experts were explaining why they would like or would not like to join the program or service in a position of the client. The students valued this more and found it more useful than the teachers' comments. It was also perceived as positive that sometimes experts disagreed with each other's opinions. So the students had experienced the situation that it is normal to have various preferences and we are not looking for an 'ideal or perfect solution for everyone'. Finally, experts said it was interesting for them to comment on projects that the students were suggesting. In their opinion, some of them were similar to projects that already exist, but were not useful or functional. But they understood that such projects might be created with good intentions, but the problem is often a lack of knowledge of needs and opinions of the potential users.

It's mainly about confronting an aspect of reality that we would probably never experience [...] I think it's great that we were able to offer some solutions to problems, and they were able to supplement our perspective with that of the situation in reality and show the limits of our suggestions. This helped us see what the clients themselves would appreciate, which nobody ever tells us. They also told us when they had already seen similar project in practice, but it hadn't worked. (student W, FG_S3_2017)

In regard to their experience with participation, the students stated that the most novel findings had been gained thanks to the equal interaction with the experts. If the participatory approach had not been used, and the experts had merely shared their personal story, it would not have necessarily had the same effect.

A participatory approach also has its own risks; for example, it may lead to frustration for the expert due to possible class differences and not recognized privilege. Students do not often reflect on their more privileged position, which can generate a certain dynamic when coming into contact with the experts. In the second year, for example, some students mentioned that they had gone to study at university but did not know where they were aiming. This was in contrast with Petr's situation, an expert who works triple-shifts at his job, and on weekends is studying secondary school, which he has to pay for. The fact that the students may not understand this was reflected by expert Petr thus: 'I think that a lot of the students who mentioned this did not even realize that any of us (experts) would have to deal with something like that.'

Participation can often point to large gaps, which is always one of the pitfalls when people from different social environments come into close contact. Some are born into a world where the college is a matter of course and others must fight for it.

As teachers, we must be prepared to react to such situations; however, this is very difficult when a discussion is under way. It is necessary to think about how to work with these issues and not to burden someone with a sense of guilt for being privileged, but to allow them to become more sensitive to the structural differences related not only to the class, but also gender, age, ethnicity, etc. Of course, it is not possible to prepare for all situations in advance, as we do not know what the students or experts will say, and how they will react to one another. But we find it to be of a great importance, and inseparable part of the participatory approach to be sensitive to the structural issues and include their understanding to the learning process. This is also the reason why we prefer repeated seminars, rather than one meeting, since it offers the opportunity to be more flexible and respond to the specific issues during the next meeting.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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