HOW SI LEADERS EXPERIENCE TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AS A RESULT OF SERVING IN A PEER LEADERSHIP ROLE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Problem Statement

Institutions of higher education must seek more intentional ways to nurture the growth and development of student leaders outside of the traditional classroom experience to prepare them for fulfilling lives, successful careers, and lifelong learning, as well as to prepare them to lead our communities (AASCU, 2017; Reich & Checkoway, 2014; Astin & Astin, 2000).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore how undergraduate students experience transformative learning within their student leadership roles as a result of working in a Supplemental Instruction (SI) program in higher education.
Institutional Context

• Private, comprehensive coeducational institution of higher education, located on a 156-acre campus less than one mile from the New Jersey shore and one hour from New York City

• Offer over 50 undergraduate and graduate degree programs to approximately 6,000 students

• Tier-one institution, featured in The Princeton Review’s “Best 382 Colleges” 2018 edition

• Ranked #28 by U.S. News & World Report for 2017 as one of America’s best institutions for study in the northeast region of the United States

Monmouth University
West Long Branch, NJ
SI at Monmouth University

• Began as a pilot in Fall 2010 – originally offered in 7 sections

• Now offered in 62 sections by 27 SI Leaders

• SI is offered in Chemistry, Biology, Physics, General Science, Accounting, Economics, Psychology, Health Studies

• For the 2017-2018 academic year:

  86% of SI participants passed the course for which they attended with a C grade or better
Research Questions

1. How do former SI Leaders describe the impact of serving in leadership roles during their undergraduate study at a private, four-year university in New Jersey?

2. In what ways do former SI Leaders who served at a private, four-year university in New Jersey connect their student leadership experiences to transformative learning?

3. In what ways do former SI Leaders apply their student leadership experiences to their post-graduation lives?
The present study combines Mezirow’s (1991) Transformative Learning Theory with Nohl’s (2015) Practice-Based Approach to Transformative Learning into a six-stage, blended model to assess how former SI Leaders experienced perspective transformation.
Research Design

Qualitative Research Design

• Aligns with exploratory nature of transformative learning (Merriam & Kim, 2012)

Case Study Methodology

• Particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, bounded (institutional context) (Merriam, 2007)
• Enables participants to tell their stories (Baxter & Jack, 2008)

Participants

• Purposeful sampling strategy
  • Maximum variation
  • Captured heterogeneity of SI Leader population across disciplines

• 31 former SI Leaders solicited via email
  • 22 participants
  • 2 months to 6 years post-graduation
  • 1-3 years of SI experience
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Data Collection

Individual Interviews
• Transformative experiences cannot be directly observed
• Semi-structured, open-ended design (Rossman & Rallis, 2013; Turner, 2010)

Graphic Elicitation
• Drawing allows research participants to become more aware of their own thoughts, opinions, and emotions (Copeland & Agosto, 2012; Bagnoli, 2009)
• See sample

Data Analysis
• Single-case, continuous data analysis (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam, 2007)
• First- and second-cycle coding
• Triangulation of data

Process Coding
In Vivo Coding
Pattern Coding
Sample Graphic Elicitation

Below is a figure of an SI leader. Please represent, whether through visual drawings or written expressions, the responsibilities and relationships of the SI leader and how they are connected to the SI leader’s experience, as well as any other aspects of the position that you find relevant.
Findings

Eight Emergent Themes

- Skills Gained
- Personal Growth
- Connecting with Others
- Engagement on Campus
- Internal Changes
- Interpretation of Role
- Transferability of Skills
- Post-Graduation Life
Perspective Transformation in the SI Leader

Discussion

Connection between Student Leadership and Transformative Learning

- allows for greater interaction with individuals different from themselves
- making meaning of their own knowledge and experiences
- participants’ reinterpretation of self
- period of self-examination when they became SI Leaders
- engaged in critical reflection in action
- emerging experience as a peer facilitator offered a new frame of reference
- internal and external encounters shaped initial experiences when transitioning from students to facilitators (social testing and mirroring)
- opportunity to test their new facilitator roles
- trusting and authentic relationships with faculty, students, and peers
Interview Excerpts

“Because of SI, I can now pretty much strike up a conversation or talk to people who are dissimilar to me, just because we had all kinds of people coming to SI with different backgrounds.”

“I just like the confidence of feeling like I could teach other people such a complex course.”

“When [professors] knew you were an SI Leader, they kind of just were impressed and saw you as maybe taking on more than you needed to . . . you’re going above and beyond, so I think for faculty, it really just showed that you care about the subject material.”

“You’re learning how to interact with students that are younger than you, and you want to be a mentor for them, not just another person that’s like, ‘Oh, you have to study this.’ It’s a different kind of relationship. I feel like you learn how to build that type of relationship and you learn how to work together with people.”

“You go from being a little bit more introverted before getting involved with teaching students and helping them re-learn things.”
Bridging the SI Leader Experience and Post-Graduation Life

Discussion

Preparation for Post-Graduation Lives

• soft skills related to self-direction, communication, and teamwork are transferable across multiple disciplines and careers
• “return-on-investment” conversation: connects the skills most desirable by employers to those gained in the outside-of-the-classroom experience of serving as an SI Leader
• participants gained experiences and competencies that will not only make them more well-rounded citizens, but better prepared to enter the workforce and be successful
“When I finished as an SI Leader and I went off to graduate school, it was so much easier for me to apply that information for myself in my program just because I knew it so well from re-learning it to teach it to other people as an SI Leader.”

“Through SI, becoming involved, being able to become more social, meet new people, actually helped me become more social, meet new people, and transfer everything that I learned into my medical school career, so I was able to talk one-on-one with professors and students.”

“It shaped my career as a teacher, and it kind of helped me determine that I did want to go into education. I don’t think I would have done that if I didn’t have the opportunity to be an SI Leader.”

“SI developed critical life skills and how to handle difficult situations and how to work with different people.”

“I think that being an SI Leader will definitely help me as a doctor, not only in being patient, but also with learning how to explain things.”
Additional Benefits for SI Leaders

- Academic improvement
- Communication skills
- Public speaking ability
- Leadership development
- Mentorship role
- Relationship-building
  - Faculty
  - Students
  - Peer SI Leaders
- Opportunities on campus
- Increased confidence
- Work/school balance
- Interactions with others
- Openness/Branching out
- “Finding Yourself”
- Sense of belonging
Significance

Practice
• Contributes to the growing body of research that suggests offering transformative learning experiences outside the classroom prepares students with competencies and skills that will impact their future leadership

Research
• Serves as a stepping stone for future research on peer-facilitated academic assistance programs, including how serving as a student leader benefits future career and academic aspirations
Discussion Questions

• Have you observed perspective transformation within the SI Leaders employed within your SI programs?
• In what ways do you feel serving as an SI Leader prepares undergraduate students for life after college?
• How do you leverage the benefits of serving as an SI Leader to prospective student employees?
• What leadership development opportunities do you offer your SI Leader staff during the academic year?
Contact Information

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References


