

Exploring career identities through creative writing

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Creative writing has shown itself to be a powerful tool for reflection and is increasingly being used in professional development contexts (see e.g. Bolton, 2001; Creme and Hunt, 2002; Winter et al., 1999). With its potential for playful self-exploration and access to feeling and emotion, it can quickly get beneath everyday identities, providing alternative ways of thinking about oneself.

Of course, being a powerful tool, it should be handled very carefully, and I say more about this below. From responses to the workshop I facilitated at the International Career Studies Symposium in September 2009, it is clear that carefully chosen and facilitated creative writing exercises could be valuable in helping people explore their career identities.

The exercise that I used at the workshop was adapted from Cheryl Moskowitz's 'self as source' exercise (1998) which was originally devised for use in a health care context. It is best suited to adults in transition, e.g. people looking to make a career shift or those moving from work to retirement rather than younger people with little work or career experience.

Here are the guidelines for the exercise:

1. Make a list of things that characterise you in your career.
2. Select two of them, preferably two that are contrasting, and write them on a piece of paper at the top of adjacent columns.
3. Add to the columns two or three metaphors for each of your chosen characteristics, starting with 'he/she is...'
4. Develop these characteristics into fictional characters by answering the following questions for each of them:
 - What are his/her physical characteristics?
 - What sort of clothes does he/she wear?
 - How does he/she relate to others?
 - What does he/she do for a living?
 - What is his/her name?
5. Now that you know your characters a bit better, write down something that each of them might typically say.

6. Write a short third person narrative in which your characters meet each other, talk and eventually exchange something of value.
7. Reflect on what you learn from this exercise about your career identity.
8. The exercise can be repeated with another pair of characteristics.

The following example of 'Jennifer', a fictional career academic, shows you how this might work in practice:

1. A short list of things that characterise Jennifer in her career:
 - having started late and entered by the 'side door'
 - frustrated mothering
 - desire for community and belonging
 - conscientiousness bordering on obsessiveness
2. Jennifer chooses two contrasting characteristics: 'Lateness' and 'Mothering'
3. Jennifer's metaphors for each characteristic:

Lateness

She is the reserve in the netball team
She is the last bus you just missed

Mothering

She is an ample bosom in a low-cut blouse
She is Christ feeding the five thousand

4. Names and characteristics of Jennifer's fictional characters:

Mary (lateness)

- Grey and mousy, a bit hunched, apologetic
- Dresses in neutral tones
- Always wants to be liked but is a bit of an isolate
- Works as a library assistant

Gloria (mothering)

- Large, energetic woman, a bit over the top at times
- Flamboyant dresser
- Likes people and expects them to like her
- Is a foster mother

5. Something typical that Jennifer's characters might say:

Mary: 'Sorry I'm late. Hope it hasn't spoiled the party'.
Gloria: 'How lovely to see you! Come here and let me give you a big hug'.

6. The beginning of Jennifer's third person narrative where her two characters meet and exchange something of value:

It's a quiet day in the library and Mary is taking the opportunity of sorting out a trolleyful of returned books which still haven't been re-shelved. This is a favourite task. She likes her environment to be ordered but the pressures of the job mean that most of the time she is surrounded by piles of un-filed papers and un-shelved books, which makes her feel out of control and anxious. She is in the history section, lovingly dusting and ordering the books on ancient Greece and Rome when she hears the bell on the desk being rung, not just once, but several times. She pokes her head around the corner and sees a busty blonde woman in a red dress at the counter. Mary feels immediately guilty that she isn't there. 'Just coming', she calls out and hurries over...

This approach to reflection using creative writing is underpinned by psychodynamic thinking, particularly the idea that there is a tendency in human development towards splitting of the personality into different and sometimes conflicting self-concepts (e.g. Horney, 1946; Hunt, 2000) and that exploring them playfully can facilitate fruitful connection between them (Moskowitz, 1998). As I said above, creative writing as a reflective tool should be used with caution. The above exercise would be best used in the latter part of a longer session, where other (less challenging) exercises have already been undertaken, and where the group are reasonably comfortable with each other or have worked together before. Apart from the usual features of group work, such as agreeing a group contract or 'ground rules' at the start of a workshop (see Bolton, 2001), I would always allow time for talking about the nature of creative writing for personal and professional development, the possibility that people might find themselves engaging with unexpected material and the importance of self-care and care of others in this context. The usefulness (or otherwise) of such a workshop will depend very much on the open and collaborative atmosphere the facilitator helps to create in the group setting (see Heron, 1999).

References and suggested reading

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