



## Intellectual Output 3: Course material in module Language and intercultural communication

### Article 2

On the art of supporting immigrant clients learning about career opportunities in career guidance and counselling conversations

This article is part of the CMinaR project, an Erasmus+ project which aims to develop career guidance and counselling for refugees, in order to facilitate integration into the labor market. The article is a translated and revised version of an article that originally was published by the Swedish national agency for Education (Sundelin, 2017).

### Introduction

In the European context, the aim of career guidance and counselling (CGC) often is described as to contribute to individuals learning about career opportunities and to develop individuals career management skills (CMS).<sup>1</sup> Thus the aspects of learning that are dealt with in CGC may concern anything, from socialisation and qualification processes in a broad sense (for example, to create motivation to take part in society) to more directly career-related learning (for example, to increase the individual's knowledge of education opportunities). Regardless of the aspect of learning that is in focus, questions concerning education programs, vocations and working life take up a considerable part of content in the CGC conversations. Counsellors often

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<sup>1</sup> see for example Thomsen (2014)

work with what can be described as the clients' knowledge gap on these factors, using activities such as counselling conversations, teaching or providing information.

A central issue is the question how career counsellors can best support the clients learning about career issues and develop their career management skills. Swedish studies<sup>2</sup> indicate that counsellors perceive that newly-arrived migrants often lack knowledge of the Swedish education system, labour market and working life, and that providing information about these matters presents a serious challenge. One such challenge may be providing both all-round and factual information as well as selecting the appropriate content. Career information is a comprehensive and changing field that it is difficult to take stock of. It is also emotionally charged. Education programs and vocations reflect the structures and power relations in society and are related to social status, gender and ethnicity.<sup>3</sup> Another possible challenge in counselling is to adapt the content to the clients' needs and to achieve a balance between what the client wants to know and what the counsellor considers the client needs to know. It may also be difficult to know how much the client has understood of what the conversation has been about, or in other words: the clients' learning.

This document aims to provide a frame of reference for the opportunities of counselling to support migrants' learning about career opportunities. The content departs from the following questions:

- What challenges may exist concerning learning about careers among newly-arrived migrant clients?
- What do counsellors do to help newly-arrived migrant clients learn about career-making? What challenges and possibilities do research studies indicate?

Finally, we summarise our conclusions concerning the ways newly-arrived migrants learning about career opportunities can be supported in CGC conversations.

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<sup>2</sup> Hertzberg (2015a), Wikstrand & Ulfsdotter (2015)

<sup>3</sup> For example Wikstrand & Ulfsdotter, (2015)

## Migration as a condition for learning

It is a challenge for most people to familiarise themselves with education and working life in today's society, but it is an even greater challenge for newly-arrived migrants who find themselves in a new societal context. In many cases they and their families lack experience of education and working life in their new context, as well as social networks that are an important resource when choosing a study program or vocation.<sup>4</sup> Parents may find it difficult to support their children's future.<sup>5</sup> In addition, in recent years Sweden has had many unaccompanied migrants without any family relatives at all in the new country. In many cases counselling functions vicariously for migrants/refugees and their families lack of experience and knowledge of career questions in the new context. A Swedish study<sup>6</sup> of counselling with newly-arrived students also showed that the students' learning about career issues is at the centre of the conversations.

In many cases migration causes special challenges for the individual and his/her possibilities to learn. The various phases of migration often involve both physical and psychological stress that may affect the individual's ability to learn.<sup>7</sup> The reasons for migration are often related to limiting factors in life such as poverty, oppression and/or conflicts. Schooling has often been fragmentary. The escape, in many cases, takes place under extremely risky and stressful circumstances. On their arrival, an asylum-seeking process commences, which often involves long periods of waiting and great uncertainty about the future, which may result in passivity and feelings of hopelessness. In many cases, control of the future lies out of the hands of the person seeking asylum. Many refugees have had close experiences of war and violence and can suffer from posttraumatic stress, which may further affect their ability to learn.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of the causes, migration means a radical change in a person's life. The learning situation that many newly-arrived students face can be compared with the transformative learning that Illeris means take place when the individual becomes aware that the new knowledge does not fit in with the previous schedule.<sup>8</sup> Migration means separation and loss of a feeling of belonging to relations, places and contexts.<sup>9</sup> The educational experiences of newly-

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<sup>4</sup> see t ex Hultgren (2009), Lundh (2015)

<sup>5</sup> Bunar (2015)

<sup>6</sup> Sundelin (2015)

<sup>7</sup> al-Baldawi, 2014

<sup>8</sup> Illeris (2014)

<sup>9</sup> Trondman (2001)

arrived students: forms of learning, hence also the students' learning identity<sup>10</sup>, may differ from the Swedish educational system. The student then has to create meaning and understanding in a new context, and this form of learning involves both cognitive and emotional processes. This means a change in the individual's identity that may be very demanding and stressful. It is also stressful to orientate oneself in new social conditions in a new language.<sup>11</sup> One student describes this situation when she relates her experiences of coming to Sweden:

In comparison, it's not so easy if you come here and know nothing or haven't been to school in your home country. And then when I started learning Swedish, it's not so easy to study so quickly. But it takes time, I know. If I compare things in Sweden, it's very difficult to get a job. So if you go looking, they say "have you got an education?" or something like that. Life here is so weird. (she cries)<sup>12</sup>

While learning about career is central to counselling newly-arrived clients, it is in many cases a challenge for both clients and counsellors. It really questions the ability of the counsellor to support learning about careers. The following three sections throw light on various aspects of how learning about career takes shape in CGC conversations between newly arrived students and counsellors; conclusions are also drawn about what can be helpful to support newly-arrived clients in counselling. The empirical material is foremost based on Sundelin (2015), a Swedish study of counselling conversations with young migrants in the individual program of the Swedish upper secondary school. The students are aged 17 – 19.

### 1. Signs of learning in counselling conversations.

Conversations always have a potential for learning, but studies of isolated talks can seldom say whether learning has taken place.<sup>13</sup> By analysing conversations it is, however, possible to identify occasions when learning may have occurred and thus find clues as to how learning can be supported. The following gives three examples of occasions when learning could be identified in Sundelin (2015).

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<sup>10</sup> Bunar (2015)

<sup>11</sup> Sheikhi (2013)

<sup>12</sup> Sundelin (2015, s 192)

<sup>13</sup> Linell (2011)

### Example 1 Attempts to understand

Signs of learning were identified especially when the students used what Sundelin calls an understanding strategy in the conversations. That was when students expressed an effort to understand the content in the counselling conversation, above all by asking the counsellor questions or reformulating and summarising the counsellor's information about career issues. Here follows an example of this. The student (S) asks elucidatory questions to make sure that he has understood the counsellor (C) correctly when the counsellor has described how selection to the upper secondary school takes place:

- C (...) And then, you know, this is how it works, so when school starts you call the school direct, because that's when the school can accept students. Understand?
- S When it starts?
- C Yes, when it starts. In the summer, when I get back from vacation, we get lists, these are the students you get. Of course these students may have moved away and people also call us and we have reserve lists. That's when you contact the school direct.
- S For example I get a paper saying I haven't got a place, then I have to call the school direct.

The student asks a question and reformulates the counsellor's answer; the counsellor both confirms and corrects what the student has understood. Earlier in the conversation the student has answered the counsellor's questions and foremost talked about himself. Now he seems to process the counsellor's information and tries to both understand it and make it usable for himself.

From this we can conclude that migrants/refugees learning can be supported by the counsellor encouraging the clients to ask questions and formulate their understanding by, for example, summarising the counsellor's information.

### Example 2 Attempts to compare

Another sign of learning was identified when the students compared the Swedish context with their experience from their home country. In the next example, this is evident when a student asks what sort of status work with animals has in Sweden.

- S So it's not shameful, to help animals?
- C What do you mean?

S You see, there are lots of people in my country who, er, when they ask what your dad works with, well, he's an animal doctor, they just laugh 'cos they think it's shameful. When he works with animals, they laugh.

The student wants to know about the status of the profession in Swedish society and finds out that it's different from his home country. The student seems to understand the Swedish context in relation to his previous experience.

Another example of the importance of being able to compare previous knowledge and experience with the new context is given in the next excerpt in which a student described her feelings to the counsellor after having compared education in Sweden with her home country:

S Aha. Quite different.

C Aha, you say, what will you think of next? You are always bringing up new things, that's very good.

S Because it's so terribly different, in X-country it doesn't work that way. This works differently. (xx) So it's rather good. **I knew a lot of things. Yeah!**

The comparison reveals the differences between the countries, and it is as if the student gets a better overall understanding. This student too seems to understand his/her new context better by comparing it with the home countries' education system. By making a comparison, the student also discovers that he/she knows a lot (see the marked text in the excerpt). The student notes his/her knowledge and experience it as valuable.

Encouraging migrant/refugee clients to make comparisons between previous experience and knowledge of education and work and the new context also seems to be a way to support learning about careers. Furthermore, this seems to give value to the students' migration experience.

### Example 3 – Attempts to reason

A third example of learning opportunities was identified when students reason about various educational options in relation to themselves. The next excerpt shows this when a student discusses the advantages and disadvantages of various educational programs:

- S This is how I feel about Health and Social Care program, this is how they work with elderly people, it gets better, I feel better. You learn more than Children and Leisure program. There you work with children and so on. So it's good because it's the same thing, they're like each other. What goes on in Health and Social Care is how you should work with adults, like.
- C That's what you think is the difference between Child and Recreation program, you'll be working [with kids
- S [children, like, yeah. But if I work with elderly people, with adults, then perhaps I'll learn much more than with children and recreation.

The student discusses various educational options in relation to himself and his image of the future. The counsellor uses listening in the first place, which seems to encourage the student to go on discussing. Thus the student seems to develop an insight both into what is important for him/her in his choice and into the contents of the different programs. One conclusion that can be drawn is that the counsellor's active listening may support the student's possibilities to reason about, for example, various educational options, which may promote learning about career issues.

To systematically use the strategies presented in the examples above seems to promote the students' learning about career issues. What is highlighted here is probably not news for counsellors as it is in line with accepted counselling models and methods in the field. However, how and to what extent they are used in practice differs among counsellors. This brings us to the next step: the counsellor's various strategies for supporting learning.

## 2. Counsellors' strategies for supporting newly arrived students learning

Sundelin's study shows that counsellors use both similar and different strategies for supporting their students' learning about careers. These strategies developed in the interplay between the counsellor and the student and in relation to the framework of the counselling. It was possible, however, to distinguish two main strategies: supervising and informing. Both of these strategies have their advantages and disadvantages for the students' possibility to learn; some of them are briefly discussed below.

## Informing strategy

The informing strategy was carried out mainly by the counsellors describing and presenting the contents of sources of information such as brochures and the Internet, or by sharing their own knowledge and experience. Another common feature was that the counsellors used a computer and showed the students how they could look for information themselves. The student sat beside the counsellor and looked at the screen. One student describes his experience of the counsellor's informing strategy in these words:

I understood well 'cos to begin with I didn't understand how the education system worked in Sweden. I know nothing, I knew nothing. Then she (the counsellor, my note) explained everything, how the upper secondary school works, the elementary school, grades, what you have to do if you go to upper secondary school. So she explained everything. I understood everything.

The student feels she has access to knowledge about Swedish society thanks to the counsellor's explanations and descriptions of the school system. The informing strategy also seems to have an important function in translating and explaining written and Internet-based information material.

It may, however, be more difficult to identify signs of learning when the counsellor uses an informing strategy. For instance, look at the following example when a student wants to know more about a program:

S What do you do at Hotel and Conference?

C You know, when you come in to a hotel, you usually register at what is called the reception where you can do that sort of thing. Take care of guests, book them into their rooms, register them. Then at a conference, for example, that's a very big meeting [S: meetings] exactly and then you have to do everything – make sure there is food and chairs.

S OK

C It has a lot to do with service and you work shifts, that's how it usually is.

S Yes.

After that, the conversation continues with other matters. The student says she understands but it is difficult to decide whether she actually has understood the counsellor's description. This pattern of interplay recurs in Sundelin's study concerning the informing strategy.



The counsellor has the knowledge and experience of career opportunities that the students need, and the informing strategy can give the students access to it. The strategy can contribute to the transfer of information about careers in Swedish society that migrants/refugees need to be able to influence their situation and make well-founded choices. Thus this strategy can reinforce the students' possibilities to control their lives. When the informing strategy turns into a monologue, that is, when the counsellor describes without having a dialogue with the student, the student's learning runs the risk of being invisible in the conversation and the counsellor's possibility to support the student's learning is restricted.

### The supervising strategy

The supervising strategy is characterised by the student managing the computer with the counsellor beside him, supporting the student either and mostly by putting questions or by giving instructive directions to the student. The supervising strategy seems to require more time. The conversations in which this strategy was dominant were those that lasted longest in the study. This strategy may also be felt to be more demanding in several respects. It may be both linguistically and cognitively demanding for the students, as the following excerpt shows. In an interview a student (S) describes his experience to the interviewer (I) after a counselling session in which questions played a dominant role:

- S It was a good talk. I thought C understood what I was thinking. She usually asks me why, why did you say that. I think it's difficult but I think it's good.
- I She asks a lot of questions and you find it difficult to explain. Have you any idea why she asks?
- S She asks questions because she wants to know why I think like that.
- I Does it help you?
- S It helps.
- I How does it help?
- S I keep changing my mind. I think of being a dental hygienist and then a nurse. She wants to know why I like that and don't want to be an estate agent. Why I want to be a dental hygienist and not an estate agent. Actually I think we get good results.

The supervising strategy is felt to be demanding by the student, but also rewarding; and it contributes to the student's learning about career issues. The counsellor's questions also helped to clarify the student's learning. In addition, the strategy helped provide a guiding function for

the student. He/she was given the chance to reflect on different educational alternatives in relation to his/her own situation. Using questions in the supervising strategy seemed to be favourable both for the student's learning and as support when making decisions.

An overall conclusion is that both the informing and the supervising strategies are needed and can complement each other. As pointed out above, both strategies have their advantages and disadvantages in supporting the students' learning. The third and final section throws light on some of the challenges that can arise in conversations about learning about career issues.

### 3. Resistance towards learning

Sundelin's study reveals occasions when the counsellor has difficulty in contributing to the students' learning about career issues in any way. These difficulties were identified mainly when the students did not want to take part in the counsellor's attempts to broaden their perspective in some respect. Here, this is called resistance towards learning and it occurred above all when the student seemed to experience the counsellor's behaviour as too threatening. The following gives two examples of such situations, together with the lessons we can draw from them.

#### Resistance 1

The first example of resistance to learning is when the counsellor wants to warn a student of the possible risk of not getting a place in an upper secondary school unless the student makes complementary choices, which can guarantee a school place. The counsellor tries to inform the student about the admission system and the processes surrounding the choice of upper secondary school programs so that the student will understand the consequences of different choices. But, the student does not seem to want to accept the counsellor's information; instead he tries to persuade the counsellor that he has enough qualifications to be accepted by an upper secondary school. This is illustrated by the following sequence:

- C It might be possible to compete but I don't know if you have to have a reserve choice as well. Have you thought about that?
- S I have no idea, but they told me that... I knew that you had to have twelve credits and Swedish and I will do that this year.

To some extent the counsellor and the student are talking at cross purposes when they each argue for their own opinion. This pattern is broken a little later when the counsellor compliments the student on his good grades and knowledge. The student then starts asking questions about the admission system and he reformulates the counsellor's answer – in other words, he shows signs of an understanding strategy. (See Example 1. p.4). The student begins to take part in the counsellor's educating project.

One interpretation of this interplay is that the student shows resistance to not being recognised as good enough. The counsellor's information about careers seems to signal that the student's background and previous knowledge are not adequate. When the counsellor shows appreciation of the student's achievements, the student's knowledge is recognised and he no longer needs to convince the counsellor about his abilities.

CGC with migrants often focuses on conditions in the new context and runs the risk of centring on the students' shortcomings in relation to the conditions in the new country. Counselling can make the students feel that their backgrounds have no value, which might create resistance to learning. The inclusive aim of counselling may have an excluding effect.<sup>14</sup> Counsellors may need to focus actively on strengthening and emphasising migrants/refugees knowledge and previous experiences of education and working life in order to support the clients possibility to learn.

### Resistance 2

Another example of resistance towards learning was identified when a student showed no interest in the educational options that the counsellor tried to present. The next excerpt provides an example when the counsellor wants to describe possible alternatives after the Health and Care program:

- C Precisely [S: Exactly] Right. And when you graduate from that program, when you have done three years in the upper secondary school, you should be able to look for a job [S: Yes]. But you can also go on after

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<sup>14</sup> Hertzberg (2015b)

upper secondary school if you have passed out, if you have done... What sorts of vocations are there in that field? [S: What?] Do you know?

S What do you mean?

C If you want to continue your education in the field of Care.

S No, I don't know.

C There are many students who think of becoming nurses. [ S: Oh.] or doctors perhaps, but then you have to do some more studying, take a few more subjects before you...

S What I'm thinking is I have to do the basics first, then I might think about it if I got good grades.

The conversation then continues with a discussion about the student's immediate choice.

The counsellor tries to describe future programs so that the student will know about possible ways ahead. The student does not want to talk about it. She seems to experience the counsellor's alternatives as something she has to decide about there and then. She also seems to perceive the alternatives as far too distant from her possibilities to interest her.

In many cases counselling is a matter of supporting the client's learning and decision-making. It seems as if decision can take the limelight at the expense of the possibility of learning in the counselling work. The surrounding world seems to be perceived as too personal, something the student has to make an immediate decision about, for learning to take place in the conversations - in particular when a student's position is far from the possibilities that are presented.

This indicates that it may be significant that counsellors pay attention to whether it is the learning processes or the decision-making processes that are in focus, and to distinguish between them in the counselling situation. It also indicates that responsibility for learning about such complex processes as education and working life cannot only lie in individual conversations on rare occasions.

### Some conclusions concerning learning about career opportunities

This article has shed light on some of the conditions for migrants/refugees learning concerning career, and how learning about these questions takes place in career guidance conversations.

As we have pointed out, learning about career issues is a complex question, in particular for newly-arrived immigrants. In conclusion, we summarise some recommendations as to how migrants/refugees learning about careers can be supported.

Understanding when students' actions indicate learning processes would help counsellors both to identify signs of learning and to support the students' learning. This article has identified learning as taking place when students actively tries to understand, compare experiences or discuss various alternatives; in other words, use strategies that are aimed at understanding and/or reasoning during the conversation.

Conversation methods often focus on the counsellors showing their understanding of what the clients have related. The opposite seems to be of importance when supporting migrants learning: to let the clients show their understanding by summarising or reformulating what the conversation has been about seems to support learning. Clients are thereby given the opportunity to process their understanding of the conversation, while the counsellors get the opportunity to clarify questions that seem unclear.

Research<sup>15</sup> on counselling emphasises the value of interactive information in guidance conversations. When meeting migrants/refugee clients, it seems to be important to give information in dialogue form if learning is to be supported. Clients are then also given the opportunity to process their understanding of the content. This is not least important because of the language obstacles that newly arrived migrants often have to deal with to understand the new context. Counselling puts great demands on client's language skills.<sup>16</sup>

Actively highlighting migrants/refugee clients' previous experiences and knowledge also seems to encourage learning. The importance of building on the students' previous experiences is repeatedly emphasised in connection with multilingual persons' learning in general; their development of knowledge is supported when their preunderstanding is activated.<sup>2</sup> This can also counteract the risk of the students' migration background being ignored and thereby contributing to stigmatization of migrant experience.

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<sup>15</sup> Lindh (1997)

<sup>16</sup> Sheikhi (2013, s. 231)

Questions concerning career have a personal and existential dimension that gives these issues a special significance. Learning about career issues is not just a matter of learning cognitively; it is also connected with how the individuals perceive themselves and their possibilities in relation to the future.<sup>17</sup> As this article points out, counsellors may have difficulty to support learning which lies beyond the client's opportunity horizon. Clients who have a long way to go in the educational system, which is often the case with migrants/refugee clients, run the risk of missing out on valuable information if the possibility to learn about career opportunities is left to the guidance conversations. The situation of migrants/refugee clients emphasises the general need of that the career guidance and counselling field develop and offer education activities that support the individuals' learning about career issues.

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<sup>17</sup> Lundh (2015)

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