Know it – Show it! Practice projects and project reports as elements of quality development in SF certificate trainings

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Abstract

Learning can have more sustainable results if learners have a chance to create knowledge (instead of just consuming it). In SF certificate programmes this principle can be followed strongly by requiring participants to perform and document a practice project. The article shows the benefits for learners and teachers, gives examples for good practice in choosing, coaching and documenting projects and shows how the SFCT review process can help to make the appraisal a precious learning experience for all participants.

Project work in SF certificate trainings

*D*ocendo discimus is Latin and means: by teaching, we learn. Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BC – 65 AD) says in his letters to Lucilius Junior that we are learning if we teach (Seneca, L. A., & Loretto, F., 1988, I, 7, 8). So, "Docendo discimus" is the motto of many institutions involved in teaching. Ages later, Insoo Kim Berg put it this way: *Teaching is learning twice!* This quote has been a motto for me, as it points out the **interactive essence** of teaching: the more I teach and interact with others, the higher are the chances for me to learn myself.

Since 2003 I have been offering SF certificate trainings in order to improve my SF knowledge and proficiency. In my first courses I cared most about giving participants ideas and

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suggestions to improve their coaching and team-coaching skills. My courses were packed with demonstrations and exercises that gave participants an idea of what's different and what's helpful in working with a an SF approach.

By evaluating the courses thoroughly I learned that some participants made much faster progress than others. The ones who tried to adopt SF tools and principles into their own work quickly had a much better chance to learn. Not everything went perfectly well with them – on the contrary – I remember well how frustrated some participants were when they came back to the next session. They had hoped it would be easy to replicate the simple and elegant SF way of asking good questions – finding out and following the client's needs.

As anyone knows who has learned SF from scratch – it looks simple and it is not easy. So I put a lot of effort into encouraging participants to keep on practising. It turned out that the fastest way to success for participants of my trainings was testing and experimenting with the SF tools and principles in their professional practice combined with enough time for feedback, reflections and more experiments in the learning group.

We learn to coach by coaching and to train by training. Real-life situations in professional practice offer the best learning challenges. So one of my best suggestions for teachers – if they want any suggestions – is: give your participants a chance to show what they have learnt by planning, performing and documenting a project in their practice field.

That fits in nicely with the steadily growing interest of participants to have the shortest possible time of personal attendance in training courses. My SF certificate course – which matches with Mark McKergow's and Jenny Clarke's training programme – has now only 9 days of training in the group: three modules with two and a half days from Thursday afternoon till Saturday afternoon and a fourth module of one and a half days. The learning architecture contains a lot more opportunities to learn and practise: Coaching sessions with changing partners, telephone conferences between the

modules (in a span of two to three months) and the planning, performing and documentation of a so called "practice project". That adds to about 100 hours of learning in groups with at least an additional 50 hours of intensive learning experience.

Projects as pieces of work and the "SFCT review process"

One of the crucial factors in achieving success is how to select a suitable project. In the Association for the Quality Development of Solution Focused Consulting and training (SFCT) we developed a review process. One of the reasons why SFCT was created is to be able to say something about standards of SF practice. *"How do we understand the 'quality' of SF use in organisational work? There is no guarantee of quality if we only know a professional's formal background, educational level or personal reputation. Being simple and solution focused, we prefer to ask people to demonstrate with detailed evidence what they do. Hence, the SFCT review process looks at what you do and how you do it rather than your status and background."* (SFCT Review Process, 2012)

SFCT reviews 'pieces of work' rather than individuals. This respects the idea that every case is different and avoids specifying a syllabus or methodology, etc. It reviews the work, not the individual.

Examples of suitable pieces representing SF organisational work could for instance be (SFCT Piece of Work, 2012):

- Team coaching
- 3 sets of 3 hours of coaching with individuals from the same customer organisation
- Coaching engagements with one client over multiple sessions with different topics
- A change management project with a large group facilitation
- Team development/training

- Facilitation, supervision
- Workshops
- Trainings with SF elements (which show an SF teaching and learning philosophy, but teaching people SF itself is not the core objective – eg leadership, personal effectiveness, etc)
- Consultancy (external and internal) conducted in organisational settings, including planning, line management, coaching assignments.

These examples make it clear that the project should be self-contained. Criteria for a suitable piece of work are:

- it is predominantly solution focused (i.e., other models may have been used, but only as a sub-component)
- it is in the context of organisations, or the work of individuals in organisations
- it is no less than 9 hours of face to face time with the client(s).

Other important criteria for the participants of my SF trainings are:

- that the project – piece of work should be something they would have planned and performed anyway, even without participating in my training
- that it is of importance for their work and their clients and
- that they can discuss it with other participants freely.

Some examples of well performed and documented projects by my participants of last year's course are:

- Team coaching with an intercultural team.
  Most important learning aspect: SF interventions helped participants to interact immediately and created a productive workshop atmosphere.
- "Enquiring learning" in the study of history.
  Most important learning aspect: One of the major

challenges was to find simple and concrete language –
using SF questions was very useful for that.
- Workshop for delegates from social organisations.
  Most important learning aspect: SF interventions
  supported participants to acknowledge their differ-
  ences in experience and made productive exchange
  possible.

There are many more good examples on the SFCT
"Members" website in English or German (SFCT Members'
List, 2012). They contain a description of the piece of work,
a candidate's summary and summaries of the two reviewers
as well as a short abstract about the candidate.

Project documentation

Once the decision is made for a project, it is highly recom-
mended that you start with the documentation as soon in the
process of planning as possible. Experience shows that
writing down a project report is easier if you have collected
notes about your work from the very beginning. It can be
very helpful to have a look at good examples of project docu-
mentation which I provide for the participants.

In my training programme participants have the chance to
present their project reports in different ways:

- They present their projects verbally in the second and
  third module of the training (10 minutes) and get a lot of
  helpful feedback from the trainer and other participants.
  They can expand this by using their project-work as a
  topic in their coaching sessions with other participants
  and the trainer.
- In order to receive a qualification certificate, partici-
  pants of my training programme are asked to present
  written documentation (2.000 to 3.000 words) of their
  project before the last module. They are guaranteed to
  receive feedback from the trainer and – if they want it –
  from other participants of the training.

In developing the SFCT review process, we have found out that it is helpful for candidates to get an idea about how the description of the "piece of work" should be structured (SFCT Piece of work, 2012).

- The process should be outlined with a clear beginning, middle and end.
- The documentation should make it possible for the reviewer to identify clues of SF work.

Ideas for the beginning could be: the context and background, the client briefing and how the final proposal was negotiated and approved, preparation and planning for the approved work by the candidate and the client.

Ideas for the middle: how the work was conducted, respecting the uniqueness of the situation (structure, process, emergence and developments), clear examples of practice and responsiveness throughout the implementation.

Ideas for the end: the outcomes and what happened regarding the request and achievement of the client's goal as well as other results, perspectives and reflections from the candidate and the client; evaluations of the project by the client and, ideally, the participants

Writing down a project-documentation serves several purposes:

- first of all it helps to structure and to explain for yourself what exactly you have planned in order to follow the goals of your clients and how it came out. It brings many of your professional skills into consciousness, which run more or less automatically – especially when you are very experienced
- the more concrete the description is, the easier it is for an outsider to follow. Reviewers report that it is most helpful for them if they find for instance workshop plans, slides that have been shown or a photo-protocol of a workshop. Even short video sequences make it much easier to find clues for SF work.

One of the great innovations made by SFCT is a list of "Clues" that gives answers to the question: how do we notice that a piece of work is using the SF approach? (SFCT Clues, 2012). The clues are revised at the annual general meeting: anyone can suggest changes to them — full members decide on the amendments.

"These "Clues" are offered as part of the SFCT reviewing process. We wish to suggest many of the different ways of noticing that someone is using the SF approach. We do not seek or claim a complete description of what SF is or is not. Instead, we seek a kind of 'family resemblance', with traits that might be visible signs of an SF approach. This is a list of ways that we might notice the SF approach in action. Of course, not all of these need to be present for a piece of work to be a good piece of solution focused work."

The list contains concrete descriptions of criteria for good SF work: in the basic position of the practitioner, in the tools used ("What it tends to look like") and in the background / bigger picture that is used.

In our latest reviews we experimented with a new format for documentation: a two-column format with 'what was done in the piece of work and what happened' on the left and 'clues and comments' on the right – this could include clues spotted, reflections, learnings, options, roads not taken on the day, why was it like this, etc. This is an idea of Mark McKergow's which he offered in a survey I conducted amongst SFCT reviewers about their experience with the review process and how it could be further improved. It turned out to be very helpful for both candidates and reviewers as a more neatly arranged form of documentation. The clues were numbered, so that it was easy to refer to them, by candidates and by reviewers.

In my workshop at the trainers' conference in Bad Soden (SFCT Programme, 2012) I sent "clues detectives" out to interview practitioners about a specific piece of work. Reflecting the experience, the following points turned out to be helpful to find clues:

- to have the clues list (which was for some a sort of questionnaire / guideline for the interview)
- slowing down and looking closely at each step in the process
- asking for proof and evidence of what happened
- a team discussion with different perspectives.

Other points turned out to be helpful to document the piece of work:

- a template with questions for reflection
- an outline for the basic dates regarding the piece of work (e.g. number of participants, duration of work)
- being asked by somebody else about the piece of work who can clarify questions and write the answers down
- if possible, some snippets of video recording.

Conclusion

If you have read the article up to this point, you will have noticed that for me practice projects add a lot of zest to trainings. My enthusiasm stems from the experience that participants of my SF certificate courses – including me – learn the SF approach with a lot more reflection and more thoroughly than they would without the project work. Planning, discussing, performing, reflecting and documenting a piece of work brings you into an intensive form of involvement with all the possibilities and boundaries of integrating the SF approach into your own practice.

When I watch colleagues at work I always learn something new. This is actually how the approach was developed – with a practitioner working with clients and colleagues behind a mirror for reflection in the break and after the session. Apparently, this kind of hidden observation or other forms of direct observation are not possible with many clients.

For experiential learning there is a helpful substitute: reading and reflecting documented pieces of work. By working through documentation I go into a discussion about

how I would work in a situation like the described one. I find out what I like about the way my colleague has worked and what I could imagine adapting to my practice. And I find points which I would have tried differently or bring other options for working in similar situations to my mind.

This is learning on a very concrete and practical level, which makes it easier to reproduce success and to avoid mistakes. As all SF practioners know, the SF approach does not work by itself. Mark McKergow once compared it to a piano: it will not play by itself and will only produce haunting music with a talented and / or an experienced pianist tickling the ivories.

I work most effectively when I am convinced that the way I work is the best I can offer to my client at this very moment. Clients have an antenna for that and in more and more cases it leads to an interactive flow of cooperation with satisfying and surprising results. There may be many ways to gain this kind of proficiency. For me, working with practice projects is an especially successful way.

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