

# Beyond words: an exploration of the use of 'visual tools' within career guidance practice

Samantha Cregeen-Cook

**By** means of shared best practice, this article explores 360° feedback on the use of 'visual tools' for career guidance practice. Developed through data obtained during interviews with guidance practitioners, young people and their drawings, innovative thinking for practice is promoted at this 'crossroads' in time for the careers profession. The study observes practitioners' commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) and research despite the current issues they face, along with the need for more inspiring engagement with young people. Evident in the data produced, is the variety of responses from individual participants to the same questions and to the visual tools themselves, demonstrating the interpretative nature of the research and the individual meanings constructed from it. This study argues that as we move towards a National Career Service for England, resourceful and inventive practice is crucial for future development.

## Introduction

Traditional approaches to the guidance interview, presuppose that a verbal exchange takes place between the guidance practitioner and client. However, it is generally accepted that some people are better able to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions through the use of visual images, and the use of such an approach is already accepted in many therapeutic settings (Sutherland, 2009). It seems reasonable to suggest therefore that the use of visual 'starting points' and creative techniques, may have a potential role to play in a career guidance setting and in doing so enhance the design of career services. Visual tools are researched here to decipher their value for the field of

career guidance.

The work of Margot Sutherland (Sutherland 2009) and her use of storytelling as a therapeutic tool within art therapy, provided me with a set of ready-made resources which could be explored. 'Visual tools' selected for investigation, were initially chosen from Sutherland's manual of resources designed to help young people and adults express, communicate and deal more effectively with their emotions through drawing. Sutherland's materials are designed to promote clarity of thought, as a first step towards positive action and to put seemingly unmanageable and unsolvable problems in a new perspective. The exercises her work provides, may be adopted for any age or ability, can be freely photocopied and provide a resource to those who work directly with the emotions of others; e.g. therapists, teachers and social workers.

Sutherland's tools represent 'visual metaphors' to be used to evoke thoughts, feelings and experiences beyond the specific objects that they depicted. They were considered useful for enabling clients to express that which might otherwise be difficult to articulate verbally. According to Kerr Inkson, 'The new interest in metaphor is part of a 'post-modern' view of careers – one in which flexibility, creativity and personal narrative play a part, enabling the development of wider and more imaginative views of career behaviour and practice' (Inkson, 2010:2).

In talking about her work, Sutherland explains that the exercises use 'a visual image which the participant can elaborate on, either with words or by extending the visual metaphor' and she goes on to say that, 'images

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can help people to 'see' what they cannot verbalise' (Sutherland, 2009:4). The above reasons provided the rationale for selection and, it was hoped, promote preliminary discussion on the topic.

Literature reviewed for the study established that the use of visual resources for careers work was a comparatively under researched area. Whilst some innovative techniques using visual means were being developed, e.g. Storyboarding for Career Management (Law, 2010), existing resources may lie outside the subject of careers. What was required for this exploration was a 're-purposing' of that which already existed (Haseman and Mafe, 2010).

Donald Winnicott's work allowed for recognition that the space between career counsellor and client (where projection and transference may be played out) was the place where trust and reliability through therapeutic empathy, could be replicated.

For Winnicott,

The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living.

(Winnicott, 1967 48:368-372)

Reflecting on both Winnicott and Sutherland's writing implied that visual tools could be used as potential spaces within potential space, as a vehicle for increasing a client's autonomy, and it was this value for careers work which motivated the research.

### **Multisource Methodology**

Authorised as part of the MA in Career Guidance at Canterbury Christ Church University, the research used a multisource methodology (Lepsinger and Lucia 2009). This combined desktop research, semi-structured interview, focus group, observation and drawings evidence. In 360° feedback on the use of 'visual tools' within current practice, the study revealed practitioners' commitment to research and continuing professional development, as well as enthusiastic engagement by young people through their drawings evidence. These qualitative methods supplied a rich

range of data gathering instruments which then offered wide opportunities for interpretation and analysis.

The data were analysed through the identification of themes (e.g. the most common visual tools currently in use within career guidance). This used participant validated interview data (from the six semi-structured interviews with guidance practitioners) and data accumulated from a focus group with young people; who used the tools and provided feedback on their use. All practitioners appeared to be open to what could work and the idea of utilising the visual tools drawn from Sutherland's art therapy work. Whether participants modified their behaviour and showed enthusiasm in response to the fact that they were participants of research (Gillespie, 1991), or whether their responses were genuinely motivated by a need within their practice – is not conclusive. However, with no prior knowledge of the interview questions, practitioners overall were observed to demonstrate reflective practice, attempting to integrate theory and practice, thought and action (Schon, 1983).

### **Drawings Evidence**

The views of young people were captured through engagement with the tools, producing drawings' evidence during a focus group following the practitioner interviews. Young people were observed to engage with the tools in a way that was meaningful to them, and the visual tools revealed the personal quality of their experience, through their unique and varying results. It was observed that engagement in 'drawing' activity was indicative of the focus group's level of participation to go beyond words and to reveal what was significant to them. Young people were observed to write words, draw symbols and use colours of their choosing.

From the feedback that young people gave, it would appear that they found the activity fun, a good way of thinking things through and useful for decision making. This was supported by comments made by an observer (Learning Support Tutor), who made notes and then wrote these up at the end of the focus group. Figure 1 indicates the degree of engagement by one young person who took part in the focus group, demonstrating their creative activity, as well as the thinking processes which took place.

Figure 1: Options for GCSE subjects

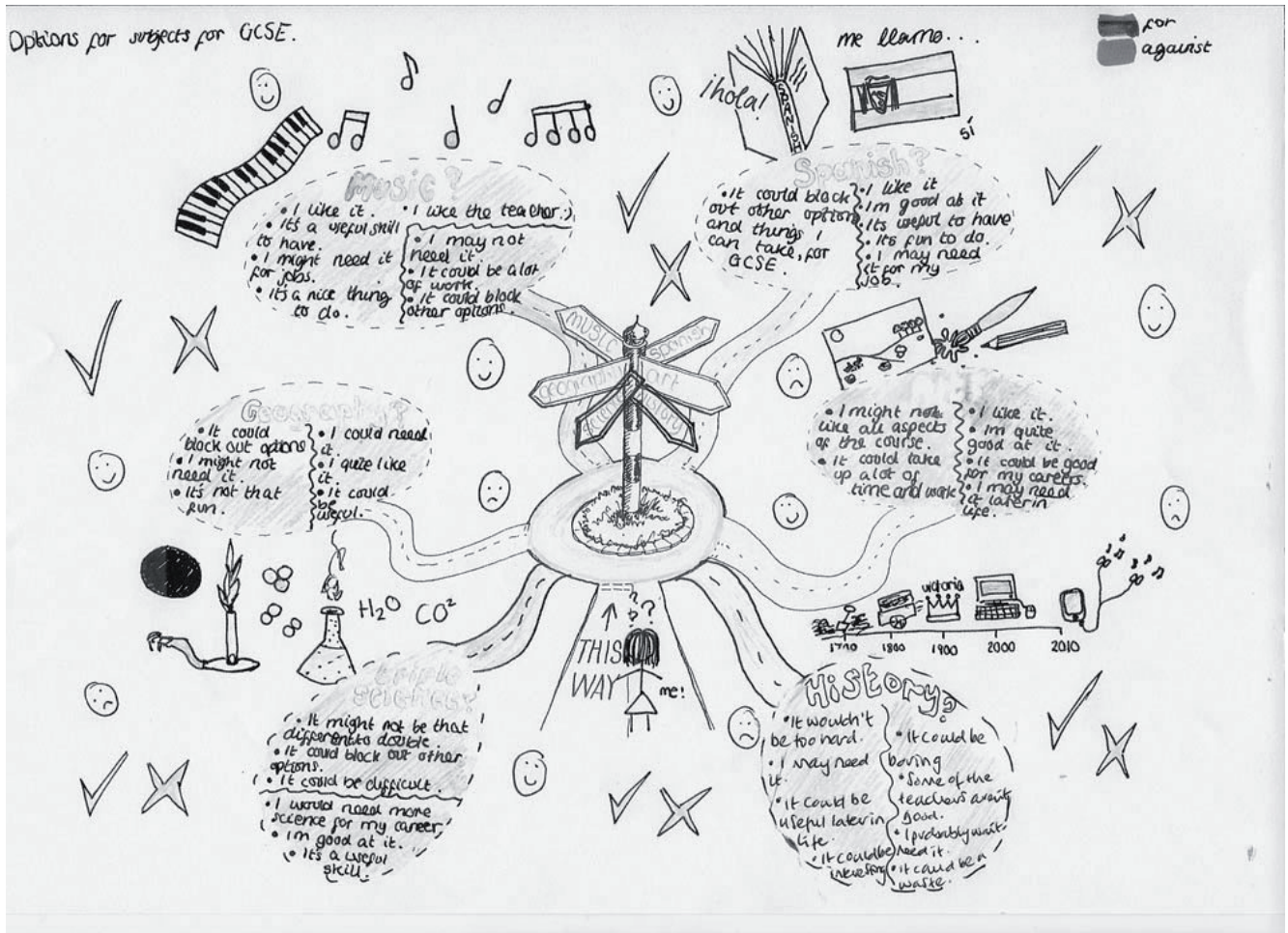
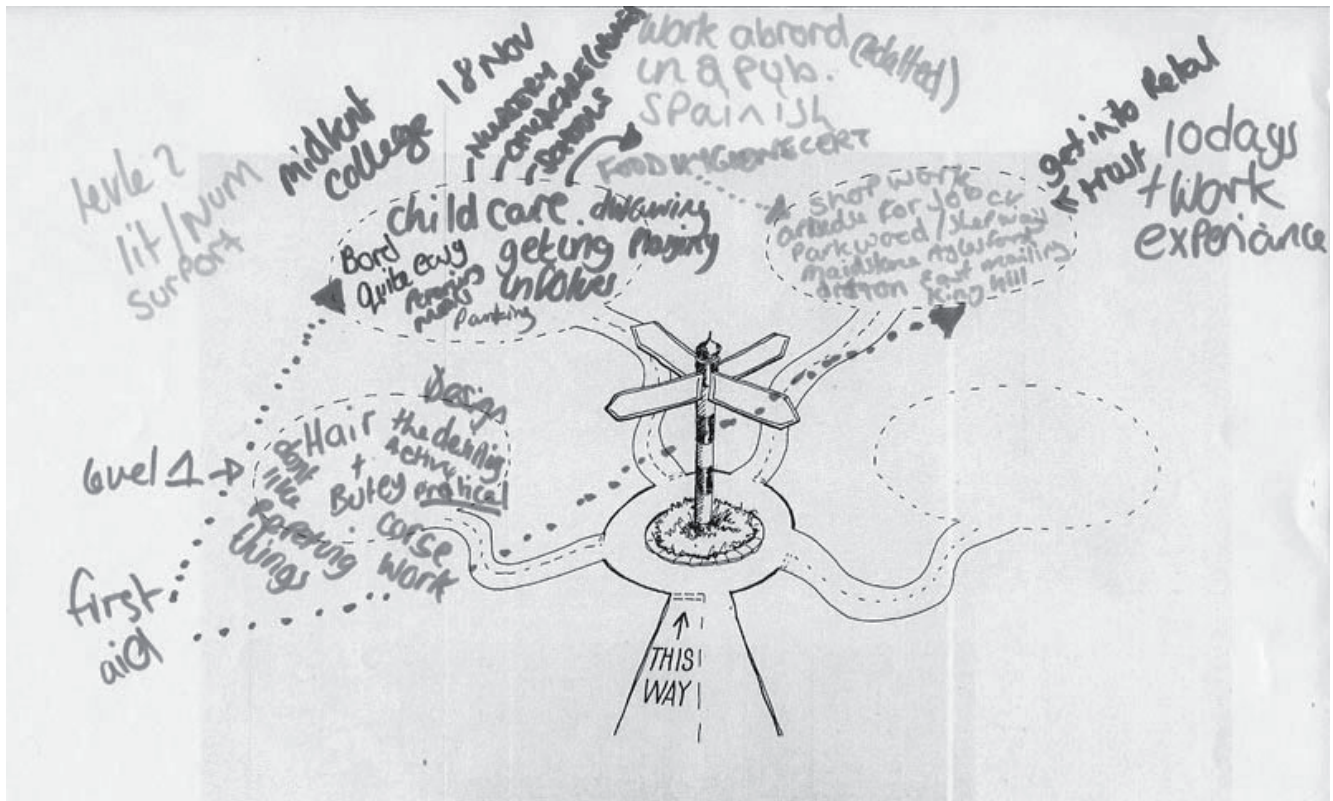


Figure 2: Options for education, employment or training





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Utilised in this way, this 'Crossroads' tool, was interpreted as being 'helpful' for decision making and could potentially be used within group work (e.g. GCSE or A Level options), or within one to one guidance (e.g. as a progress review tool).

What follows is another example, this time an illustration of a young person's engagement during a one to one action research interview, following the initial study. Figure 2 illustrates the young person's priorities of a different kind, revealing some of their 'story' as well as their thoughts, ideas and feelings about the possibilities for education, employment and training.

### Analysis and findings

According to the practitioners interviewed, the introduction of visual tools was a welcome resource for use with clients 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET), for visual learners and with those with identified learning difficulties and disabilities. For clients that were NEET, practitioners considered that the tools could be used as a vehicle to express and think through their choices to enable careers work to take place. In thinking about practitioners' identification of 'visual learners', Fleming's Visual, Auditory and Kinaesthetic (VAK) model (Fleming, 2001) was used to interpret the learning styles. Fleming claimed that visual learners have a preference for seeing (think in pictures; diagrams, using handouts, etc.). Auditory learners best learn through listening (lectures, discussions, tapes, etc.), whilst Kinaesthetic learners prefer to learn via their own experiences or learning through doing. Fleming's model is however, one among many others on learning styles (Revell, 2005).

The largest group who may potentially benefit from engaging with the visual tools, according to practitioners' identifications, were young people with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities. This identification was interpreted as evidence of equality and social justice legislation in action (Equality Act, 2010), through the socially inclusive contracts delivered by Connexions services at the time of the research. Despite this legislation to provide legal rights to disabled people in the areas of education, employment and training, many of these contracts have

subsequently been terminated, leaving countless young people without support, impartial advice or career guidance.

Both practitioners and young people agreed that the 'Crossroads' visual tool could be successfully utilised within career guidance group work for decision making and option selection. In developing ways that enable 'externalising conversations' (Winslade and Monk, 1999) with young people, alternative stories constructed through more 'playful' means, may hold relevance for some in 're-authoring their stories' (Reid, 2006:11). For guidance practitioners working within narrative models, 'visual tools' may enable this guidance process.

The six practitioners who took part in the study welcomed the prospect to try out the tools that were introduced via the research, which was interpreted as an indication of willingness to evolve practice and try new ways of engaging with clients. Following recommendations from the Careers Profession Alliance to raise the minimum level qualification for careers work to Level 7 within the next five years (Silver, 2010), practitioners' professional practice may be enhanced through research activities.

Reflecting on the groups of young people identified by practitioners, as those who may benefit from 'visual tools', allowed me to consider whether guidance services could provide tools which catered for difference or develop tools which encompassed it. These reflections were evident in the focus group with young people who brought their individual capacity to the 'visual tool'; the visual tool did not single out a person, type or disability, each worked with what they could meaningfully bring. The drawings are unique responses, illustrating young people's stories, their thought processes, interests and what is meaningful to them.

The guidance practitioners interviewed, considered that the 'visual tools' should fit within the 3 stage model (Egan, 2007), as this was the model they were all using: which is not to assume they used a variety of models to meet different client needs. For clients within the NEET group, other models may be required depending on their needs. Motivational Interviewing (Miller and Rollnick, 2002), Solution-Focused Therapy

(O'Connell, 2005) or Narrative approaches (Reid and West, 2011) offer alternative methods, and it could be that 'visual tools' best fit as 'therapeutic documents' within one of these models. Alternatively, culturally specific interventions may enable more intuitive and collaborative practice which better accommodates 'visual tools' (Arulmani, 2011).

## The future use of 'visual tools'

Under the previous administration, careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) could be seen primarily as a vehicle to address social exclusion through partnership working between IAG providers and schools. Under the Coalition government however, a greater emphasis is being placed on school autonomy, with the Education Bill now placing a new duty on schools to secure 'independent careers guidance' (Higginbotham, 2011). This provides a challenge to schools to provide careers advice (with the potential cost of employing a careers adviser), purchasing external web-based and telephone services and/or buying-in professional impartial guidance, with less money available due to cuts in school grants. Thus schools are now being asked to purchase these services from their limited resources. Where there was once an effective partnership model, a contractor-supplier relationship now exists (Watts, 2011).

In taking the learning from this research forward however, converting 'visual tools' to online files, which form part of electronic interactivities, could provide an animated experience, mimicking that which is drawn. As 90% of young people go on-line to support their studies (Livingstone and Bober, 2005) this might provide more stimulating engagement than job-matching software. In thinking about the importance of helping clients 'actualise an ideal narrative' (Cochran, 1997, cited in Kidd, 2006:67), more creative uses of media – through art and technology – might engage young people in the production of artefacts which employ technology to help gain self-awareness.

As we move towards a National Career Service (Hayes, 2010), resourceful and inventive reflective practice is crucial for future development (Bolton, 2010). In recognition that some experiences are

'Beyond Words', client centred artefacts and 'visual tools' assist to convey the meaning of events by actively construing without language. Drawings for example, like many other 'making' processes, can be used in a multitude of effective ways to illustrate parts of an interview, to chart change (real or potential) and go beyond words in revealing more of the underlying meaning. Technical drawing skills are not necessary and people can choose to represent themselves in all sorts of ways, where dialogue and self discovery may be promoted through more playful interventions (Cregeen-Cook, 2011). Few careers guidance practitioners are trained artists or art therapists and neither are their clients experts in these fields. The visual tools suggested here are simple, basic and easy to use, enhancing guidance interactions, not replacing them. In harnessing the creative process of drawing as a potent form of communication, participants in this study experienced the way imagery can be used to solve problems, think about decision making and describe learning. The potential of art making within the context of career, for both practitioner and client, may hold the key to making sense of what is painful, generate personal meaning and enhance well-being in order to become whole (Brownell, 2010). The future of the career guidance profession may depend upon how resourceful we are in finding new ways to serve others.

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## For correspondence

Samantha Cregeen-Cook  
Phd Scholar, Canterbury Christ Church University  
[s.j.cregeencook107@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:s.j.cregeencook107@canterbury.ac.uk)