Engaged Learning in Belgium

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Chapter 3 Community Service Learning: An Appropriate Model for Social Work Education in Complex Urban Settings? Findings from Brussels

Odisee University of Applied Sciences

Erik Claes, Mieke Schrooten, Julia Clever, Anja Desmedt, Marie Deleener, and Floor Michielsen

CHAPTER 3 COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING: AN APPROPRIATE MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN COMPLEX URBAN SETTINGS? FINDINGS FROM BRUSSELS

3.1 Introduction

Rachida, a Belgian-Moroccan mother living in Brussels, has been living in Molenbeek, one of the 19 municipalities of the Brussels-Capital Region, for almost 20 years. She recently moved to another neighbourhood, near the canal and Brussels South railway station. Her new neighbourhood is an arrival neighbourhood, where migrant families come and go. Rachida does not feel entirely safe on the street. She feels uncomfortable with the drug trade, the street sales of stolen goods, and the hostile looks of men. Children are up late at night, and large groups occupy the park at the edge of the canal. She is especially worried about her second daughter who does not wear a headscarf and who is regularly insulted and harassed in the streets.

A few months ago, there were two ambulance vans parked near her flat, and Rachida saw police cars coming from everywhere.

> *I heard the voices of women, screaming and shouting. From my window I saw six Syrian women and a man with a child. They were all dragged out of a flat by the police. I heard my neighbour, a man from Lebanon who sells car, say to other people: "He killed his wife". The crime had been committed in a flat housing a large family of Syrian refugees who had come to live here a year ago. Meanwhile, members of the Syrian community gathered in the streets. When traffic was allowed again, a group of about 50 Syrians gathered near the flat where the tragic events had taken place. The streets were filled with carpets. I saw members of the Syrian community praying and mourning.*

Rachida expressed her helplessness in this situation, but also her disillusionment with the local authorities.

> *Me and my neighbours, we are all powerless. We cried on each other's shoulders. What we need is safety. I left my previous apartment because of what I went through when I witnessed the arrest of Salah Abdeslam, and then I come here, and again a part of*

CHAPTER 3 COMMUNITY SERVICE LEARNING: AN APPROPRIATE MODEL FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN COMPLEX URBAN SETTINGS? FINDINGS FROM BRUSSELS

Syria haunts me. We had to bear the consequences of IS there, and now we have the refugees here. They cram the neighbourhood with Syrian people. They place heavily traumatised families in communal flats, with almost no professional support.

Rachida's testimony is illustrative of the complex urban reality in which many social workers work today. Many cities face an accumulation and intersection of conflicts and fracture lines between and within groups, and with their institutional and political environments (Claes et al., 2020). In her book 'Social Work and the City', Williams (2016) argues that social workers need to be aware of the impact of the urban context on their work: they have to be able to 'read' the city, its spatial dynamics, and its impact on living conditions. Rapidly changing urban conditions inevitably put pressure on social work to reposition its roles, missions, habits, routines, and underlying normative beliefs, according to Williams.

How, then, should social work students be trained to obtain a clear understanding of urban complexities? What pedagogy is suited to teach them how to navigate these – sometimes competing, contradicting, and paradoxical – urban realities and to properly address the needs of Rachida, her neighbours, and Syrian families? In this chapter, we will address these questions in three steps. First, we recapitulate some central ideas that emerged from an earlier publication (Claes et al., 2021). These ideas revolve around Community Service Learning (CSL) as a promising, alternative approach to social work education in the city. Second, we briefly describe the urban geography of Brussels and outline a Brussels experiment of CSL that was rolled out in 2020-2021 as part of the Erasmus+ project 'Urban diversities: Challenges for social work'. We describe the urban settings and trajectories around which CSL was initially designed and in which the learning process evolved. Third, we critically examine the extent to which the CSL in Brussels has fulfilled its promising role in addressing the many epistemic challenges arising from urban complexity, based

on our own experiences, complemented by three focus group evaluations of the CSL experiment.

3.2 CSL as a Promising Model of Social Work Education in the City

In an earlier publication, we explored the tentative claim that CSL could be an alternative and promising learning approach in social work education, in particular, to prepare social work students to work with the complex challenges they will face in urban settings (Claes et al., 2021). CSL is a "pedagogical model that intentionally integrates academic learning and relevant community service" (Howard, 1998, p.22). Although different concepts and practices of CSL co-exist, many models encompass three intertwined basic principles, namely (1) student learning is driven by civic engagement, (2) learning is cooperative and reciprocal, and (3) the construction of knowledge is highly reflexive and experiential (Butin, 2006; Donaldson and Daughtery, 2011; Eyler and Giles, 1999).

Figure 1: The wedding cake model (drawing by Erik Claes)

Departing from the model, presented in Claes et al. (2021), we can visualise CSL as a wedding cake, each layer forming the basis of another. In a context of urban complexity, civic engagement is considered the most basic layer because it is the shared motivational and value-oriented dynamic on which processes of mutual or cooperative learning between students, lecturers, social work professionals, and service users or residents of a neighbourhood are built. In this wedding cake model, reflexive learning through and on experience is placed at the top of the cake because of its specific and valuable contributions. It is the beating heart of CSL.

Our reflections on the potential of using CSL in a social work programme to appropriately address urban complexities can be summarised in three arguments. First, by moving the classroom to real and more complex urban life situations and anchoring the learning process in civic engagement, students open their ethical awareness. They better feel the ethical urgency to come to a renewed understanding of urban complexity. Second, by broadening the scope of the learning process to different stakeholders (students, residents, social professionals, lecturers), making it cooperative and enhancing experiential knowledge, the ability to appropriately align different types of knowledge is increased. Third, by assigning a crucial role to collective and individual reflection on lived experience, it enhances the ability to uncover, refine, and even produce (often tacit) practice wisdom that addresses, at least in part, urban complexities.

In what follows, this chapter will assess these claims through concrete findings resulting from a one-year intensive experience with CSL in Brussels. This was embedded in the Erasmus+ project 'Urban diversities: Challenges for social work', in which a consortium of five schools of social work – Odisee University of Applied Sciences (Belgium), University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (Netherlands), Manchester Metropolitan University (United Kingdom), University of Debrecen (Hungary), and Turku University of Applied Sciences

(Finland) – developed and piloted a blended learning course aimed at strengthening the capacities of future social work professionals to intervene in situations of urban tensions. The blended learning course consists of a CSL track at the local level, combined with the transnational virtual exchange.[11]

The CSL trajectory in Brussels was prepared in the academic year 2019-2020 and was piloted between September 2020 and May 2021. The pilot was spread over several settings and CSL trajectories, which will be introduced in the following section. Eight students participated in the pilot, as well as 17 residents, seven social work professionals, and three lecturers.

3.3 CSL in a Complex Urban Geography

To paint a clear picture of the settings and trajectories of CSL, a few general brushstrokes are needed to contextualise CSL in the urban geography of Brussels. The city of Brussels can easily be described as an ideal case of urban complexity. Brussels is the capital of Belgium and of Europe. With a population of approximately 1,200,000, it is a cosmopolitan area with a dense, super-diverse, and growing population.

Brussels has a fragmented and segmented political structure. Several authorities are active on the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region: three community commissions, one region, two communities, the Federal Government, 19 municipalities, and supranational and international institutions. These different authorities each exercise their powers on the same territory, but they are also interdependent. For example, a particularly complex division of powers has been worked out for personal matters. The labyrinthine character of these interacting local, regional, and federal policy levels shapes the urban

[11] See https://deb.tuas.fi/urban/ for more detailed information.

complexity of Brussels and is complemented by a rich, organically developing web of bottom-up initiatives and new ways to reinvent urban solidarity.

Brussels has sharp, geographically visible contrasts between rich and poor. Most poverty indicators show that the proportion of people living in poverty is higher in the Brussels Region than in the other two Belgian regions (Schrooten et al., 2017). Within Brussels, this poverty is distributed in a very unequal social and spatial manner. On the one hand, there are large differences between the impoverished city centre and the richer periphery. On the other hand, Brussels also has a large internal geographical, social, and economic dualisation between the western and eastern neighbourhoods, with poverty being strongly concentrated in the 'poor crescent' or the 'croissant pauvre', a crescent-shaped zone on the northwest side of the city centre (Vandermotten et al., 2009).

The CSL experience in Brussels took place in two different settings: a team of community workers developing advocacy for service users who depend on last-resort social assistance benefits (Team Baskuul), and a citizens' collective called Wijkacademie, working with residents living in a social housing complex. Students participated in the activities of one of these organisations for at least half a day each week. Two lecturers supported the students both in the field and online.

3.3.1 Team Baskuul and Collectif Cartach: An introduction

Team Baskuul consists of five community workers employed by SAAMO, an association of community workers committed to facilitating access to basic human rights. Since 2020, these community workers have been developing a participatory project with a collective of service users called Collectif Cartach. Collectif Cartach works to ensure proper access to social protection around the right to last-

resort social assistance benefits, which has become more and more conditional in recent years.

The genesis of Collectif Cartach is intertwined with a process of digital storytelling that was facilitated by lecturers of the Odisee University of Applied Sciences from November 2019 until June 2020.[12] The collection of digital stories from service users stemmed from the conviction of both the community workers of team Baskuul and a lecturer from Odisee that these short visual stories could be a useful pedagogical and political tool to reveal the world of people who depend on a minimum basic income, and also to open a space for meeting and dialogue with the staff of the municipal social action centres or other selected target groups.

These expectations turned out to be justified. During the process of digital storytelling, participants discovered themselves as owners of experiential knowledge. They also discovered their willingness and ability to use their digital stories as leverage for political action. The team of community workers supported this process of collective citizen action through the participatory project mentioned above, with the ambition of shifting the balance of power between service users and service providers, both through individual social and legal assistance and collective actions, discussions, and interventions with beneficiaries of last resort social assistance benefits as engaged citizens.

Together with service users, community workers seek a systemic change in federal and local policies, whereby the conditionality of entitlement to last-resort social assistance benefits is reduced. They do this by making visible the many dependencies, insecurities, and vulnerabilities of service users who depend on these benefits, as a first step in removing the many barriers in the power relations between

[12] For more information on digital storytelling, see Lambert (2010).

service users and service providers and in strengthening the position of service users as full citizens and holders of basic social rights.

The Baskuul team also decided to repeat the process of digital storytelling with a new group to enable another collective process of political awareness-raising. It is in this context of collective action, triggered by digital storytelling, that the opportunity arose for a CSL experiment based on citizen engagement. Initially, two CSL trajectories were designed in cooperation with the Baskuul team. In the first trajectory, students participated in a two-month collective process of digital storytelling. Each of them moderated a parallel group of four service users. The second trajectory was embedded in the casework of social legal advice. Here, three students would complete a CSL trajectory, consisting of listening and guiding individual service users depending on last-resort social assistance benefits. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, it became extremely difficult to make this learning environment operational. In total, only three meetings took place. After a month, the students were integrated into the final sessions of the digital storytelling trajectory.

At a later stage, a third short CSL trajectory was added. The students participated in two group sessions with Collectif Cartach. In the first session, Cartach members showed their digital stories and asked for a reaction from the students. In a second session, members of Collectif Cartach, participants in the digital storytelling process, and the students came together to listen to all the stories collected from 2020 to 2021. The aim of the meeting was threefold: to share the stories, to valorise the storytellers' experiences, and, not least, to identify unmet needs in order to communicate these needs to target groups in a further stage.

3.3.2 Learning with a collective of citizens in Molenbeek

The second urban setting for CSL was the super diverse and underprivileged municipality of Molenbeek. The CSL trajectories in Molenbeek were linked to the activities of a citizens' collective called Wijkacademie, which literally means the academy of the neighbourhood, a place or space where Molenbeek residents share their experiences and learn from each other through workshops, debates, storytelling, and dialogue tables.

In 2016, three mothers started this collective mainly as a reaction to the attacks in Paris and Brussels, and to the subsequent global negative framing of Molenbeek because of its link with Salah Abdeslam and his terrorist companions. Wijkacademie easily attracted a super diverse mix of – mostly – women with a migration background and succeeded in creating a safe space for residents to express their often-unheard stories, experiences, and opinions. This was much needed in a particularly difficult period of collective trauma and stigmatisation. Wijkacademie was able to bridge the often-missing link between local residents living in precarious conditions and more formal social services (Claes and El Miamouni, 2019).

By the time of the CSL project, Wijkacademie had become an independent NGO, temporarily receiving government funding. It had also moved its scope to a precarious neighbourhood near the metro West station, where it initiated informal street talks, street walks, and workshops with residents. After a four-month exploratory phase, the staff decided to focus on community work within a social housing complex called Cour Saint-Lazare, using door-to-door conversations as a lever to listen, identify urgent needs, build trust, and understand urban complexities.

Within the setting of the Wijkacademie students took part in two CSL trajectories. One student participated in the exploratory work of

Wijkacademie. During the first semester, she took part in weekly street walks and talks, participated in workshops, and reflected with staff and residents on pressing issues. In the second semester, she facilitated a process of digital storytelling with residents of the Cour Saint-Lazare.

A second trajectory was anchored in the door-to-door conversations with residents of Cour Saint-Lazare. Together with the two community workers of Wijkacademie, students listened attentively to the needs of residents about their wellbeing, living conditions, and relationships with their neighbours. They gradually discovered how these needs constantly revolve around the balance of power between social tenants on the one hand and the local social housing companies on the other. At the end of their CSL trajectory, students participated in a collective preparation of participative action research[13] on living conditions in the Cour Saint-Lazare.

Through reflection on experiences and the creation of a collective digital story about the challenges of living together in a social housing complex, the students engaged in a process of cooperative learning with residents, community workers, and Odisee lecturers. Participating in this process gave the students a different insight into current social housing issues, while for the first time they worked with social intervention methods such as door-to-door conversations, digital storytelling, and participatory action research.

3.4 Lessons Learned

In this chapter, we bring together the lessons learned from our experience. Based on the experiences from the different CSL trajectories, as well as field notes and three focus group discussions, a few sets of findings can be outlined. First, we address the settings of reflexive learning. Then we will look at whether the three claims we

[13] See Van Acker et al., 2021 for more information on this method.

made in the second part of the chapter – CSL opens up an ethical consciousness and a new perspective on urban complexity; CSL opens up the possibility of aligning and uniting different types of knowledge; and CSL creates practice wisdom to address urban complexities – were confirmed or invalidated in this experiment. We also add some reflections on time as an important aspect of CSL.

3.4.1 Reflexive learning comes in different forms and scales

The CSL trajectories taught us that reflection takes different forms depending on the contexts and the type of interventions. Whereas in the walk and talk trajectory intensive reflection on conversations and meetings were often made possible through careful transcription and initial interpretation of audio recordings, other reflection moments were informal during phone conversations between the lecturer/mentor and social work professionals. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis and its limitations inevitably resulted in an alternation between real-life reflective encounters and online meetings.

Depending on the changing circumstances, the scale and plurality of the collective reflections also changed constantly. While some reflection meetings took place in a rather large group with a variety of stakeholders (students, residents, lecturers, and social workers), most reflection took place in small groups, mostly including only two types of stakeholders. This variety in form, scale, inclusiveness, and intensity of reflexive learning as such seems inevitable and in line with the CSL idea of multiple learning. However, at least two threats to CSL emerge when this variety is not well managed. First, there is a risk of losing an overview of all these processes, which may weigh on the ability to map and systematise these learning processes. Second, there is a risk of missing links and communication gaps between the stakeholders involved, which can easily create confusion, uncertainty, and lack of transparency.

3.4.2 Ethical awareness and a new perspective

One of our basic assertions was that by prioritising civic engagement in CSL, students would fully open up to the lived urban realities of others. This would make them more sensitive to the ethical nature of these complex realities, and at the same time make them look at urban reality differently. Piloting CSL in Brussels revealed some important findings that support, refine, and nuance the above claim.

The first finding concerns the awareness of a shared sense of equality. In the group discussions and interviews, students and community workers saw a clear difference between an internship and the CSL's civic engagement.

> *During an internship, I have to check a list of competencies. Here I can simply guide the students to the essence, to what really matters in the field. The students came along and I could help them experience the basic commitment of social work. This commitment is crucial because it helps you not to give up. (Community worker from Wijkacademie)*

For some students, this difference with an internship was a source of uncertainty that they had to overcome. Others experienced it as something positive, as liberating, as an opening up to be of significance to others.

> *Unlike an internship, you are not constantly assessed on competencies. You are free to be there and to be of significance to others. You act, do something instead of delivering and proving. You do something according to your own choice. You can be yourself. (Student)*

Students also connected this free space with an enhanced sense of equality in their relationship with their lecturer. They experienced a shift in the latter's position.

The relationship with the lecturer was different. He was also there in the field, to be of significance to others. There was much more open communication. We had more of a say in the process. (Student)

There was less distance. It wasn't like…, in general, a lecturer-student relationship. I saw the lecturer less as a lecturer and more as a person, as someone who was also involved in the project. That was very positive for me. (Student)

Students also experienced this sense of equality in the attitudes of others involved, especially in the interaction between residents and social workers in the field. One student pointed out that this sense of equality was the essence of what she learned from CSL, both in theory and in practice. In a conversation with her lecturer, she even noticed that this sense of equality is a prerequisite for authentic speaking and listening.

Everyone took the attitude of equality and respect, and didn't put themselves above someone else. I think that was important, because you also noticed that the service users felt that. The things they said, they wouldn't have said if there hadn't been this sense of equality. (Student)

One might critically ask whether this enhanced sense of equality within the CSL experience also influenced the students' understanding of complex urban realities. Did it open up a new perspective of these realities? For community worker Marie, this deepened sense of equality is intertwined with a deeper understanding of the essence of social work. For her, a stronger sense of equality does not directly lead to a better understanding of urban complexity, but it sharpens the most essential tool for a more refined reading of this complexity.

For me, the essence is the ability to hyper-listen, the ability to really listen, to really hear what is being said, rather than hearing what you think you have heard. (Community worker from Wijkacademie)

Students involved in the Baskuul project explicitly mentioned a shift in vision toward caseworkers providing social service in public centres for social action. The latter's visual and narrative representation contrasted sharply with the sense of equality experienced by service users and community workers. By being immersed in the CSL experiment of the Baskuul project and seeing the contrast between a context of equality and a perceived context of power relations, the students were able to see a multiplicity of positions and roles of social workers in a complex urban setting. In addition, students took a critical view of their own profession and the mental representations of service users.

> *I discovered that there are many pitfalls in social work. You can easily get into a vicious circle, where you work like a robot, because you have to follow the procedures, the rules, and that you lose the humanity of it all. […] I was a bit in conflict with myself, because I really want to practice my profession to help people, and then suddenly you realise that not everything in social work is positive and not everything goes as it should. And that touched me, because I had the feeling that there are a lot of people who have a negative view of our profession. (Student)*

3.4.3 Combining different types of knowledge

Williams (2016) emphasises how crucial knowledge about the city and its spatial dynamics is for social workers to become full actors in these spatial dynamics. Knowledge building is an important aspect of the spatial practice of urban social workers. However, Williams gives little indication of which the vital kinds of knowledge are and how they should be adequately combined. A plausible answer could be the idea of a multifocal knowledge base (Schrooten and Veldboer, 2021): a combination of a broad sociological vision of urban transitions with more partial and contextual field knowledge. This still raises the question of which specific type of knowledge should preferably be

combined for which purpose, and in which conditions. Some insights can be gleaned from the CSL experiment in Brussels.

In terms of types of knowledge, both the Baskuul teams' CSL experiment and the CSL experience on Cour Saint-Lazare have taught us a privileged interaction between conceptual knowledge on the one hand, and experience-based knowledge on the other. For community worker Floor, key concepts, and conceptual insights can help clarify experiences, and even temper inner doubts and hesitations.

> *I remember an informal telephone conversation with lecturer Erik. He explained to me Hartley Deans' distinction between interpreted needs, needs as they are subjectively interpreted by service users in their daily lives, and inherent needs, abstractly formulated, defined and conditioned needs as they are articulated by scholars, legislators and lawyers. That distinction helped me to better understand and address a puzzling experience that happened to me at the time. One day in the middle of a session on digital storytelling, a lawyer called me. She was upset with a service user who was involved in our participatory project. The latter refused a home visit of her case worker. She wanted to be protected in her need for privacy, because the personality of the caseworker had triggered a traumatic experience. 'Why is this lady acting as if she does not know the law?', the lawyer asked me with a judgmental undertone. I was stunned by this phone call. Why was this lawyer unable to stand by her client? (Community worker from Baskuul)*

Dean's theoretical framework (2015) helped her to better understand her witnessing of tension between needs that were concretely experienced by individuals on the one hand, and the needs as defined and limited within the legal discourse of legislators and lawyers.

> *Theoretical distinctions also gave me practical insight into my position as a community worker. I discovered that I fulfil a bridging function here, to mediate between service user and lawyer, to link interpreted needs to inherent needs, to give the service user*

> *negotiation space in her relationship with her lawyer. I am fully aware that conceptual knowledge does not give me a ready-made answer to my position as a community worker. It is not a recipe book, but it leads me to what I have to invent again and again. […] Theory turns into flesh and blood when I discover that it is about me. These are not just concepts. They are immediately about me, my role as a community worker, and what I do there. (Community worker from Baskuul)*

She further adds that the added value of sharing conceptual knowledge in CSL takes on a specific value in complex urban settings.

> *As community workers, we are often confronted with unexpected and unforeseen problems that arise in the midst of other activities. Difficult problems often occur at the wrong time. You are taken by surprise and have no routine adequate response to these problems. This complexity makes us insecure. Having space to reflect on your experiences and share conceptual knowledge helps to build self-confidence to deal with unforeseen problems in the future. (Community worker from Baskuul)*

The match between conceptual knowledge and reflexive experience does not work in one direction only. Experiences and stories of residents or service users also contribute to refining concepts. In April 2021, lecturer Erik gave an online lesson to the CSL students and community worker Floor on yet another Hartley Dean distinction: the difference between 'thin' and 'thick needs'.[14] This conceptual distinction was an analytical framework for the community worker to interpret the deeper meaning of service users' experience of dependency and powerlessness, but also to discover similarities between different stories.

[14] 'Thin needs' are needs that a person must fulfil in order to survive (hygiene, food, water, shelter, safety). 'Thick needs' are needs that enable people to develop as full human beings (Dean, 2015).

The conceptual framework was seen as a useful instrument to uncover more systematically what service users called the invisible part of their iceberg. During the discussion between students, community workers, and service users, it also became clear how the digital stories and narratives made it possible to refine the conceptual distinction between 'thin' and 'thick' needs. Service users pointed out how thin needs (shelter) and thick needs (love, sexuality, personal development, and the capacity to live fully in one's own space) interact and how a strict hierarchal dichotomy between thin and thick needs might easily support a political discourse that last resort social assistance benefits only serve thin needs and service users only deserve to survive rather than the fulfilment of thick needs.

3.4.4 A path to practice wisdom

In social work research, there is substantial literature on what is called 'practice wisdom', a term that refers to the ability of social workers to know how to judge, decide, and act in concrete and specific situations (Chun-Sing Cheung, 2016). Practice wisdom is more than the sum of theoretical concepts, empirical knowledge, and a set of practical tools. It refers to a certain inner disposition to find the right orientation and the right match between different types of knowledge to define one's course of action in a concrete and uncertain situation. This inner disposition is developed through experience, through repeated exposure to challenging and uncertain situations.

Practice wisdom can come in different shapes. It may manifest as a tacit, unarticulated ability to know how to proceed. Yet often practice wisdom implies a deliberative practise in which an individual or a group interrupts its course of action and has to reflect on the situation, discursively discern salient features of the context, and articulate relevant values and principles to find an appropriate course of action. In complex urban settings, with their accumulation of intersecting fault lines, practice wisdom plays a central role in the practice of social

work. Practice wisdom enables social workers to anticipate conflicts, diffuse tensions, and position themselves as full actors in the city, as space makers, builders of bridges, community builders, and policy influencers.

In Claes et al. (2021), we argued that CSL offers a promising avenue for mapping and acquiring new practice wisdom. Again, our experiences nuance and refine this statement. First, we experienced that shared civic engagement is a necessary basis for reflexive learning. The quality of civic engagement depends to a large extent on the degree of shared commitment to basic principles of interaction, to common goals, and to the shared ability to translate private concerns into public issues.

> *Social workers are only fully prepared to participate in the reflexive process of CSL if they themselves embody a strong civic commitment and have a strong, articulate vision of the need for structural change. Such social workers are also needed in the process of guiding CSL with students. Such engaged social work will provide a framework that helps to understand students' experiences. In the absence of these assets, social workers will be tempted to abandon reflection through experience. (Community worker from Wijkacademie)*

Personal ambitions and individual desires for recognition, acceptance, or social advancement can damage the ability to focus on public issues. It can also weigh heavily and negatively on the trust base of a collective civic engagement. Moreover, multiple 'blessures de l'âme' from the past, provoked by certain events, can discourage civic engagement for fear of being disappointed or rejected again by fellow citizens or by institutional partners.

Second, the importance of equality, a theme we developed in the section on ethical awareness, emerged strongly as a prerequisite for deep and sincere reflection on experiences.

> *Creating an equal space for each participant allows you to show your vulnerable side, to express and share the different thoughts and considerations that were in your head just before you made that decision, or said what you said. The reassuring prospect of being allowed to show your vulnerability. This is important because you sometimes have to make difficult choices, or you make wrong choices. This can have an impact on your mental well-being. CSL makes it possible to share this mental process, to reflect on it and learn from it. (Community worker from Baskuul)*

The importance of equality and reciprocity as a route to practice wisdom is not limited to the relationship between social workers, students, and residents or service users; it is also reflected in the joint learning process of lecturers and students. Joint reflections and practice in giving meaning appear to be essential for the acquisition of practice wisdom. Open, horizontal discussions between student and lecturer deepen the process of meaning-making.

At the same time, the community workers also stress the vulnerability of this reflexive learning. They point to the fragility of emotional safety, which must be seen as a very fragile condition for this kind of learning.

> *Many residents live in a survival mode. Their attitude is generally hostile towards institutions and social workers. There is so much distrust. And in their survival mode they are unable to be kind to others. […] Social media also reflects and reinforces our inability to really listen to each other's needs. We are marinated in blaming and judging each other. (Community worker from Wijkacademie)*

So how can we strengthen this crucial condition of emotional safety for students and service users? A powerful way to build emotional safety is when students can reinforce each other.

> *Before the start of the CSL, we as lecturers very carefully composed the subgroups and distributed them among the different trajectories. Our advice to students was: form a pair with another student with whom you feel comfortable. And so, the students who participated in the door-to-door conversations at the Cour Saint-Lazare were able to stimulate each other, to share, share experiences, create emotional security and build up trust. (Lecturer)*

Moreover, community worker Marie stresses the importance of limiting the boundless responsibility of social workers in complex urban settings.

> *In difficult stories and cases, such as in Cour Saint-Lazare, things are so complicated and the needs are so multiple that you can often only intervene when there are urgent needs to be met. You have to make such decisions for your own emotional safety. For the rest you have to keep listening. (Community worker from Wijkacademie)*

Regarding service users, Floor emphasises the importance of supporting group sessions of cooperative and reflexive learning, combined with private sessions of preparatory care and aftercare with individual service users. It is crucial to make time for each, to listen carefully, and adjust interventions when necessary.

> *The process of digital storytelling with service users is very powerful, but also throws up many issues. Participants often go back to a difficult and painful period. And they expose themselves. That is tough and has an impact, perhaps not on the spot, but afterwards. Emotional safety can also be at stake when participants bring out their story out in a workshop or in a classroom with students. Emotional safety has to be reinvented again and again. (Community worker from Baskuul)*

3.5 CSL and the Question of Time

The issue of time brings us to the last set of findings on the CSL trajectories in Brussels. Most of these trajectories took place within a period of 10 weeks. Students, lecturers, and community workers agreed that this time frame was too tight for the participants to fulfil the promise of cooperative and reflexive learning through civic engagement. Sufficient time is needed for focus, mental space, and concentration, for reflection and communication to articulate inner processes, thoughts, and intentions, and to clear up misunderstandings. But also for investing in trust, care, and safety, for celebrating, valorising, and enjoying each other's presence.

> *Time of reflection allows me to make explicit what I have in my mind, what goes through my head when I about to make a decision. It allows me to discover my doubts, my not yet knowing, and to see with delay how things can be made better. (Community worker from Baskuul)*

Lecturer Anja, who coached the students involved in the door-to-door conversations, points out the difficulties related to the type of timeframe in which the CSL trajectory took place.

> *The students told me that they needed time to familiarise themselves with the context and the residents. By the time they felt they could start, the project had already ended. (Lecturer)*

Another observation around time is that every learning process has its own time. Each CSL trajectory has its own rhythm that often exceeds the planned timetable within the students' course programme. As a result, the CSL process informally and organically expanded beyond the pre-planned time scale. In the context of the Wijkacademie, a student extended her civic engagement by volunteering to facilitate and conclude a process of digital storytelling with residents. To some extent, she acted ethically toward residents and social workers by

finishing what she had started. Loyalty, rather than what one is academically obliged to do, seems to drive the learning process to a great extent.

In the setting of Team Baskuul, the interest of service users in exchanging with social work students extended beyond the time frame of the Odisee students. In the autumn of 2021, the service users presented their digital story in a full class of another school of social work. During the seminar, the students' interpretations of the stories were used as a starting point for further cooperative reflection with the service users.

3.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we started from the need to find an alternative pedagogical approach for (future) social workers to tackle urban complexity. We distinguished three epistemic challenges: the need for a fresh understanding of the city, the need to find the right match between different types of knowledge, and the importance of practical wisdom. Based on an evaluation of a pilot case in Brussels, we confirmed, refined, and nuanced our initial claim that CSL is a promising pedagogical approach to address the aforementioned challenges. At the end of this chapter, we recapitulate three nuances that deserve attention for those who want to further explore the added value of CSL in urban social work education. They all revolve around the beating heart of CSL: reflexive learning.

The first nuance concerns the complexity of reflexive learning with different perspectives and stakeholders. The variety of different forms and scales of experiential reflexive learning threatens to lead to communication gaps, lack of transparency, and confusion among those involved. To prevent this, we recommend the establishment of a working group with the task of coordinating the reflexive process,

consisting of a lecturer, a social worker, a resident (or service-user) and, if possible, a student.

The second nuance links reflexive learning and engagement. A strong shared civic engagement between lecturers and social workers is needed to process reflexive learning and gain practice wisdom through trial and error. A recommendation in this regard could be the collective drafting of an ethical charter or the creation of a collective narrative that embodies a shared attachment to core values and a perspective on social change.

The third nuance concerns the preconditions for reflexive learning: emotional safety and time. The focus groups with students, lecturers, and social workers emphasised the importance of revealing one's thoughts, feelings, and needs, as well as the ability to listen carefully and non-judgementally to the feelings and needs of others. However, such an open and authentic space requires that people feel safe and have sufficient time to construct that safety together.