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## An Exploration of the 'Lived Experience' of One Cohort of Academic Peer Mentors at a Small Australian University

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

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# An Exploration of the 'Lived Experience' of one Cohort of Academic Peer Mentors at a Small Australian University

**Judith A. Couchman**

## INTRODUCTION

Academic peer mentoring programs have gained a firm place in higher education student support over the last couple of decades. One such program, Supplemental Instruction (SI), has been extensively evaluated as particularly effective in the United States (Arendale and Martin, 1997) and has subsequently figured in recommendations for adoption by both Australian (Australian Universities Quality Agency, 2009) and New Zealand (Prebble et al., 2005, p. 76) universities.

While the benefits of SI for students have been well documented over the last 36 years (See, for example, International Center for Supplemental Instruction, 2009), the benefits to Supplemental Instruction Leaders (SILs) have been less well documented. These benefits, while found throughout the SI literature in the form of claims, have received little exclusive attention. Instead, they typically occur as virtual footnotes in reports on the results of SI implementation. In these documents, evidence of leader benefits is gleaned from SILs themselves in end-of-training or end-of-semester surveys, and is most often expressed as generic 'leadership skills', with 'communication skills', 'self-confidence', 'organisational skills', 'teamwork' and 'group skills', providing some explanation of what might constitute such leadership skills (Couchman, 1997; Loh, 1994; Murray, 1999b).

Such descriptions, while serving their purpose well in program evaluations, provide little insight into the full range

and depth of what our leaders gain from their experience, for, not only are SILs required to exhibit leadership skills, but they are also expected to display facilitation and pedagogic skills as well. Congos and Stout (2003) have begun to remedy this with their extensive survey of graduated SILs. However, Stout and McDaniel (2006, p. 61) have noted that there is still a “dearth of research on the skills leaders feel they gain”.

Indeed, few studies have viewed leadership as personal experience (Logue, Hutchens, and Hector, 2005). Therefore, it is timely that our SILs’ personal experiences as academic student leaders be more fully examined so that a more fine-grained and ‘insider’ account can be developed. As our SILs are engaged in a pedagogical process, it is their “lived experience and practical actions of everyday life” captured in text that provide especially pertinent and powerful data (Manen, 1990, p. 53). This study aimed to collect such data from a particular university’s current cohort of SILs, and analyse it so that current generic expressions of our SILs’ experience might be expanded.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature on student peer mentor experience is typically found in evaluation reports of the various programs, and, although extensive, is generally not particularly rigorous in its methodology. For the purposes of this paper, the Student Peer Mentor Program (SPMP) leader literature is divided into two sections: that on SI and its derivative programs, and that on other SPMPs. Findings reported in both sections of the literature included the development of, or improvement in, student leaders’ communication and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, organisation and time management skills, teamwork skills, group facilitation, and an ill-defined category of leadership skills.

### **Supplemental Instruction**

The most reliable and fruitful study on the benefits of SI leadership was that by Congos and Stout (2003) who surveyed 110 graduated SILs from three US institutions using a range of open-ended questions. An analysis of the statements from the 27 respondents yielded development of,

and improvement in, the following categories: communication and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, organisation and time management skills, teamwork skills and group facilitation. Included was also the vaguely defined category of leadership skills.

These categories were also found in the vast majority of the literature on SI student leadership which is from program evaluation reports, and which, as such, focuses on SI's effects on and benefits to students, their grades and perceptions of the program. These reports typically do not cover benefits to SILs in great depth; however, the student leadership qualities that are reported and which carry most validity are those derived from the use of multiple instruments during and after program implementation. Various reports from the US, the UK, Australia and Sweden have used leaders' post session forms, surveys, semi-structured interviews and discussion groups (Capstick, 2004); portfolios and narratives (Green, 2007); weekly journals (Lundeberg and Moch, 1995) and review forms (Fleming and Hurne, c2004); and essays (Zaritsky, 2001). In addition, there were findings from staff observations during sessions (Best, Hajzler, Ivaniv, and Limon, 2008); focus groups and interviews (Muhr and Martin, 2006); surveys and a group interview (Couchman, 1999); and a reflection session during a conference (Johnson, 2006). Most arrived, with Congos and Stout, at the categories of improved communication and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, organisation and time management skills, group facilitation as well as the typically ill-defined category of leadership skills. The reports which sought to provide more detail by employing a leader essay, diary, narrative or journal as the source of data do not seem to have exploited these documents as fully as they might have and the resultant findings are the poorer for it.

Other SI program reports (Couchman, 1997, 2001; Garvin and Snyder, 2001; Murray, 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Zaritsky and Toce, 2006) relied solely on leader self-reporting in response to a brief survey administered at the end of a particular program in order to gauge its effectiveness. They all claimed the development of communication and interpersonal skills, with Murray, and Zaritsky and Toce adding self-confidence, while Murray further included organisation and time

management skills. SIL self-reporting through such surveys may fulfil the required function of overall training or summative program evaluation and be deemed an acceptable component of such evaluations, given the recommendations in the supervisor training programs to do so, the demanding nature of supervising these programs and the inevitable tight time-frames for producing these reports. Even so, the leadership findings would have benefitted from greater rigour in the development and analysis of the surveys, thereby also avoiding the labelling of such surveys as “happiness sheets” (Milne, Keating, and Gabb, 2007, p. 8).

#### **Other SPMPs**

Similar approaches to data collection and subsequent findings are evident in the other SPMP literature. Amongst this literature, more reliable findings come from rigorous analyses of substantial numbers of leader journals, reflections, focus groups, letters or surveys. Such analyses were carried out by Good, Halpin and Halpin (2000) targeting African-American first year engineering student leaders; Micari, Streitwieser and Light (2006) working with first and second year biology peer mentors; Newcomb and Bagwell (1997) supervising first year psychology teaching fellows; and Tenney and Houck (2004) reporting on first year chemistry and biology peer leaders. All found that communication and interpersonal skills were in evidence in their leaders. Self-confidence was added by Good et al., Micari et al. and Newcomb and Bagwell, while group facilitation also figured in the studies by Newcomb and Bagwell, and Tenney and Houck. Organisation and time management skills and teamwork skills were recorded only by Newcomb and Bagwell.

Reports on SPMPs in science subjects (Lazik, Conroy, Lee, Rocha, and Kirby, 2004; Solomon and Crowe, 2001; Stover et al., 2001), arts subjects (Gittleman and Woolf, 2001), public affairs (Thibodeau, 2001), law (Weisz and Kemlo, 2004) and subjects from across the university (Milne et al., 2007) had a similar profile of their student leaders. This was gleaned from a range of instruments and often involved a combination of telephone interviews, questionnaires, narratives, focus groups, reflective journals, and interviews. Not unexpectedly, communication and interpersonal skills

were noted along with self-confidence, organisation and time management skills, teamwork skills and group facilitation as developing or developed abilities in their student leaders.

A final critique of the SPMP literature may be made. Irrespective of the peer mentoring program and the mode of data collection, the leader qualities reported were often ascribed to SI or other SPMP training or experience; however, it is difficult to draw a causal relationship with any confidence as there is no clear link proven between the two. There was a common lack of suitable controls, often small samples, and the choice of leaders in the first place was often on the basis of students exhibiting these qualities in some degree already. The best that might be said is that the SI and other SPMP training and experience developed or strengthened many of the reported qualities already possessed by leaders due to their other 'lived experiences'.

Given this difficulty in drawing this causal relationship and the limited rigour in establishing leader qualities in the literature, an investigation into leader lived experience that made no claim to causality and sought to deepen the current understanding of the qualities of academic student leaders was warranted.

## **METHOD**

A qualitative research paradigm was chosen as this was an exploration of the student leaders' lived experience. One of the principal methods of this paradigm is textual reflection on everyday experience, and, as Manen (1990, p. 90) asserts, it is particularly congruent with the process of pedagogy, in this case, andragogy, and most appropriate as the world of the leaders is both the source and object of the research. To capture a manageable part of this world, leaders were asked to submit a written narrative of a critical incident in one of their successful sessions. Brookfield (1995) recommends recalling critical incidents to encourage reflection. As the emphasis of this investigation was on the 'what' that was written rather than the 'how', thematic analysis was applied to the narratives (Riessman, 2006), converting the unique experiences into common themes, categories and concepts of

their leadership experiences while retaining their language (Bryman, 2004; Sarantakos, 2005).

### **Participants**

The participants were the 11 undergraduate student leaders in the first semester 2009 PALS program at the University. They each facilitated two PALS in each teaching week of semester beginning in the second week. Their subjects were first year ones from across the university: management accounting, with five leaders; and business law, business statistics and computer programming, with two leaders each. Three of the five accounting leaders were in their second semester as PALS leaders, while all the others were in their first semester. There were four female and seven male leaders, among them three international students and one mature-age student.

### **Data Collection**

During the second half of first semester 2009, the 11 PALS leaders were asked to electronically submit to their supervisor a narrative of no more than 500 words recounting one of the best PALS sessions they had taken and including what they thought were the leadership skills that PALS had provided them with, or reinforced, and those which enabled them to function successfully. The writing of this narrative was one of the self-evaluation tasks they were required to undertake as PALS leaders, thus providing an autobiographical lens through which to reflect on their practice (Brookfield, 1995). All 11 leaders responded with narratives.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The students who were asked to participate in this research project were those who had been chosen by the researcher, in collaboration with other academics, for the position of PALS leader. As such, there was a power imbalance which had to be treated sensitively when requesting permission to use their texts. It was made clear that there was no compulsion to participate and that non-participation would not adversely affect current evaluations of performance or future prospects of being chosen for the PALS leader position. As this exercise of writing a narrative was part of their

responsibilities as a PALS leader, no ethics approval was required.

To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned at the point of collection of the narratives, and in writing up the study all details which could reveal the identity of the participants, including the subjects for which they were PALS leaders, were suppressed.

#### **Data Analysis**

The analysis was an iterative process beginning with a detailed, line-by-line approach which involved assigning to each sentence or clause a code encapsulating what it revealed about the experience of the particular student's leadership (Manen, 1990). Further analysis of the preliminary codes resulted in higher order, more conceptual categories, and, through establishing and reflecting on meaningful links, themes began to emerge (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). Consultation about and discussion of emerging themes with experienced colleagues aided the validity and rigour of the final themes (Miles and Huberman, 1984). The themes of these leaders' lived experience appeared to be the facilitation of communities of practice, reflective practice and mutuality, the three of which became, as Manen (1990, p. 90) suggests: like the knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes ... the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes.

#### **FINDINGS**

The first main theme of these leaders' experience that appeared to emerge from the data was that of the facilitation of communities of practice in their sessions. This was inextricably linked to the second main theme, that of their reflective practice. The third main theme, mutuality, was the result of the first two; everyone, leaders and students alike, benefitted from the developing communities of practice and the leaders' habit of reflective practice.

**Facilitation of Communities of Practice**

For the most part, these leaders produced narratives that focussed on their efforts in facilitating collaboration among all students so that learning became a matter of joint negotiation of meaning, the building of shared ways of doing their subjects with all students participating. The leaders were active in building communities of practice for students as managers in accounting, law and statistics as well as IT professionals. The elements which enabled this were their obvious empathy with their students, their use of collaborative techniques in their sessions and their philosophy of inclusiveness.

**Empathy**

The leaders' efforts at facilitating communities of practice in their sessions were underpinned and informed by a marked empathy with their students, a sensitivity to student feelings and attitudes, both at the beginning of sessions and at different points throughout. This was evident in their readings of their students' moods and feelings. Their narratives were replete with observations such as "the room was exceptionally quiet ... the students looked lost" (Harry); "everyone in the class was quite tensed ... I could see the fear on their faces" (Vic); and "by the end of the session everyone understood it better and were feeling a lot more confident about the test" (Alice). Sam noted "Throughout the semester, I have been enlightened by the differences in thought among students. Some really think quickly and others take their time."

This empathy extended to an understanding of what the likely cause of student feelings might have been and the challenges they faced. Vic noted the importance of this, recording that "a good leader should always understand his group members", and "the most important skills that I have learned as a leader is the skills of listening", while Kim revealed his grasp of student needs in "tailoring a PALS session" for them as "for most of the students, English was not their main spoken language, for others X is not a subject matter they are yet familiar with".

It seems that these leaders, because they were mostly removed from their peers by only a year, were aware of what

they were feeling and thinking, as well as what the causes of their unease would most likely be, and were able to respond appropriately to build co-operation and collaboration in their sessions.

### **Collaborative Techniques**

The leaders used a number of collaborative techniques in their sessions to provide their students with every chance of understanding and learning the content of the discipline together and becoming an embryonic community of competent practitioners in their subjects. Collaboration was encouraged through the successful employment of whole class and small group discussions, group work and reciprocal questioning. The use of these strategies was referred to often in the narratives either as hallmark of a successful session, or, occasionally, not using collaborative strategies as indicative of a less than successful session.

These leaders considered successful sessions as ones in which discussion was prevalent: “everyone started answering the question and discussing” (Vic); “a PALS session that went extremely well was a full sessions’ worth of discussion” (Sam); and “having a class with students discussing the question among each other is the whole idea of PALS in the first place. And it also makes my life so much easier as I can just sit down with them and throw the question around to different people” (Harry).

As well, group work was a feature of leaders’ strategies for student collaboration: “in groups, [students] look up a case corresponding with their allocated topic, and then share a description and its significance with the rest of the group ... This method ... built confidence in some of the students” (Liz). In addition, there was intergroup interaction. These recorded, “the room was ‘buzzing’ with questions from each group asking another group for the answers and others helping them out with ideas throughout the rest of the session”. Thus group work also contributed to a sense of community in the sessions.

In addition, the leaders often redirected questions to provoke student collaboration, participation and learning: “I was able to get them to the answer without giving it to them, as I ...

knew where they could find the information” (Steve) and “different students were able to answer the question in different ways, until what was being asked was fully understood” (Sam). Conversely, Tom reported “my worst [session occurred] ... because ... I rarely redirected questions”; however, through reflecting afterwards on this session he was able to remedy this the next week.

### **Inclusiveness**

These collaborative strategies were complemented by a leader philosophy of inclusiveness so that everyone was able to enter into the communities being built; indeed, there would have been no real developing communities without everyone participating. Such comments as “to initiate an energetic group discussion which all of the students participated in” (Garry) as an aim of the sessions, and “the entire class actively contributing to the in class discussion” (Vic) as an outcome of sessions were common.

Leaders also used inclusiveness as one of the criterion of a successful session. For instance, Abby remarked “It was a nice experience to see how all students gather together and practically start to talk to each other comparing they assignment”. Therese was quite clear about this when she wrote:

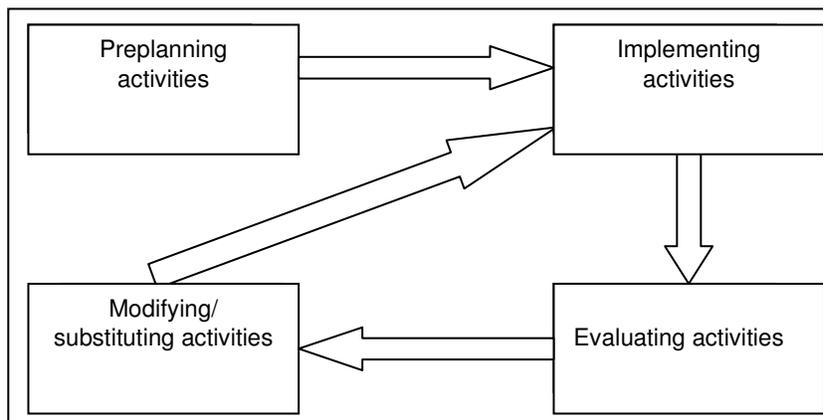
One of the best PALS sessions that I did, was when the group were all involved in finding solutions to questions that were put up on the wall (carousal). All of the group, about eight of them, ended up surrounding one particular question and came to the answer together.

The leaders’ understanding and appreciation of student needs drove the focus of sessions towards building student engagement, collaboration and success. They acted as peers and not authorities, and “in general conduct[ed] activities in such a way that they [the students] feel PALS is the student’s time to expose their weakness without a fear” (Abby). This, along with the deliberate use of collaborative learning strategies and an emphasis on inclusiveness consolidated the construction of communities of practice during PALS.

### Reflective Practice

Reflection was very much present as a part of these leaders' lived experience. It occurred during as well as after sessions; however, the narratives focused almost exclusively on reflection in action, that is, during sessions, and referred to it at times as "flexibility and the ability to improvise when things aren't going exactly as planned" (Alice). Their reflective process exhibited the typical sequence of reflective practice. First was planning, which initially occurred before the session in formal debriefing and planning meetings; second was implementing the plan during the session, activity by activity; third was evaluating both their own and student performance while gathering student feedback, again, activity by activity. At this stage, if the evaluation of any activity was negative, the leaders rapidly moved to modifying the particular activity, sometimes substituting another altogether, to arrive at implementing the new plan so that the session could continue with minimum disruption, whereupon the leaders would embark on another cycle of reflection (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1: Leaders' Reflective Practice Cycle



These substituted activities were based on an ability to identify issues and aim solutions at student needs. They often "moved from simple to the complex" (Tom) as well as taking account of different student learning styles and backgrounds "where both visual and verbal activities were utilised to explain a concept" (Kim). The leaders readily

responded to both unexpected student preferences and difficulties. Alice noted that when she observed that her group “wanted to focus on revision more ... we skipped the topic exercise and spent the whole session going through revision”. In an unusually small session of two students, Steve reported that:

Both of these students were regularly at PALS sessions, they were doing well in the unit and were aiming for high grades. As such, neither of these students needed to go over the activities we had planned to do that week. Here is where my PALS training first helped me as I knew I could just throw away the planned activities and quickly come up with some others. As it turned out both students wanted to work on an assignment that was due at the end of the week, so that's what we did for the forty minutes we had left. When they come to something that neither quite understood we went through the examples the lecturer had provided and then moved on. This turned out great as the two students worked together and only came to me if they needed help. However, solutions did not always come quickly. Alice dealt with confusion over very basic content by persistently working through a number of cycles of reflection before arriving at a workable solution for her group:

Looking at the first questions on the sample tests, there was a lot of confusion about interpreting a given graph. After trying to work with each small group/pairs to try to understand without explaining it myself, without much luck, I got a student to draw it out on the whiteboard with everyone contributing. Many of the students had differing notes which made it hard to work with them not as a whole group. The whiteboard work was fantastic. We went through the basics of the graph then went into some of the different terminology used.

Improvisation was sometimes needed for only a short time or at only one point in a session. For example, in one of Vic's sessions the imminent exam was mentioned, and from the students' negative reaction he realised that:

As a PALS leader, it was my duty to put them to ease. The only thing that struck my mind at that moment was to give

them the confidence, by showing them they knew more than what they thought they did. So my goal here was to boost their morale. I started asking them basic questions (I was sure everyone knew the answer). To begin with people were a little nervous but they started opening up. We then started discussing the exam paper.

Garry recounted a time when the issue was brief student disengagement:

The students were very prone to getting sidetracked by unrelated issues and were rather chatty ... I ... redirect[ed] the energy of the group into covering the planned subject matter. By asking some strategic questions of some of the group and getting the points of view of some of the others, and then further additional points from some other students I was able to initiate an energetic group discussion which all of the students participated in.

At other times a particular solution served more broadly:

One session that I took, did not use the activities at all. The students were too happy to forget the activities and ask questions, regarding the assignments that they had to hand in. From this session, I derived a pattern that I use in every session that we have. The final activity is always a discussion regarding what the students want to learn. To aid the discussion, a space on the board is set aside for students to write their questions which will later be addressed. (Sam)

The leaders were tuned into their students sufficiently well enough that they were easily able to adapt so that "the activities prepared [were] not necessarily the activities to be used through the session but rather as a guide" (Sam). These leaders, frequently faced with the need to reflect on unforeseen student requests and difficulties, responded with pertinent and workable alternative activities so that they could all say with Kim, "I was able to guide a small tutorial group to what I like to call a 'ah huh' moment."

### **Mutuality**

The data revealed a third theme that can be termed mutuality. Leaders considered this mutuality was the result of the engagement of and interaction among all students

during their sessions: Harry wrote, “Not only do I get a chance to improve myself, I am also able to help other students improve themselves.” In the same vein, Kim commented, “PALS is not a one-way street. It is rewarding to the leader as well.” There was a number of ways in which students and leaders benefitted that were noted in the narratives: improving understanding of the subject, increasing confidence and communication skills and establishing friendships.

### **Learning**

The most obvious and common benefit was learning. Leaders and students developed their understanding of the content together: “it is not only the students who learn from the PALS sessions but also the leaders ... in the end we are all there to learn something new” (Sam). Kim felt he was “being constantly tested and scrutinised as to [his] own understanding of the subject matter ... It is rewarding.” Similarly, PALS leadership has benefitted Liz by “help[ing] with my own studies”; in particular, Garry mentioned that “I have found that this has aided me in giving presentations as part of my own studies”, while Harry reported “doing much better in my current classes.”

### **Growing Confidence**

Leaders experienced confidence developing both in themselves and their students during sessions. They wrote of the “confidence gained from taking a group and helping them and sharing my knowledge” (Alice); of PALS giving them “the knowledge that I can talk in-front of a group of students my age or older and be confident” (Steve) and making them “feel confident in my ability to convey information to convey information efficiently to others, in order to help their learning” (Liz).

Leaders also noted a growing confidence in their students: “the look on the faces of the class was no longer of frustration or confusion but of clarity and confidence” (Tom); “[PALS] I feel built confidence in some of the students who were given the opportunity to speak publicly” (Liz); and “at the end of this discussion ... they were now more confident in participating” (Garry).

### **Developing Communication**

Communication was another mutually developing skill during PALS. Students were able to achieve this through “advis[ing] their peers in a friendly environment” (Liz). Tom learned that communication was an important skill and PALS helped “thinking about what you will say and the most effective and simplest way of saying it”. Similarly, Abby believed that “PALS has helped me ... give specific instructions of how to conduct activities” and Liz considered that “PALS has ... made me confident in my ability to convey information efficiently to others in order to help their learning”.

### **Establishing Friendships**

Friendships, both among students and between students and leaders, were established during sessions. Harry “managed to befriend quite a number of people and got to know both them and their culture a little more” and “believe[d] that new friendships were formed and strengthened throughout the semester” as a result of PALS. This theme was elaborated on by Sam who considered that “the students do not need PALS Leaders as Tutors, but rather as friends that get them thinking.”

### **Other Benefits**

There was often built up in sessions a general, shared feeling of satisfaction and well-being as is evident in Alice’s comment:

As well as making me feel good about it being a successful PAL session, I think the students felt good by working out the problems, because it’s more rewarding if you figure stuff out for yourself rather than being told the answers.

Kim addressed the reciprocal relationship between student and leader, maintaining that “a PALS leader grows to be respected by the students, and with this respect comes an expectation that lessons will be organised, informative and valuable”. And Harry came “to realise that planning is a crucial aspect in life ... juggling both my studies and work has also taught me how to have a better planning and time management.” Finally, leaders wrote of how PALS has “benefitted [them] in most areas outside of PALS” (Alice). It

“affirmed my self belief in my chosen field” (Kim), and “as a Y-in-training I have picked up both leadership and communication skills I would not have normally come across in my studies” (Steve).

Abby’s comment summed up the leaders’ experiences of resultant mutuality well:

enthusiasm was the vibration in class and the feedback with positives comments at the end of the session left me a feeling of satisfaction that the message was across clearly and most relevant everyone participate and got results in the session.

## DISCUSSION

It is clear that the leaders’ experience of facilitating communities of practice in their sessions reflects Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder’s (2002) descriptions of what constitutes communities of practice. Firstly, there were negotiation of meaning and participation, which were both encouraged in the sessions through collaborative techniques, as were mutual engagement and the sense of a joint effort in learning a particular subject in shared ways with specific tools and representations of that knowledge (Wenger, 1998, p. 49). Secondly, as students together, there was a common discourse based on the particular subject and a sharing of a certain view of the world through the lens of that subject (Wenger, 1998, pp. 125-126). Thirdly, the leaders had the necessary insider perspective of student life and learning and were connected to the outside perspectives of lecturers and supervisors as well (Wenger et al., 2002, pp. 50-51). Finally, there was a focus on value, on all members benefitting, as well as providing a familiar and neutral place for the social production of meaning (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 61).

As reflective practitioners, the leaders engaged in Schon’s (1983) reflection-in-action. While they were engaged in facilitating sessions, they were continually monitoring their performance and adjusting it to meet student needs.

Mutuality, as well as helping confirm the development of communities of practice during sessions, reinforces commonly held opinions and findings in the SI literature that SI develops leaders' communication and interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and organisation and time management skills. In addition, this group of leaders expanded this repertoire to include learning skills and enhanced self-esteem through the respect given by students and the satisfaction of making a difference in students' lives.

SIL training might benefit from the findings here. Leaders could be encouraged to consider their role as not only academic peer mentors, but also as facilitators of communities of practice in their disciplines. Their task would also be to model the thinking and actions of the professionals their students aim to be and encourage them to think and act similarly. Attention in training and in regular debriefing and planning meetings might be given to reflection-in-action during sessions. Leaders would be introduced to the cycle presented in Figure 1 above, or one similar, in training; subsequently, in regular meetings with their supervisor, they would be prompted to share their reflections-in-action for the benefit of all leaders.

#### LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this research are similar to those of qualitative research: no generalisations are possible as the object of the research was one group in one institution at a particular time. Moreover, there was no extension of the data through follow-up requests for interviews. Therefore, no causal relationship can be claimed between either SI leader training or experience in SI and these students' leadership qualities; here there is given only a glimpse of what the 'lived experience' of these leaders is.

The possibilities for further research are numerous. Qualitative analysis of existing leader journals, reflections and essays would be the simplest starting point. Another obvious possibility is a truly iterative approach to data collection to provide a deeper and broader understanding of student leader lives. Tapping into the experiences of other

groups of SILs from other universities and colleges, nationally and abroad, and well as comparisons among the experiences of leaders from different disciplines would yield valuable data.

## CONCLUSION

This snapshot of one session chosen by each of this group of SILs has revealed a complex experience. It was not a simple matter of implementing the activities planned for the session. Rather, it was a careful and considered construction of communities of practice for novice managers in accounting, law and statistics as well as beginning IT professionals. Moreover, it was a construction that underwent appropriate and timely modifications in the process as the leaders strived to facilitate student success, collaboration and inclusivity. The outcome was a raft of benefits to both leaders and their students.

There is much fertile ground yet to be tilled in understanding our SILs' "lived experience"; meanwhile, it remains a privilege to be associated with young people who consider that "it was rewarding to achieve a moment in class where the students stopped and sighed a relieved "ah huh" of understanding" (Kim).

## AUTHOR

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