

Creative writing practices in career guidance: an autoethnographical approach

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Today's careers practitioners are tasked with offering assistance to a populace becoming increasingly culturally diverse, whilst facing ever growing professional insecurity. Uncertainty besets not just the seeker but also the helper. There is a need to develop creative practice to meet the needs of individuals but also to motivate practitioners to, tentatively, venture forward. This article will consider creative written practices referring to case studies and my own MA autoethnographical experience, offering both a reflective and reflexive account. Some feel unable to voice their thoughts and feelings. Writing their narrative could heighten self awareness and become a catalyst for career development.

My intention is to encourage career professionals to consider possible creative writing processes to facilitate clients to tell their unique stories, but also as a way to observe their own career journey, thereby better assisting others to understand the changing nature of career.

Introduction

Today's cosmopolitan society offers a cultural diversity, which whilst presenting the potential for enriched career guidance practice, could also increase individual uncertainty. Perhaps, if practitioners had a better understanding of their own career stories they could gain an enhanced perspective of their clients' lives. This suggestion formed a part of my MA journey and was to become a catalyst sparking a desire to explore creative writing practices, not just for my own research and writing, but also as a possible tool for creative guidance practice. Fervently I hope that what I have to say will motivate others to try creative

writing practices with clients of all ages. If we do not take risks how can we possibly ask our clients to take risks? My fear of submitting work which would be subject to peer review, abated when I thought of writing as a conversation; a sharing of ideas with other people (Smart, 2010). Inspired by authors such as Etherington (2004), Meekums (2008), Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Richardson (2000), to write a 'different way', I would like to share an account of the writing process involved in my recent autoethnographical MA dissertation; following with an exploration of case studies where creative writing practices were used: thereby offering a reflective and reflexive account.

My MA Story

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

(Maya Angelou, undated)

When I decided to studying the MA Career Guidance I knew I wanted to tell my story. I believe that in order to make sense of someone's story we first need to understand the importance of our own as it can provide an 'advantage point from which we understand others' (Reid, 2003:67). The lack of self belief that I have felt is echoed through the individual stories I am privileged to hear in my job as a career guidance adviser in a further education college. The cultural diversity of those who seek assistance instigated a need to acknowledge my own cultural background and the formation of my career identity. Let me explain.

I was born in Sri Lanka of a Eurasian Burgher heritage. Seen as middle class, urban, Europeanised English speakers (Ryan, 1960) at the time of my birth, this group shared a common culture rather than ethnicity. My family arrived in England in the early sixties and brought with them their own ingrained cultural values, beliefs and assumptions (Arulmani and Nag-Arulmani, 2004), embodying generational cultural traits, eclectically intermingling European and Asian ideologies which were unique to mine, but not necessarily other Burgher families. Such distinctive cultural inclination caused confusion in childhood as I struggled to find my self identity. In the dissertation I questioned if the values indoctrinated in childhood still influenced the adult, as it is noted that 'families tend to shape the cultural roots of adult ways of thinking' (Dominice, 2000:102).

The research considered aspects of my life: the familial influences on career identity, the societal influences affecting the female career roles of 'wife' and 'mother', the personal values gained from lifelong learning and the influence of chance on career decision making (Neary-Booth and Hambly, 2007). The dissertation was a personal, individualised study where I hoped by adopting a reflexive approach to my research (Etherington, 2004), and by using my own experiences and background to inform possible conclusions, I would gain an in-depth understanding of both the societal and cultural influences that have affected my career identity. In doing so I hoped to find meaning (Bruner, 1990) born of subjective immersion in my past, to better understand my present and future actions. My aim was not to offer generalisations for career guidance but rather indicators from my career thinking which could offer practitioners insights into their own and their client's thinking when they tell their stories. I chose the research instrument of an autoethnographical free flowing journal which documented my career story from childhood to present day, forming the basis for critical analysis. It also provided the opportunity to 're-author my story' (Meekums, 2008:298), offering a representation of the events from my viewpoint; acknowledging how an individual perceives the world (Bell, 2005) and their place within it.

Autoethnography is a creative analytical process (CAP) which may be seen as 'a self narrative that

critiques the situatedness with others in a social context' (Spry, 2001:710); a personal level of studying describing both method and text. Therefore, I became the research instrument, integral to the experience. Autoethnography can take the guise of stories, poetry, novels, personal essays, journals, performance related and more (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). It has been argued (Sparkes, 2002) that such alternative genres do not necessarily provide an enhanced result. Yet, they can draw the reader into the writer's story, as in the case of Meekums (2008) who uses an autoethnographical study with a partial narrative to express the formation of her identity as a counselling trainer. She discusses that she tried to write using Richardson's (2000) criteria: does the work offer a contribution to an understanding of social life, does it have aesthetic merit, is there sufficient reflexivity, is there emotional or intelligent impact and does it provide a lived experience? I too tried to meet such demands in my own work and also attempted 'verisimilitude' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:751) so that my reader(s) would feel that what they read was a believable and 'true' to life account. Furthermore, I tried to write evocatively (Richardson, 2000) to engage the senses.

Yet, how could I ensure congruence and validity (Reid, 2008) with my subject? The qualitative nature of my research may have undergone a 'triangulation' of methods as an alternative to an objective validation of findings. However, a multi-faceted 'crystallization' (Richardson, 2008) could be deemed more fitting when considering creative genre texts. Indeed 'what we see depends on our angle of repose – not triangulation but rather crystallization' (ibid:478). The author discusses an example of this process as when she and her husband shared similar experiences when co-authoring a travel book, but saw them through different professional eyes and biographies; keeping their own narrative accounts and engaging in interdisciplinary conversations. Richardson, suggests that there is no single 'truth' but that the texts validate themselves (ibid:479). I sought such justification as my writing unfolded and included poetry and photographs to add further dimensions. The latter offered 'portals' to the past enhancing the meaning of my words bringing them to life, as I had found when I read the work of Meekums (2008) and Muncey (2005) whose own photographic inclusions added 'richness' to the text.

My choice of a 'free flowing' journal as a research tool seemed 'right' to me as since studying the QCG I have endeavored to write in a reflective diary: I find writing calms me and it is also a way to reflect on my actions (Schon, 1991). I feel an affinity with this writing genre (Bolton, 1999) but recognise it may not be for everyone. Perhaps the creative analytical process of autoethnography could offer suitable alternatives when considering individual needs in career guidance practice.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that, 'the stories we write put us into conversations with ourselves as well as our readers' (ibid:784) and as I began to write I became immersed in the past. Stanley (1992) suggests that our memory helps us to gain an understanding of the 'here and now' because it captures some understanding of the 'there and then'. My consciousness became saturated with previously forgotten almost painful memories; often the strength of emotion was frightening as the past surfaced and with it unresolved issues. Yet, by freely writing I was able to engage in a process of deep reflexivity and in doing so '...attend to the untold' (Sharkey, 2004, cited in Bolton, 2010:8). Further, Bolton (2010) notes it is paradoxical that we reflectively tell and retell our stories to feel secure, but an additional need calls for a critical reflexive examination of our actions and those of others, to heighten our self understanding and that of our practice so that we can 'develop dynamically' (ibid:10). By freely writing and analysing their own stories, career guidance practitioners could infuse their practice with new understanding of how individuals see their career identity. As such they may then be better able to assist others to 're-interpret' their stories (Reid and Scott, 2010). To make visible my reflective and reflexive thoughts, I re-visited my journal and added bracketed text in italic font. This amplified my 'writing voice' (Seamus Heaney, 1980, cited in Hunt and Sampson, 2006:33); my words both incorporated my feelings and had a feeling of 'me' about them. On completing the journal I wrote that I felt 'invigorated', 'relieved' and 'unburdened' and wondered if this could be a way for others to express deep-seated thoughts; heightening self awareness.

Tentatively I began to think of other creative writing practices, for example letters, scripts and memos.

Poetry could become an expressive outlet for some. 'Rap' as a musical genre could be considered a form of poetry whereby the musician uses words to express their feelings and as such may appeal to those who struggle to vocalise their thoughts in other ways. Tomlinson (2006) suggests making music could be a coping mechanism, providing a space to create meaning and attain a sense of control. In an American study using 'rap' in the classroom, Cooks (2004) noted that students said it expressed their 'reality' and one said that it had 'flow' which was 'described as a combination of making sense, telling truth, and fitting words together' (ibid:75). Others, such as Weinstein (2006), discuss how the pleasure gained from such work beyond school literacy can affect school engagement and achievement; students were not just rapping but writing. So, perhaps 'rap' and other creative writing practices maybe a way to engage the disaffected.

Moving from my story to the stories of others

I became excited by the prospect of creative writing practices in career guidance and decided that on completing my MA I would investigate some possibilities. Therefore, I would now like to offer a sample of creative writing case studies. Where extracts are included it is with the kind permission of those involved, for writing is a private affair, 'a communication with the self until you decide to share it...' (Bolton, 1999:22).

The first opportunity to venture into this creative realm came when a young woman wanted to book a careers guidance interview. She seemed angry and her voice was clipped as if she was trying to control her emotions. I booked the appointment and was then taken aback when she said "is there anything I can do before I see you?" No one had asked this of me before. I enquired if there was something in particular that she wanted to talk about and she explained that she had just been diagnosed with a severe back problem and as a result was unlikely to achieve her dream of becoming a nurse. I suggested that she may want to write a letter to herself on how she was feeling at this moment in time as it may help to gain some perspective and

clear a path to other possibilities. She readily agreed as it gave her something tangible to latch on to at a time when she felt lost. A week later she returned for our appointment, smiling. "How did you get on?" She told me that she cried 'loads' as she wrote the letter. My heart sank and I wondered if I had escalated her misery. Then she told me that she had been angry with herself but seeing the words on the page began to make things clearer. 'Forgiveness is a gift that comes with increased understanding' (Bolton, 2010:62). By writing a letter to her 'pain' she was able to forgive her body and move on. She said that she had a long chat with her tutor and now wanted to consider other career options.

On another occasion I was asked to deliver a group work to mature learners on progression opportunities and I decided that I would try something 'different'. I gave each person a large sheet of paper and asked them to fill the page with words that described their skills and qualities, writing them their way using different fonts and colours. At first people looked at each other, not sure where to start, so as they worked I asked them to call out words which I wrote on a board. Soon the room began to fill with expressive conversations. Some people filled their page with a myriad of coloured words in all shapes and sizes. Others wrote orderly lists in a more traditional way, for this was 'classwork' to them. Afterwards I asked if anyone would like to share their 'story' of how they came to return to learning. Interestingly, those who had embraced the creative exercise seemed to be more open to talking. This group had formed a bond prior to my interaction so it could be that they had already developed rules regarding confidentiality. People spoke freely on aspects of their lives which may not have been forthcoming under other circumstances. Was it that they had been waiting for the opportunity to tell their stories? This was not a therapy session (although creativity may be considered therapeutic) yet the participants wanted to talk. I felt energised by the positive atmosphere created through a creative activity. I also felt that I was more able to offer my clients genuineness and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957) as the exercise seemed to open heightened channels of empathy as a result of 'deeply' listening to the diversity of stories.

Would practitioners be willing to participate in

creative writing practices? Nervously I pitched my idea and to my delight the response was positive; almost as if the individuals had been waiting for 'permission' to write their story their way. I suggested that they write about a time that resonated with them and to include their feelings and thoughts. The first, I will call her Lucy, wrote about remembering the moment she decided to leave her marriage: 'When I think of 2005, my stomach gets just a little bit tight. It's almost imperceptible, this tightness'. She wrote of how her days were defined by 'anxiety, of worrying, of tiptoeing around...' and that the day she received a 'list' of her shortcomings with 'bolded headlines, bullet points and 10 point font' she decided to leave. She wrote:

I read it at the kitchen table. It was a cold January morning and the light outside was harsh, I remember thinking that as I peered out the kitchen window, blinking to clear the tears that clouded my eyes. The silence was loud in my ears. But for the first time, I was certain.

When I read her story I felt as if I was in the room with her; the depth of feeling demanded my attention as the reader. I emailed the participants and asked three questions:

- How did you feel before you started writing?
- How did you feel when you were writing the article? What did you notice?
- What were your immediate thoughts once the piece was written?

Lucy responded that initially she was excited as she loves to express herself this way and thought the project 'was unique and interesting'. However, she had doubted being able to write something that would be 'worthy', expressing that it was symptomatic of her experience in 2005. In response to the second question, Lucy noted that it was harder than she thought it might be as she was writing about a very difficult time in her life. In her response she wrote 'my body even got a little sick feeling' and that she had 'awareness that it wasn't real but it still didn't feel good'. She also wondered if what she had written was 'silly' and explained that it exemplified her struggle

with self esteem at that time of her life. Finally, she felt relief that the piece was finished and importantly 'I felt relieved that I was no longer in that place in my life'.

The second, Sue, wrote a poem:

A moment in time when the right solutions
arrive at the right questions.
A decision made and a plan made.
No regrets.

A moment in time when the right opportunity,
pursued,
results in a re-focus and the path forward is set.
No regrets.

A moment in time when all is black and all that
has gone before seems pointless.
A gathering of strength and focus and a new path
is taken.
No regrets.

A moment in time to reflect on the past and
recognise knowledge, to value experiences.
An earned respect as a practitioner with an
ongoing career ever changing.
No regrets.

In response to my first question Sue said that after I had spoken to her she began to reflect on the previous fifteen years of work and her 'thoughts and emotions became complex and confusing'. She started to write with a 'brain dump' and just let the words out. 'On paper it became simple and uncomplicated and fifteen years were summed up in a few sentences'. The piece was written in one go with a few subsequent alterations. Sue's thoughts on completing the piece were 'Work wise I have been liberated from doubt and I feel more confident about the future at least for now. – More hopeful'.

Both participants wrote with 'verisimilitude' as described earlier in this work, both offered reflective and reflexive accounts of moments in time. Each chose to tell their story in their own way, providing narratives infused with feeling (Law, 2003). They are narrators of their own stories (Fine, 1992). It can be easy to lose sight of our actions and by engaging in a creative process these individuals may have heightened a sense of self.

Concluding Thoughts

This work aimed to share some of my MA experience and how writing has become for me a method of inquiry which 'documents becoming' (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2008). Inspired by the authors researched on my journey I wanted to explore creative writing processes as a possible tool for career guidance practice. Such creativity may engage some but it will not be for everyone. Yet others find the writing process therapeutic. It could be a way to explore feelings about certain events (Bould, 2001). The individuals who participated were women, but the group also included men who readily told their stories. Would male practitioners find creative writing a positive experience? Perhaps this is an area worthy of consideration for future research.

None of the participants were under 17 years of age. How would younger individuals respond? Direct scribing has been used by Martin (1998) to amplify the 'muted' voices of young people in child protection. She typed their stories as they dictated them to her and followed this with conversations about what had been written. This method would reinforce a collaborative relationship (Egan, 2002).

Yet, such activities are time costly and some practitioners find their practice constrained by institutions with their own agendas. If we, as guidance practitioners, do not pursue practice that applauds creativity we could find ourselves at the mercy of institutions who seek to protect their own interests. With a reduction in face to face guidance foretold in the plans for a proposed National Careers Service (Hayes, 2011) it is crucial to be more creative in our impartial practice. Moving towards professionalism calls for dynamic practice; creativity is the key if guidance practitioners are to be recognised as innovative professionals who embrace these challenging times.

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