

# Guidance in communities – a way forward?

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**Qualitative** research in career guidance has largely focused on how participants in guidance change due to their participation in different guidance or counselling interventions or activities. This article, conversely, describes how young people and adults seek to change and modify the guidance, and consequently how this changes the possibilities for participating in guidance for themselves and for others. This article presents data from a qualitative and explorative study of guidance in communities. One case study about career guidance in a factory setting is presented. The interplay between the participants' (non-) participating and the career guidance practitioners response is analysed. The article describes how new opportunities for guidance emerge through changing the practice. The study suggests that participants try to change the delivery of guidance from individual interventions to more collective forms/ modes of delivery.



## Introduction

For many years, individual guidance has been the dominant or preferred mode of delivery in Danish guidance. This is now contested in various ways: it is resource heavy (Plant 2011); it is criticised for contributing to individualisation of societal problems resulting in feelings of guilt and failure for those who do not succeed in education (Krøjer and Hutter 2008) or in the labour market; and finally, many of those considered most in need of guidance are the most unlikely to participate in an individual session (EVA 2007). An emerging interest in collective forms, group guidance and integrative approaches is evident in Denmark. This change has been characterised as

part of a collective turn in Danish guidance (Thomsen and Plant 2012 forthcoming). The study presented in this article is fuelled by and fuelling this collective turn in Danish guidance. One aim of the study was to investigate whether and how participants in guidance practices seek to change and modify the guidance offered to make it more relevant in their everyday life, and consequently what could be learned from this.

## Methodology and analysis

The theoretical basis for the study drew from the critical psychological perspectives of Dreier (2008), Holzkamp (1983) and Thomsen (2009). The methodology adopted was based on practice research (Højholt 2006). Critical psychological perspectives are based on a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the individual and the society. People act in accordance with their conditions and the meaning they ascribe to these conditions. Through their actions, they modify, change and create the conditions for themselves and for each other and the new conditions once again change the possibilities for action. In a critical psychological tradition, practice research is based on the ideal of a dialectical and democratic research process in which participants act as co-researchers on a common problem, which for me/us was how to organize a guidance practice they and others will find useful and relevant. The guidance practitioners and the participants in the case studies therefore had to commit to a long term research project. A folk high school<sup>1</sup> and a factory

<sup>1</sup> A folk high school is a form of liberal adult education based on the ideas of Grundtvig. If the folk high schools accepts students between 16 and 25, the school is obliged to offer career guidance as part of its curricula. Please see [www.fhd.dk/the-folk-high-school](http://www.fhd.dk/the-folk-high-school).

that was in the process of shutting down production met those criteria. In both cases, the career guidance interventions were practiced in the existing communities.

## Participants

In this study, two cases of career guidance were studied intensively through participant observation (Spradley 1980) over a period of time. Five students at the folk high school, five workers in the factory and the guidance practitioners or teachers at the folk high school and factory were each observed over a two day period. These participatory observations were then supplemented by semi-structured interviews. Interviews were held with management at the factory and the school principal at the folk high school. Both interviews and observations were based on a 'decentred approach' to the investigation of social phenomenon. A decentred approach means to study how participants come to make sense of that participation within their everyday life in psychological interventions (Dreier 2008; Mackrill 2008), guidance and counselling interventions (Thomsen 2012 forthcoming) or learning interventions (Kousholt 2011; Kousholt and Thomsen 2012 forthcoming). The observations took place over a two year period from 2006 to 2008.

## Data and analysis

Data consists of field notes and interviews. The interviews were transcribed in full length and altered to protect participant anonymity. The analysis involved a number of steps. The interviews were coded using Atlas 10. A set of preliminary codes were derived from a reading of the interviews and the field notes. The codes were further developed through a theoretically informed analysis based on central concepts from critical psychology such as the personal conduct of everyday life, the context of action, participation and self-understanding. The analysis was conducted on each case separately and resulted in the formulation of the following dialectical categories. In the factory, the categories were: a) to be made redundant, b) career guidance in the factory, c) guidance corners, and d) new educational opportunities. In the folk high school,

the categories were: a) the situation for the pupils, b) career guidance at the folk high school, c) room for guidance, and d) the importance of community. The two cases are reported in Thomsen (2012 forthcoming) and contain detailed references and quotations from the interview material and the field notes.

A second analysis was done on the two cases, and with the analytical categories from the two cases in conjunction, to identify possible paradoxes and dilemmas related to career guidance in the participants' everyday life. The analysis of the two cases in conjunction resulted in the following new categories: a) guidance in communities, b) seeing other people's experiences as resources, c) the importance/meaning of ethics and confidentiality, d) motivation and realism, e) the consequences of conceptualising desires as an inner process, f) how does guidance become relevant and g) the meaning of place.

## Results

The full results are reported in *Guidance in Communities* (Thomsen 2012, forthcoming). In the following, I will present a central theme from the analysis of career guidance in the factory, and use this theme to frame a central finding from the study.

### 'Then we took the wall'

Ulla was a career guidance practitioner in a publicly financed career guidance unit called 'VUS-kontakt'. VUS-kontakt specialised in offering career guidance and competence development to employed adults with little formal education. A paint factory was shutting down its production unit and the managers commissioned VUS-kontakt to set up a Guidance Corner to help their employees find new jobs.

Ulla arrived at the factory and was assigned a corner in an office building for a Guidance Corner to be established. She installed a table, a bookshelf, a noticeboard, two chairs and a computer. She set up the computer and two chairs side by side. The Guidance Corner was on the ground floor in a building separate from the production and the administration. This

building also housed the logistics offices and the director of production. Actual production took place in a separate building adjacent to this one. In that second building was located the production, the foremen's office, showering facilities and a lunchroom for the workers. Another building housed the reception, the human resources (HR) department, the public relations department and cafeteria. Ulla began to post job advertisements and flyers about training and education on the noticeboard outside her office. Very few of the workers came to see Ulla, so she faced a choice; either to go to the HR department and tell them it was not working, or to try to get in touch with the workers in a different way. After carrying out my observations, I interviewed Ulla about the situation:

Rie: You said earlier that it should have been a Guidance Corner, what happened?

Ulla: Well the Guidance Corner was set up in a corner in this very office and I got a desk and a chair in here right? And then the folks were over there in the production halls. Some of them came over...when Tonny, the foreman, sent them. I started to find job ads and posted them on the noticeboard here outside the office. A few came and looked at them, but it seemed like unemployment was very far in the future. Then Tonny said: Why don't you come over? So I moved over there, into the production. And then I used the wall in the lunch room (as a noticeboard) and I started to move around in the production halls.

First they look at you, you are a stranger and you are a woman. This is men's work; I mean, there are women in the office building, but not many. And then it becomes obvious that this is a situation that not everybody likes. I mean my presence reminds them that soon we will all get 'sacked' or we will stop working here. We know this already, we have been notified right? It is a very emotional situation. First, I try to make myself invisible; I tried to look them up without being presumptuous. But then we 'took the wall' in the lunch room and they cleared it for me

so that I could post job ads and information about training and education there and then we had something to talk about.

(Interview with Ulla)

The field notes reflect that when the workers now went on lunch break, they would gather around the wall in the lunch room to look at the job advertisements and information and to talk to each other about openings, difficulties and opportunities. I saw Ulla stand among them; sometimes they asked her questions and sometimes they did not. Sometimes she would address them, sometimes they would answer and sometimes they would just pretend that a question was not addressed to them in the first place. Later, in the same interview, Ulla described this as 'non-threatening': 'They can just pretend that they don't hear me or that the question was meant for someone else. It is a very informal situation.' (Interview with Ulla). When I interviewed the workers and asked them to describe the guidance activities they had participated in, most of them would answer 'none'. But they all told me that they had talked to Ulla about their situation.

The interview with Ulla revealed that she made the decision to change the location of the guidance corner to 'make it work'. The interview also revealed that the decision was not entirely her own. The foreman, Tonny, made an invitation that Ulla accepted and this transformed the guidance practice in a series of ways. Ulla spoke of trying to make herself invisible when she changed location. When she moved into the production hall she tried to make herself invisible; she was in the workers' territory, and the invisibility seemed like a precondition to get to talk to the workers. When she was in the first building, it was the individual workers who were singled out and 'made visible' to the others if they decided to go for a guidance session with Ulla. Ulla informed me that the workers approached her at lunch, not because they were very interested in the advertisements, but more to ask her questions. She said: 'It is a 'not dangerous' situation'. They can have an informal talk with me even though it is about something formal, right. If I get too close and say: Have you sent that application? Well, then, they can just pretend they don't listen, there is someone else there, right? But it is true, it is not

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dangerous. They have each other and I think that is important.'

In the interview, Ulla spoke of a formal/informal dichotomy. Ulla emphasised the informality of the lunch room situation, which indicated that she and the workers regarded conversation in the Guidance Corner in the office building as more formal. It seemed that the relocated career guidance dialogue became less formal through the everyday lunchroom setting. Furthermore, Ulla drew attention to the collective aspect of the situation by emphasising the importance for the workers in having each other nearby. The placement of the Guidance Corner in the office building singled out the individual worker and individualised the problem of unemployment, but the lunch room did the opposite. In the second setting, the workers were no longer singled out and any question one might ask could interest the others. This decentred approach, with a focus on how guidance can make sense in the everyday life of the participants, shows how the workers sought to modify the guidance to suit their own needs. The analysis enables me to frame the following changes: a change in location; a change from formal to informal; and a change from individual and private to shared and collective.

## Discussion

The analysis of a guidance practice in a factory that was shutting down production revealed the following changes: 1) a physical movement from an office in one building to the workers lunch room where they would talk to each other on a daily basis; 2) a change from what was experienced by the guidance practitioner from formal to informal and from a potentially dangerous situation to a safe situation; and 3) a transformation from an individual approach where the workers left the others to receive guidance to a collective approach where the guidance practitioner approached the community of workers on their own turf.

This study supports the view that there are benefits to be had by focusing on guidance as *part of a community* and not as an activity *separate from the community*. One of these benefits is that, by being practised in the community amongst the workers with little

knowledge of and experience with participating in career guidance, those who do not see the relevance of career guidance in their lives can listen in without appearing to do so. By listening, they get inspired to form questions of their own. In other words, the shift from individual to collective supports listening to others and the possibility for members of the community to become resources for each other.

This has implications for career guidance practice and policy. 'Guidance in communities' can be considered as a social practice theory which advocates changes in perspective from the individual to the collective as the starting point for guidance. The change in perspective brings attention to the local practice. One conventional question might be: when, where and for whom is guidance present and available? In 'Guidance in communities' this question will be supplemented with other questions: What characterises the community around the local guidance practice? How does the guidance practitioner approach a community rather than the individual? How can guidance become a meaningful activity in the everyday life in this community? Instead of waiting for participants to seek guidance, the guidance professionals can make themselves available to the people in the community by becoming visible.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition states that guidance consists of many different activities, but also stresses that activities may be delivered 'on an individual or group basis, and may be face-to-face or at a distance (including help lines and web-based services)' (OECD 2004: 10). The Council of the European Union uses a different definition: '...the definition of guidance as referring to a continuous process that enables citizens at any age and at any point in their lives to identify their capacities, competence and interests, to make educational, training and occupational decisions and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which those capacities and competences are learned and/or used. Guidance covers a range of individual and collective activities relating to information-giving, counseling, competence assessment, support, and the teaching of decision-making and career management skills' (Council of the European Union 2008). This research

on guidance in communities suggests that we could add that activities may be delivered in communities, amongst the participants, and in ways that can be adjusted to suit the participants. This would be in line with recommendations from the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) regarding quality assurance in guidance. Within the publication *Improving lifelong guidance policies and systems*, it is emphasised that quality assurance systems should '...ensure that individual users are regularly consulted on their satisfaction with, and experience of, the service; require service providers to make systematic use of the findings from such consultations; involve the user in the design, management and evaluation of guidance services and products (Cedefop 2005: 18). One way of involving users could be to practice guidance in communities as a flexible form of delivery which allows for changes in order to meet the differing needs of different communities.

I opened this article by pointing out that guidance in communities is fuelled by and fuelling a change towards the collective. As guidance becomes more prominent in European policy making and in educational and labour market policies all over the world (Zelloth 2009), discussions on how to invest resources become increasingly important. Danish policy makers have chosen to prioritise and target individuals most in need of an intensified guidance effort (UVM 2011). This revolves around the individual at the outset. The research on guidance in communities suggests that new policy strategies can be developed on the basis of the collective. By engaging existing communities in creating flexible modes of delivery, new resources can be activated. By allowing the participants to influence the guidance process, they, together with the guidance professional, set the stage for new collaborative modes of delivery.

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