

Innovative activism through empathic involvement

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Paper presentation

Activism appears in many forms, but without critical consciousness in dialogue (Freire), the actual actions can be misguided, do more harm than good, or appear as totally futile. But if guided by reflective dialogue, hope and emphatic involvement (Levinas, Krznanic) the actions stand the chance of doing good in ways that support learning, social justice, solidarity and care for people positioned as vulnerable (x).

Here the activism takes the shape of the promotion and development of a promising technological and social innovation for people with intellectual disabilities. It deals with how a particular smartphone application (Milla Says) can support children with intellectual disabilities in learning supportive sign language. The app seems to have the potential of building communities, connected to extended use of signs to support spoken language (in Norwegian; tegn til tale - TTT), and sign language.

In the Nordic countries, reforms for people with intellectual disabilities, and for deaf people, have resulted in transfer of guidance in language development from centralized institutions and special schools to the municipalities (Tøssebro). This move leads to an increased need for multilingual staff qualified in sign language, in kindergartens, school and in a life-long learning perspective. Many municipalities don't have these competencies in their (pedagogical/caring) staff. When family, friends, kindergarten, school etc. do not master TTT or sign language, children and grown-ups in need of TTT for communication and social interaction will have lesser access to a stimulating language environment. These are obstacles and challenges we have identified in our current research project (x, y and z 2019) where we have observed cumbersome practice in school and interviewed staff in schools and kindergartens where TTT (with and without the app Milla Says) is in use.

We have also interviewed parents of intellectual disabled children, and in particular one of them, the father of Milla in the capacity of inventing the app Milla Says. This presentation highlights his story as a narrative travel through shock (of having a daughter with Downs

Syndrom), despair (lack of supportive communication systems), and a series of turning-point events that produce both indignation and hope. Through a strong emphatic story, he tells about an activist's struggle to remove disabling barriers, a growing awareness of the necessity of open communities, the promotion of full participation for intellectually disabled people and the necessity of being inventive and creative.

The narrative analysis reveals interesting turning points that open paths towards action and benevolent social change. We understand turning points as “interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives. ... They are often moments of crisis. They alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life. Their effects may be positive or negative” (Denzin). We also link this to Turner's theory of ritual and liminality, described as the liminal phase of experience, or a threshold moment where the person is in a state of suspension, a “no-man's land betwixed and between” (Turner), a creative moment between the past and the future.

Question from the call? What it means to be an activist and whose values we represent?

Keywords: Activism, narratives, social justice, social innovation, language environment

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