

3. Developing the Guidance Skills of SI Leaders

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Abstract: SI is a voluntary programme of professional guidance under the leadership of the students themselves. The purpose of SI is to improve student performance and reduce interruptions to studies through collaborative learning strategies. SI complements regular teaching, where advanced students guide new students. The question I raised in this study was: How do SI leaders understand guidance in the SI programme and how do they experience guidance in the SI programme? The results presented in this article are based on a secondary analysis of a study carried out among SI leaders at Nord University in 2017. A phenomenological approach was chosen in relation to the aim of the study in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how SI leaders have understood and experienced their role as educational facilitators. As a phenomenological study, the data collection process involved primary in-depth interviews and multiple interviews with the same individuals (Creswell, 2007). Two interviews were conducted with each SI leader, one at the beginning of the semester and one towards the end.

The purpose of a phenomenological study is to find the central underlying meaning of an experience. This article presents the results of a study of SI leaders concerning their experience of facilitating an environment that provides opportunities for learning. In guiding the students, the advanced students experienced being in a guidance situation, and it has been important to bring these experiences to light. How do SI leaders understand guidance in the SI programme and how do they experience guidance in the SI programme?

My findings show that SI leaders express an expectation that their work as an SI leader will contribute to their own personal development. They experience that it is important to create a sense of security among the students by clarifying the forms of guidance and adapting the guidance to each student's abilities. They state that as SI leaders, they need to be able to deal with and handle the unforeseen and, through guidance, support and help the students to find their own answers to their questions. As such, the SI leaders perceive themselves as a learning support for the students.

1. Introduction

Student-centred learning through guidance is a key element of the Supplemental Instruction (SI) programme, as for learning in general. During the past decades, we have seen enormous developments in the field of learning and guidance. From a situation where lectures and teacher-led activities served as significant access points to information and knowledge, the learning challenge of today is about critically engaging with widely available knowledge, transformative practices serving both profession-related

but also life-long learning goals, and developing capacities to self-evaluate, self-regulate, and manage one's own learning (Damşa & De Lange, 2019; Boud et al., 2018).

The background to this development is the emergence of post-modern society, which emphasises the construction of knowledge within a social, cultural, and historical context. There is thus more competition for the truth in today's society, which provides more options but also places more demands on individuals to manage this freedom. This is the experience and risk of having to face a world beyond absolutes and yet live and learn in a meaningful way. It challenges students to think and act according to their own perceptions without recourse to recitation or transcending ideals (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). It is no longer the case that someone owns the truth, neither teachers nor others, and this affects learning in that it becomes more of a sequence of guidance. Knowledge is socially constructed, and the dialogue becomes the criteria for truth (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Skagen, 2004). This has influenced how we look at learning, where various student-active learning methods have received increasing attention.

Supplemental instruction is a voluntary programme where advanced students provide guidance to new students in subjects in which there is deemed to be a high risk of failing or drop-out. SI therefore complements ordinary teaching. SI has also proven to have a social value since it is often offered to first-year students who, as a group, are generally new to both the institution and their place of study. It has therefore been demonstrated that SI has both an academic and social function. SI leaders, whose job it is to facilitate cooperative learning at SI sessions, receive training under the programme. SI leaders are students who have previously taken the course, have good academic knowledge of the course in question and have taken a three-day SI leader training course. In the training, they are taught how to facilitate learning by helping the students to cooperate and find their own solutions. My study concerns SI leaders' understanding of this guidance role. The following research question was examined:

How do SI leaders understand guidance in the SI programme and how do they experience guidance in the SI programme?

2. The SI Leader as a Facilitator for Learning

The SI programme defines the SI leader's task as follows: "Their job is to help students think about the lectures they hear and the books they read, and then put it all together during the SI review sessions. What SI leaders won't do is re-lecture" (University of Missouri, 2014, p. 30). The course material also points out that a key facilitation skill is to redirect the discussion to the group (University of Missouri, 2014). The SI leaders are responsible for facilitating discussions about course content and related study skills, and for preparing learning activities (Dawson, Van der Meer, Skalicky, & Cowley, 2014). This indicates that a large part of the SI leader's job is to facilitate learning by *guiding* the students at SI sessions.

Guidance requires conversation (Nordbøe & Enmarker, 2017; Skagen, 2004; Tveiten, 2005), and dialogue is the most important tool. A dialogue might include the supervisor asking questions, challenging, supporting, confirming, and stimulating the focus persons to reflect (Nordbøe & Enmarker, 2017). This dialogue is based on humanistic values and knowledge of guidance, learning, communication, ethics, and other topics, depending on the object of guidance (Tveiten, 2019, p. 23). As such, it is important to create a good relationship and a good atmosphere between the person providing guidance and the focus person(s). The participants are equal persons with different roles. It is the focus person's experiences that are paramount, while the person providing guidance actively participates in what happens and is focused on seeking the other person's perspective rather than their own.

3. Method

The study is based on a secondary analysis of qualitative data from an earlier study conducted among SI leaders in the Road Traffic Division at Nord University. This concerned the topic of SI leader experiences and understanding of SI as an educational tool and SI as a leadership development programme (Helde & Suzen, 2019). The dataset in the original study comprised 14 semi-structured interviews and two questionnaire surveys completed by seven SI leaders. In the present study, the secondary analysis has been performed on the basis of the semi-structured interviews. The transcribed interviews were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which is an inductive approach. Smith and Osborn (2003) state that IPA involves a "double hermeneutic" as the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant, who is trying to make sense of their experience. The decision to use this analytical approach was made on the basis of the research question and data from the original study, which employed a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to obtain data from interviews (Helde & Suzen, 2019). The interviews therefore consisted of open questions with follow-up questions, with a focus on SI leader understanding and experiences.

The first step of the secondary analysis was to review the transcribed interviews and extract significant statements or sentences that best described how the participants experienced the phenomena (Creswell, 2007, p. 61). The next step was to combine the statements into overriding themes. The statements were used as a basis to form a description of what the participants experienced (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). For this part of the process, I used abstraction (to group together similar statements from participants), subsumption (underlying recurrent themes in the statements that deserve a separate status), polarisation (differences between the statements), frequency (how often they occur), and function (whether the statement has an underlying meaning) (Smith et al., 2009). In this last level of analysis, I developed a theoretical discussion of the main tendencies in the material in line with interpretive phenomenology (Webster-Wright, 2010), the goal of which is for the reader to be left with a

better understanding of what it is like for someone to experience this (Creswell, 2007, p. 62). In phenomenological research, experiences are open to different interpretations (Suzen, 2018), with the most important factor being to strive to understand our participants' perspectives as best we can.

To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned at the point of collection of the interviews, and everyone was given male names. When writing the study, all details that could reveal the identity of the participants were suppressed.

4. Findings and Discussion

The main tendencies in the material are presented by theme and together describe how guidance in the SI programme is understood and experienced from an SI leader's perspective. The following six themes emerged from the data: (a) expectations concerning own personal development, (b) creating security by clarifying the form of guidance, (c) adapting group guidance to individual abilities, (d) dealing with the unforeseen, (e) helping the others to find their own answers, and (f) being a learning support. These are presented below.

4.1 Expectations Concerning Personal Development

The SI leaders expect their work as an SI leader to contribute to personal development. As Edward says,

It's interesting on a personal level to be part of an arena where I get to try things out. Because I will make mistakes, but then I'll try again and again, and then I'll maybe gain some experience from that too.

In guidance, those seeking and providing guidance are both in development processes, or inner journeys towards learning (Skagen, 2004, p. 11). This process is described by, among others, Daniel in the following statement: "I hope that my last class will be better than my first, as such." They expect to be personally challenged, and that this will contribute to their personal development and growth. Andrew stated that he had chosen to become an SI leader precisely because he expected it to be a challenge and that he would not become better if he did not try. This was also expressed by George, who in the same way as the others, expects the SI programme to provide learning: "So I expect it will be good practice for me" (George). "That I maybe grow as a teacher, or that I get that kind of thing out of it" (Frank).

The SI programme includes follow-up of the SI leaders, where they receive guidance from the SI supervisors along the way. This provides learning support in their work. The SI leaders also have expectations related to this role, and that the supervisor would support their personal development. "I expect follow-up of my own role – expect to receive guidance myself" (Daniel). The SI programme at Nord University has used two SI leaders at each session so that they are also able to support each other. SI

can as such be said to have similarities to peer learning, since it also “involves people from similar social groupings who are not professional teachers helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing” (Topping, 2005, p. 631).

4.2 Creating Security by Clarifying the Form of Guidance

SI leaders find that the students need to feel secure in order for them to be able to contribute to the guidance. They find it important to prepare the students for this work method. This means clarifying the form of guidance with the students, its purpose, and how it will take place in practice. They believe that this creates a sense of confidence and predictability for learning. It was also considered essential that the students and leaders get to know and feel secure with each other.

The people who are going to learn something feel secure much faster once they get to know us. That they can share, ask and things. That can be a bit hard when they don't know us or each other – it can make it a bit difficult to ask for help. At least if they think they're the only ones who can't do it. Should maybe keep an eye out and be a bit more aware that maybe not everyone is asking questions, but see whether they understand it, see if they're actually keeping up. (Ben)

To share and reveal their own academic shortcomings, the students need to feel secure, and the SI leaders feel that they are responsible for creating this sense of security. “That they dare to ask more, what you could call ‘stupid questions’” (Frank). Trust is a fundamental element in the pursuit of higher learning. It is only through a sense of trust that students will embrace an empowering experience of freedom, and the exercise of this freedom requires a risk (Curzon-Hobson, 2002). C. R. Rogers (1959) describes a secure guidance relationship as a *safe relationship*. The quality of the relationship between the person providing guidance (SI leader) and the focus persons (the students) affects the quality of the guidance (Tveiten, 2019, p. 22). People need relationships in which they are accepted. For Rogers (1967), acceptance is considered the ultimate liberating force since humans both require and give acceptance and move toward self-actualisation.

In addition to creating a sense of security, information about the SI programme could also motivate the students to participate, according to the SI leaders. They find it important that the participants are familiar with what is going to happen and that they prepare the students for the work method. Daniel thinks that the students might benefit more from participating in SI when they get to know the programme, “the students who have likely come so far in the system that they know how it works and will use it in a better way” (Daniel). This entails being assured that what is said and the reactions and reflections that arise are not shared with others (Tveiten, 2019, p. 55). It also means establishing rules and procedures for what takes place. Although the SI leaders are very against establishing clear rules for the SI programme, they recognise that some things need to be made clearer to the students. It is beforehand that

alternatives and possibilities can be assessed and limits and rules for the work can be clarified.

Participation in the guidance should be voluntary because it is assumed that change processes are most expedient when they are voluntary. As such, it is assumed that the ability to tolerate the consequences of increasing awareness is greater when the process is voluntary (Tveiten, 2019). Participation in SI sessions is voluntary, and the students attend of their own free will, which in turn could make them more open to guidance. This is also mentioned by the SI leaders, who feel that one of the most important aspects of the programme is that it is built on a voluntary approach and has the flexibility to be adapted. However, the framework must be clear in order to create a sense of security.

4.3 Adapting Group Guidance to Individual Abilities

SI leaders find it essential that SI sessions are perceived as meaningful by the students. To achieve this, each individual student is addressed based on their level. The SI leaders believe this adaptation of guidance to each student's abilities to be a key factor. This applies in particular to personal abilities.

It is in any case an advantage to include everyone. But then not everyone is as comfortable in group situations, and then you have to be considerate in relation to that too. It would be a shame to scare people away from SI, that would just make it worse. So yes, I think it's fine to try to get them to cooperate, but not force anyone into anything. (Frank)

Although dialogue is emphasised in the SI programme and in guidance in general, the SI leaders are keen to point out that taking part in discussions does not come naturally to everyone.

That's quite individual too, because it's not a given that taking part in a big discussion works for everyone. Some people probably learn by listening to the others having a discussion as well. That's also possible. But we need to find that out in one way or another. What's easiest for them and what they like, and it has to work for them too. If not, they won't come again, and then we're no better off. (Andrew)

Everyone needs to feel integrated, and the SI leaders feel that this is their responsibility. However, the SI participants will naturally be at different levels, academically speaking, and it is important to reach everyone at their level. The SI leaders are therefore concerned with creating good learning processes and that their guidance is on the students' premises. This means, among other things, listening to the students and allowing them to steer the guidance process. As George puts it, "It pays to follow up the things that people wonder about."

4.4 Dealing With the Unforeseen

The SI leaders did not believe that the SI sessions could or should be planned, since SI calls for flexibility, which in turn requires the SI leaders to deal with the unforeseen. This is because it is the students who should benefit from being there, they believe, and the activities and sessions must then take place on the students' premises, thus requiring the leaders to be able to handle what arises.

What is important to me is that the student has a positive experience of the session to then come back later and work more on the material ... if we have a plan for the session, it can quickly become us steering the students away from a good learning process. (Edward)

They emphasise not preparing for sessions, since this could in the worst case be detrimental to the student learning processes. Their attitude is therefore to be prepared for most things: "We asked them what they wanted to work on. So we didn't have much control over what needed to be done really" (Ben). SI leaders work in a dynamic context. In this context, C. Rogers (2012) emphasises that guidance is not a static method or a set of techniques, but a process that is in constant dynamic change. Guidance must be adapted to student needs and tempo, which are constantly evolving. The students are also different, and the SI sessions must be adapted accordingly: "I believe that SI should have a platform where there is room for everyone" (Chris). The dynamic process means that the guidance can take different tracks, and the SI leaders state that these sidetracks can hold great learning value. They deem it important to follow up the sidetracks at times since they may wish to clarify something basic, for example, assumptions.

You learn more by incorporating other things. The more you draw in other things in a conversation, the more you learn. I mean, that someone says something the others have wondered about, but haven't dared to ask about. It's better to let the conversation flow than that you have to talk about something. (Ben)

If it gets sidetracked into something more basic, I think it's very important to focus on the basic bit. (Frank)

These sidetracks can also be important to the social environment at the SI sessions.

Sometimes, I think it's important to sidetrack in order to make it more fun. You need to see whether people are tired mentally or should maybe take a break instead. It really depends on the situation – it's sort of intuitive. I need to read the people there to see whether we need a break or whether it's OK to sidetrack for two minutes to gain focus or look at it afterwards. (Edward)

I think that's just fine by me. If they want to talk about something else, that's why I'm there in a way, to listen to them and not necessarily find the answer. I think that we're there to help them and not to get through an agenda. (Chris)

4.5 Helping the Others to Find Their Own Answers

The SI leaders state that SI is about the students finding the answers to their own questions together and that SI leader guidance should help and support the students in this process.

Helping others to find their own answers, as long as we don't cross the line to them needing a psychologist, in a way. ... Helping others to find the answers to their own learning without giving them the answers – they should find the answer. ... Ask open questions, never give the focus person an answer, since the whole thing is about the person finding the answer themselves and achieving a sense of mastery and ownership over the answer that emerged. And through the discussion together, let the focus person find the answer. (Chris)

The SI leaders also feel that even if the answers are not always the best, it is still important that they do not intervene and give advice but let the students think out the answer themselves and discuss it further: “If they have a theory, they can try it out and see if it's right. If it's not, they can find another way as a group” (Ben). This is related to the SI leaders' understanding of guidance and their role in it, which they point out is to support rather than to teach or give advice.

Instead of opening the door or getting people through the door, I just point in the direction of the door, which is even further away from the goal basically. And I've never really been there before, never that far away. ... Instead of standing there with the answer and, in a way, feeding it to them, I stand far away and point. As far away as you can get really. (Edward)

In this work, the SI leaders feel that it is important to ask open questions that invite the students to reflect.

Maybe not be that specific in the questions you ask ... maybe try to ask slightly more general questions so that they have to think more themselves and discuss it in the group ... not lead them, not make it easy for them to find things out. I think that can help them to discuss things among themselves. (Frank)

In this work, dialogue is the most important tool, and this dialogue forms the core of the guidance.

This should be an open discussion where they do assignments, we're there to guide them through the assignment. It doesn't have to be more complicated than that. ... It's easier with a slightly open discussion and group dynamics. I mean if you're like 30 people in the auditorium, it's very difficult to have an open group discussion. It can easily feel like more of a teaching situation. (Chris)

In this student cooperation, the SI leaders also see that they have a role in and responsibility for them working well together. This means that when guiding them, they may need to step back and let the process take its course.

expert but rather facilitates the others to find their own problem-solving skills. This represents something different than giving advice and recommendations. According to phenomenology, understanding is far more important in interpersonal interaction than explanations and causal analyses.

4.6 Being a Learning Support

Approaching the individual at their level and supporting them in the process of finding the answers themselves has a strong connection to the SI leaders' understanding of the purpose and intention of the guidance. They describe their own role as a learning support: "You should in a way pull the strings a bit ... you ask the right person the right questions at the right time in the right way" (Edward). The SI leaders experience that guidance under the SI programme is related to learning and that through it, they help the students to develop a different academic understanding: "It emerged at some point when I talked a bit about *why* things are like this and that in the different assignments. That you develop an understanding instead of just 'you should know this, you need to revise this'" (Chris).

The SI leaders express a clear understanding of roles, where their job is to provide guidance: "We're not supposed to have a teacher role, but we should have a role where we bring students together and motivate without teaching, in a way" (Edward). They also find it beneficial that there are two SI leaders at the sessions. This enables them to support each other in their roles and work together as a team.

We can support each other, help each other and avoid having to stand there by ourselves really. It's easier when there are two of you. I think it works better for me at least than if I'd been stood there by myself. I don't know what I would have done if I couldn't, well if I got completely stuck or something, or got really thrown off. I don't think that would've gone that well. (Andrew)

The SI leaders feel that SI is a positive learning support for the students. They perceive the guidance they provide as contributing to student understanding and sense of academic confidence. As such, they feel that the students gradually contribute more to the discussions. They do not always perceive the students as feeling confident initially, but they in any case grow from their participation in SI. "You see that they are proud, in a way. They become a bit more enthusiastic about taking part in the teaching and talk and say what they think" (George). The SI leaders believe that SI gives the students self-confidence, both academically and personally. The students also develop independence through SI, and, in this way, the guidance contributes to a self-development process. Contributing to student development is the SI leaders' main motivation. They also see that this is a two-way job and contribution. "When you see that it works, that's a bonus in itself. That's what's fun. When I can help them to understand it and that we both make it work from our different positions" (Andrew).

The SI leaders themselves find it motivating when they experience that their guidance supports learning.

When you're there working with them and trying to get them to reach a higher level and they actually do, that's a good feeling. (George)

I'm really happy about the time we noticed that the level was far too much for them. That we then divided them into groups. There were no questions, we just did it really. And then everyone got the help they needed. I think they really appreciated that. It seemed that way at least, and I think it was good to see that they seemed happy and were enjoying it. They said afterwards that they got a lot out of it. I think that was really good at least. (Andrew)

This is also related to their interpersonal skills and understanding.

If you want people to have common sense and good attitudes, you need to treat people as people" (Edward).

I think that praising what is good can quickly pay off. ... Pat on the back, in a way, when it seems like everyone has gained an understanding. (Chris)

In this way, the SI leaders express an understanding that is in line with Carl Rogers' principles of congruence, empathy, and a positive fundamental attitude in communication and relations work. That communication is congruent means that it is genuine and unambiguous. When our feelings, words and actions are in accordance with each other, our communication becomes congruent. Rogers emphasises the importance of the guidance being genuine. Empathy is also only meaningful to the degree it is genuine (C. Rogers, 2012).

Being able to be there for others I think is great. I think it's a good way of doing things. It's a bit grown-up in some way or another. It's not like "I know everything, they don't know anything." It's more like, "I show them the door, they have to walk through it." I think that's interesting. (Edward)

5. Implications and Further Research

Guidance always concerns other people and will always contain an ethical dimension. It is important to be aware of this ethical dimension, and that each person has an awareness of the various ethical aspects of guidance. SI involves a guidance relationship between students, but there is currently little research on the ethical aspects of this relationship.

In this study, I have looked at SI leader understandings and experiences of providing guidance under the SI programme. It would also be interesting to investigate SI participant experiences of the guidance they receive. A natural continuation of the study would also be to observe SI sessions to look at how the guidance process takes place and what happens in the interaction between SI participants and SI leaders.

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