Spaces of Learning
- teaching others the tricks of your own trade

Essay
Trine Paludan

This is a story about passing on ‘tricks of your own trade’ to others, and letting these tricks take on a new life and serve new functions as they arrive in new contexts. The focus of this essay is a project related to DAIM in which the scope was to assist other professionals – nurses, dieticians, social workers, and bureaucrats – to do user studies and user-driven innovation on their own. Having been academically trained as an anthropologist, it was a challenge for me to teach methods central to my discipline in a very non-academic fashion to a community of professionals. However, the engagement with these methods by different people proved in un-expected ways to re-trigger the value of my own education. This essay is a study of spaces of learning and the effects of participating in them - on both sides of ‘the teacher’s desk’.

Approaching spaces of learning
I was in the midst of conducting three workshops with the design bureau, 1508 and KL (Kommunernes Landsforening, Local Government Denmark Consultancy Services, KLK) and three municipalities, Århus, Odense, Haderslev. The project sought to develop, describe and pass on to other municipalities a user-centered innovation model. The ambition was to enable Danish municipalities to employ user-driven innovation with their ‘own’ citizens and in their own fields of activities and services. It was a classic case of consultants being hired to teach others how to do what we do. After the first workshop, I was back in my own work environment and participated in a DAIM tool seminar in Århus. There I talked about the many challenges we faced ‘training people’. Then Lis Sanders made the comment: ‘I never think of myself as ‘training people’ – I think of myself as creating spaces of learning’.

And obviously, this term was much more true to what we were actually doing.

But what is a ‘space of learning?’ What can be said about the type of learning space our course created? And in what sense was it a space of learning for methods and processes central to anthropology?

Theories of learning
To get closer to the puzzle of learning spaces, I found it useful to look at our experiences through the lens of Professor Mads Hermansen’s discussion of different types of learning theories: mechanical, dynamic and dialectic theories (Hermansen 1993:219-227). Mechanical theories view learning as a one-way communication based on an unquestioned authority

1 The project was headed by KL(K) consultants Anne-Mette Scheibel and Sune Thøgersen; from 1508, Katja Øder Hansen, Stinne Schultze and Kristina Dam participated.
vested in the position of the teacher. In fact, the term ‘training someone’ bears resemblance to exactly such a conceptual universe and Hermansen includes Pavlov’s theory in this group. ‘Dynamic learning theories’ view learning more as a two-sided exchange between teachers/students (or consultants/course attendants) in which both sides are influenced by the process (220). This essay attempts to illustrate how I think we were all very much influenced by the learning process - and to some extent also changed by it (producing change being the ambition of ‘Dialectic theories’) (ibid.). In regard to concepts of learning, I found this definition useful: ‘when existing competences are united with new ones’ stressing the centrality of reflection - not only upon what is learned but also upon the conditions of learning itself (220).

And yes, this is what we tried to do: we tried to create a space of learning that allowed a process where existing competences and experiences were given space, allotting time for each project to present, allowing time for questions and discussions and encouraging collective reflection upon the challenges and potentials of working with these new methods.

Overall, it worked – but not without challenges, and, on my part, worries:

Workshop 1 – framing the learning space
The first workshop presented an opening of the course and began with a one-day intense introduction to a wide selection of methods. There were 35 participants; Stinne Schultze from 1508 gave a rich and nuanced introduction to these newcomers to the field of user studies and user-driven innovation. The participants were presented not only with an overall general introduction to anthropology and user-driven innovation, but also to a wide range of methods central to ethnography and service design, e.g., user-travels, cultural probes (e.g., photo-diaries), service blue prints, interviews, observations, voix pop, personas.

Worries
In a university setting, the frame is much different. Methods – any method – will normally be introduced to students with a superstructure of methodological and meta-theoretical reflections. As for ethnographic methods, they might be taught in the good company of theories of culture and social forms, or theories of organisations and social technologies. In such company, there are always more than just methods for data collection. Frankly, I worried. Would these methods, ripped from the bodies of theory a long with which they were developed, introduced in one day, produce anything of interest? Would people know where to begin, which method to pick up?

One of the first and most important things I learned from participating in this special ‘space of learning’ was this: methods don’t produce anything in themselves. People do - People inspired by new ways of looking at old routines. People armed with new tricks up their sleeves.

Fieldwork – Having a go

2 Anne-Mette Scheibel from KL alerted me that before the workshop Katja Øder Hansen from 1508 did a round of interviews with each project team; here methods were discussed in relation to each project and its special need. This priming might very well be part of the success of the workshops themselves.
After the first workshop, each project participant should go back to their respective fields of work and try out some of the methods to which they were introduced as a pilot exercise. We were not long into the second workshop before I realized that my worries were groundless. It seemed that in fact, it was not academic rigoroussness, cultural theories or time for in-depth studies and supervision – but something else. Things such as courage, eagerness and inspired motivation, a ‘let’s just do it’ attitude, were what really mattered. Much to my surprise the number of different methods introduced – on some of the five project teams at least – seemed to have the effect of a beautiful and fascinating ‘buffet’ where people had gone on with the ‘method dish’ they found most appetizing. The project teams with the most appetite had no hesitations; they just tried out methods and had fun doing each. Other project teams were more hesitant and had many questions and worries. Interestingly, people with the most hesitations and worries were those with academic backgrounds; they mirrored my own initial worry and scepticism. It appeared that people less burdened with the skill of academic scepticism appeared to have more courage and energy at the outset.

Shopfloors for handicapped people
- flowers and solitude
Some of the very energetic people were a project team consisting of social workers and leaders from three shop floors for mentally handicapped people (in Danish ‘beskyttet værksted’) in Odense.

Example 1
The shop floors functioned as subcontractors to industrial factories, assembling small ‘items’. The overall idea behind the project was to develop more attractive and modern workplaces that could improve work life for the employees (the group of mentally handicapped) and also attract new groups.

Trying out an inquiry method known as cultural probes, a social worker had given to one of the shop floor employees a digital camera and asked her to make a photo diary of important things in her everyday life at the shop floor. The woman was about sixty years old and had worked at the shop floor for almost twenty years. The photos were taken and printed. The woman and the social worker sat down together to discuss what was in the pictures. And here something stuck out: there were many photos of the table where the woman spent her working hours; photos of the different mechanical parts; and photos from breaks and her colleagues. But to the surprise of the social worker, there was also a large number of photos of flowers from the gardens surrounding the shop floor. The woman explained: I just love flowers. At home, I always work in the garden. I love garden work.

The woman had never mentioned this before, nor had anyone had the idea to ask her. The woman had worked twenty years in the shop floor assembling little things. It had simply never occurred to anyone, that garden work could be part of the job they offered people. Now they were looking into the possibility of organizing work differently, allowing for garden work for this woman, and perhaps for others with similar wishes.

Among the participants this brought up a discussion of how these methods providing insights into how users look at their world, opened up for fresh reflections the existing organisational practises.
Example 2

The new leader of one of the shop floors had used the method ‘user travel’ to create a new type of dialog with employees. Two people, a man and a woman, had been interviewed in this way. They had gone through their day, instance by instance, telling about nice things and frustrating periods. The woman revealed that she spent every break on her own. She sought solitude: ‘I just want to be on my own. I don’t really like the company of many people. And many of the others make so much noise. Sometimes it can be difficult to find a place of my own during breaks’.

This was new to the leader, and not only to him. It was also new to his colleagues who had worked with this woman for several years.

Looking for answers – or looking for questions

Let me now go back to one of the questions raised above, i.e. ‘in what sense is this a space of learning for methods and processes central to anthropology?’

One of the central things that students of anthropology are taught in method classes is: when arriving in a new field, you are not looking for answers; you are looking for questions (see Spradley 1979). As a newcomer to a cultural field, you don’t yet know what types of questions are meaningful to this particular group of people. You are there in order to discover these questions. This approach stands in stark contrast to the dominant sociological approach where you go to a field – or send out a questionnaire – in order to find answers to questions you already have.

The people from the shop floor had had a classic anthropological experience: they had found new – relevant – questions. As one man from this project explained:

- It has brought up a whole set of new questions, questions that we did not even think of before. Like: Do we pay enough attention to what happens during breaks? How can we accommodate people with different social needs and wishes?

  And: What types of work can people do here?

New areas of the social space making up the workshops had been brought to attention and debate. One might also paraphrase a classic Bourdieu insight (Bourdieu 1977): before the project and before the elder lady made her own photo diary, it went without saying, that the primary work of shop floor employees was related to manufacturing. It belonged to the realm of things that could not be discussed because it was simply taken for granted. Now, however, the content and form of what a ‘work task’ could be, suddenly moved from the realm of the unsaid to the front of the discourse.

Example 3

Foodservice for elders

This particular project focused on an overall improvement of the food service offered to elderly people who stayed in their own homes. The project participants, both employed in the health sector in the municipal of Århus, had been inspired by the methods of ‘service blue print’ and ‘user travel’.

They had conducted ‘user travel interviews’ with five directors:
1) director of the municipal ‘Visitationskontor’ (office undertaking visitations and deciding who needs municipal food service)
2) director of ‘Udførerkontoret’, (office implementing and organizing the food service)
3) directors of three different private contractors (food companies, delivering food to elders)

Comparing the five interviews, it became clear to the project team how the relationship among these three institutions was characterised by flaws and a serious lack of communication. They realized how the overall guiding principle in the Visitationskontor was ‘the free choice of the citizen’. This strong ideological focus on choosing freely meant that direct communication between the food delivery companies and the elder people was prevented, in order ‘to protect’ the elders and their free choice. It also meant that the municipal offices abstained from giving advice to citizens about which food company to choose. In reality, it meant that the elder people, some of whom suffered from malnutrition or under nutrition, were left without any professional guidance on which type of food would best suit their health condition. This worried the two health employees and they were very eager to carry these findings further, both in an expanded round of research including the elder citizens, and ‘upwards’ in their organisation to political and bureaucratic decision makers. They furthermore saw how it also frustrated the food delivery companies that were without contact with their ‘end users’ and faced many difficulties as a result.

During the workshop session, we did an exercise called Finding Analytical Slogans – the idea was to try, in a provocative way, to sum up the essence of the presented research. To this project, one suggestion was ‘free choice to poor health’.

This brought up an intense debate among participants of how and where one should use such a slogan: it could be useful for internal communication among participants in the innovation team, but problematic in a situation where one wanted to communicate with high placed leaders and municipal politicians. To me, this type of discussion expresses an ability to discuss the premises for what can be discussed - and how it can be discussed (see Agyris 1994), - one of Chris Agyris’ famous definitions of organizational learning.

Summing up
Overall, the ‘training course’ turned into a space of learning for most of us. Participants seemed to be both influenced and changed by the process, and according to Hermansen, this should be the goal of dialectic learning processes. Participants from the three municipalities were inspired to use new methods challenging old work routines hoping for many changes in a future characterised by a new and promising tradition of user involvement. I experienced a fruitful change in my view about what anthropological methods can be - carried into new contexts by new and engaged actors.

References
1990
Agyris, Chris Overcoming Organizational Defences: Facilitating Organizational Learning, by Simon and Schuster, Inc., Needham Height MA
1977
Bourdieu, Pierre *Outline of a theory of practise*, University Press, Cambridge

1993
Hermansen, Mads ‘Læring’ i *Voksenpædagogisk Opslagsbog*, Christians Ejlers Forlag, København

1979
Spradley, James *The Ethnographic Interview*, Holt Rinehart Winston, New York