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# Challenging biographies:

re-locating the theory and practice of careers work

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The Department of Career & Personal Development (DCPD) is committed to contributing to enquiry and research which supports the development of good practice in a range of guidance contexts.

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## Introduction

This occasional paper is one outcome of a conference held in the summer of 2002 that brought together academics, students and practitioners, in order to introduce and to explore biographical and narrative perspectives on the making of career. The germ of the idea had formed many months earlier and other colleagues who shared the same vision came together as a conference-planning group with the aim of offering a fresh analysis in which we could examine some of the real tensions between narrow and overly classified approaches to guidance as juxtaposed to the dynamic realities of people's experiences in a changing world.

More than this, we wanted to root the discussion in such a way as to challenge careers and guidance communities – and we include ourselves - concerning our assumptions made about career, and specifically how this is dealt with in respect of educating careers guidance professionals to work effectively with a wide cross-section of people in our contemporary world. We wanted to understand how biographical perspectives can inform and change practice, and to identify a potential future research agenda that could enrich the quality of discourse within the careers guidance community. These were ambitious aims!

Our present society has been defined as one experiencing worrying degrees of change and uncertainty. Everyone within this 'post-modern' world, has to grapple with uncertainty, ambiguity, ambivalence, unpredictability and anxiety. This is a world in which notions of secure and linear career progression have given way to dislocation and uncertainty over our identity. And yet we can see this change as offering new opportunities for self-definition and for the development of more flexible ways of thinking about 'career'. There is a need, in consequence, to compose a sustainable narrative over our career/ life course.

The learning society places considerable economic, cultural, emotional and biographical strains on people. This includes careers and guidance practitioners too! They, like their clients, must find ways of redefining and redirecting themselves according to a range of growing and sometimes contradictory policy-related pressures. They may be called upon to facilitate self and occupational awareness, the exploration of possibilities and the learning of career planning skills. They may also be asked to assist with stress reduction, anger management, indecisiveness and work adjustment. All this, some suggest, requires a fusion of career and personal counselling roles. Furthermore, in this world of flux, established or politically and commercially driven research and theory may no longer be sufficient to underpin careers guidance practice. New interpretative and narrative-based approaches may be needed, both for practitioners as well as for their clients. The conference and this paper that followed argued in short, the case for more stories – both as sources of understanding career and as ways of enabling clients and learners to draw strength and motivation from their own life resources.

The essays that follow offer three original and distinct perspectives on this topic. There is much to digest and reflect upon in each paper. Insofar as we attempt a synthesis, this is left to the final section, which takes the form of a dialogue' between the editor and the three authors. Our hope is that this section will anticipate some of your questions as you engage with the three papers. We try to uncover some common ground - which we need - but allow the writers the freedom to talk about their differences too. We all tell the story differently!

We invite your response to the paper and any suggestions you may wish to make for the direction of further research in this area.

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## Contributors

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Linden is coordinator of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults Life History and Biography Network. He has worked in further education, for the Workers Educational Association, in Local Authority adult education, for the Open University and as a broadcaster. He has written extensively in the field of adult education and learning, over many years and is particularly interested in processes of managing change and life transitions, and in the use of 'auto/biographical' research methods. He is currently working on an evaluation of Sure Start programmes in Kent, and a Home Office sponsored study of educational initiatives in relation to women and violence. Linden has also completed a study of the role of the community arts in facilitating progression in learning among disaffected young people, which London Arts recently published, in association with the University of East London. Linden's latest book is a study of doctors and their learning, *Doctors on the Edge, General Practitioners, Health and Learning in the Inner-City*, (Free Association Books). His previous work includes *Beyond Fragments, adults, motivation and higher education, a biographical analysis*, published by Taylor and Francis.

**Hazel L Reid** is a Senior Lecturer in Education within the Department of Career & Personal Development at Canterbury Christ Church University College. Previously, Hazel worked at the College of Guidance Studies in Kent, lecturing at post-graduate and Masters level on the UK qualification for career guidance practitioners. Her previous work was as a careers adviser in Sussex, where her last post was managing a community-based careers centre. During this time she gained an MA in the Psychology of Guidance.

Working in higher education Hazel teaches in the area of practical skills and processes, career and guidance theory and careers education. In addition, she works with the NVQ department delivering theory-into-practice workshops. She is programme director for the MA in Career Education, Development and Guidance.

Hazel has published articles in national and international journals and presented papers at national and IAIEVG conferences. Her current research for a doctoral study is associated with the development of support and supervision for careers advisers who move to a personal adviser role.

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Bill was for 12 years a secondary-school teacher. From 1972 he trained careers advisers and teachers in the University of Reading. In 1975 he was appointed founding Senior Fellow in the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling. Since 1992 he has been an independent consultant – working in the UK and abroad.

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His major theoretical articles include the following: on community interaction in *The British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* (1978); on autonomy in *Career Development in Britain* (1981); and on progression in *Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance* (1992).

His most recent development work is published as *Effective Management for Careers Work* (1997, with Andrew Edwards), *How to Coordinate a Careers Education Programme* (2000), and *New Thinking for Connexions and Citizenship* (2001).

Much of this new development work is explained and related to contemporary conditions in "How Careers Really Work", *International Careers Journal* (2001).

## Chapter One

### Challenging auto/biographies: careers and guidance in a 5 to 9 world

*Linden West*

*The job for life is dead. Send no flowers. The day of your own chair, at your own desk, day in day out, year in year is gone. Thank God. Who wants a predictable existence? The 9 to 5 job has been replaced by 5 to 9 jobs in a lifetime. You can do what you like. All that counts is attitude. Employers get keener, more professional staff. And keen professional staff get more opportunities. Don't mourn the job for life, Say long live jobs for life*

(Advertisement in Brook Street Staff Bureau, quoted in Cohen and Hey, 2000)

#### Introduction

I want, in this paper, to reflect on the wider context of guidance work in what is often described as a 'postmodern' and 'globalised' world in which notions of predictable career trajectories and 'the 9 to 5' job have, for many people, broken down. I argue that contemporary culture places great stresses on people as well as, paradoxically, creating new opportunities for self-definition. This is, arguably, because of two interrelated processes: first, people having to cope with unprecedented change, as a result of the quickening pace of scientific and technical innovation, the impact of multinational enterprises and the levels of associated unpredictability, uncertainty and insecurity these bring. Second, associated processes of economic liberalisation and individuation mean that people have to take greater responsibility for the circumstances and rules of their lives. This is a world where the emotional and intellectual demands made on individuals can be considerable and in which the situation of déclassé groups living in economically marginalized communities, can be dire. Managing a life, in this world – or what can be called 'biographicity' - requires the capacity, and resources, to make meaningful choices and to re-orientate oneself afresh, and recurrently (Alheit and Dausien, 2002; West, 1996). The question at the heart of this paper is what is required for individuals, however minimally, even those on the margins, to do this kind of identity work and, in effect, create greater agency in their lives?

It may be unsurprising that a world of increasing uncertainty has precipitated uncertainty among many professional groups about their role, not the least as the State has increasingly sought to regulate their practices. The guidance community is not immune from such pressures and there is a growing debate about its purpose, values and methods in such a context. Where does this community stand, for instance, in relation to the powerful imperatives of the Brook Street worldview? Has, for example, a simplistic discourse of flexibility and adaptability to the new world order, and incorporation into Government agendas, penetrated the stories 'guidance' tells itself about its purpose and, in turn, the message, however ostensibly obscured and ameliorated, it conveys to clients? Some in the guidance community are deeply critical of the 'new realism', which includes uncritical acceptance of the Government's bidding. They insist, instead, on a more questioning, client-centred, empowering and independent approach, in which people can consider, critically and eclectically, the quality of choices available to them (Collin, 2000).

Of course, some practitioners may feel they have little choice but to do the bidding of those in power, in a hard economic environment, dominated by targets and prescribed outcomes. They do what they can, they might say. But the self-same people may also have doubts about some current imperatives, and how these relate to their own values and training. I want to contribute to this debate, in my paper, by reference to research conducted among marginalized adults and young people. These are individuals trying to build and manage careers in difficult, demanding

social and economic conditions and with minimal material resources (West, 1996; 2001, 2002). I use four illuminating case studies to consider the ‘social psychology’ of building a life, of finding some agency even in highly oppressive situations. And I explore the implications of these stories for guidance practitioners: the basic argument is that building an authentic self-narrative is essential to composing a more authentic career, broadly defined, in conditions of pervasive insecurity. And that this requires the active support of significant others, including, perhaps, people like guidance workers and advisers in the Connexions service.

The paper begins by reference to the ‘postmodern’ world, and how this impacts on notions of career but also our basic identities. I then consider the ‘crisis’ in the guidance community itself, before introducing four telling stories from ‘auto/biographical’ research. I use the word ‘telling’ to suggest that these four stories have a particular luminosity in revealing, in fine detail, some of the social psychology of building a career and an identity, in the widest sense, on the margins of our society. Such studies can be helpful in focusing the debate about what guidance is for and the role and importance of story telling within it.

### Intimate cultures

Anthony Giddens (1999) uses the phrase globalisation to describe a number of interconnected economic, technological but also cultural and political processes that are impacting on our lives, including in intimate relationships. The new global economic order involves fund managers, banks, corporations as well as millions of individual investors, transferring massive sums of money from one part of the globe to another, at the flick of a switch. Traditional economies can be destabilised overnight, whole communities may become deskilled and traditional occupational structures disintegrate. Moreover, whereas in previous agrarian and industrial societies, people lived according to more or less clearly defined social scripts, economic change can mean these can quickly unravel in what is becoming a more individualised as well as unpredictable world. The point being made is that the macro-level forces of globalisation, alongside the politics of neo-liberalism, impact at the micro level of human experience. Many working class men, for instance, have lost traditional roles, and may struggle, psychologically, to cope with change and lost status. Family relationships, including those between fathers and sons, can be dramatically affected, as the old opportunity structures of industrial capitalism disappear. Many working class women, on the other hand, are forced, like it or not, to enter the labour market, often in poorly paid, low skilled jobs, while continuing to carry traditional domestic responsibilities, with implications for the welfare of children. For those men and women in reasonably paid work, increasing demands are being made on their time, under the banner of efficiency, by the greedy work place, while growing occupational insecurity creates pressure across occupational groups. If most people continue to want some degree of security, they are told, persistently, in the neo-liberal economic mantra, that this is impossible in a world of cut-throat competition (Elliot and Atkinson, 1998).

### Risk

Sociologists such as Giddens (1999) and Beck (1992, 1997) have coined the phrase ‘risk society’, to capture the impact of such a world on individuals and the choices they have to make. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1997) has observed that individuals are facing a range of insecurities, at a time when they have lost faith in national governments or corporations to address their insecurities or to deal with environmental degradation and pollution. The political agenda, in this view, is dominated by a pervasive neo-liberal economic consensus, in which responsibility has shifted from the State to the individual. The welfare state, in the UK and increasingly across Europe, has retreated and individuals, under the banner of lifelong learning, for instance, are ‘encouraged’ to take greater responsibility for themselves and their lives. And people are told, as in the Brook Street advert, to be permanently flexible, which means, as Beck sees it, ‘*Cheer up, your knowledge and skills are obsolete, and no-one can say what you must learn in order to be needed in the future*’ (Beck, 2000). In this new dystopia, those most marginalized by economic and cultural transformations are also castigated for their ‘individual’ shortcomings. Under a mantra of responsibilities they are cajoled into taking jobs,

however short-term, unskilled and low paid, or into training, however purposeless. Lifelong learning becomes a key element in this agenda: learn, direct, or lose benefits; ‘upskill’, constantly, or lose your job (Field, 2000). And it is many of the marginalized that turn, whether willingly or not, to guidance workers for help and support. The question of what is on offer and how the role is framed becomes critical.

### Guidance in crisis?

The guidance community, as indicated, is not immune from these seismic economic and cultural shifts, and their associated politics. The guidance literature, at least, is redolent with debate about the profession’s seeming incorporation into a neo-liberal, ‘realist’ agenda. There is, in one view, an uncritical, even triumphalist acceptance of globalisation, and the liberalised labour market in which the virtues of flexibility, portfolio careers, and ‘5 to 9’ jobs are trumpeted (Colley, 2000; Collin, 2000; Irving and Marris, 2000; Watts, 1996; 2001). Practitioners, in these perspectives, are under perpetual pressure from those in power to facilitate ‘realism’ in their clients, which, in effect, becomes an exercise in social control (Colley, 2000). This is a community, some insist, that has lost its professional bearings, and where older Rogerian values of ‘client-centredness’ have given way to a harsh realism. ‘Guidance’, in this world, may mask ugly and increasing social and structural inequalities *‘by making them seem matters of individual choice, thereby reconciling people to their roles’* (Watts, 1996 cited in Irving and Marris, 2000). The right to work is replaced by the responsibility to secure or enhance employment; the right to learn becomes a responsibility to do so, in a language, as some see it, of moral authoritarianism (Coffield, 1999). Watts (1996) asks the question as to whether careers education and guidance serves, in such a context, to reinforce rather than reduce social inequalities.

There is also an accusation that guidance workers have become deprofessionalised too. Highly regulatory quality assurance and contract compliance procedures have been set in place, minimising space for professional discretion and more client-focused approaches (Edwards and Payne, 1997). Targets, and business pressures, add to the regulation of, and restrictions upon, practitioners. For their clients, action planning, records of achievement, behaviourist models of competence-based education, can equally serve to ‘discipline’ them in the ways of the market, and into presenting themselves as commodities worthy of hire. Guidance, in one admittedly extreme view, exists to help clients re-invent themselves as marketable products (Bridges, 1998). The aim is to make their views consistent with the ‘objective’ needs of society and to cultivate more realistic attitudes, ideals and expectations (Colley, 2000). This overt intrusion of power and politics seems far removed from the values of Egan and Rogers.

The development of the new Connexions service could bring some of these issues to a head. There is pressure, fuelled by moral panic over teenage pregnancy, and the violence of young working class unemployed men, to use Connexions to discipline young people, in Foucault’s sense, making them fit for the new flexible market place, by internalising appropriate values and behaviours. The assumptions made about young people tend to derive from deficit models, in which they, and their fecklessness, lack of skills or morality, are the root problem. Structural inequalities, poverty and, arguably, the pervasive power of capitalist consumerism to exploit the human need for authenticity, most particularly among the poor and vulnerable, are excluded from the analytical equation. Yet Connexions might also provide a precious transitional space for highly marginalized youngsters to take stock, to question and challenge, to form new and supportive relationships, as well as value themselves and their life experience, a little more positively. Space, perhaps, to tell their stories, and to be listened to by committed, personally and politically conscious advisers. This might not change a world, but it may create a sense of agency and choice, however limited, perhaps for the first time in a life.

### The biographical perspective

I want, then, to examine the micro processes of agency and career building – in the broadest sense – by reference to biographical research. Biographical methods are increasingly used in

analysing professional contexts, in understanding processes of change management and composing new identities (Chamberlayne et al, 2000; Dominice, 2000; Cohen and Hey, 2000). The development of such methods represents a subjective turn in social science, giving greater prominence to the active role of people as moral agents and participants in creating social processes, however unconsciously (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). It derives from recognition, reaching back to Max Weber as well as phenomenology, that we cannot understand why people act and think as they do, without their active collaboration in doing so.

I use the term ‘auto/biography’ to describe my own methodology. Researching the lives of adult learners and young people made me realise how much, in asking questions of others - about learning, managing change, building an identity and the struggle for some agency in a life - I was in fact asking questions of myself. Michelle Fine (1992) insists that, as researchers: ‘...we are human inventors of some questions and repressors of others, shapers of the very contexts we study, co-participants in our interviews, interpreters of others’ stories and narrators of our own’. Fine argues for the reflexive and self-reflexive potential of experience, in which the knower is part of the matrix of what is known, and where the researcher needs to ask her/himself in what way has s/he grown in, and shaped the processes of research. This included, for me, analysing how my gender, class and early family experience shaped my career trajectory and my feelings as a man, including a competitive individualism, and the neglect of interiority and emotional life. At the time of undertaking one of the studies, I was undergoing profound changes in my life, including taking early retirement, and needing to build a new career. Being open to our own experience, insights and biographical struggles, can, I suggest, enable us to connect more empathically with the other. It can create a sensitivity and capacity to listen, which enables the other to tell his/her story in more experientially inclusive, open and reflexive ways (West, 2001). Moreover, what may be true for the researcher may also be true for the guidance worker.

I completed three major ‘auto/biographical’ studies over the last decade: the first, lasting four years, involved a study of adults managing change and biographical discontinuities in communities undergoing economic and social dislocation. The starting point was motives for entering Access programmes, and the work progressed onto considering the social psychology of what enabled people to keep on keeping on in difficult, sometimes oppressive situations (West, 1996). The second study, also lasting four years, was of doctors and their learning when working in difficult, demanding inner-city contexts, and at a time of profound uncertainty in their profession (West, 2001). The third involved a group of highly disaffected young people living in marginalized communities in East London. It focused on the stories they told about the impact of a community arts programme on their identities and aspirations within the totality of life histories and current lifeworlds. The project was part of a widening participation initiative, funded by London Arts and the Higher Education Funding Council (West, 2002).

### Four case studies

Let me introduce four of my research subjects at this point. The first, Jim, (all names are pseudonyms) lives in Thanet, in the furthest corner of South East England, a place of economic insecurity, a fragile, casualised labour market and pockets of intense poverty. Jim was made redundant on a number of occasions. His story is of taking risks and finding some agency at the sharp and painful edge of the new economic order. His narrative of rebuilding a career evolved, over the period of four years, to encompass the central role of significant others and of finding space to reconsider his identity, as a man as well as a worker.

The second subject is Brenda, a 52-year-old woman who said she wanted to train as a teacher. Her husband was increasingly consumed by a greedy workplace, and, as it transpired, she was motivated to enter higher education, in part, because of problems in her marriage. Her children were also leaving home, all of which precipitated a crisis of identity. Her story, like Jim’s, illuminates the role of significant others in rebuilding a life, but also the importance of transitional spaces, like higher education, to rebuild an identity and to revise her self-narrative

in quite radical ways. Finally, there are Gina and Shazir, two highly disaffected young mums living on a marginalized estate in East London. They participated in a community arts and parenting programme. Their stories also illustrate how supportive others, and the transitional space provided by the arts, can be a means to re-story a life, however slightly, on more of their terms. Their material challenges one-dimensional notions of career and progression.

### **Jim and Brenda**

Jim and Brenda live in working class communities undergoing major economic and social dislocations. They have experienced the downside of globalising processes in highly personal ways. They entered Access or Foundation programmes in higher education as a way of reconstructing their lives. Higher education, for people like this, can be understood as part of a wider change management process (West, 1996; Courtney, 1992). The research with Jim and Brenda, and 28 other learners, encompassed up to 7 interviews with each person over a period of 4 years. The longitudinal nature of the process enabled strong relationships to form and what I term a dialogical process to develop, in which life stories, and their interpretation, could be shared.

As suggested, many men in working class communities, when historic occupational structures have shattered, can sometimes be trapped in pretences of coping and psychological defensiveness. Men may have the greatest difficulty in handling the emotional aspects of changing roles and uncertainty, socialised, as many have been, to repress anxiety and deny feelings of vulnerability. Samuels (1993) has catalogued evidence of the defensive mentality among many men and in elements of the men's movement. Changes in the labour market, and the rise of the women's movement, for instance, can be experienced as threatening and dangerous. Some men long to restore an older, certain and controlled order, a world where men were more like men, and women 'naturally' preoccupied with domestic roles. Fundamentalism is one response to frightening degrees of insecurity.

What is interesting is that Jim was managing some of these economic and cultural dislocations rather well. If there was pain and confusion in the new order, there were opportunities too. He was in his 30s with a wife and two sons. He was made redundant on a number of occasions in a working life of insecure employment. He had a relatively successful time as a painter and decorator, which came to an abrupt end with a further redundancy. His biography was shaped by these uncertainties. He felt insecure for most of his working life and knew what it was like to drift. Over three years in higher education, he trained as a radiographer, and distanced himself from his previous identity, as he grew more confident of making a success of the new project. At first, in the early stages of the Access programme, he was fearful of severing ties with the building trade but he gradually shifted in his relationship to this previous identity as he progressed towards a degree.

Jim told stories, somewhat hesitatingly at first, of growing disaffection with work and his need for a radical change of direction, no doubt partly for defensive reasons. His decision to break with the building industry and enter an Access programme, in the early interviews, was troubling. He felt on the margins of two worlds, of college and a previous career, but identified more with the latter. He thought he was taking substantial risks before he knew he could cope. Moreover, he felt guilty about not providing for his family, as men were supposed to, and struggled, in the early stage of the research, with the impact of redundancy, with higher education as well as the research itself. He was anxious about studying and there were constant hints of needing to justify his actions to himself as well as others, most of all to his wife. It was redundancy and the seeming impossibility of finding another job, which led him towards college and radical change. Had he found another job in the building trade, and prospects had been reasonable, for all the reservations, he would probably have continued as before. But he tried and failed in an increasingly insecure and fragile economic environment. Jim might have drifted into drink and depression; instead he composed a new career.

In an early interview Jim mentioned, in passing, that his sister had taken an Access programme and she encouraged him to do the same. The matter was left there as we talked more about careers in a narrow sense. Towards the end of the research his story came alive and he said that he would never have started the degree, or completed it, without the support and example of the younger sister. She was a role model and her story was exemplary: *when she was young.. things were a little more torrid. She has been a kind of inspiration to me really. Probably if she hadn't done the course in the first place then I wouldn't have done it you know. Probably because I just wouldn't have thought of doing it more than anything else but it is nice to see somebody in front of you for a bit of guidance.*

Her inspiration, and their relationship, was a key to progress. Other students, and some of the teachers, helped too, by offering space and encouragement in the darkest times. His fishing, and the relationships this gave with his two sons, was also essential to building a broader career:

*...I look forward to it from one week to the next. I count the days until I next go. It is a love without a doubt. If I go just for a day's session I have to get there whilst it is still getting light. There is something about that time of day. There is a feeling about it. It looks nice, you look around, mist on the water, sun coming up, all the wild life jumping out of wherever they come from. There is just a magic about that time of day that is worth being there for even if you don't get your fishing tackle out for another hour, it is worth being there at that time of day. And then there is an excitement every time you go, even if I am going 2 or 3 times a week which I was probably doing in the summer last year, sometimes. Feeling of excitement, get your gear out, can't get it out fast enough, can't wait to get started. A strange thing. To talk to people who haven't fished, or maybe who have fished and didn't enjoy it, you can't get across your feelings for it properly.*

*...Still makes me shake when I catch a good fish and I have caught a lot of good fish, but it still gives me the shakes still. Strange, but I am not alone, there are a lot of people like me.*

*...I feel when I am out there that, yes that is what I feel, almost feel like putting it down on paper sometimes, but never bothered to try because I think I am not all that good at it.*

There was no stopping Jim on this subject, and in story telling, which, in the early stages of the research, had been constrained. A lively, enthusiastic and committed man emerged from behind a screen. Fishing was what he was good at, as well as, increasingly, radiography, and the balance composed his new life. Fishing connected him to his sons and created the kind of relationship he had never known with his own father. Fishing was where he felt most himself, a place where no-one could label him stupid. Jim talked too of changing family relationships, including with his wife. She had educational qualifications and was deeply frustrated at home and in her job as a part-time waitress. They were continually negotiating their relationship, which had recently improved. She too began an Access programme and he was sensitive to her difficulties and frustrations and wanted to help. He was enjoying his family more as he felt better about himself. He was making a conscious effort to strengthen the relationship with his children as well as his wife at this time. Higher education and fishing encouraged and enabled some reconsideration of his identity. He was becoming, however anxiously, more of an agent in composing a career on more of his own terms.

Brenda was also a student in an Access programme, and was striving, like Jim, to rebuild her identity and career. Her husband was caught up in the increasingly frenetic world of work, with decreasing amounts of time for her and the family. He eventually began an affair with another woman, in another town. At a first interview, she was a diffident woman of 52. She told a tale, like many other students, of being motivated by vocational aspirations (because this was a socially acceptable reason for educational participation). Moreover, she was anxious to serve her husband's needs too, as part of preserving her marriage:

*...I'd thought about doing it [being a teacher] for about two years before, on and off. I was also mindful of the fact that the family was growing up and there would come a point when they would start moving away...I needed something I really could get to grips with but that would also be interesting but fulfilling as well...it is important that I have my own little bit of identity down here again with studying. So I can keep motivated....he [her husband] has gone up several... rungs of the ladder, and I feel I'm down here a bit. So maybe that is another motivation as to why I am taking on an Access Course, not because I can in any way, be up there with him, but because at least I will be able to offer him a lively mind.*

Brenda was a woman of her time, born the end of the Second War and socialised into the role of servicing the needs of others. Such women often construe themselves as midwives to others' desires. As the relationship with her husband crumbled and the children left home, Brenda felt bereft. Yet she began to recompose an identity, and build a new career, partly through higher education. She felt affirmed in relationships with other learners, teachers and, most significantly perhaps, her daughter. Here too was an inspirational narrative from someone close, with whom Brenda could identify. Her daughter had completed a degree despite a life threatening illness and she encouraged her mother to take a risk too. Our research relationship developed over time, as I shared some of my experience. Her story changed, as she felt more able to interrogate her motives for, and the impact of learning in shaping a career:

*Yes, I've gone through a tremendous barrier...Well thinking about going on to Peter, my husband, he is a man: a spade is a spade, that's why philosophy and psychology are completely out of the window, as far as he is concerned. Philosophy you go mad, psychologists...forgive me, you know, as far as he's concerned, if you've got problems well I'll say 'We've all got problems Peter!' you know, we've all got differences and that. He's very much a physicist, he thinks very logically and sometimes that has caused me pain... he's hurt me, you know, with his rather blunt graphic answers.*

*I think we are all creative in some way or another.*

*Yes. He's like a peacock and I hate it.... So you see...but what is worrying me about the degree is I can see me actually pulling away. I don't know where it's going to lead...*

Brenda struggled, at first, with the research, and tended, as she later acknowledged, to tell the story she thought I wanted to hear. She often did this with men, she said. But she gradually talked more openly and reflexively about her motives and their link to childhood and gender, including abusive parents, not the least as I shared some of my experience of being a child, and needing to appease parents in a difficult family environment. Brenda, at one juncture, was struggling with feelings of failure, of never being good enough, despite everything she tried. She was stuck for words at one point and I shared my need to gain recognition and acceptance from my mother and from powerful others. Her story was enlivened in that moment of autobiography, as she talked of realising how her oppression was no isolated affair, but illuminated a highly gendered culture, in which women were often used and abused. She found tutors who empathised and encouraged her, and a heroine in literature, in this case the prostitute in a novel by Mau Passant, with whom she could identify, and who, like her, had been used in a male dominated world. She told a story of a tutor in a seminar who, rather than putting her down, as some had, encouraged her. This became a turning point in her narrative, in finding voice and talking back. Being able to take risks in her narrative, and to draw on wider narrative resources, including from feminism, in the transitional space of higher education, enabled her to feel more of an agent in her life, at many levels.

### **Gina and Shazir: 'cottoning on'**

East London has been an especial casualty of globalisation and neo-liberal economics, as well as, in part, a beneficiary too. Since the 1970s it has been subject to a massive process of

deindustrialisation, dramatized most obviously in the closure of the docks but also affecting the traditional trades and industries of the area. But large pockets of what has been termed ‘yuppification’ co-exist with the depressed public housing estates suffering racial violence, drug abuse and growing youth unemployment. It is a place of widespread educational under-achievement and social exclusion, poor health and poverty (Bardsley et al, 1998). Participation in formal post compulsory educational provision, of whatever kind, is low. There are, as indicated, other dimensions to the area, representing, as it does, the Janus face of contemporary capitalist consumerism, one redolent with new opportunity structures (as at Canary Wharf) alongside growing social division and alienation. Despite the towering presence of Canary Wharf, this is a location, in the main, where ‘imagined possibilities’, for many, are few, and participation in higher, further and adult education tends to be the exception (West and Reynolds, 1999). East London represents, in an acute form, the divided state of contemporary neo-liberal England.

Gina and Shazir participated in a community arts project organised by a body called Theatre Venture. The project’s role was to recruit young people from local communities and to organise some experimental workshops, employing a range of artists. The University of East London (UEL) was to provide additional workshops for the young people, and students from UEL would work with the youngsters on video production, as part of their own placements. The aim was both to engage disaffected learners in the visual arts and to encourage them to progress into formal arts education. The project was ambitious, and involved recruiting groups of disaffected and educationally alienated young men and women (West, 2002).

Gina and Shazir participated in a series of workshops called ‘*Cotton on*’. They were targeted at young mothers, aged 14 to 19. The focus was the visual arts, and textile design in particular, but there was sculpture, printing, photography and video too, partly used to explore the theme of pregnancy and parenthood. In-depth interviews were held with Gina and Shazir at an early stage of the project and towards the end. Gina told me about her educational background in which no-one ever really listened to her. She felt pressurised to participate in education and get a job and yet wanted to enter college too. But she had her child to think of. She felt confused, muddled and under pressure, from all sides.

Her first visit to the Centre in which the Workshops were based, was on the advice of a Health Visitor but she felt upset that she was leaving her daughter in the crèche. Separation was hard but she slowly relaxed and was able to let go. She changed, she said, as a result of the parenting programme (of which *Cotton on* was part). There was a time, she insisted, when she could not tolerate mess, in the home or anywhere else, and everything had to be kept in order: ‘*I hate mess, and everyone goes on at me to let her feed herself*’. She never let her baby play on the floor, in case she got dirty, while upstairs other children were ‘*romping about*’. She was more at ease now, and had let go of herself as well as her baby in the workshops. She was taking risks, in short, with an identity and her relationships, including with her own baby, were strengthening.

She liked the Centre and the peer education project, while *Cotton-on* had given her ideas for the future:

*I would like to go back to college, do an Art A level, but I don’t know if I am going to be able to do it at A level....Because it is getting crèche places and it is full time, I may have to do a BTEC first. Eventually I want to go back to my media...*

Gina had begun a GNVQ in Media Communications and Production. Her class in College produced magazines and radio shows. It was ‘*just basic media stuff*’ she said, somewhat disparagingly, but she dropped out when she was pregnant. As for the future:

*What is the problem? The problem is, the colleges are really good, they have got crèches and everything, but there is not enough places in them crèches. There are so many young mums out there all wanting to go back to college and they just can’t because*

*they have no childcare. Childcare is so expensive and once you have got over the money issue it is finding someone to leave your child with, someone who you trust. That is basically it. If you are lucky enough to get a place in the college crèche it is alright, it is wonderful, but there is not enough places.*

There was a great deal of anxiety about returning to college, given other pressures in her life, even though, as she put it, she was determined to do so for her daughter, at some stage. It was too much of a risk just now, in a life which was perpetually framed by an unpredictable present and a turbulent past.

Three months later, Gina was working intensely on her sculpture in the Arts course:

*When I was pregnant and I didn't really get very big. I made myself a little pregnant belly from a washing basket to put your washing in. I used chicken wire and plaster of Paris and painted it up funny colours. They kind of expressed my mood when I was pregnant, bit dark, dull colours, bit cold.*

*Yes... I don't know people who are looking at it probably won't get it, but to me it's a hangover for anger.*

Her pregnancy was hard and troubling, and she felt, at times, unreal since she did not look pregnant. She was depressed, and *'really ill throughout'*. Her mood was translated into the sculpture. She was trying, she said, *'to get across that, the darkness.'* There was no head on the sculpture, either, it was a headless torso, she said, which was deliberate:

*So there is no head, and I suppose, as I was pregnant I didn't really feel. I suppose all I was, was a baby carrier. That is what I felt. There is no head and no legs because I wasn't actually a person. Like a baby machine. So just middle, just boobs and a belly.*

She thought sculpting was therapeutic and that she needed to express her feelings about the pregnancy, and of being *'a baby machine'*. Gina also discovered she was suffering from Crohn's disease. The doctors had insisted her stomach was troublesome because of the baby and nothing else. She was sick throughout the entire period and anaemic. Her time was spent *'laying around, depressed all the things I wanted to get up and do and I couldn't'*. But she was past that now, she said, and the Centre had provided a key. She was starting to use brighter colours too, more *'yellows and reds'* and although on medication, she felt better.

She thought *Cotton-on* had been good. She enjoyed it and it gave her ideas for the future. She wanted to enrol on an art course, maybe do an A level, and the workshops offered a range of relevant experience. She in fact applied to do a graphic design course at her local college, but was doubtful about going through with it. She had always liked art but an A level might be too much, too soon. It was a big commitment given her present life and responsibilities. There were different and conflicting voices inside her. She had done GCSE Art at school and she got an A there, which she really enjoyed. But College was another story, maybe a step too far just now.

She dreamed of working for a magazine, doing the page layouts and digital designing, *'either the front cover or posters and that. Always me aim. So I am trying to get my art qualifications so that I can get there'*. She had gone with 'Hannah', from the group, to a *'Futures Fair'*. A career's woman there from the local college gave them a brochure. She needed to act soon, she said, or she was never going to do it. The thought frightened her that she might remain frustrated. But she simply could not take too many risks at present, since there was a baby to worry about.

The art tutor helped her to think about what to do. She and the youth leader encouraged her *'to go for it'*. And it was easier for her than some of the other girls, she thought, because, as she

put it, she had *'more opportunities than most'*. She was smart, by comparison and had a high IQ, she said. And she had already been to college. Gina went on to talk a great deal about her life history. She had gone to *'a really good school'* and felt she had a good start, educationally. She came, she said, from a stable home, at least in comparison to some. Her mother worked in a school and had encouraged her to be creative. Gina wrote stories, dressed up and played heartily. And her parents had supported her financially when she was at college:

*Yes. They always will back me. Since I have been coming here, I think since I have been coming here they are even more behind me. Because I am saying to them we are doing this at the project and I am really into it. And they said 'an art project?' And I said we are doing an art project, we are really into it and am thinking about doing an A level in art and they said yes go for it. So I think now they see I am doing something and am enjoying it they are happy for me because before I was kind of wasting away, sitting at home, getting my giro, but now they see me working towards something and they are really happy as well.*

There had been a 'turning point' in her life, she said. She was sitting at home, one day, and her brother asked what was on television. She could *'reel off the whole of daytime TV, TV guides and I thought oh my god how sad. That is all I do, sit at home watching TV, the same shows every day at the same time. I knew it was a bit sad.'* It made her get up and go to the Centre. Her whole life had been sad, she thought, and she did not want her daughter living that way. This motivated her to want to learn, and she enjoyed working with the others in presenting a case to the council for more single-parent friendly housing. She was also engaged in peer sex education programmes for schools. Yet there were continuing doubts about engaging in formal learning or getting a job. She had, on her own admission, a destructive and rebellious side, when she wanted to do nothing, and she disengaged from the group, and art, on occasions. Her anger could hang out in self-denying ways. At the core of the progress, in her story, was her relationship with the youth leaders, and the art tutor, who acted as surrogate parents. She liked talking to me too, she said, because I listened. And doing art enabled her to face painful aspects of recent experience, and to progress emotionally as well as aesthetically. Art was a way of telling her story.

### Shazir and mixed messages

Shazir lived in bed and breakfast accommodation when she began attending the Centre. Her social worker wanted her to take her son *'somewhere and do things'*. The social workers thought her incapable of looking after the baby properly, she said angrily. She had *'split up with his dad'*, because he was *'cheating'* on her. The police were involved and the baby was sick *'with meningitis and loads of other problems'*. Eventually she *'escaped'* bed and breakfast and *'was moved'* into a one bedroom flat:

*He [the baby] has intolerance, so it is hard to cook for him, good stuff, and I have only got a fridge indoors, haven't even got a freezer to store food for him. I cook fresh food every day for him, which is hard and expensive and the leader tries to help us budget and stuff like that with our money, things like that. It is hard. It is like being in a B & B still because at the B & B you just had a cooker and a fridge and start living like that again. But it is just you have got more space and that is it.*

Shazir was initially wary of other group members. She did not like talking to people. They only had *'to say the slightest or do the wrong thing...and I would blow up about it'*. Eventually, she settled down and liked the peer education and dealing with issues of sexual health. She felt better about herself as a result. And one of the girls she rowed with had left, which was good. She liked a residential, too, organised by the Centre, which gave her space, as the crèche workers had the children all day. People took turns in cooking and washing up and *'we got on really well'*. *'There was canoeing, horses and other outdoors activity as well as the focus on peer education'*.

Shazir thought the arts project was *'fun'*. She wanted GCSEs, educational qualifications, she said, because she needed *'a job, office work, or whatever'*. She had thought about computing, at the beginning, *'but now I wouldn't do because it would just drive me mad, but I couldn't work in an office anyway, can't sit still for a second'*. Nothing was clear for her. She never gained any qualifications at school since she ran away from home and then *'fell pregnant'*. The school *'didn't want'* her there, in any case, and she hated some of the teachers. She ran away aged 12 and *'carried on running away'* until 15. She moved in and out of foster homes and never really settled anywhere, *'until now'*.

She had not seen her parents for 3½ years:

*Me and my dad never got on. He used to hit me, he used to be really abusive and stuff. I only had to put a slight bit of weight on and he would put me down about it. My mum had heart disease so she never used to fight back or anything. And I remember when I was little when my mum used to burn food he would throw it across the room because she had burnt a little bit on his plate and I didn't like it. Me and my dad never got on. He used to call me, he used to say I was a little angel but we never got on...Yes, he used to be a lot violent, more when I got older than when I was little. He never used to hurt me that much when I was little but I had really bad asthma and I was in and out of hospital a lot when I was little, so he never used to hurt me that much, because he knew the doctors would be seeing me quite often...*

She used to fight back, as best she could. She once dreamt of being a doctor, when she was five: *'I went through about 10 years of thinking I wanted to be a doctor. Always wanted to be a doctor. And then a journalist, and then went through all the jobs'*. Her dad told her she would make a good doctor. When her sisters *'had cuts'* she used to bandage them up, *'or put plasters on, get all the dirt out, stuff like that and he said I was good at doing things like that'*. But she knew she would never make it. She might like to be a school teacher, and when her son went to school, she could go to College: *'three years in college and a year in uni and I could be a junior school teacher'*. She still had a dream.

She might, for instance, teach English. She was *'always'* good at it in school. There was a *'top band and bottom'* and she was at the top. She didn't like poetry, or Shakespeare. Macbeth *'was too nasty'*. He used to hurt people, *'and that little boy that got stabbed and they showed us a film clip and it was horrible and I didn't like that at all. And the words they used I didn't like'*. Sometimes she used to go to school *'for a whole week and not bunk'*. But she got *'a bit lost'* with *'heroin and stuff like that'*. Macbeth seemed, as she talked, too close to home for comfort.

She stayed with a friend and *'it would start off with a little bit of weed, think nothing of it, and just went a bit further than we should have done'*. She did not blame her parents *'really'*. There were reasons for what happened, which she understood.

*But I don't think I will ever forgive dad for the way he has been because if he wasn't nasty, if he was protective I would probably would have done better at school and if he had made us feel more comfortable to talk to him about stuff, then I would probably have stayed in school or gone to school, but me and my dad, I mean he, sees the baby, but he makes remarks like, your baby is evil because he is a white man's baby and he would kill him if he saw him, but he knows that I would never let him do it.*

She said she was like her Dad and they were both *'stubborn'*. She shared his temper and people told her she looked like him: *'and I don't like that. So that is why I have cut all my hair off and try and change it because of the comments that I look like my dad. I change something about me'*. This aspect of the story places identity work and risk taking, in an acute and highly personal form. We are also reminded of how children of abusive parents often continue to crave for their attention, however abusive, for fear of the alternative i.e. abandonment. In Shazir's narrative, moving between different cultures, as well as between hate for and wanting attention from parents, compounded a sense of fragmentation.

She joined a Christian Church, via an organisation called ‘*Lifeline*’. The vicar and his wife helped her with her baby, when she needed it most. They were ‘*there when he has been sick, and the hospital when I need them, and stuff like that. They come up to the flat and make sure he is OK. They have been like surrogate parents to me*’. Shazir talked about how her father ‘*went all out of control and everything. He had a breakdown three times and used to leave us, leave us with all these debts and stuff and then come back again and nothing happened. And mum couldn’t cope with it any more. She used to sit back and do whatever he used to tell her to do. And it has always been like that*’. Stability, among significant others, was a precious commodity.

The conversation turned to art at this point and Shazir talked animatedly, again, about it being ‘*good fun*’. She told me about a cushion she made with her baby’s picture on it:

*on the front of it, printed on to fabric, which is quite interesting. I didn’t know you could do that. And I was meant to be making a wall mount with all these pictures from nought to a year, going through what he used to do, and stuff like that. Haven’t finished doing it yet. I have done a few because it is getting the pictures, because I have got to go through all the pictures and try and find them at the right stages and I haven’t done that yet. But we done that with the plaster stuff, done it on our hands and done a lot of painting and stuff like that. We have cut out mushrooms and everything. Experimenting like a 5 year old again, so it has been quite fun.*

She loved art at junior school, ‘*all the time*’. She even did art in her lunch break and just talking about it made her feel like ‘*a kid again, messing about with paint. You really think about doing it now. Except when you do it with your little boy or girl. And it is quite weird because you sit there and just splash paint around and that is nice, just do a little bit more here and there. So here it has been quite like a therapy*’. It had made her more aware of her son’s need to play and experiment, ‘*instead of thinking he is going to get dirty all the time*’. She bought crayons and paints and he can ‘*splash paint around and make it more exciting for him*’. She was changing: ‘*You see more things in perspective when you are doing art, because you see more colours and stuff and you think this would look better in his room, this would make him more cheerful. Stuff like that, yes it does. And you make more things for him too*’. Shazir smiled as she talked, which she did with her counsellor, she said, as she told me about that experience. She rarely talked about ‘*family stuff*’, because it made her feel ‘*like jelly*’, but she could talk to me. Sometimes in the group someone would burst into tears, but they went outside ‘*for a fag and talk about it and cuss our boyfriends off, or babies’ fathers off*’. It was ‘*nice*’ to have people who could say ‘*I know what it feels like*’, or just listened.

There were no dreams of college, or a job, at present because her son took priority. ‘*No-one knew what was wrong with him*’, she said. The doctor was waiting for test results, and the uncertainty dragged on. One day he was fine, and then he was ill. She missed working and had been a chef in old peoples’ homes. She hated ‘*sitting round doing nothing*’. And, ‘*hopefully*’, one day she might train as a teacher. The Centre, she said, had been a lifeline, ‘*more like a family, one big family we are, quite good*’. Shazir’s story takes us to the heart of a social psychology of building a career, and into the role of art and relationships in taking risks, and finding, however fleetingly, more agency in her life.

### **Dimensions of biographicity**

What conclusions can be drawn from such stories and what might be the implications for the guidance community? For young women like Gina and Shazir, but also Jim and Brenda, making career progress, in the broad sense implied in this paper, and building a new identity, on more of their own terms, requires an act of courage, supportive space as well as new narrative resources for the task. Risk taking is especially hard when people feel overwhelmed, powerless and low in self-esteem. A person, any person, needs to feel, at core, accepted and encouraged, to engage in the business of biographicity. They have, for instance, to be able to

see themselves – in the eyes of others as well as self - as a learner or a budding artist, rather than a failure and inadequate. They have to be able to take risks and engage in a community of practice. They must learn to tolerate the deep ambivalence of moving from the safety of the periphery to embrace membership of a group and the new identity this brings (Ainley et al 1999).

Movement of such a kind, and identity work, can be a forbidding challenge to those who live on the margins of the neo-liberal order. Engaging with what is new and different, and investing of self in the process, brings, as stated, anxiety about being rejected, of being found wanting, all over again. The young women in *Cotton-on* knew, experientially, what it meant to be an outsider, to be labelled stupid as well as incapable. All of which explains why some retreat into '*defiant outsiderdom*'; and others simply give up completely (Ainley and Cohen, 1999). Yet, it is to be noted, in certain respects, when viewed in the light of a life history, that these young people were managing difficult biographical processes rather well, despite the anxieties involved.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000), drawing on the work of Melanie Klein, argue that anxiety is fundamental to the human condition and that unconscious defences come into play when a self and identity feel threatened. Klein's insights are derived from clinical work and she argues that defences against anxiety operate in relationships between people, both in early as well as subsequent experience; including when something unfamiliar and unsettling is encountered. But defences can be lowered, over time, as significant others – teachers, an art tutor, a therapist and or a guidance and Connexions worker – may contain some of the anxiety by providing reliability, psychological consistency and a sense of unconditional acceptance. All of which may enable someone to enter transitional spaces – as in art, higher education and or a relationship with a guidance worker – to take risks with their story and identity. For others, as suggested, staying on the edge may be a defence against the anxiety generated. There can be safety in the margins.

## Stories

The capacity to tell new stories also appears fundamental to recomposing a career and constructing a new identity. Jeremy Holmes (1996) has written that '*autobiographical competence*' – the capacity and confidence to construct one's own story, in an authentic way - is central to psychic health and progression in a life. The word 'narrative', he notes, derives from *gnathos* or knowing. Narrative, he suggests, '*turns experience into a story which can be temporal, coherent and has meaning*'. It creates, potentially at least, links between past, present and future. Raw material is translated into symbolic form, which allows a person some detachment from what may be painful, even horrific experience. The recognition of the role of narrative in mental health has of course a long history. Freud argued the therapeutic power of story and the importance of a narrative truth in '*the talking cure*' (Spence, 1982). Creating a narrative truth is also at the core of agency, in the sense that stories can be seen as vehicles for experiments in self composure: the more a story convinces others, whether researchers or guidance workers, the more it may constitute a new, emerging reality. We are, in a sense, our stories.

Narrative structures in other words organise and give meaning to experience rather than simply being reflective of it. At a first interview, in the early stages of an Access programme, a student, like Brenda, may tell a story that is deferential, even self-demeaning, with significant details omitted in the desire to impress others or because they are considered inconsequential. By the end of four years of study, a more distinct voice and inclusive story can be articulated. Developing such a story is essential to building and sustaining a biography and to making choices at key moments of transition; for which we need people willing and able to listen. If there is a necessary role for lists and procedures in guidance work, they ought, perhaps, to be subsidiary to narrative-based guidance.

**Conclusion: some implications for the guidance community?**

So where does such an analysis leave the world of careers guidance and individual guidance workers? The wider context, I have suggested, is one of profound change in which, traditional notions of career, and linear career progression are being undermined; and in which, as Cohen and Hey (2000) put it, there is no longer a tight fit between a life history and inherited biographical codes, or of occupations and life projects running in families. Such contexts are now the exception rather than the norm. Career counselling, in this world, is already pushing and traversing older boundaries (Herr, 1997). The task may involve diverse skills, but at its heart must be the capacity to listen, empathically: if that is, client-centredness is to be more than empty words. Further, a service like Connexions offers space for the sort of substantial, committed relationships that can make a real difference to fragile lives.

Part of the difference may involve questioning 'realist' agendas, but it is recognised that this may be difficult, as is questioning dominant approaches to needs assessment and diagnosis, which are designed, in part, to process large numbers of people 'efficiently', in search of targets. Nor would I wish to substitute, in their place, an illusion that a whole world can be transformed at the level of individual encounters. Rather it is to believe, on the basis of listening to people like Brenda, Jim, Shazir and Gina that small changes in a person's relationship to others matter, and that guidance workers have a role to play in this.

When viewed auto/biographically, what may be required is, up to a point, obvious: there is a need, in all of us, to be listened to, and for transitional spaces, as well as supportive people, in a frenetic, fragmented, frightening, unequal and at times superficial world. As Helen Colley (2000) has remarked, it is not about presenting young people and adults with a Cassandra-like alternative story of globalisation and its consequences, but to have some faith in people and what they can and do achieve, rather than labelling them deviant or deficient, however unwittingly. Such faith might re-invigorate the values of client-centredness, and associated notions of professional standards, as well as political literacy, among guidance workers.

I want to end with the story of a GP who, like many guidance workers, is under pressure to meet targets and follow clinical guidelines, but who believes in the power of narrative-based medicine. Daniel Cohen works in a distressed part of inner London. He has faced a range of problems in his own life, and from within his profession. He suffered psychological difficulties when working in a profession, which has often neglected and even derided narrative methods. Yet, according to Daniel, it was auto/biographical awareness, which was at the core of him becoming a more effective doctor. (West, 2001).

Patients' narratives, he said, were often perceived as 'piles of shit' from which the 'gold' of medical fact had to be extracted. There was pressure to process people through the system as quickly as possible, to tick boxes according to protocols. But he told me about a Somali woman refugee who came to the surgery one day. She had five children, whose father had been killed in a war. She was an asylum seeker, a 'problem' for the authorities, as she was shunted from one set of shabby accommodation to another. Daniel gave her some of the time and attention she craved, and slowly felt more alongside her in her struggles. One day the patient brought him a gift and he was immensely moved. It was, he felt, a symbol that he was providing 'a secure base' – some support and unconditional regard - which was a product, he now realised, of his own family's experience as refugees from Nazism:

*I can remember how incredibly important the GP was to us as a secure base. We had a very very intelligent link worker who is a Somali doctor herself, but can't practice here so she works as a link worker. And we ended up having the most extraordinary conversation with the mother about Darwinian evolution in relation to why were her children getting asthma and eczema here when children didn't get it in Somalia and we talked about the sort of way the immune system might be adapted for one environment but actually then is mal-adapted to another environment because the sort of ancestral*

*immune system as it evolved is not to meet what it meets here. And I found myself having a grown up conversation with this mother of the sort I might have with you and she was transformed from being a sort of exotic stereotype into actually being an intelligent equal. And... I felt it was part of... a process of her becoming a person again....*

There is a wider moral in this story of using self, and experience, as well as critical social perspectives, to become more person-centred as a doctor; a moral that is at the core of the auto/biographical imperative across the caring professions. All of us, whatever our background, have experiences of feeling lost, bewildered, confused, angry, stupid, rejected, misunderstood and redundant. 'Globalisation', and the uncertainties, anxieties and new possibilities this brings, has the potential to unsettle us all. Each of us needs human, symbolic and imaginative resources, from time to time, to enable us to cope and revise our story and rebuild a career, in new ways. By reflecting on our own autobiographies, as professionals, and the struggles to develop our narrative repertoire, we can better connect with others engaged in the same process. Therein lies, perhaps, the 'auto/biographical' challenge for the guidance community: remembering the fragile but sometimes courageous humanity that we all share, when we tell our stories.

*Linden West*

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## Chapter Two

### Guidance: Too many lists, not enough stories

*Bill Law*

The author argues for a new start on developing contemporary guidance. It could, he argues, significantly change all aspects of careers work: including careers education, personal and social education, and their integration with mainstream curriculum - in all sectors.

The argument is for the greater use of narrative-led methods, and - therefore - for weakening the grip of outcome-driven thinking. Narrative thinking, though harder centrally to control, is potentially more useful than lists of outcomes. This is because it is more congruent with the way people learn and with the way learning is shaped by attachment to group cultures.

Narrative thinking therefore promises significant new ideas for programme development in Connexions, Education for Citizenship and life-long guidance.

The 'DOTS' analysis sorts the elements of career into useful order, by clustering information into categories for 'opportunity', 'self', 'decision' and 'transition' (Law and Watts, 1977). DOTS was, however, developed as a means of sorting careers-work *provision*; it does not much help us understand how careers themselves are actually *managed*. For that, we need more subtle ways of understanding how people learn.

In particular we need: (1) to take account of the social context of career learning, now acknowledged in the design of Connexions; (2) to link learning for worker roles to consumer, partner, volunteer and citizen roles; and (3) to portray career learning as a continuously adjusting response to life-long-change. DOTS is limited in all these areas.

DOTS is an analysis, ordering the elements of career into columns - often as lists. Narrative orders the elements into sequences - as stories. Donald Super's (1957) account of 'growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline' - one of the earliest theories of career development - was more a story than a list. I argue here that we now need more of the subtlety of the story, and one which can take account of changes in the experience of contemporary career. This is not a 'post-DOTS' argument, for the abandonment of past thinking; it is a 'new-DOTS' plea, for a much-needed extension of existing thinking.

I argue that biographical writing is now a significant resource for that work. Published biography is, of course, a story; and it always portrays elements of career development. But biographical writing is an increasingly a prevalent form, with many variations: in diary, autobiography and memoir; in journalism, humour and gossip; as well as in lyric and poetry. It is set out face-to-face, in writing, in print, on radio or tv, on stage, on disc, tape and film. It is a huge, accessible and growing resource.

#### Story as learning

The link between story and learning is ageless: sagas, myths, legends, fables and parables are among the earliest teaching-and-learning methods. Contemporary educators understand the value both of stories that we tell and stories that learners tell.

#### Putting learning into useful order

But lists and stories are not the only ways of putting the elements of career into useful order. We have a range of ways of sorting learning. Some are set out on the right in table 1; it suggests four broadly distinguishable frames of reference - ranging from lists to stories.

**Table 1**  
**How advisers and teachers help learners put learning into useful order**

Frames of reference which...	for example...
... make <b>lists</b> of elements: setting down facts and perceptions	... items-by-item checklists and worksheets - in class-work ... alphabetical directories of opportunity - in resource centre
... work within <b>boundaries</b> : separating facts and perceptions into significant factors	... interest-framed data bases - in ICT work ... factor-by-factor agendas - in structured interviews
... identify <b>links</b> : mapping the cause-and-effect connections between facts, perceptions and factors and events	... freely identified themes - in loosely-structured interviews ... built-up decision-trees - in discussion work
... tell <b>stories</b> : sequencing events - encounters, feelings allegiances and intuitions - into what is 'then', 'now', and 'for the future'	... learner-led disclosure - in counselling-type interviewing ... autobiographical writing - in curriculum work

The analysis reorganises Jerome Bruner's (1986) broad distinction between 'paradigmatic' and 'narrative' ways of learning (here re-labelled 'lists' and 'stories'). The analysis may best be thought of as a learning spectrum, shading from 'lists', through 'boundaries' and 'links', into 'stories'. Few experiences offer only one of any of these learning hues. But, if there are four broadly distinguishable ways of learning here, the question is 'do stories offer any advantages over other parts of the spectrum?'

### Against narrative

Jerome Bruner (1986) says paradigmatic ways of knowing are validated by verification, logic and falsifiable truth. Narrative, he says, appeals - in a more diffuse way - to what he calls 'believability and meaning'.

The hard-headed won't take this as a recommendation for narrative. People who want to feel safe, orderly and accountable will cling to lists and boundaries. Narrative works in looser ways, infused with feelings and diffused by relationships. It is true that stories sequentially portray change; but they do not isolate specific causes-and-effects, they only vaguely show how one thing leads to another.

It is harder to find quantifiable evidence of learning in a 'fuzzy' story than in a well-defined list. Some researchers share with policy people a belief that it is not worth saying unless it can be said with verifiable precision. Supporters of narrative may put up their hands, and say that they are less interested in the structure of accountability and the problems of verification than they are in the dynamics of change. None of this will impress true policy wonks.

### In favour of the way we think

Novelist A S Byatt remarks, 'narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood'. And so it seems; stories feel more concrete, more engaging and more useful than do clearly categorised learning structures at the other end of the learning spectrum.

Some of the explanation for why this is so can be found in evolutionary neurology and psychology.

Drawing on neurological evidence Antonio Damasio (1999) finds a number of levels at which the story can be told. He distinguishes what he calls 'biographical consciousness' from 'core consciousness'. Through core consciousness an organism, driven wholly by feeling, instinctively seeks safety and comfort. But, in a learning organism, the feelings of core consciousness become part of a unified portrayal of what happens - Antonio uses the metaphor of 'a movie in the brain'. It is an accumulation of overlapping and more-or-less 'fuzzy' accounts of what we each experience and can recall. It takes us, beyond instinct, towards an imperfect but developing appreciation of how things are and how they work.

But Antonio goes on. As a species, he claims, we have the additional ability of being able to locate ourselves in that story. We not only see, and we see ourselves seeing - each a witness to our own life. This is more than 'self awareness' listed alongside 'opportunity awareness'; it is a single story of self-in-the-world, which is why Antonio uses the term 'biographical consciousness'.

According to evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (1997) this ability is useful to us, for the way it locates 'place', 'path', 'motion', 'causation', and 'agency'. Put another way, it gives us a way of asking the 'where?', 'what?', 'when?', 'who?', 'how?', and 'why?' questions of life. Medical journalist Jerome Burne (2001) surveys the evidence to indicate that stories we tell are as basic to our survival as the tools we use. It is, he says, why gossip is so prevalent; gossip seeks a useable understanding of what happens. Finding that understanding is positively pleasurable. Literary academic H Abbott Porter (2002) agrees, pointing to a small number of recurring master plots in human story telling ('girl-meets-boy...' is among the most common. Each of these plots has a special significance to the survival of the species).

There is an important career-management point here. Our capacity for narrative means that we most naturally make a *unified* account of self-in-situation - less separation of the 'S' from the 'O' in DOTS. That, in turn, means that we can see ourselves both as effects and causes of what happens 'out there'. This has survival value - we learn for action! There are a lot of young men and women, sitting in a lot of classrooms, to whom this is going to come as a big surprise.

### How to write 'better' biography

A publisher's test for a good story is called the 'water-cooler effect': do people talk about it? Celebrity biographies pass the publisher's test, but fail in other ways.

How good can biographical writing be? According to our story-guru, H Abbott Porter, good narrative allows inner conflicts, flaws, confusions and uncertainties to appear. They also, he says, counterpoise this inner tension with external tension. All of this means that there is uncertainty about how the story can be resolved - it depends on what view prevails. That is the narrative tension - different ways of reacting to the same events. As literary critic James Wood puts it, 'there is something about narrative that puts things in doubt'.

We can draw implications from all of this. The 'story teller' must show enough about what is happening, but not so much as to bog down the audience. The story needs to have enough room for different interpretations, so that it is interesting. It does that by offering each member of the audience the chance to learn in his or her own way. This is not, then, didactic or moralising stuff. Good story telling is more subtle than - scaffolding learning, but not seeking to compel it.

Good biographical writers each offer a distinctive 'take' on these qualities. Table 2 illustrates how.

**Table 2**  
**Biographical stories - differently told**

> disclosing of 'good' and 'bad' feelings for other people	Terence Stamp 1989	autobiographer
> accepting ambiguity - such as concurrently holding people in contempt and affection	Terry Eagleton 2001	memoirist
> informality in conversation, eliciting trusting disclosure	Richard Sennett 1998	sociologist
> open accessibility and warmth for people, releasing what otherwise would be hidden	Paul Willis 1977	researcher
> having seen and heard enough to appreciate the significance of what people say	Studs Terkel 1975	social commentator
> humour, not just for the laugh, but for the incisiveness	Jeanette Winterson 1991	novelist
> interweaving lives, showing gains of the one from the troubles of the other	Tom Courtney	biographer
> courage to probe what other people do not want probed	Nick Davies 1998	journalist
> imaginative empathy and regard for the character	Carole Angier 2002	biographer

All biographical writers can do some of this. None can do all of it. Some careers-work case-studies have very little of it. None of it can be learned from manuals on research methodology.

Yet, it seems that it is part of our humanity to learn like this.

### Where is the power?

The art of the biographer can make research - and even policy - interesting. Narrative has power, to the point that politicians deliberately seek 'a story' to represent their ideas (Hunt T, 2001).

What power? We have already come across the elements of narrative power: a story has characters (people), in a situation (setting), engaged in dialogue or soliloquy (talk), involved in plot (events), and leading to some resolution (meaning).

All five elements raise issues for the management of career. For each element this chapter selects four signposts to further development in careers work. Twenty running hares is more than we can chase here. But, at this stage, we need the ideas.

Table 3 sets out the five - and the twenty.

**Table 3**  
**Five story elements - with twenty signposts for careers work**

<b>A</b> People	1	encounter
	2	allegiances - and letting go
	3	feelings and tensions
	4	driving events
<b>B</b> Setting	5	roles - linking setting and person
	6	inter-linking roles
	7	different 'selves' in different settings
	8	culturally varied role
<b>C</b> Talk	9	learning
	10	culture
	11	changing minds
	12	imagination
<b>D</b> Events	13	luck and learning
	14	resolving through explanation
	15	other-than-rational resolutions
	16	this and other stories
<b>E</b> Meaning	17	meaning and facts
	18	meaning and person
	19	turning points and the crux of the matter
	20	multiple meanings

## **A** People

Biography portrays people - their abilities, allegiances, feelings, assumptions, beliefs and values. But the story adds a social context to the 'S' column in DOTS. There are, then, signposts beyond DOTS:

- 1 encounter:
- 2 allegiances - and letting go:
- 3 feelings and tensions:
- 4 driving events:

### **1**

#### *Encounter as structure*

Terry Eagleton (2002) constructs his memoir as a procession of encounters - deeply layered and in tension with one another. Early on we meet his working-class father; towards the end we meet the élitist tutor who admits him to Cambridge - at about the time his father died...

*'It burst on me like a strange kind of forgiveness. The gatekeeper had let me in, though it was my father who had turned the key. Greenway had accepted me as a literary type; had my father ever done as much? Perhaps this was one reason why I kicked so hard against Greenway when I got to Cambridge. His world was the Law which had brought my father to his ruin, but it was a Law which my father was asking me to love.'*

It is evidence for 'community-interaction' theory (Law, 1981). But it is more: it has a depth and dynamic - manifesting forgiveness (where the theory might have settled for 'feedback'), acceptance ('expectation') and love ('support'). It can persuade a reader why and how Terry will now move on. The articulate can express it, but we all experience it.

Encounter frequently marks transition between episodes in biography. That step is often a letting go and a moving on.

## 2

### *Allegiance and 'letting go'*

DOTS has no room for encounters. And, so, it misses the way in which career change can be not so much a matter of new information as of changing allegiance.

Terence Stamp (1989) hales from London's East End; his move on to the West End entailed a difficult letting go.

*'There are certain moments when you know that if you hadn't been there, or met that person, you would never have taken a particular road. Meeting David Baxter was one of those milestones... A psychological tug-of-war complicated my life... Those trips up west with him were invariably followed by an uneasiness which left me clinging for days like a limpet to my old mates and haunts.'*

Terence eventually made the move, with career consequences which - it turned out - David had anticipated better than Terence.

Researcher Paul Willis can portray that tension. At some level of awareness his 'Joey' always knew that something better was possible. It is the research method, but is also the researcher's accessibility, which allow Paul to describe Joey in some depth. We can understand why Joey would not 'let go'. And we can also appreciate that it might be a mistake (see Career-Learning Network, 2002a). Great stuff! - and it all depends on the character.

## 3

### *Feelings, 'roundedness' and tensions*

Much of what we call 'feelings' are a deeply-laid responses for managing threat or promise (Goleman, 1996). Both can be found in the way journalist Nick Davies (1998), speaks for another Terence. Terence left school at 16, and had - so far - resisted the enticements of criminality.

*'The younger people were angrier, less respectful, willing to take more risks and to organise themselves. They had grown up without the solid certainties of life in Jamaica, rejected by the society around them, feeling insulted and disrespected. Now they advertised their hostility... But ever since he had been a child in Spanish Town, Terence had dreamed of becoming a lawyer... [But] the reality was that he was living in a ghetto, where he was far more likely to become a pimp.'*

Nonetheless, Terence signed up to study law. The skills he will learn merely *permit* Terence to do that work; it is fear and anger that *drive* him; and hope that *beckons* him. We could list the skills; but if the fear and the hope are un-woven from the story it falls apart. To try would be to compress character in the interests of being easily understood. And, as H Porter Abbott (again) observes, such 'flat characters' are for formulaic writing, '...restricted to a narrow range of predictable behaviours... a reduction of the human to the mechanical'. That is for celeb biogs, not careers work.

Because DOTS disregards social life it also misses what all narrative portrays - conflict or (in Greek) '*agon*'. The word is cognate with 'protagonist' and 'antagonist', characters since the

dawn of drama. H Porter suggests a learning purpose for drama: ‘conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it’.

Terence’s feelings are rooted in allegiance: his work is to be for, with, and in response to his people. But allegiance implies the likelihood of conflict, as Terence will discover (see Career-Learning Network, 2002a).

#### 4

##### *Character and plot.*

‘Rounded’ character means portraying ‘skills’; but it means portraying them in a life of ‘feeling’ and ‘purpose’. And it means seeing all of that in a network of old allegiances - and new ones. It also means understanding that all of this risks tension - perhaps conflict. So skills are just a part of the picture; perhaps a small part; perhaps a not-terribly-significant part.

In the moment the actor enters, a glance, a posture, a remark will set the action in motion. The action is the product of inner life - her own and those of her acquaintances. Through the use of narrative Terence and Joey can learn to understand how they are the present effect of past causes. But - if they will - they can also learn to see themselves as the present cause of future effects.

But they will not learn enough of it from the formula ‘S into O plus D equals T’. It needs a story.

## **B** Setting

The setting for career development comprises the locations where learning-and-action unfolds. Different settings enable different learning in different roles. The signposts to action here relate to:

- 
- 5 roles - linking setting and person:
  - 6 inter-linking roles:
  - 7 different ‘selves’ in different settings:
  - 8 culturally varied roles:
- 

#### 5

##### *Role, person and situation*

‘Role’ is a narrative term, it is a variant of ‘the roll’, on which ancient drama scripts were wound. In sociological use, a role is a social position - such as ‘woman’, ‘worker’ or ‘citizen’. Insofar that there is agreement, ‘role expectations’ are assigned to the people occupying the role - a kind of script. But sociology also acknowledges that role occupants influence roles, through their own ‘role conceptions’ (Biddle and Thomas, 1966). And so, although people are assigned roles, they also create them. Role is, then, almost always the forging - from something handed down - of something new. There is both holding on and letting go - both stability and change - in ‘womanhood’, ‘worker’, ‘citizenship’... in all roles. How that happens can only be told in a story.

Again, in considering story as a framework for career, we find something that is neither ‘self’ nor ‘opportunity’ - role is a-self-in-a-setting.

As we have seen, story involves conflict. Some conflict is external - between self and others ‘out there’. Terence’s conception conflicts with other people’s expectation in that way. But some tension is wholly ‘in here’. Journalist Peter Lennon’s (1998) interview with Jonathan Miller portrays an example. Jonathan speaks...

*“Everything that has happened to me in the theatre, including my exit for medicine, has always been the result of my being pathetically susceptible to someone knocking on my door with a frisbee in their hand saying ‘Do you want to come and play?’... “There was [before that] a whole series of people who I looked up to, admired and who set standards for me and expected much... [The conflict] is suddenly realising at the age of 65 that what I have done in the theatre world is simply not worth what I left.” “It was unintentional,” Rachel [his wife] put in sympathetically, “and you never did anything cynically.” “I know Rachel thinks I exaggerate these things.”*

What a career, and what an insight into it! ‘Doctor’ and ‘theatre director’ are roles, as are ‘family member’ and ‘spouse’. In drawing upon them Jonathan speaks both of what is ‘in here’ and ‘out there’ - in one breath. The issues - ‘what can I do?’, ‘what am I expected to do?’, ‘what might I have done’ - are all, neither ‘S’ nor ‘D’. They are, in any and all of those roles, simultaneously both.

The idea of ‘role’ is as central to any worthwhile concept of careers work as any idea can be. And DOTS has no place for it.

## 6

### *Roles inter-link*

The stories we have already looked at do not allow us to think of work roles in isolation from other roles. Becoming an academic, a school-boy, a lawyer, or a theatre director cannot be properly understood in isolation from a person’s other roles. Being a son, a friend, a neighbour, a spouse bears upon becoming a worker. Almost all of these links belong to almost all of the stories we have looked at.

In contemporary society new conceptions of roles - as lover, parent, partner, consumer, volunteer and citizen - are being re-negotiated. We should also put criminal roles on that list. They all bear upon being a worker; indeed, they are all seen as alternatives to conventional work roles.

In some deeper sense all roles are work roles. All roles are a position, in a setting with a task that pursues some end. That end may be for survival, for fulfilment or for achievement. In some cases the alternative role offers the more promising route to the end.

Ideas of life-role are necessary to the concept of the ‘boundary-less career’ (following Arthur, et al, 1999). To understand such links is to open up a more extensive map of possibilities for careers work than we have yet imagined. Ideas of life role are necessary to developing those possibilities. The use of story is necessary to the method.

## 7

### *Different roles manifest different aspects of self*

Role expectation is pressure. John Mortimer (2000) speaks of resisting that pressure, referring to his mother’s wifely role.

*‘What was it that made my mother stay with my blind... and, in many ways, impossible father?... She had been an art student, had read Bernard Shaw’s The Intelligent Woman’s Guide to Socialism and Capitalism. She shipped herself out to South Africa before the 1914 war... So why do they do it?... Is staying on to put on other people’s socks the mark of a truly heroic character?... Of course, my mother did have her temptations. I can remember times when she would steal away in the middle of dressing my father and leave him with his braces dangling..., make herself a cup of tea and waiting till he had learned not to class her among the cretins.’*

Freedom from the pressure of role expectation is never an option. But re-conceiving a role in new terms always is. This wife's other roles - their positions, settings and tasks - fed her own ideas about being a wife; she would be no less committed, but much less biddable.

Life's continuous back-and-forth movement between roles - now artist, now mother, now lawyer, now friend, now director, now spouse - is *the* enabler of role re-conception. We all need a 'repertoire' of roles to manifest all that we are - and can become. Indeed - as welcoming young men and women back from their work-experience frequently demonstrates - people's very identity can seem to change as they expand their life-role repertoire. It may be more helpful to say that new roles reveal new aspects of self; they reveal a roundedness of character which is always there, and which it is the work of education to find. Careers work could do more.

## 8

### *Role is a cultural phenomenon*

Role scripts - such as those for wife, worker, and citizen - are different in different cultures.

Culture is a group response to what sociologist Irving Goffman claims is the most basic of all questions - 'what is going on here?'. Groups develop shared beliefs about the way things are, what can be changed, and what must be protected. Culture is transmitted in all the story forms mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Humour is often important: sociologist Jason Rutter argues (and Joey's story illustrates) that 'having a laff' is one of the ways in which cultural 'outsiders' are marked off.

For that is one of the prime functions of all cultures - to mark off positions. 'Women's' work', 'our kind of work' and 'valuable work' are all culturally defined.

Phil Hodgkinson and his colleagues (Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 2001) drawing on the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, point to how culture perpetuates beliefs. Those beliefs are often deeply internalised by individuals, and crystallise into habitual forms of life-role management: the 'out there' inhabitation nurtures the 'in-here' habit. Bourdieu's term is '*habitus*'; and it - yet again - breaches the boundaries set up by DOTS.

Habit can inhibit career development. Even in the young; perhaps especially in the young. In her partly autobiographical novel, Jeanette Winterson (1991) is funny in pointing up the discomfort of ill-fitting cultural habit. The occasion is the classroom reading of a primary-school essay.

*"This holiday I went to Colwyn Bay with our church camp." The teacher nodded and smiled. "It was very hot, and Auntie Betty, whose leg was loose anyway, got sunstroke and we thought she might die." The teacher began to look a bit worried, but the class perked up. "But she got better, thanks to my mother who stayed up all night struggling mightily." "Is your mother a nurse?" asked the teacher, with quiet sympathy. "No, she just heals the sick." ... "Very good, but I don't think we'll have time today. Put your work back in your tidy box and do some colouring till playtime." The class giggled. Slowly I sat down, not sure what was going on, but sure that something was. When I got home I told my mother I didn't want to go again. "You've got to," she said. "Here, have an orange."*

The test of good story is recognisable authenticity rather than sterile veracity. And there is authenticity in the way in which this young woman finds roles in tension: pupil with believer, believer with writer, writer with pupil. Little of this could be understood at school, some only at home, some not yet by anybody - not even, for the time being, by the child. But she vaguely and persistently senses that something is beginning to hurt, and an orange will not help.

For some in her school-room the tension will be slight, and will not matter - they can be confident and relaxed enough to deal with it. But careers work must do better by people for whom deeply-embedded *habitus* will breed serious *agon*.

## Talk

Things like this are often expressed in what can be called soliloquy. We are all engaged in a more-or-less continuous process of background thinking, through which we each deal with our own version of the basic question - 'what is going on here?'. And its supplementaries: 'how did it get this way?', 'what is now important?', 'what can be changed?' - and what am I going to do about it?', Soliloquy is a feature of narrative: the most compelling example begins 'To be, or not to be...'. You might call that 'action planning' - if you thought the official term does the human phenomenon any justice.

Soliloquy is a conversation with a virtual other. Gossip is the most prevalent example of addressing the basic question, and its supplementaries, with a real other.

The four careers-work-relevant signposts relate to:

- 
- 9 learning:
  - 10 culture:
  - 11 changing minds:
  - 12 imagination:
- 

## 9

### We learn through conversation

Studs Terkel shows how a taped conversation provoked a significant experience of learning. 'On one occasion,' he recalls, 'during playback, my companion murmured in wonder "I never realised I felt that way".' Telling it - being what we have already called 'a witness to our own life' - is one of the deepest ways in which we, as a species, learn.

The usefulness of telling it is the major premise of the careers interview. It is also how Jeanette's little girl learned in her classroom conversation. There may be fewer opportunities for young men and women to converse in classrooms now. If that is so it would be a serious loss.

Theodore Zeldin (1998) urges the usefulness of stories in such processes. We need more stories, he argues, to help people to see how they can live together 'as equals, with humour and self-confidence but without arrogance'. According to Jonathan Rose (2001) it was published story tellers who did that for the Victorian working classes. Stories offer 'allusions, characters, tropes, and situations' that could help people learn to make sense of their own lives. Jonathan offers countless examples. One is of a workhouse laundress struggling to improve her mind by reading a novel, and coming across a reference to *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son*. In her first visit to any library she found the book:

*'I read my first mythology. I earned my first real history... With Lord Chesterfield I went travelling the world. I would fall asleep reading the letters, and awake around three o'clock in the morning my mind deep in the fascination of this new world, where people conversed - nor just talked... Dear, dear, Lord Chesterfield; snob or not, I owe him so much.'*

It was Catherine Cookson.

In making his appeal to an appropriate literature Zeldin is not pandering to celeb-biog obsessions; he makes a more subtle point. In the past, reading stories furnished minds with the words and concepts we need to make sense of our lives.

There is widespread alarm among educationists concerning how policy pressure constrains learning conversation in school (Carnell and Lodge, 2002). We should wonder whether that pressure has also damaged careers work. We should also wonder what we can do about it.

## 10

### Conversation is framed by culture

This is Jonathon Rose's point. He doesn't make the obvious point about accent and dialect being detectable in conversation - though that is, often enough, influential enough on life chances. He argues that the characters, the dialogue, the beliefs, the values, the feelings and allegiances expressed in stories, frame the terms and concepts in which conversation is conducted. There is more than one way in which such talk can help or hinder us in presenting self to opportunity.

Culture is that strong: a single culture can entrap; cultural diversity can liberate. This was always part of community-interaction theory. Here is a poignant commentary on that aspect of the theory. Lenny James's (2002) seems to attribute some part of the entrapment of his own people to their culture - its beliefs, feelings, allegiances ('ghetto love')... and dialogue.

*'Ashley had the brains to be anything he chose. But he put aside his potential for a life on the street. That should hurt us, anger us, and shame our community. It does me. What hold does 'ghetto love' have on our young men that even the brightest of them can't break free of it?... Our community has been involved in two conversations, running concurrently. The first conversation has had us talking to the wider community about how we want to be treated... Then there is the second conversation, the conversation the black community has been having within itself... To say out loud that we are not happy with the way we do things might sound like betrayal... Our young men need alternative means of self-identification to the street... They are not less black if they educate themselves, or less of a man because they refuse to settle an argument with a bullet.'*

Ashley is 'Asher D' of the 'Garage' band *So Solid Crew*.

I doubt that Lenny James is seeking black middle-class success stories, to provide heroes for such young men. It is true that biographies were once mostly to celebrate the heroism of the successful and influential. But that kind of writing no longer works so well for our society. Contemporary audiences want to learn as much from the disclosure of failure as from the parading of success (Evans, 1999). Good writing needs that kind of tension. And, for our purposes, this may be no bad thing.

Careers work needs more stories; but we need to *use* them more imaginatively than by parading so-called heroes. More on this later.

## 11

### Conversation changes minds

Theodore Zeldin sees conversation as learning. Gossip is an example. So is effective therapy. The class-room should be. As should a careers interview. Here is Mary Karr's (2001) account of her maths teacher's attempt.

*'He's telling you that you'll need math more than you know. "Actually", you say, "I intend to be a poet, sir."... "How you plan to get folks to pay you for it?" This stumps you a minute. Finally, you say, "I'll sell my books." "How much you think that'll make you?" he says... You want to say he's being unfair. But you can't quite locate the unfairness of it... You peel the bottom of one sweaty thigh up from where it's stuck to the chair and tug down your skirt... Your parents never give that concern the slightest*

*credence. "Shit, you can do whatever you feel like, Pokey", Daddy would say, while your mother would claim "those idiots wouldn't know poetry from piss ants." Briggs waves his hand saying, "Let's drop the poet thing. It's true you don't need math to write poetry. But any other task you undertake will require a thorough grounding in mathematics."... You know better than to invite him into the various lives you've constructed for yourself - an apartment in New York, a beachcomber's hut, a Victorian mansion surrounded by a maze-like garden. Your own silence nudges you to the edge of tears...'*

Tears mean feeling, and feeling might mean threat, or promise - or both. Is there a change beginning here?

If there is, daddy and mother seem not to help much. And Mary ignores Briggs's questions. But, like Stud's Terkel's contact, becoming a witness to her own life moves Mary towards a realisation of how much she cares about poetry. If that is it, it is an important change - though no more than a change in mind.

She moved on, from being a 'raggedy kid', to becoming a poet, an academic and a memoirist. Mary seems to acknowledge significance in the encounter: Briggs seems to have helped, though inadvertently.

Careers work must offer a more reliable form of help. It would be based on an understanding of what Mary can do with the help we offer.

## 12

### Disturbance, imagination and 'moving on'

Mary is overwhelmed by unvoiced feelings. Feelings are not always taken into proper account by academics. Some academic historians deride biographers for putting feeling above logic. But historian and biographer Ben Pimlott (1998) defends biography: 'it is', he says, 'an unpredictable and picaresque adventure... Lives themselves are always unexpected'. In life, child Mary understands the need to feel this disturbance, better than does mathematician Briggs.

In life and writing it is the non-formulaic which disturbs. Ready-made formulae reassure; but we are all disturbed by at least some part of our own stories. Learning theorist Jean Piaget's term for the learning experience describes a form of disturbance. It is, he says, 'disequilibrium' - our natural uneasiness in accommodating new knowledge. We may try, like Briggs, to neutralise the feeling by assimilation of what we find to 'what we have always known'. But then we lose the new learning, to what Antonio Damasio calls the comfort sought by core consciousness. Living-and-learning is not a comfort zone.

For an account of uneasy soliloquy, eavesdrop on Tim Lott (1997). Tim is a successful and comfortably-off publisher. Here he is, reflecting on 'some dumb instinct', which...

*'...tells me that this secret of life - the secret that someday will be revealed to me - lies, not lodged in the world itself, but in the way I make sense of it all. My thoughts feel cheap, ephemeral, unsatisfying; and I want them fleshed out... And there is something else. Perhaps on some level I feel that there is something in Kate [his girl friend] that disdains me. I feel sure that she loves me, but, when we are drinking with my loud friends in a loud bar... I see something in her eyes... University it must be, if I am to be properly reinvented.'*

Tim is provoked into searching for some possible self in some possible future. He calls it 'dumb instinct'? Damasio would disagree about that: it is not a core, but biographical consciousness which provokes such day-dreaming. So what is it: imagination? intuition? what? (More, also, on this later.)

Some might think Tim should be grateful for what he's already got. Some careers workers might. But, if careers is to link - in any meaningful way - to education, then careers work must be able to process such restlessness - for Tim, for Mary ...and for Joey.

All these stories show the importance to career of encounter, culture, allegiance, tension, change-of-mind and moving on. You will have noticed that most have more than one of these elements - almost any could be used to illustrate almost any of the elements. Of course they could: life does not sort itself into the lists and categories of analysis.

But, in all, the stories seriously outflank conventional notions of information, advice and guidance.

## **D** Events

Our narrative man, H Porter Abbott, observes that 'as soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is good chance we are engaged in a narrative'. Plot is a sequence of verbs. Action-driven blockbusters need little more. But good biographical material also needs a lot of nouns and adjectives, portraying 'rounded' characters who drive the plot. It all needs not only action verbs but what, elsewhere, I have called *learning* verbs (Law, 2001): understanding is the basis for sustainable action.

Readers of biography also use learning verbs. They look for a resolution of the story, but they each learn their own version of that resolution.

All of these features of plot are useful to careers work; the four signposts concern:

- 
- 13 luck and learning:
  - 14 resolving through explanation:
  - 15 other-than-rational resolutions:
  - 16 this and other stories:
- 

## **13**

### **There may be luck, there is unfairness, there must be learning**

Luck is an event: an unforeseen, coincidental happenstance. Narrative tension is wound into situations where the character fails to notice the approach of unforeseen danger. As it sneaks up, we want to cry out 'look behind you!' - especially in pantomimes and career interviews.

Luck may be indiscriminate and unfair; but it correlates with culture. Career possibilities which - in Mary's neighbourhood - might seem to need amazing good luck, can - to the likes of Jonathan Miller - seem as natural and expected as the sun's rising. A cost which - to a successful publisher - would be an acceptable investment, would - to Joey's people - put an option so far out-of-reach that it might as well be on the moon. As political philosopher John Rawls beautifully argues, if we had any real sense of its unfairness, we would want to minimise the impact of birth-position 'luck'.

In fiction resolution is unsatisfying if it seems to depend only on luck. We would feel that Charles Dickens had cheated if there were no more to Pip's life-chances than Magwitch's gifts. Pip is a thinking kid; he knows what to do with his luck. Different people deal with luck in different ways, some better than others. In this respect, there may be some analogies between being lucky in work and in love: in both cases, experience helps us to recognise 'that's for me!' - and to know what to do about it.

That may also be why we generally find biographical writing more satisfying where resolution

depends on learning, rather than luck. That is what careers work may - in part - be to help people learn how to make good use of luck.

But, most of all, it is to make luck matter less, and to make eyes-wide-open learning matter more. In this respect we cannot yet claim to have made much progress.

## 14

### Learning as resolution

We work through the events in an episode (like those quoted above), or in a whole story, in order to reach a resolution. Resolution is a way of knowing, not just how things come out, but of understanding why they do so in this way. Career learning is the enablement of that understanding. It enables us to know what to do in our own story - moving us towards *its* resolution. Career-learning theory sees this understanding as being able to connect causes to effects - however fuzzily. That is why story resolutions can often be paraphrased along the lines 'so *that's* why she did it!'

A grasp of causality has survival value. We need stories to help us to see cause and effect. Story-guru H Porter Abbott takes this quality to be close-to-essential to what he calls 'narrativity'. It is the quality of a story which helps us to see events as order rather than chaos. Literary critic Andrew Rissik (1999a) makes a parallel point, characterising good biography as able to 'instruct us how to alter the future by showing us the havoc and damage wreaked by the past'.

An appreciation of the need to link causes to effects suggests one of the most useful questions in careers guidance - 'So what gave you the idea of doing that...?' Briggs should have asked it of Mary. But answering open questions relies on practice in conversational narrative. Good open questions are the most difficult to ask - and to answer. Mary didn't even try; the question was wrong. There was no resolution for her in the causes and effects that interested Briggs.

Without some feeling for how our learners seek to resolve their stories, we cannot know how to start a guidance interview, how to bring counselling to an end, or how to design progression into curriculum.

## 15

### Rationality is not all we have

Mary senses unfairness, but can't yet get a clear fix on it. Tim finds he can act on what he calls 'instinct'. Sense and instinct - useful to career planning? We return to the question: is careers work only interested in information and rationality, or is there something else important going on here?

We already have the terms to refer to other-than-rational ways of knowing - 'tacit learning', 'intuition' and 'imagination'. But they have not yet been much used in career thinking. Researchers Phil Hodgkinson and his colleagues (1996) rightly point to the need for a new direction - using the term 'pragmatic rationalism'. But what is rational about Mary, and pragmatic about Tim?

DOTS cannot help to answer the question. Furthermore, it may not be entirely at home in the contemporary world. It is not just rational; it describes the content rather than the processes of learning: it says nothing about the way we know things. Yet, in all of the stories quoted here we witness other-than-rational ways of knowing. Ancient rational philosopher Socrates is reported to have asserted that 'an unexamined life is not worth living'; representatives of today's cultures might retort 'an un-lived life is not worth examining!'. In our society 'just-do-it' impulse and 'new-age' superstition are regarded as serious options for basing significant action.

It seems that, whether rightly and wrongly, people are searching for other-than-rational ways of dealing with their lives. We can come some way towards this need. I would limit myself to the

bet that there are useful intuitions in career management. Mary and Tim have them; but we need to know more. The term ‘pragmatic choice’ signposts a possible new direction for that understanding of career. But we have not yet set off on the search.

For example, where does pragmatic rationalism stand in relation to tacit knowledge, to intuition and to imagination? And, for that matter, where does all of this stand in relation to culturally-learned responses - such as prejudice or superstition? And where do such learned responses stand in relation to the biologically-rooted feelings we call instinct? And does the word ‘instinct’ really do any justice to the heart of Tim’s decision?

Biography points to non-rational ways of knowing. But we don’t yet know how to describe them? How, then, will careers work be able to support and enhance them? Not by studying DOTS.

## 16

### This and other stories

We are each at the centre of our own here-and-now story; but every plot, however heroic, is also a sub-plot for another story. You are an episode in other people’s sagas, and they in yours.

Furthermore, each story has its own scale - of time and of setting. Of time: there is a story-line in Mary’s few minutes of conversation, in Tim’s months of deliberation, in Joey’s years of self justification, and in Terence’s and Asher D’s generations of suffering. Of setting: the setting may be a corridor, a pub bar, a neighbourhood, a culture or the planet. However interesting biography may be in personal and local terms, Ben Pimlot’s historian is right to remind biographers of the larger scale.

It is not that ‘big-and-long’ story is important, and ‘short-and-small’ is trivial; it is that each story stands in relation to others. And so each story can offer entrances and exits to others. That short-small-sad episode is not the end of everything. Nor, for that matter, is that big-bright-triumphant moment.

In all of these senses, there are very few stories which can stand alone.

If Briggs ever gets round to helping Mary, a key question may well be ‘Do you have any sense of what can happen if...?’. It would mean Mary opening that exit door from ‘raggedy kid’, to a story she had already started telling herself - of some other self in some other future.

She didn’t tell Briggs. But with the right kind of help, she might have. Being able to see one’s here-and-now story in the broader context of wider events, or in the alternative context of other possibilities, these possibilities open doors to both learners and helpers. And they may go against some of the grain in some counselling thinking (particularly where it emphasises the need for here-and-now immediacy and exclusive empathy with the learner). The study of narrative offers us some new thinking to do.

## **E** Meaning

Story has meaning - whether poignant (dry your tears!), instructive (pay attention!), funny (pull yourself together!), or all three (the best of all stories!) Plot resolution usually offers a clue to meaning. But not everybody agrees with the author’s intentions. The four signposts here for careers work concern:

- 
- 17 meaning and facts:
  - 18 meaning and person:
  - 19 turning points and the crux of the matter:
  - 20 multiple meanings:
-

**17****Meaning is more important than fact**

In some important sense it doesn't matter whether the child Jeanette Winterson wrote that essay or not. What we really want to know is why a mother's facile reaction would have begun to change a child; this is where the story's meaning might be found.

Mary Evans (1999) suggests that, because biography is increasingly concerned with private meaning, public information may actually hinder the audience. Biography-as-scholarly-research is now accompanied by biography-as-empathetic-insight (for example, in Carole Angier, 2002).

There is, of course, a risk: so important is meaning that we are prepared to maintain belief in an implausible story, in order to retain belief in its meaning. We can be quite gullible about this, especially if the meaning engages attention-grabbing issues - unhappy childhood, getting rich, being a celebrity (all three references guarantee a six-figure advance). But the primary significance of this search for meaning is not that it can mislead us (of course it can!) it is that we are somehow left hungry if we fail to find it. For Andrew Rissik (1999b) doing no more than gathering information is '...like searching a dead author's pockets and finding only keys, credit cards, cheque book and driving licence: they tell us something of the life, but not what we really want to know.' Some progress files are like that.

There is also a signpost for careers-work research here. Gathering material that can help to uncover meaning in a life is rare skill: how did Paul Willis manage to get in so many facts, yet keep us in clear sight of what they meant to Joey and each of those other lads? Research data is always sculpted, but not always with such telling authenticity.

**18****Meaning as theme**

H Porter Abbott (whom we have already met) offers rather simple advice on finding meaning in stories: 'Look', he says, 'for what repeats itself.'

That process of looking finds links: things that, somehow, remind you of other things in the story. The links are within and between elements of character, dialogue, plot and setting. The resonance they sound suggests a theme for a life. Such a method featured in Abraham Maslow's (1970) work (he drew on what was known of public figures). It led him to his well-used hierarchy of human needs. 'Themes' and 'needs' are not so dissonant, as concepts for the human condition. And there is some confirmation of what he argues in our short quotations; you can find people searching for 'material well-being', or 'safety', or 'attachment', or 'esteem', or 'influence', or 'discovery', or 'aesthetic' or 'self-actualising' satisfactions.

But let's not be precipitate: Abraham Maslow's is a crude analysis and certainly not beyond doubt. Biographer Ulrick O'Connor (1991) probes, by looking for the most significant clues. He uses the metaphor of 'inner sap' to locate the essence of a story. And he seeks it in a word, a gesture, an intonation, a posture... often enough some transient but compelling moment. 'No matter', he says, 'how a biographer has submerged himself in archive or interview, he should keep such incidents before the mind's eye - working from the inside out.'

In career-development thinking Mark Savickas (1995) has done more than anyone to develop the usefulness of life themes to the helping professions. He enables us to look for clues in persistent memories, recurring dreams, favourite stories, repeated phrases... Beyond a certain level of practice you don't have assiduously to search, you start spontaneously to recognise where people are most fully telling what is going on in their lives.

This way of understanding behaviour can be linked back to Antonio Damasio's neurology-based understanding. He suggests that biographical consciousness - the 'movie in the brain' - enables us to imagine a life beyond both instinctive and biographical concerns. The way we

need to think in order to deal with the world, also allows us to imagine more than we have yet experienced. He claims that the clarity with which such possibilities can be incorporated into the ‘movie’ is why people feel that they might be prepared to risk personal fulfilment, for the sake of some more valued purpose. Jonathan Miller knows about this.

Such ideas about career development seriously undermine notions of career as solely about securing and maximising material well-being. People work for other reasons (if that were not so, there would be no able people in careers work or education). But we still need to say how contemporary work offers meaning to people’s lives.

## 19

### Turning points and crucial questions

There is, often enough in stories, a turning point. It may be no more than an encounter, a discovery, a remark, a hesitation. But it is one which catalyses a question - going to what we call ‘the crux of the matter’. That question is about some element - of character, dialogue, setting or plot - which may, until now, been overlooked. But it is the key to understanding the story. It is the big moment in narrative fiction. It offers the prospect of plot resolution - you begin to see how things are coming out.

Researchers Mary Mallon and Laurie Cohen (quoting L R Cochrane) nicely illustrate the point - at the movies: ‘Attempting to understand a career transition without a recognition of how the individual accounts for that particular adventure within a whole life is akin to walking in on the last scene of a movie. “Without a grasp of what came before and what is at stake, the scene is apt to seem fat and overdone. However, if one has seen the movie from the beginning, the same scene might be deeply moving, highly meaningful and entirely appropriate”’.

Our own Mary never allowed her maths teacher to ask the crucial question. And so he asked the questions he knew how to ask. Maybe we should have some sympathy with his reluctance - to press hard on the crucial question is high risk. Psychiatrist Adam Phillips sounds a dramatic parallel warning to opinionated biographers, ‘the subject of a biography’, he says, ‘always dies in *the biographer’s way*’. Whether helper or biographer, our questions, allowing only our answers, impose our meaning.

Death resolves everything. But - between now and it - who is able to help Mary, or Joey or Jeanette find the crucial question? There are plenty of people - in families, schools, cultural groups, government, commerce - ready to volunteer.

And what is it, exactly, that makes careers advisers and teachers any better at asking it? In this volume Hazel Reid (2003) raises a key issue for the use of biographical ideas in careers-work training.

## 20

### How to live with multiple meanings

Adam’s warning is an acknowledgement of what is, for our purposes, a *strength* of biography. It is a strength because any sign of an author-imposed meaning can provoke an audience into critical reflection. And this is a good thing.

But to realise that good, we may need to worry less about the distinction between fact (Captain Robert Scott) and fiction (Captain James Kirk). Adam worries about biographers attributing to Robert the qualities of James. Such misattribution occurs: Mary McCarthy admitted to it: her early biography made her father more ‘dashing’ and herself more ‘lost’ than - on critical reflection - she felt was justified.

And, in some writing, the distinction between fact and fiction crumbles: some biographical writing is both - sometimes deliberately so. Recent ‘lives’ of Pontius Pilate, Caravaggio, Charles

Dickens, A Wainwright, Marilyn Monroe and Ronald Reagan include explicit invention. Indeed early biography and fiction were read by the same audience for much the same purpose - which was, for some people, enlightenment (Holroyd, 2002).

We must acknowledge the possibility of self deception. In one study (reported by Elizabeth Loftus and Mayranne Gray, 2002) people who had been shown phoney ads featuring 'Bugs Bunny' at *Disneyland*, came up with accounts of having met him there. They could not have: Bugs belongs to Warner Brothers.

We lie, we invent and we fool ourselves; but a quizzical audience need not be deceived. Terence Cave (1993) is undismayed by the trends; 'A lot of readers', he claims 'know how to commute between fiction and reality.' He explains: 'This is fashionably post-modern... the play between reality and fiction, or truth and fiction, is clearly meant to be comprehensible to a relatively wide public'. Fellow journalist Decca Aitkenhead agrees. She finds deception un-worrying because, she says, it is so easily detectable - converting 'life' into 'copy' is almost impossible to do well. And all of this helps to explain Alison Utley's (1999) claim concerning a public rejection of formulaic biography: 'there are too many, they all sound the same, they are too shrill, they cannot all be true.'

It makes biography (good and bad) a potentially powerful tool for learning-for-life. It means that, if we can't find a well-equipped scepticism among our learners, we should help them to become more quizzical. It is possible. And the thinking use of biography is a method. H Porter Abbott implies as much: we do justice to biography, he argues, not by *rejecting* the author but by educating the *reader*. And the most difficult thing a reader has to do, claims H Porter, is 'to remain in a state of uncertainty'. We are referring here to a subtle but contemporaneously necessary set of skills: knowing how to live with multiple meanings - asking what, for my purposes, can be trusted ...and what can't.

People do not - cannot - always tell the truth. But this no more excludes the use of biography in practice than it does ethnography in research. All such material is the product of an ability to tell a story. And that ability is flawed - none of us do it perfectly. But the flaws are detectable, through noticing inconsistency, lack of authenticity, and an appreciation of people's search for self-justification.

In research, this is a plea for the critical use 'case study' material. Respectful appreciation is not the same as gullibility. In practice, it is a plea for helpers to help learners to question biography. For, in quizzing other people's lives, we each learn to question our own. This would be the realisation of Jonathan Rose's case; he calls it the primacy of the reader in the use of narrative - a story is useful, not for how it is told, but for how it is heard.

Which points us to the imaginative use of story in practice.

## Using fewer lists, making more stories!

### The people's research?

But first, a final nod in the direction of research. You may understand why I hesitate to use the term, but biography is - in a demonstrable sense - 'the people's research'. It provides a basis for thought and action which they-who-run may read - to hand in every bookshop and library.

Sharing sources with our users in developing understanding of career could usefully counter-balance the other powerful alliance in our field. The other alliance is the one between policy, commerce and academia (Philo and Miller, 2001). In our own, as in other fields, policy interests have enlisted such help to construct formulas which now dominate practice (Law, *et al*, 2002). We need an independent basis for explaining what we are doing (Law, 2003b).

Biographical material serves such purposes well: it is a practically limitless resource, which we share with our learners; and on whose behalf it can speak.

### Using other people's stories to make sense of your own

We are not evolved to learn in order to raise standards, achieve targets or manifest outcomes. Taking tests and sitting exams are, for most of us, uncongenial. When the examination is completed the target may or may not be reached, but the learning is often discarded. As a species we learn for action. We remember best what seems most to be useful. For most of us, most of the time, the meaning of learning is knowing what to do about it. We are back to Irving Goffman's question: and it is the challenge to careers work - to enable learners to know 'what is going on here?' and 'what will I do about it?' (Law, 2003a).

Jonathan Rose has shown us that this is what people do with literature - use other people's stories to make sense of their own. He further suggests that a significant sector of working-class people have used literature as a springboard for telling - and in some cases writing - their own story.

It is why gossip is so prevalent and soap operas so popular. Contemporary media are extending the scope with reflective observation - 'Big-Brother'-type 'reality-tv' shows are not all wholly driven by prurience and voyeurism (Crace, 2002).

In table 4 all of these processes would move - by one route or another - from top-left to bottom-right.

**Table 4**  
**Routes to the use of stories**

	<i>getting stories</i>	<i>making a story</i>
<i>enquiry</i> ( <i>learner research</i> )	gathering material, setting it in useful order	assembling 'the story so far'
<i>reflection</i> ( <i>learner theory</i> )	pointing to key features and hunching themes and resolutions	anticipating possibilities and planning what to do

*progress learning* ↓

→ *transfer learning*

These processes suggest big extensions to current practice. They call for open and sensitive management of disclosure, enquiry, case study, real-time role play, community-based learning, formative action planning, and personal reflection (Law, *et al*, 2002). Few lists are needed here; even games and simulations offer no more than tasters to the depth and dynamics of these learning processes.

Towards the left in table 4, people are working with other people's stories - biographical material. Towards the right, on their own stories - in records and profiles. The challenge for this 'horizontal' movement is to transfer useful learning from (left) the learning setting to (right) the living use (Law, 1999).

In the upper row, people are like researchers - gathering information and sorting it into useful order. In the lower row they become their own theorists - seeking to understand how things get to be the way they are, and how they can be changed. The challenge for this 'vertical' movement is to enable progression from basic observation to useable understanding (Law, 1996).

Jonathan Rose's view suggests that upper left is a natural starting point - where people begin to make sense of other people's experience. He is thinking about formal writing; but other people's stories also come as diary, journal, song, rap, scrapbook, album, film, video; they also come as tv soap, 'reality-tv' and cartoon; and they come, of course, as face-to-face disclosure - such as learners sometimes find in work experience and shadowing.

Portfolio development is an obvious area for development. And writing-as-therapy (Bolton, 1999) suggests ideas for one version of this process. But the methods for setting down material are wider. Writing-as-therapy is a form of disclosure (Wright and Man Cheung Chung, 2001); and, for our purposes, performance-as-learning, cartooning-as-learning and photography-as-learning are among the many methods that need to be developed (examples can be found in Career-Learning Network 2002b).

There are real possibilities here for significant new developments in contemporary careers work. And - because what is suggested is particularly appropriate to the delivery of Connexions, Education for Citizenship and life-long guidance - there is a degree of policy mandate.

What is ruled out is a straight imitation of some other person's life (even Richard Branson). The process is more subtle, more creative and more respectful of learner identity than unreflective hero worship would allow.

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## Chapter Three

### Narrative and career guidance: small talk or useful dialogue?

*Hazel L Reid*

#### Introduction

The tension created by the need for new ways of working in guidance practice, to meet the UK Government's inclusion agenda, has led to a quest for new ways of understanding. As practitioners, or trainers and managers of practitioners working in Connexions partnerships, we seem to be seeking new or 'better' theory, or new interpretations of existing knowledge, to meet these new demands. This paper asks in what way can an exploration of narrative-based approaches help us to move forward to manage the changing world of 'career' for our clients? And, is there a place for interpretative and narrative-based approaches in a 'quick fix', post-modern world?

The paper will question the usefulness of narrative-based approaches by sharing some of the insights, doubts and confusion experienced in my own exploration of the literature. The paper does not explore the use of narrative within education, and the concept of biography is employed broadly, in the main as an aid to understanding the client's worldview. The analysis will attempt to raise some of the crucial questions to ask, but makes no pretence of knowing the answers! The paper tries to avoid employing the authoritative voice of the writer – such an approach would be illusory. In keeping with this, and against academic tradition, the first person singular will be used. I have not reached a confident conclusion about the usefulness of narrative models in guidance, and am still struggling with the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in an interpretative approach. However I do feel the struggle is worth the potential prize! So, finally, and as a possible step for introducing narrative-based approaches into practice, the paper will discuss the use of narrative within career guidance training.

#### New learning for new transitions

*You will come to a place where the streets are not marked.*

*Some windows are lighted, but mostly they're darked.*

*A place you could sprain both your elbow and chin!*

*Do you dare to stay out?*

*Do you dare to go in?*

*How much can you lose?*

*How much can you win?*

A Dr Seuss story, given originally in a graduation speech (Seuss, 1990). It describes a moment of transition and both the uncertainty and anxiety experienced on leaving a familiar place and stepping into the unknown. There is clearly risk involved in change, and risk involved in staying the same. To some extent the verse resonates with my own feelings about the potential of narrative for career guidance activity. In other words what can I lose or win by engaging in this exploration? In the broader field not only is the verse relevant to our clients' transitions, but it also has some resonance with *our* experience of the changing world of guidance theory, policy and practice. In trying to make sense of recent changes in the status of career education and guidance we have struggled with a lack of direction, uncertainty and confusion (Watts, 2001a). However, some clarity about the role of the personal adviser has emerged during the

process of implementation of the Connexions strategy (DfEE, 2000) and the initial uncertainty could be viewed as a benefit. With the flexibility to develop services according to local need has come some freedom to influence the development of the role of the personal adviser, and, to restate the importance of careers education and guidance as a discreet and vital service. In other areas of course (be they geographical or curriculum related), Connexions could undermine the position of careers education and guidance with the loss of the careers adviser title and a greater focus on youth and social work.

The 'flaws' within the original policy design have been commented on (Watts, 2001b, Colley & Hodkinson, 2001). It is also noted that the careers education and guidance community needs to proceed with some caution in its 'embrace' of the government's inclusion policy (Roberts, 2002). However, whilst not ignoring these issues, this paper aims to focus on the needs of clients, and practitioners, working within this new context. What new ways of understanding do we need in a world where notions of secure and linear career progression have been overturned? Whilst acknowledging change and the importance of labour market information, how many careers education programmes remain fixed on the concept of making *a single* career choice (Reid, 2000)? What new methods are required to avoid the often, submissive engagement with careers work, for example working through exercises in a careers programme without much active learning?

One acknowledgement of the passivity of traditional careers education and guidance is Career Learning Theory. With its revision of the DOTS model it is based on active learning about the self in a changing social context (Law, 1999). The need for a radical reworking of careers education programmes has now been argued for in a number of publications (see Law, 2002). The thinking behind New DOTS is embedded within a wider concept of career that locates career choice within broader notions of career/life identity. The approach does not assume that personality traits are known or fixed and does not view self-concept as an unproblematic aspect of development. What it does view as important is the creation of a 'learning-space' for people to develop their ideas of self in the context of their own lives. This is no 'quick fix' solution as the development of self-identity takes time and involves testing and indecision. Cochran (1991) refers to this taking time as 'wavering' and states this should be viewed as normal and necessary when people are in transition. It indicates provision of a 'healthy' space where meaning can catch up with doing. This sense-making then should not be rushed and will involve *learning* to create a career/life narrative.

Careers guidance in the UK is in transition and the time taken to introduce Connexions in England could be viewed as a healthy space where meaning can catch up with doing. We could extend this and state that many careers guidance practitioners are also in a process of learning to create their own changing career/life narratives.

### Cometh the hour!

With the imperative to implement policy it is understandable that we look for 'new' approaches for new situations. There is a danger however that in the search for the new we ignore existing knowledge. Many current dilemmas for careers guidance have been explored in other disciplines and agencies, and we need to avoid re-runs of, for instance, counselling or social work history. A key example here would be the learning that can be gained from other agencies for the development of support and supervision (Edwards, 2002).

Within career theory, interpretative approaches are not new. Audrey Collin (1998) sees the concept of mapping practice against theory as outdated in the rapidly changing environment of practice, and has long advocated the need for interpretative approaches to understand career development (Collin & Young, 1992). Cochran (1991, 1997a) has developed an approach that helps clients to assess possible futures by writing their own career narrative. Savickas (1997a, 1997b) and Peavy (2000a, 2000b) have written extensively on the use of narrative approaches in career counselling (see Reid, 2002).

However, in the current UK context of policy change, research is at a crossroads where established theoretical concepts seem inadequate when applied to current practice (Collin, 2000). In this state of flux greater attention is being paid to 'new' or emerging approaches. Perhaps in the training arena, we have been 'wavering', but now is the time to redefine and redirect what we teach as 'foundational theory'. By '*we*' here I mean *training institutions*, *careers companies* as learning organisations for new and experienced practitioners, and, *professional institutions* as committed deliverers of continuous professional development through courses and publications.

We need to do more than 'bolt on' new and emerging theory to our learning programmes. We need to go beyond outdated notions of equal opportunities and consider what we mean by empowerment and social justice (Irving & Marris, 2002). We also need to incorporate multicultural principles *within* our guidance intervention models (Bimrose, 1996), rather than discuss these in discrete sessions, or merely assign them (and reduce their significance) to 'our equal opportunities policy'.

### **Moving on the debate - understanding narrative-based approaches**

Can interpretative and narrative-based approaches help to deliver any of this? Whilst reading around the topic provoked an enthusiastic response in me, there remain some nagging doubts about how it could be implemented in career guidance practice. I can hear the pragmatists cry, "All very interesting, but tell me how to use it!" So whilst convinced of the value of a narrative approach in terms of its truthfulness, what about its usefulness? What potential does it have for careers guidance in the UK?

This is not an argument against theory but it does highlight the tension created when elegant and eloquent abstract ideas fail to resonate with their intended objects. In other words, will narrative approaches be viewed as esoteric or can they connect with the day-to-day realities of guidance practice?

### **Time to listen and understand**

In allowing the client to 'tell their story' (Egan, 1998) we can help them to find unity through recounting their life /career story and then help them to reconstruct it and plan the new (preferred) story. This approach suggests that we can only begin to help if we have some understanding of events that are especially significant to the individual. Peavy (2000a) offers us what he terms a SocioDynamic perspective that combines a sociological, individual and holistic view of intervention as a general method for life planning. The approach views the individual as both a psychological and a social being operating within multiple contexts. This cautions us to beware an approach that sees the individual as a series of traits, and avoids the reductionist tendency to view an individual as a member of a 'labelled' group.

**The SocioDynamic view moves away from interventions designed to adapt behaviour to the majority norm, to an environment that is 'co-operative, hopeful, and clarifying' (Peavy, 2000b).** In looking at adult motivation in higher education, West (1996) states that to create this environment individuals need to feel valued before they are able to tell their stories in their own way. This is particularly important for those clients who may be the focus of an inclusion policy of intervention. These may be people with less confidence to engage in a discussion of self-identity, or they may be clients who tell their stories in different ways. And, this kind of empathic listening requires *knowledge of self for the practitioner* as well as the client.

When listening to clients' stories we need to acknowledge that in telling their stories we are being presented with an interpretation. If a genuine trust has been established whether this is an accurate interpretation or not, is not important. What is important is the significance for the individual, in other words, their perception of how the event affects their current situation. We need to engage with their cultural context in order to understand their 'world view' (Sue *et al*, 1996). And, this is not about a 'them and us' position, which can be the mindset when we talk

of multicultural approaches. Culture here is more than ethnicity and can refer to differences within the same 'culture'. Within the same culture it is so easy to assume we understand another's position when differences in socio-economic class, age, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, ability and disability can result in very different perspectives on choice and decision making.

For guidance, this suggests the need for a partnership approach where ownership of the outcomes is in the individual's hands. So, before any goals can be discussed, a shared understanding of the situation must be worked on, and clarity sought about meaningful goals and action, *for the client*.

*any recipe for resolving your issue should be personally meaningful to you and should not come from my 'cookbook' (Peavy, 2000b:7).*

Clearly this is time consuming and the doubts over how this can be applied resurface. I have no doubts about the potential of narrative-based approaches, but how committed can we be to the depth of work needed for such long term solutions? Will the requirement for tangible results (however measured) limit the scope of our interventions? Probably, but that is not reason enough to dismiss the approach yet. So, how far can we go with narrative-based approaches, what resources do we need, what 'tales' can we cope with?

### Telling tales – what does it all mean?

'Telling Tales' is the title of the Edwards *et al* (1998) book that brings together reflective accounts on guidance and counselling. The title is deliberately thought provoking and combines a number of possible meanings, **including the notion that some stories are more 'telling' than others**. Locating meaning in action and meaning in career guidance practice, is neither certain nor uncontested from this viewpoint. A discursive perspective that examines the macro concepts of power and the location of meaning, moves away from universal explanations and solutions and points to the essential need to understand individual meaning-making in a social context.

Practitioners involved in the guidance *process*, do not simply apply theory to practice, but work with clients using knowledge that is 'present at hand' in the immediacy of an interview, and what is 'ready to hand', i.e. that which emerges via reflection (Collin & Young, 1992). In doing this they begin to explore possibilities with clients based on the *learning* taking place about who they might become. The practitioner's role is not to direct this but to help clients to create their own story. We already know how to do this as trained using a staged model, where the first steps build the foundation for the client to 'tell their story' (Egan, 1998). The aim is to build rapport, in a culturally appropriate way, to give clients the space to begin this narration.

The concept of the narrated self (Harre, 1998) refers to the self that is voiced. This means that others can know us and understand us by listening to the stories in which we reveal 'who we are'. This idea of self is located in experience around significant events in our social life. As a result individuals learn to speak from that particular focal point – they tell their stories from that perspective (Peavy, 2000b). The current interest in assessment tools is unlikely to encompass this sense of self if not based on dialogue and interaction. In order to benefit from such tools, the client must already have a developed sense of identity. Such interventions can do more harm to self-esteem than good, if used at an inappropriate stage of the helping relationship.

Working with narrative may be a better way of helping the client to enhance self-esteem, by working toward a positive self-identity in order to research life/career possibilities. This development of self-identity would be nurtured alongside recognition of the importance of *esteem for others* in a diverse, complex and dynamic world.

## Narrative approaches in career counselling, Savickas and Cochran

In the move from positivistic to interpretative models, Savickas (1997a) suggests that the development of narrative approaches in the USA is located within a **21<sup>st</sup> century preoccupation with meaning in contrast to a 20<sup>th</sup> century focus on facts**. For example, Cochran's (1997b) model is very different from 'scientific' matching approaches. The model is characterised by seven episodes which progress through elaborating the 'problem' as a story line around the current situation, to constructing the conclusion of the story as the desired ending. Working together counsellor and client define the gap in between and probe needs, values, interests and abilities. This involves exploration of the individual's deeply felt motives, which are then built into the 'plot', so that the emerging possibilities for the future are seen as relevant.

This is termed 'giving life a point' by Savickas (1997a), and emphasises the need to locate narrative interventions within their wider social context. If interventions are to be meaningful and motivating, the point must be both understood and linked to a desired outcome. This stage or 'episode' in the Cochran model concludes when a satisfactory life history, as background, has been formed as a foundation for the possible future. This is described as '**founding a future narrative**'.

*The client must decide at this turning point what to bring forward into the future and what to leave behind.... The future narrative should show how the plots in the old story can be harmoniously integrated into a new story (Savickas, 1997a:177).*

What follows are 'enactment episodes' where a possible future can be explored. These include exploring options and gaining information about the future narrative and testing this against reality. The outcome would be positive if the future role appears to fit, in other words a positive 'typecasting'. Where this occurs, the client, supported by the counsellor, changes their life patterns to permit the enactment of the new role. The reality testing will need to acknowledge the social context in which the client operates beyond the cocoon of the counselling interview. Such aspects must be brought into the work as the dialogue is not merely two-way, and any future goals will not be realistic if this wider dimension is ignored. And, we need to appreciate that what is realistic will mean different things to different people (Colley, 2000). The creation of a narrative plot does suggest a linear progress and it needs to be acknowledged that the rest of life can intervene in the planned narrative. This can result in periods away from the story or rewrites of the story.

To enact in the narrative may mean changing behaviour immediately in order to enhance motivation and confidence. Savickas (1997a) suggests that if, for example, the desired future is to become an artist then 'one starts painting tonight'. These activities help to bridge the gap between the current situation and the possible future. This need for immediate action can be thwarted if the mechanisms are not in place to support the individual – clearly there are resource implications here. At a basic level, will clients 'start painting tonight' if they do not have access to the materials or an environment within which to enact their possible selves? This kind of intervention requires policy makers and fund holders to think 'outside the box' of the usual education, training and employment solutions. This is of particular importance when considering the motivation of young people who are the current focus of inclusion policies.

## Building a career narrative - life before work

*The heart of my counselling model is to identify a life theme by comprehending how clients actively master what they have passively suffered (Savickas, 1997b:11).*

Savickas, citing Adler (1956), states this progression from symptom to strength is a movement from 'a felt minus to a perceived plus'. It is a *counselling* model used with clients who may have chosen career pathways that are, or have become, dysfunctional. In this model, **time must be given to analyse personal stories in order to locate the life theme**. Savickas asks the client to recount early recollections and to identify *role models* (which can be real or fictional

characters). This helps to discover deeply rooted *needs* as reflected in the early recollections, and, *values* as reflected in the role models. The practitioner's task is to connect the two in order to move toward the life theme of the individual.

This again places interests in a context. The gap between early recollections, and role models / future goals, becomes the working space to identify the *interests*. Interests then become the possible solutions, as they are built around a life theme seen as meaningful by the individual.

This article is limited to an introduction of the narrative life theme exploration model. It must be noted that Savickas does not view a narrative approach as replacing the benefits of using established approaches for example, trait/factor theory.

*Counseling that narrates the client's life theme combines objective person-position matching with the subjective meaning created by the client's spirited quest for meaning (Savickas, 1997b:18).*

This suggests that the narrative approach can be integrated into other models. Research that looked at the use of established theory, concluded that career guidance practice in the UK integrated a range of theory and was not based on the use of singular theories (Kidd, 1996). Does this increase the possibility that practitioners and their managers will view an interpretation and integration of narrative-based approaches as desirable? The question remains, however - how do we apply a career counselling concept to the UK guidance context?

### **New interpretations of existing knowledge**

Clearly, what interpretative and narrative-based approaches emphasise is the need to explore 'meaning' by allowing the client to construct a career narrative that resonates significantly with their values and interests for life, not just for a job. More is involved here than fitting young people into available educational courses, training schemes and jobs. For example, Cochran (1997b) invoking an image of the social system as a play, sees career counsellors as 'role casters'. However, in this role casting it remains important that guidance professionals retain their status as 'impartial broker' between the needs of individuals and the state and do not become agents of social control (Watts, 1996). The ability to retain this independence when working with disadvantaged clients is already being questioned in the Connexions era (Roberts, 2002).

In the use of such terms as interpretative and narrative-based, it is clear that what we are considering is a significant move away from the psychological and rational (scientific) approaches to career intervention. Employing the concept of discourse within a social context, Usher and Edwards (1998) remind us that a notion of self-development and autonomy can often mask the tension between the formation of self-identity and the influence of power and politics. The need for enhanced guidance for certain individuals in the UK context, can be seen as an aspect of post-modern life that purports to extend involvement, but only within parameters that accord with more powerful views of what work or life style is seen as meaningful.

Usher and Edwards comment that in a post-modern world, the authority of governments is realised through 'power at a distance'. For example in the education field, this can be achieved through the self-governing practices evoked by the need for lifelong learning. What part does guidance play in this? Guidance, with its focus on individual choice and self-determination, can be the foreground for developing self-identity and 'employability skills' for 'realistic' choices. However an uncritical delivery of guidance intervention, focused on individual development that ignores the wider aspects of social context, power and politics, risks partial, 'sticking plaster' treatments (Reid, 1999).

Usher and Edwards with reference to this wider context of power and knowledge allude to,

*the paradox that guidance and counselling is becoming more central in a period when the achievements of its goals appears to be more unlikely (1998:212).*

So, can an exploration of narrative approaches help practitioners retain their impartiality? In the world of busy practice, how can practitioners integrate models derived from psychology with its emphasis on individual autonomy? When trying to build a new identity, individuals can be overwhelmed by the problems they face and will find approaches that do not engage with the social interchange of their lives unrealistic. Criticism of a humanistic, narrative approach can be made if the model views the individual as sole author of their story (Gergen, 1994). Gergen does not take up the polar position that identity is determined by socio-economic status, but that personal narrative is arrived at through interaction with others.

So, the reality test of career/life narrative work with a client needs to focus on both self-esteem, but also esteem of others, in order to recognise that action occurs in a social context and in an interactive world. Further, negotiating action moves a narrative approach out of a retrospective past. Young and Valach note:

*Once we bring narrative into fields like action and culture, we begin to address the problem of the separation of narrative and reality. Narrative is more than persons spinning stories as they sit in their armchairs (2000:186).*

### **Building a new identity – an example from practice**

A good example of the concept of *exploring the interests* and *locating the life theme* in order to create new career narratives, as described by Savickas, is the Danish Open Youth Education programme. This programme was initiated in 1996 to combat educational drop out rates (Plant, 2000) and, although not named as a ‘narrative approach’, helped the young people involved to build new career stories based on their real (rather than realistic) interests. The success of the scheme attracted others, so that not all of the young people involved had the kind of personal or educational problems that can lead to disadvantage. Many were able to build plans for career interests way beyond the established opportunities. Whilst many opted for more traditional choices, others aimed ‘at vocations such as Adventure Tour Guide, Falconer or Clown’ (Plant 2000:26). With no fixed curriculum, and no age limit but with flexible guidelines and financial support, which sometimes included study periods abroad, this created the need for 1-1 guidance that was truly collaborative. **The agreed plan recognised that the participants wanted the freedom to design their own projects, not fit into what already existed, however innovative.**

By 1999, 14,000 individuals had taken part in what appears to be a successful intervention in terms of both completion and ‘positive’ drop out rates. Plant comments that:

*About half of the participants continue in further and higher education, thus, in practice, living up to the official goal of motivating the students of Open Youth Education to pursue Lifelong Learning (Plant, 2000:27).*

If we relate this to the Cochran model, these participants have been able to move forward to ‘crystallizing a decision’ (Cochran, 1997b). Here clients have moved their past self into the new character by crystallizing the decision which brings movement and closure. This movement can be exploring the occupation further, or getting a job or training in the interest area, or reconstruction of the narrative to test different ‘enactment episodes’.

The Danish scheme is managed through a planned programme that works towards a career/life theme. The notion of ‘positive’ drop out encompasses opportunities that arise on the way and acknowledges that horizons change for people on the move (Gadamer, 1979). So flexibility is

important - steps towards the narrative life/theme may lead to a positive outcome, earlier than expected, or a reconstruction of the narrative.

So, keeping our feet on the ground, what are the potential benefits and possible limitations of applying a narrative approach to career guidance practice in the UK?

### Benefits

On the side of enthusiasm, a narrative-based approach,

- Is more than just interesting, it has an attraction that beguiles, fascinates and can energise both clients and practitioners
- Can help us to think creatively about our interventions *with* clients
- Pays due attention to the client's story and can help to reveal, rather than ignore or underestimate, personal preoccupations
- Avoids selective summarising of what is heard, which could frustrate the client who may feel 'unheard'
- Can lead to realistic plans based on taking people's interests and 'worldviews' seriously
- Using *testing* and *enactment* steps can encourage a sense of achievement and agency, which helps build confidence and self-esteem. This can demonstrate how we can evolve out of the past, rather than remain trapped within it
- Acknowledges individual traits and contextual influence and change, can make visible and challenge self-imposed (limiting) 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson *et al*, 1996)
- In taking time to establish a working relationship between practitioner and the individual, can help to avoid making assumptions about what is 'best' based on inaccurate beliefs about what is important for the individual
- Can help to develop articulacy by giving clients the space and time to tell their stories in their own way
- Avoids 'revolving door' syndrome as the client is less likely to be dealt short term, 'quick fix' solutions

### Limitations

On the side of caution, a narrative-based approach,

- Would not be recommended for inexperienced or untrained practitioners as the potential harm to a client is obvious (see McLeod, 1996, 1997 for a discussion in relation to counselling)
- In contrast to the current interest in Solution Focused Brief Therapy (O'Connell, 1998) with its 'problem free talk', could be seen as placing too much emphasis on past problems
- Is a long term project requiring considerable commitment from all involved
- If applied within a deficit model which views current behaviour only in terms of problems to be corrected, could lead to 'pathologising' the individual
- If the focus is too individualistic and does not incorporate social context, can ignore the influence of family or community on decision making, and therefore may not be suitable for some groups
- May not suit those who are uncomfortable telling their story, who need extra help to articulate their concerns and interests
- Will not appeal to positivists who would view the lack of 'scientific' and quantitative research in the field as problematic
- Is time consuming and costly.

The final economic point could be the determining factor, but is this false economy? How will we measure the success of current guidance interventions? Will narrative-based approaches be considered viable only in situations where cost is covered, by the individual or a well-resourced organisation or institution? In the context of Connexions, is this an approach that can help lubricate transitions for our clients or should it remain a *counselling*, rather than career guidance practice? By adopting such techniques are we colluding with the view that guidance for individuals is part of a 'cure' for social exclusion? As Roberts states:

*We need to be clear: guidance may assist but it cannot be the main answer to the disadvantages that arise from wider socio-economic inequalities (2002:9).*

We can enable, but we need to be beware of the claim that we empower. If we adopt, integrate and interpret more and more counselling approaches are we moving beyond our expertise and mandate? Guidance activity and intervention could become part of the problem if we apply approaches without a proper grounding in the underpinning theory.

**However**, we do need to develop our practice in the face of the growing network society with all its post-modern concerns. Modern working life is fragmented and that includes guidance work. 'Work' includes good, poor and indifferent jobs, and for many will include periods working in the informal economy and periods of no work. Most commentators acknowledge that our understanding of career needs to be broad and no longer concerned with making one choice. In this transitional period of doubt for career theory and research (Collin, 2000), approaches will need to be tried *in practice*.

The demands and constraints of present day practice mean practitioners cannot wait for research to evaluate the application of theory for particular circumstances. Although we speak of pilot schemes that can 'navigate' the way forward, in reality work organisation and change feels mostly like white-water rafting, you're on the raft, in the water or left upstream! The training arena is one place where we can take time to introduce new interpretations of existing theory. How could we include interpretative and narrative-based approaches in professional training at all levels?

### Using narrative material in initial training

Bill Law's contribution to the conference demonstrates how narrative material can be incorporated into career learning; it is accessible and can be read by or with the client. Stories can offer images and understandings based on real people in real lives. This can avoid what, to those unsure of the benefits of career guidance, must often feel like coercive views of possible futures. In terms of building a sense of career/life identity the questions asked do not focus on official ideas about what individuals need to consider (Law, 2001). Imposed ideas often result in submissive responses in careers education sessions, already viewed by many students as marginal to the main curriculum.

If we are serious about social equity, the use of narrative approaches in careers education settings may prove particularly useful for clients of diverse backgrounds. For example, in a multicultural context, the development of narrative approaches can recognise and value oral traditions of what counts as knowledge. It can encourage students, perhaps in targeted groups, to explore their cultural backgrounds in relation to their future decision-making (Barker & Irving, 2002). Further, provided we acknowledge that not all groups have easy access to new technologies, ways of using narrative can encompass the use of multimedia – not all stories need to be in the written word.

In our training courses we could encourage practitioners to make creative use of narrative approaches for their guidance group work. In one-to-one work we need to be sure they can see the limitations of a humanistic, client-centred approach and give them access to the material that will help them to incorporate multicultural principles into their interviewing model (Sue *et al*, 1996).

### More than case studies

So, as introduced earlier, a possible step for introducing narrative-based approaches into guidance practice can be through initial training. Of course within education the use of narrative is understood as a valuable strategy for teaching and learning, but how can we develop its use in the career guidance field? We already use case studies in career education sessions but working with narrative can achieve far more than working with case studies. By using other people's stories, young people, who often have difficulty in articulating ideas about themselves, can be helped to identify their own life themes and interests. Stories then, can be used to help clients move from the general to the specific to the individual, by encouraging them to develop and test their own future narratives. The difference between case study work and using narratives, however, is not immediately apparent – what's the difference?

Narratives have an immediacy that is lost when the story becomes written into a case study. The case study is often written to encourage the recognition of what the writer thinks is important. Questions about the case study can be posed to guide reading or to emphasise major themes and specific learning points. For example, when I write a case study for our students (students undertaking guidance qualifications) I have these points in mind so the story is 'manipulated' to these ends.

Working with case studies is fine, quite interesting but only engaging up to a point according to the level of interest of the reader. Is this because, in many respects, the presenter of the case study already makes the interpretation? This may diminish the goal of active learning as the value of the story is weakened. Case studies are sometimes seen by our students as difficult to work with and can lead to responses such as 'we do not know the full story', or, 'we haven't got enough to go on'.

Narratives however, appear to provoke a different response. Un-interpreted, the raw story opens up thinking to the possibility of further and often deeper interpretation. It is difficult to argue with; clarity, ambiguity and first-voice speech gives authenticity and less time is spent commenting on the grammar! Accepting that any transcription *may* be selective, the narrative voice has nevertheless, an exclusive reality that situates the reader as direct recipient of the story. Put another way, the story speaks uniquely to each listener. This should not lead us to conclude however, that speech is always more 'real' as it too *re-presents* action and meaning. We need to remain aware that the selection of what to tell can involve rejection of other parts of a story. We also need to recognise that language is not neutral, but culturally determined. However, the language in narratives is original, connections and meanings are explanation free and are not forced upon the reader in the same way as in case studies (Merttens, 1998).

When using narratives (other people's stories), our students appeared far more interested, engaged and produced insightful comments less hampered by feelings that they were being tested in some way. Initially I made the mistake of giving them some questions to guide their discussions, but opened up the possibility that they could ignore these and just work with the text. Fortunately many did! I now give the story and ask them what they think is going on in the context of the particular learning module (in the example that follows, we were considering vocational choice development and decision making).

An example will illustrate this. **First, a case study with questions to guide group discussion.**

*Mark is a young person in care who has a record as a young offender involved in repeated car theft and 'joy-riding'. Lately Mark seems to have gained some maturity and now has a better understanding of rule-governed behaviour. For example he can now see the point of car insurance and how reckless driving can cause injury to others. However, Mark does not consider himself to have been a 'crazy' joy rider and feels he does know how to drive properly. He is now taking proper driving lessons and when he passes his test, he says, will probably buy a car.*

*Before he was placed in care, Mark tells you, he had problems at home and often broke the rules. He knows it is hard 'getting back on the straight and narrow'. In care there are house rules, he tells you, that you have to abide by and you have to sign an agreement. He speaks of his Mum with affection but is aware that his behaviour at home was sometimes silly, but disruptive nonetheless. He asks you, with momentary indignation, if you understand that people have different upbringings, which makes them behave in different ways with their mums.*

1. *What's going on here – how is the sense of self portrayed?*
2. *What more would an adviser want to know?*
3. *How might current policy be helpful or unhelpful about this?*
4. *How about the theories and models that we've looked at – how do they 'fit'?*
5. *How would you help this person script a possible future?*

#### **What follows is Mark's story, told by Mark**

*As you get older you come to realise, know what I mean, that you shouldn't do it, it's not worth it. I didn't realise before about insurance, running someone over, but I weren't one of those crazy ones, you know. I can drive properly. I ain't not getting into a car and going Brrwhrrrrrrrr (Mark made extremely loud and realistic car revving noises) 90 miles round the corner and all that. I drive like a proper driver. Fair enough, you think (he interpreted my thoughts rightly) 'they all say that!' but you know, most people in a car, they go speeding. That's what joyriding is all about. For me it weren't like that. For me it was more getting used to being in a car and driving the car. I'll take my test now, I'm learning, and then I'll probably buy a car...*

*It's hard getting back on the straight and narrow. Here they've got house rules. You have to abide by them, sign an agreement. There is rules at home but I break them. Sounds silly. Bang doors...I love my Mum but I've had problems all over my life, it's not easy (Mark raised his voice, as if indignant). People have different upbringings, do you understand. Some people are different towards their mums from others, know what I mean – so there you go (and he seemed to relax again).<sup>1</sup>*

How much more powerful and engaging is Mark's story told by Mark! There is a sense of the real, active voice, which speaks more directly than the interpretation in the case study. You have to work with it and make your own interpretations, and as a real story, it is not a complete story or the end of the story.

As yet, I make no claims based on any evaluative research for using narratives as a learning tool. However when using this story (and a contrasting story) with students, I was surprised by the resulting depth of our discussion. For example, the use of metaphor in conveying meaning and self-concept surfaced as an interesting area for discussion (Mignot, 2000). Our active engagement with the material and the enjoyment and ownership of the learning that took place appeared significant. Certainly by not determining what to learn, it seemed that more learning took place (Thorpe *et al*, 1993).

### **Meeting course requirements**

Learning and new knowledge, and/or the need for it, often emerges through reflection. However, we need to beware the uncritical rhetoric of the 'reflective practitioner' so often reduced to mapping exercises in portfolios. When asking students to reflect on learning in initial training, can we move from the dominant focus on 'how' aims and learning outcomes

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Curtis (1999:60) *Children Who Break the Law*, London: Waterside Press, quoted in Law, B. (2000) *Autobiography: The people's career development research?* The Career-Learning Network, unpublished.

are met and address more fundamental issues of 'why' they chose to work in career guidance? Would employing a narrative approach here be more reflective if students engage with the implicit and explicit values, meanings and significance of guidance practice? Training which explores the complexity of the current context for 'career' itself places biographical strains on students. Students have to find ways of redefining themselves according to a range of contradictory pressures located in the various roles they negotiate. A narrative approach to this learning is likely to be more self-critical and meaningful than any mapping exercise.

So, can we practice what we preach? Can we introduce more narratives into our teaching of the theoretical bases of guidance practice? Can we encourage more use of stories in our training for guidance group work in careers education settings? Can we employ narrative to enable students to address their development of practice as a more authentic process for critical reflexivity? And if doing the latter, we must allow students to move to the personal, to place themselves in the practice they analyse and avoid the academic tradition of the third person singular. Will these steps help to move narrative approaches into guidance practice?

### Summing up

If we recognise that theory is always transformed in the process of application (Eraut, 1994) then it seems there is scope to interpret and integrate narrative-based approaches for use in career guidance practice. How this happens may not be understood with any degree of certainty, and it seems likely will not occur unless viewed as useful by practitioners. It will only prove useful if it speaks directly to the client's problem, but the problem needs clarifying first. In other words, 'new' theory can help the practitioner to understand the problem *before* trying to address it, albeit that any theory may only provide part of the answer. I would agree with Edwards that 'knowledgeable practice (therefore) requires more than practical knowledge' (1998: 30). In challenging circumstances new learning is required to extend practical interviewing and information giving skills. Whilst 'getting on with the job' may be the prime concern (Closs, 2001), effectiveness will not be achieved if the tools used for the job are old, outdated and less relevant for the changing work context.

Such technical viewpoints undermine the ability of career practitioners and need to be challenged. Practitioners already go beyond what is known and often have to work using their intuition in new and untried circumstances. Practitioners recognise that the current working context requires them to think beyond their initial training and existing experience. They do reflect on their practice and want to extend their skills and knowledge according to the needs of their clients (ICG, 1999). However, space and time in busy working lives will be required to achieve this, and 'sheep-dip' courses that are not directly applicable will not be money well spent.

So, what interpretative and narrative-based approaches can help to do is place context in the foreground. Rather than use theory that is more concerned with general laws of behaviour, it places the focus on the interaction between adviser and client and locates this within what is meaningful for the client. People do not separate the rest of their lives from the career choices they make (including deciding to become a careers practitioner); decisions in a changing world are influenced by and grounded in prior experience. Allowing clients to tell their stories can help us to understand their concept of career and what is possible. Such an approach moves us closer to 'reality' as we can acknowledge that people are more than a collection of traits and although influenced by, are not always determined by their environment. A narrative approach can allow clients to see their life/career path differently and with ownership of the narrative and acknowledgement of their social context, new meanings can be developed.

**But**, in the current context, is this grand theory, too focussed on understanding and not focussed enough on action? Is such an approach less applicable than cognitive approaches that focus on assessment, action, monitoring, and management – all viewed as an effective way of fixing people quickly? Does a narrative-based approach appeal more to researchers and

academics than it does to practitioners? The approach highlights the need for the practitioner to be self-aware; an aspect that gets lost in cognitive-behavioural ‘teaching’ approaches (McLeod, 1993), but is the approach still too abstract at present?

At the moment it remains on the boundary between career theory, explaining behaviour, and guidance intervention. So, whilst useful in training, the voice in the back of my head is saying, “If I were a practitioner, I’d want a model, a framework that is adapted from career theory and career counselling for use in career guidance.” Is this possible and economically viable? There is an interesting action-research proposal somewhere here! Practitioners are always operating in advance of known theory; can they be given more space to engage in such research?

In terms of the development of ‘new’ career theory, we are in that healthy ‘wavering’ space. Returning to Dr Seuss, we cannot risk ‘staying out’, not trying out new approaches. Some approaches will prove to be more valuable than others according to the circumstances, but practitioners will determine their usefulness. In the meantime practitioners are working in Connexions services with real, not pilot, clients. Narrative-based approaches appear to offer an insightful way of working with clients where long-term benefits really are the goal. Allowing clients to tell their story and helping them to build new narratives within a meaningful context, helps clients to understand themselves better. Listening to stories also helps the rest of us to bridge the divide between public knowledge of concepts such as motivation theory, and private interpretations sited in real lives (West, 1996).

So, certainly more than small talk, but there is a need for further research and practical interpretation to turn the approach into a more useful dialogue for career guidance intervention for the UK context. The potential is not yet clear – *the streets are not marked*, but the conference and this publication aims to extend the dialogue on the usefulness of narrative approaches for guidance practice. Can our dialogue light up some more windows?

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## Chapter Four

This last chapter is framed as a dialogue, between myself as the editor and the three authors of this paper. It is an attempt to address some of the key questions that emerged at the conference as well as those that have subsequently arisen from our own discussions in relation to this debate. The questions are deliberately provocative in places and endeavour to prise open some of these complex ideas more fully. There is a lot of rich material here which should repay careful reading and consideration. It is not an easy read however. As you will have appreciated having got this far, narrative and auto/biographical approaches are immensely rich for illuminating and giving meaning to human experience - so relevant to those working in career and personal guidance work. Yet the central ideas are still evolving and taking shape, and maybe still possess a certain elusive and elastic-type quality that makes their application to guidance training and practice difficult to determine. None of the writers are under any illusion about this

### Question 1

Are Bill, Linden and Hazel talking about the same thing? In what way are their perspectives on biography and narrative similar and how, if at all, are they different? Are the differences significant and in what way?

#### Bill:

*Yes and no. My focus is on narrative, with biography as a sub-set. We are both interested in the process of biography, but I am explicit about this in different terms - drawn, in part, from literary theory. Also, I see its use by both learners and their helpers in understanding career. For me it is a necessary part of the apparatus of research and development in the professional field. Linden sees its use in a wider historical context than I, and his interest is, I think, more strongly therapeutic. But these are not contradictions, just perspectives. Hazel's paper provides a professional frame which is capable of accommodating all of this.*

#### Linden:

*I agree. I am interested in the business of biography and career in a culture where the older social scripts that people were expected to live by, as in previous agrarian and industrial societies, have been undermined, and where society is throwing more responsibility on individuals to choose their own identities. I think people, for a range of reasons, are also choosing change as well as change choosing them (witness the number of self-help manuals in any bookshop). Inherited templates are frequently challenged, although, some of this, a la Foucault, may be a consequence of a powerful capitalist consumerism that packages identities like commodities and yet leaves people feeling empty and inauthentic. The idea of narrative belongs alongside biography and career because of the importance of stories: people need stories for direction, meaning and basic well-being. And there is a relationship between the capacity to compose a good story - which includes having the narrative resources to do so - and finding purpose and direction in a life as well as psychological health. The professional issues, and constraints of practice, need to be located within this wider frame, rather than practical and ideological constraints constantly determining what is to be thought. But Hazel you are right to be constantly pulling us back in this practical direction: there has to be a dialectic here, between wider conceptual awareness and the world of practice.*

#### Hazel:

*I see commonalities in terms of questioning the taken-for-granted views of the purpose, process and outcomes of 'inquiry' in the field. Both approaches are concerned, I think, in taking an ethical and moral position in relation to how we gather data, i.e. who owns it (authors it) and what we do with it. Speaking on behalf of others as a way to*

*'truth' is suspect, and what these approaches offer is a route for others to speak for themselves – something to do with the problem of representation that exists in the use of traditional research methods. But, such an approach does mean that the reader has to work harder to analyse his or her own response to the stories told! So, this cautions against us providing readers with the one view – the correct answer.*

## Question 2

Why is it important to understand one's own story and sense of agency as part of understanding other people's stories?

**Bill:**

*We are all part of other people's stories, and they are part of ours. It is, however, true that some contemporary autobiographical writing offers a limited understanding of that shared involvement. Contemporary writing increasingly portrays self as 'victim' or 'hero': to greater or lesser extents, the former complains 'he/they/things have treated me unfairly/badly/cruelly...'; the latter claims '... you see how right/clever/brave I was to endure/resist/overcome. The morphing of victim-to-hero is becoming a particularly popular theme in celeb-biog. The writing - often enough 'ghosted' - is crafted with varying degree of subtlety. But, however cunningly written, self-serving autobiography allows for only one point-of-view. Everybody else is, more or less, scenery.*

*The trend is relevant to this question. Self-serving and unrealistically individualistic stories seem not to be useful learning resources for careers work. In the most deeply boring cases this is undoubtedly true. But, we must accept that all learning comes from imperfect resources. By drawing on their own experience people can imagine how a story, that seems somehow not to stack up, might be re-told. More importantly they can learn by telling their own story, in what they now appreciate are more authentic terms. They can learn not necessarily wholly to accept everything that he/they/we thinks might fit well to their own story.*

*But, to be fair, much autobiographical disclosure is self-insightful enough to understand how one's own heroism and victim-hood feed on each other. I list some examples of what I regard as authentic writing in my chapter. Some of that material is more than thirty years old, and powerful for its evocation of still relevant and socially situated learning.*

*If there really are 'better' and 'worse' biographies, it is that the better ones avoid the portrayal of hero-victim to the exclusion of all else. Other people emerge from the scenery, to be understood - each in their own way - also as heroes and victims. Such writing understands that it is not possible to appreciate 'me' wholly in terms of my free-standing individuality. Becoming a person is a process of exchange with attachments and cultures which - for both good and ill - frame and feed who we are becoming. In that way, we are all in debt and we all need forgiveness. But in that way we are all surrounded and need to move on.*

*It is the tension-laden dynamic layering of these themes, variations and developments that make the use of biography so useful to learning. No two people will take the same learning from the same story. But, in all kinds of important ways, other people's stories give us each a clue to our own. There is as much to be learned from other people's stories - even where it is self-serving.*

**Linden:**

*This is a fundamental question, with important implications for the way we conceptualise guidance and what is involved in enabling others to make important, informed and imaginative choices. I agree with Bill that too often popular autobiographies are formulaic and simplistic, with subjects presented either, for*

*example, as heroes or villains, successes or failures. These one-dimensional accounts, drawing on narrative stereotypes, do a grave disservice to the complexity of human experience, and to the complexity of individual narrators. All of us, always and inevitably, have richer and more varied stories to tell than such linear, polarised accounts suggest. There are, as Bill suggests, bad stories: those riddled, for instance, with grandiosity, narcissism, self-deception, illusions, escapism or self-denial. The 'good' story, on the other hand, becomes narratively more complex, experientially more open, more reflexive and sensitive to our weaknesses and failures as well as successes; it is a story that is never complete. The good story, for present purposes, focuses on becoming a person, recognising, in Bill's compelling words, that this is 'a process of exchange with the attachments and cultures which – for good or ill – frame and feed our being'. Our own being, as well as that of the other; in understanding ourselves we become more attuned to the other, and the strengths and weaknesses of their story.*

*It was feminism that taught that the personal was also deeply political, and that at the heart of human experience were forces that either liberate or domesticate us. Story-telling liberates or domesticates too: giving voice, putting words to experience, empowering us to name, however imperfectly, who we are and what we might be, on more of our own terms; or their antitheses, closing us down in an ontological, existential death. Good story telling often focuses on the people who constrained or encouraged us, the dramatis personae that, in a basic psychological sense, are internalised, for better as well as worse. We need, as practitioners, to remember those who guided, supported and facilitated us and to weave into the narrative awareness of the spaces – like higher education, maybe - and the stories that gave us hope. Most guidance practitioners, I suspect, have been taught to learn from lists, or a spurious psychological and individualistic science, rather than, more experientially, from their own lives and those of others. This is what I term the auto/biographical challenge.*

**Hazel:**

*Ouch! Dealing with Linden's last point, as a teacher of guidance practitioners I would not agree that most guidance practitioners have been taught to learn from lists! The 'teaching' of guidance is interdisciplinary and will draw upon the insights gained from a range of social sciences. The work of Ken Roberts, of course, has done much to alert trainers and trainees to the importance of a sociological approach, and the need to incorporate an understanding of the social context of the person on the receiving end of guidance. Bill's work on Community Interaction Theory provided a bridge between over-individualistic and over-structural accounts of how individuals make career decisions. But, I agree that in practice this learning gets stored where the need to meet targets, or to place a young person in an 'opportunity' to secure them benefits, takes primacy. And, much careers education seems to be about lists in terms of making a single choice via endless worksheet experiences. And also, Linden is quite right that practitioners are not encouraged to use the experience from their own lives – perhaps this will change for those who work in the core areas of Connexions. However, to be effective in the PA role in Connexions will require an understanding of self in order to understand others.*

*Provided we do encourage clients to 'tell their story', they do not provide us with a list of experiences or facts, they tell us about events. These events are not a series of unrelated occurrences but form patterns that are part of the individual's story. We all see the world and imagine ourselves in that world, past, present and future, in terms of stories. These are complex thoughts and I'm trying to avoid wandering into some 'ontological hall of mirrors' here (I've been dying for an opportunity to use that phrase!). We learn through stories and we construct stories to make sense of events and our experience of them. We can enter the world of someone else's story but our understanding is inevitably framed by our own culture and experience, built on*

*cultural norms of what's 'real or meaningful'. We need to understand our stories in order to be aware of how we make sense of other people's stories. And, this is more important perhaps, when we cannot make sense of other people's stories. When working with clients that we do not understand – we are not relating to their story – we do not understand their experiences. Our own stories are the vantage point from which we understand others – that's why it is so important.*

### Question 3

All three writers suggest the value of other people's stories as a means of helping 'clients' frame and understand their own story. Does this assume that stories are therefore linear and are always about progress? Also, what does this mean about stories that don't have a 'happy ending'? Stories are often about dysfunctional experiences. Where do these fit?

#### Bill:

*All stories are progressive in the sense that they 'move on'. Some stories are progressive in other senses. But, if we are going to use them at all we must take the stories that are there, and not select – between or within – in pursuit of what might be regarded as constructive. In any event, who can agree on what is constructive? And on what basis? All stories go wrong somewhere. Surely, seeing dysfunctional stories is as useful as any other aspect of a story? People urge me to make use of Richard Branson whom they regard as inspirational. Sorry, but I can't see it. I find 'Joey's' dysfunction much more inspiring. The kid's alive, afloat, feeling deep and thinking hard. What else is there – part from money? I'd really like to know what Joey did later.*

#### Linden:

*Stories are often non-linear and non-progressive. They and people get stuck, while, for some, the story may be, including within education, one of loss, failure and disappointment. John Field has pointed out that we are easily seduced by the heroic journey narrative, especially in relation to educational participation, and it is not always like that. This may become more so in a culture in which lifelong learning becomes, at times, more of an instrument of moral authoritarianism and social control. Learn, or be damned (deskilled is the term used, but the bite of the rhetoric feels medieval at times). But yes, as Bill says, the point is to recognise dysfunction and work with it, informed by a cultural as well as psychological literacy.*

#### Hazel:

*In terms of narrative and careers counselling in the USA (Cochran, Savickas) it is about 'counselling' and suggests a use for dysfunctional past narratives (although not exclusively). In this case, the counsellor's task is to help the 'client' understand the choices made that are causing dysfunction in lives – not just jobs. Other people's stories can highlight why choices are made and are used by Savickas to illustrate the process as well as suggest 'happy endings'. However, a humanistic approach does assume that individuals are positive and seek 'happy endings'. Seeking help suggests a desire for change. If the approach ignored the social context of the individual then it could be accused of being selective (does Solution Focused Brief Therapy do this if the helper insists on excluding any negative reflection?).*

*It is important to recognise that many clients will come with dysfunctional stories, and/or that the rest of their lives can interrupt work towards a more positive story. However, we must be careful not to judge an individual's past or present from our own viewpoint. When we use such terms as 'dysfunctional' we start to label clients and cast them in a negative light – what was referred to in the conference as 'applying deficit models'. Also, where life intervenes, a change to the story, even if as the result of a crisis, may lead to a positive outcome. Crisis, as we know, has two faces, and non-planned for events can lead to a change in the horizon, but, horizons will change for people on the move!*

**Question 4**

We can all project future stories – those we'd like to write for ourselves and these may be fanciful. In a guidance context, where does reality-checking come into the frame? Does the articulation of the narrative/story take primacy over the above? How are these tensions resolved?

**Bill:**

*Story telling does not exclude reality. It startles me that it is necessary to make such a claim. I regard stories as, in all the important senses, more real than much we churn out in guidance. The feature which impresses me is the counter-position of (in literary terms) 'character' and 'events'. There are times when the inner life of the character is the dominant 'reality'; there are times when, if reality of it is not shared in events involving others, then the thing will unravel. Only a story can tell you how.*

**Linden:**

*I agree. At the risk of being really contentious, however, reality checking – in the sense of never encouraging challenge and narrative reflexivity in relation to the great social structuring forces of class, gender and race, for instance, in composing careers – has been far too much of a dominant value in some of the guidance world. There is a hard world out there, which never fails to intrude: it has shaped careers agendas and individual's stories all the time; it constantly keeps people in their place, or, in another language, ensures social reproduction. It teaches 'this is not for the likes of me', in a society where the imprints of class remain ubiquitous. The point is, in part, to consider how things, however marginally, might be slightly different, by working narratively. Which, in turn, depends on the capacity to listen empathically, with a socially critical edge, enabling the other to be a little more open, reflexive and aware of different possibilities, however limited.*

**Hazel:**

*Me too! Whose reality are we upholding here? Perhaps we are reacting badly to the term 'reality checking'. Reality checking is of course part of what careers advisers are expected to do within the exploration and planning action stages of an interview. However, how you do it is important, and effectiveness rests upon the relationship that has been built between adviser and client. Reality checking, using the skills of challenging, needs to be sensitive. I always advise students to adopt the Columbo approach rather than Cracker approach (for students old enough to know both TV detective series!). In other words, a la Columbo, "There is something here I don't quite understand, perhaps you can help me, when you said...?". We need also to acknowledge that a young person's view of a real opportunity, as part of a narrative, may not conform to a policy maker's view. For example, if you live in a community where the illegal or informal economy grants you status and gets you wads of cash, this is likely to be viewed as more realistic than a government training scheme with a (perceived) limited reward of £50 per week.*

*So, some stories are more telling than others of course. As Richard Edwards has shown there are issues of power here when we put forward a particular view of 'reality'. If a narrative approach viewed individuals as the sole author of their story then we could get stuck in mere story telling. However, the approach sees a personal narrative arrived at through interaction with others. The reality check includes a recognition that action, in the current and future story, occurs in an interactive world.*

**Question 5**

Narrative methods seem principally a means of understanding the past – a means of developing a personal history. Is this the main use?

**Bill:**

*A story has momentum. The recall of past implies the necessity of a future. I personally doubt that anybody tells their own story except with a future in mind. The point (in literary terms 'theme') of a story is often, 'so now what?'*

**Linden:**

*Far more in fact; stories are the route to meaning, health and purpose as well as more critical forms of understanding and engagement in a life. We need a future, yes, to be anchored in (what is the point of anything without some sense of a future?); and to recover a past, as part of composing a life. We need a present too, and a basic sense of legitimacy in the present, to imagine a more confident future, on more of our own terms, however marginal. I don't want to set impossible goals for the careers and guidance community, in a hard world, but its role can be significant. Just listening and being alongside the other helps, more sometimes than might be realised: I heard this frequently in the narratives of adult learners reflecting on their life histories. Maybe one problem is that guidance workers may sometimes be simply too frightened to really listen, and or unaware, including of the extent to which they and their practice are being storied by powerful agendas; and or too full of their own assumptions and presumptions. Such issues need to be looked at, critically and reflexively, in professional training and in research.*

**Hazel:**

*I do not see it as principally a means of understanding the past, although an exploration of the past helps clients to identify life themes and decide what they want to build into the future story. This is how, according to Savickas, clients make sense of the future narrative. It avoids ignoring or discounting the past, but is about looking back in order to move forward in a meaningful way for the client. The client decides what to bring forward and what to leave behind – this is about action not just reflection. In guidance terms, at the most basic level, it reminds us to allow time for clients (all clients) to 'tell their story'. We need to understand the present story before we can discuss future options. I agree with Linden, so much guidance is constrained by the need to 'assess' the client with a swift (too swift?) move to action and outcomes.*

**Question 6**

Much public money for guidance goes to support work with young people. Adolescent transition(s) and the formation of self-identity (and hence stories) are complex and contingent on a wide range of contextual and environmental factors. Histories are still in formation...in fact; the only history is one of childhood. Does this limit the relevance of this approach to work with young people? If so, how? If not, how does it overcome the issue?

**Bill:**

*Are you saying that working with story will be expensive? It will be. But I do not think that narrative is an option for our work, I think it is a necessity. I believe that a failure to use narrative in portraying careers will – in the dynamism and complexity of contemporary career conditions – be damaging. We will wind up with a bowdlerised version of career. I believe it is already happening.*

*The issue for how we best manage appropriate change. A few importations of techniques with narrative element is not the answer. It will need something much more strategically thought through. But neither do I believe that root-and-branch change in thinking and practice is a short-term possibility. Would it be possible to develop a strategy that uses the principle features of narrative to identify:*

- *What we are doing that uses narrative productively?*
- *What we are doing which may be counterproductive?*

- *What new narrative techniques can be imported?*
- *What needs to be developed?*

*There would be a cost-effective element to be built in here. Prime examples for immediate development would be in work-experience and profiling techniques. Both of these needs to lose some elements, develop some, and invent some. The point is that although the gross cost is high the net cost will be significantly lower. I write in terms of 'elements' in narrative because I want the ideas to be capable of having this kind of practical effect.*

#### **Linden:**

*Histories are always in transition: perpetual transition seems to have become a permanent feature of our culture! And adult identities are deeply contingent too. I don't see any difference, in principle, in working with young people and adults. 'The only history is childhood' ... the only? This is some history, as they say, to begin to engage with, one that many never really transcend.*

*I feel a basic issue in all this debate, and one that is important, is that of practice/ reality versus what is desirable. Hard-pressed workers are busy pursuing their targets, and using their instruments to make things manageable. That pressing world will not go away but the problem needs to be reframed, maybe marginally at first, but reframed nonetheless: instruments and targets are a means to an end, and not the end in themselves. There are whole people out there, who are trying to make some sensible choices in an uncertain, sometimes frightening, highly unpredictable world, where old certainties, including about linear careers, have disintegrated. One in which reality, in the sense of the neo-liberal political agenda and a superego, insecure culture (which demands excellence all the time and makes many people feel they can never be good enough), intrudes ubiquitously. Yet one of new possibilities too, which is part of the paradox I refer to in my paper. What we need is more transitional spaces in which people are encouraged to consider the story of who they are, and how this might change, just a little, on more of their own terms. The Connexions Service could be at a cutting edge here.*

*Yes and we always need to be practical: introducing auto/biographical methods in training; seeing how narrative methods can be tried out in particular situations, as pilots, which can be thoroughly action researched (now there's a thought!).*

#### **Hazel:**

*I agree with the above. Where do we want to be in this debate? Me, I'd rather not be with the view that quick fix, 'sheep dip' methods are the solution, particularly when working with young people seen as 'difficult-to-help'. I think there are serious constraints around time, costs etc, but it is a question of rethinking approaches in careers education and guidance. There is also an issue about the ability of young people to tell their stories (which is not to say they do not have enough of a story to tell). But, there are different ways of articulating a story – the young woman's sculpture in Linden's story for example, or via a range of other media, formal and informal ('acting out' / graffiti / rap). The power of a narrative approach is that it can bring to life the experience of people traditionally viewed as 'inarticulate'. And along with self-identity and self-esteem, esteem of others needs to be built in to the story, and into the action – part of recognising we live in an interactive world.*

*I think part of any 'conclusion' needs to consider areas where we might be able to 'test' the practical application of narrative and auto/biographical method, as suggested by Linden. I also like Bill's bullet points, which include an audit of what is already happening. Although I'm not sure we can offer a model yet for guidance interviews, I would like to develop my own thinking about how this could be done.*

**Question 7**

Recent theorising on adolescent development suggest that adolescents tend to deal with 'big' issues/concerns/relationships one at a time, rather than on a multi-dimensional basis. Does not story telling necessitate a level and depth of conceptual dexterity that requires multi-dimensional thinking and reflection? Not as a means of telling a story, but as a means of analysis and finding meaning?

**Bill:**

*This is a useful thought and I have no complete answer. It is true that, when the elements of narrative are listed in general terms, as I have done, they look more complicated than anything that can come out of DOTS. That is of course is the point: we need to accommodate that greater complexity. But there is also this: when the elements of a particular situation are assembled into a narrative sequence they become more recognisable, memorable and useful. I argue that this is because it is the way we have evolved to understand how things work and what we can do about them.. We survive by being clear, honest and explicit about all that is going on: and this applies as much to career management as to any aspect of our lives.*

**Linden:**

*I am not sure about this: the narrators in 'Cotton on' were operating at many different levels in doing their sculpture. As they were in telling their story to the researcher. Being clear, honest and explicit is one of the biggest struggles all of us face, one that brute experience may have made especially difficult. I think the role of the other, and of audience is especially important in progressing, however minimally, in the struggle. The comment also makes me think of the role of popular culture in providing narrative resources and in shaping the stories young people tell about themselves: soaps, for instance, may work in young people's narratives at many levels: as part morality tales, part exemplars, part a potential means for finding direction (in relation to drugs etc), via identification, partly as a social glue, a basis for conversation with others; and part as a kind of experimental laboratory in which others may be trying something out, and we may get a sense of new possibility. Soaps and popular culture are part of the narrative repertoire available to young people and one the guidance community needs to make use of too!*

**Hazel:**

*Yes, we are after ways of making what we do more effective and being honest and explicit is a congruent approach. Congruence gets lost however when top-down impositions on practice do not allow practitioners the time and space to maintain this position. Nevertheless is there a problem with dealing with 'big issues' one at a time? Provided these are dealt with in the context of the person's whole life it can still involve narrative – looking at part of the story, an episode at a time. And, yes understanding the 'theory', on the part of the client, does suggest the need for such conceptual dexterity. But story telling is a human trait and can be encouraged without needing to refer to the conceptual difficulties. How the story is told is of course key – again we need to remember to think about alternatives to 'talking'.*

*For practitioners, applying narrative as a counselling approach, full training on how to use the methods would be a necessity. In counselling we assume enough time is available to work with a client in this way. But what about guidance?*

*I accept that what we are considering here is wider than career education and guidance practice and also includes research methodology and career/life planning. I suppose what we could do, is extract that which is useful for the more limited aims of guidance (rather than counselling – although the boundaries are not as clear as we may think). The question for me remains – how can we do this and build this into our integrated approach? Practitioners will not view the approach as useful until this is demonstrated,*

*I suspect. My more holistic view however, is that we (all of us in the guidance community) need to be challenged and approaches that do not question our established ways of seeing (in research, training and practice) are merely repeating what we already know. Narrative offers both clients and us new ways of seeing which bring back the personal and the ethical. But, how you fit that into a target-driven climate needs to be part of the ongoing negotiation of the relationship between theory, policy and practice. The relationship is, after all, mutually dependent.*

### Question 8

Is it not the case that 'interventions' or action of some positive kind is a critical factor in this work? Individuals in Linden's study needed new life-development chances in order to be able to frame new and more positive life episodes. What happens to the story without the intervention?

**Bill:**

*Yes, but people also help themselves. And people help each other. We, in guidance, are not nearly as important as we think we are. Sometimes we actually hinder the unfolding of the story. If we and other people can help we must all learn to see ourselves as part of other people's stories. (It's they, after all, who are the central character.)*

**Linden:**

*Interventions can involve many and diverse people, and people can also help themselves, as Bill mentions, although resources, in the form of significant others and a wider narrative repertoire are also needed. I guess the key issue for me is how people are able to create new life chances. I think it is partly about seeing oneself as more of an agent in a life, however marginally, which takes me back to the role of story and guidance. Stories are real, and how we position ourselves in the texts of our lives is critical. Are we agents in the story, or storied? Do we merely repeat what powerful others have taught, or are we beginning to find our own voice? That is what guidance workers need to listen for and work with, although not much will be achieved in forty minutes.*

**Hazel:**

*Yes, I may have answered this in a previous question – the approach is about action but at the right development point for the individual. In career guidance practice all interactions with clients are interventions – what narrative aims to do is make these more meaningful for the client. If they are more meaningful then it seems more likely that guidance interventions will be more effective. But at this point we come up against how that effectiveness is measured! And we all know how difficult it is to measure the effectiveness of guidance interventions. As Bill indicates, we are only part of the story and should never assume we write the plot!*

### Question 9

So, let us address a central question about the application of this methodology to guidance practice. Is it practical?

**Bill:**

*It depends what you mean by practical. 'Practical' has come to mean 'what resources allow'. So provision is deemed impractical if it takes a lot of time, needs in-depth training, or will involve expensive development. Spoken like this, impractical means 'expensive'; practical means 'cheap'. So, if this question is asking, 'at present funding levels can we afford this?', the answer is, probably, 'no!'. Not - that is - unless we give up something else.*

*But wait a minute. Education and guidance has always got more than is paid for. Some teachers and counsellors try to do what is needed, and they don't necessarily stop when the money runs out. Careers education and guidance would have never gotten started in education if this were not so. We have work experience and progress filing in education because long-forgotten teachers and counsellors insisted - against the grain - that they were going to be useful. (And, as it happens, these two kinds of provision are best developed in narrative terms).*

*The point, for the moment, is this: funding is an issue for careers work. But it need not be a killer issue.*

*The word 'practical' also means 'will it work?'. And we know less than we need to know about the answer to the question 'will the use of narrative methods do any good?'. But we are entitled to some thoughtful hypotheses: given the way in which our understanding of contemporary career is deepening, widening and becoming more dynamic, it is reasonable to hunch that we are going to need new ways to frame our understanding of it. And the need for more stories and fewer lists is indicated. There are some aspects of career development, which can only be portrayed in stories. Career development means encounters, roles, turning points, other people, allegiances, points of view, conflicts, feelings, causes and their effects, unfolding learning, meaning and purpose. The positive hypothesis is that the use of stories will increase learner's access to the understanding, insight and appreciation of how all this happens in their own lives. The negative hypothesis is that the exclusive use of lists will obscure it.*

*Money is, of course, important. But it would be fatally impractical for careers work to obscure what happens in people lives.*

#### **Linden:**

*This is an important question, which has recurred time and again in our discussions. It reminds me of a similar point made by many teachers when policy makers and politicians insist on further change, almost always from on high. They pretend they know best in a manic, over-centralised culture in which the more impotent they feel, the more the pretence of hyper-activity and effectiveness has to be maintained. Asking 'is it practical?' is one response from an educational profession that is weary of too much ill-directed change, without the real involvement of those who must implement it. I sense there may be similar feelings among guidance practitioners, where perpetual change and a long-standing tradition of top-down management may have produced similar disenchantment. 'Is it practical?' becomes the slightly cynical response of those who yearn to be left alone to work with their clients. Except, it's not that simple. The regulation of guidance work, the proliferation of regulatory procedures and the intrusion of neo-liberal agendas is inhibiting the exercise of discretion and professional judgement, as well as constraining more person-centred, flexible and empowering ways of working. Like education, there is a sense in which provision is being made practitioner proof, minimising subjective discretion, nuance and individual judgement, under the mantra of standardisation. But effective guidance, like effective education, is grounded in the quality of human relationships, in dialogue born of sensitivity, self and other awareness, as well as empathic challenge, rather than imposed procedures. We often mistake this substance for the form.*

#### **Hazel:**

*Bill and Linden have covered the main points here I think. Beyond this practitioners will also say, "Fine, but tell me how to do it!". Not because they are uninterested in the theory, but for the reasons Linden cites above. We are not at the stage where we can do this, but these papers and the debate have begun an exploration of the possibilities for guidance.*

*Within guidance, narrative approaches will be more useful with some clients than others and more useful in some contexts than others. Personal advisers within Connexions are developing the role, and whilst this can lead to role confusion and role ambiguity, there is some freedom to work differently with clients. Clearly training is an issue here and that has cost implications. To make it 'practical' examples of how it can be used will be beneficial.*

### Question 10

This debate may have achieved some closure but not totally. What is still open in this debate?

#### Bill:

*There are people for whom the announcement of 'the end of history' came as an enormous relief. No need any more to worry about troublesome questions: 'everybody knows what needs to be done - so let's just do it!'. Not true of global conditions; nor of careers work.*

*There are parallels: action in both global and our more modest arenas have worked better for some people than for others. And, in both, big questions are being raised. Open questions.*

*The base-line question is 'how does narrative help learners?' There are people who feel that their lives grind on without anything that can be called a 'turning point'. How is it that they come to see themselves as the effects of other people's causes? Can their allegiances entrap as much as they liberate? Why do some people never think of their lives as expressing a purpose with any meaning for them? Is that what we understand to be lack of self-esteem? Can seeing lives as stories (rather than analyses) help?*

*Other people have other needs. How do people get advantage in occupying a range of varied roles. What kind of edge can being in touch with a diversity of useful contacts give a person? Does realising that other people's views are often just points-of-view permit people to believe anything they like? Do some people come, in that way, to see themselves as the sole causes of all worthwhile effects? Is that what we mean by self-esteem? Can learning to unpick one's own story help a person to a more sustainable basis for action?*

*I hunch that we will find that narrative is most valuable for some aspects of career learning, at some stages of development, and for some people. That's about practice; I also believe that we will find that the use of narrative will re-balance our approach to enquiry, training and programme development. But we yet have to learn how and why this can be so. So our history ain't over yet.*

*It is not a good idea to rush headlong into answering such questions. Even if we could afford it, it would be a mistake - in the mere interests of looking like a 'cutting edge' - to implement across-the-board use of narrative. Not until we know more about 'with whom?', 'how?' and 'why?'.*

#### Linden:

*Yes, there are many questions that remain unanswered: there are issues, for instance, about the different meanings of biography and narrative as well as their inter-relationship. Bill uses narrative to denote how people structure their stories and lives: how some get stuck in particular narratives, which deny their potential for agency. I agree with this narrative approach, which is potentially powerful and liberating. My work as a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, as well as an adult educator, is full of stories of learned self-deprecation, of individuals being storied, often from birth, stuck, for ever, it seems, in self-destructive plots from which it can feel impossible to escape. Stuck in a plot that is normally someone else's too. Biography, as used in this volume,*

*is a broader concept, to which narrative relates. Its remit is a whole life and its composition, in a world of insecurity, unpredictability, fragility, perpetual change but also new opportunity. It forces us to focus on the emotional, intellectual and narrative resources needed for the task of composing a life. This, I have suggested, is a central and ubiquitous question in a culture of 5 to 9 jobs, where inherited templates have fractured or no longer suffice and where we need, in a certain sense, to make ourselves up as we go. Narrative, in these terms, becomes central to the biographical project - to the reflexive project of self – since stories are the means by which we make meaning and choice and find some direction, however constrained. It is the way each of us can make our own history, however marginally, even if the conditions may never be of our own choosing. A globalising, individualised culture forces us, like it or not, to find more of our own answers as received authority is challenged, and we face choices about how we should live and on what terms.*

*But this brings me back to the nagging question about the role of the guidance community in such a world, where older notions of career and the once and for all choice are redundant. And where what guidance is for, like much else, is fiercely contested. The guidance community might need to talk more about the politics of guidance work, including the need for a new kind of personal politics, to begin a process in bell hooks' compelling words, of talking back to power. Scary, maybe, for a world brought up on top-down models. And, yes, there are difficulties with this: surrounding the limitations of what can be done in some contexts as well as the problematic boundaries between guidance, therapy and social action. Guidance workers are neither Therapists nor Politicians, but what they do has potentially important therapeutic and political dimensions and consequences.*

**Hazel:**

*I do not have a sense of closure and I think it is an unhelpful word in terms of the debate, if not this publication. I feel we are trying to open something up rather than close it down. So, my response to 'what is still open in this debate?' is everything! The careers guidance story has been written of late by policy makers with a wider agenda, which is leading to a situation where the word 'career' is disappearing. This may fit within our own arguments about career being better associated with life choices rather than choosing 'a career', but it is dis-empowering for many career guidance managers and practitioners. So, yes the career guidance community and its professional body do need to think more about the politics of guidance work. In recent years the professional institute has found itself in a kind of Faustian pact, where real concern about the future of careers practitioners has, it is perceived, resulted in too much willingness to adopt government policy. However, resistance is most likely to come from institutions whose positioning within other institutions and discourses, gives them the resources with which to resist. The career guidance community's position in relation to other agencies has not given it these resources to resist – perhaps now is the time for a bit more risk taking and a lot more resistance. Although this may extend the metaphor too far – we need to start writing our own story again!*

### **Question 11**

What recommendations do you offer people working in the guidance sector?

**Bill:**

*In careers work - perhaps more than in most other fields - there are all kinds of authority to engage: guidance and curriculum practitioners, programme managers, staff developers, materials developers, both local and 'institutional' researchers, policy wonks, community interests, learners and their families. Careers work has never been driven by 'higher' authorities, showing 'lower' levels what should be done. Indeed a good case can be made for saying that academics and policy makers have followed, rather than led. It is what people do on the ground which poses the questions, suggests*

*the ideas and raises the issues for careers work. There is no higher and lower authority here; but there is plenty of authority - everywhere.*

*This publication suggests the possibility of development. It sets out why it may be important. It also tries to sift out the elements which offer a fingerhold to improved help. But none of this takes us very far. What the field does about adapting the ideas for use with particular groups must be done in localities, adapting, fixing, creating. And it must be done with the people who seem most to need the change. (Again, work experience and profiling were first introduced on that basis.) This is close-up-and personal stuff. Academics and policy wonks can't do it at all. But everybody else on the above list can take a useful swing at it. And I think they should.*

*Down the track, new patterns will start to form. Then we are going to need another publication - saying what has been done and with whom, how and why it helps. Then we can get systematically into what this suggests for new developments in staff, programme and organisation development. And, finally, in what the implications are for policy and theory.*

*But not yet.*

#### **Linden:**

*Good stuff Bill, and we do need to map what is being done, and how well it is working. What really matters, as suggested, is what happens on the ground. And there may be space here: for risk taking in Connexions, and for some auto/biographical work among those involved, supporting them in their efforts, and helping practitioners and their clients learn and connect from shared experience. An action-research project, generating guidelines for experiment, support mechanisms, reflexive practice and careful observation would be helpful. Not everyone in the guidance community will be willing or able to take such a risk, but some will, if, that is, they can have a sense of ownership. I think there may be many guidance practitioners who are deeply alarmed, but frightened to say so, by over-centralisation, 'targetology', utilitarianism and 'efficiency', which marginalize their own professionalism, understanding and capacity to give in more person-centred ways. Practitioners who may feel, like many teachers, emotionally disengaged from much of what may be asked of them. This is hardly efficiency or effective service delivery, even if it may be 'practical'.*

#### **Hazel:**

*Yes agree with all of that. The recommendation would be 'find out more and evaluate its potential for your work, in your context'. As Bill said this will work or not on the ground, in particular localities. We, the university college, can encourage our students, particularly at MA level, to engage in action research, and our colleagues to engage in collaborative research, that incorporates narrative and auto/biographical approaches. As trainers we can include it in our approach to teaching in college and on external workshops. It will be a piecemeal and somewhat tentative start, but that's OK when you are trying to decide if this is a real opportunity to be more effective.*

### **Question 12**

Where do you want to see this work going from here?

#### **Bill:**

*The careers work field needs as much as anything to be kept in touch with itself. It is not that we need to copy each other; indeed we may, as much as anything, need most of all to avoid each other's mistakes. But we do need to know why and how other people are changing what they do; because in those stories are the clues to what issues are worth taking on board, what ideas for action are worth developing, and what procedures are worth adapting - for whom.*

*We do not do this by reading theory or policy, we do it by finding ways of talking to each other. Professional associations and their regional and local groups are important for these purposes. And the ideas, issues and suggested practice set out in this publication should certainly be introduced into professional associations' magazines, meetings and conferences.*

*But maybe we should also be looking for something more specifically focussed on the issues, elements and possibilities suggested by the use of narrative?*

**Linden:**

*Bits of research would help, focusing on what people actually do, and what they perceive is the room for manoeuvre. A new study is being proposed in Kent on guidance work in the voluntary sector, comparing and contrasting the public narratives of agencies – as encapsulated, for instance, in mission statement or the nice neat boxes and arrows of administrators' overheads - with the more private narratives of many workers, surrounding what they seek to do, and feel they want to achieve, when working with marginalized people. I would also like to see auto/biographical methods introduced into initial training and the continuing professional development of guidance workers. Starting with experience, with turning points and moments of choice, using story telling and reflexive interpretation alongside theory. This to bring alive the meaning and practice of agency, the role of narrative, as well as the social psychology of building a life, and the role that guidance can play, in all its dimensions, when people search for direction.*

**Hazel:**

*This is covered I think in previous responses, but what about me personally, in my own practice? I would like to start practising what I preach! I would like to respond to Linden's wish to see auto/biographical methods introduced into initial training and the continuing professional development of guidance workers. I have already started talking about narrative approaches in career counselling and careers education, but want to see how I can extend reflexive interpretation alongside the theory. I'll need to think about that some more!*

### **Question 13**

Do you have any further concluding thoughts?

**Bill:**

*Three: 'commitment', 'courage' and 'imagination'. And they will make more sense in your story than on this list.*

**Linden:**

*The processes and contradictions at work in guidance are echoed in other practitioner communities. There is a narrative and biographical turn in many of them too: in education, health care and even medicine, despite many pressures to the contrary. The issues are bigger than guidance: they have to do with basic questions about the purposes of a range of services, how they function and their epistemological underpinnings, in an age of insecurity. It helps to know none of us is alone in these struggles.*

**Hazel:**

*I have had the luxury in this debate to speak last and now find I have nothing further to say, other than agreeing with Linden that there is a general turn to narrative and interpretative approaches across a range of academic disciplines and professional communities. Can I give Mark Savickas the final words here? He says that the development of narrative approaches is located within a 21<sup>st</sup> century preoccupation with meaning in contrast to a 20<sup>th</sup> century focus on facts.*

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