

# On-line careers work – hit and myth

Bill Law

**Much** of careers work is located on-line and this article examines what on-line careers work does well. That makes the internet a careers-work hit; but there are also internet myths. And the article identifies them as camouflaging what is at times no worse than a shortfall, but which can also do actual damage.

So there are issues. The article sets out evidence to show how careers work is well-equipped to deal with them. The conclusion illustrates the need for what it calls 'grasp', 'reach' and 'embodiment':

- grasp enables critical thinking in an on-line search for reliable learning
- reach connects on-line learning to off-line usefulness
- embodiment internalises on-line experience as off-line identity.

All require direct-and-personal conversation between careers workers and their clients-and-students. The article therefore significantly repositions careers work in relation to the net. And in relation to policy.



## Introduction

The internet is content – what is said and shown. It is also technology – a tool that makes saying and showing possible. And it is process – an activity which engages with both. The argument here is that coverage is pretty well out of our control. And the technology is changing at such a rate that people with any kind of off-line life are in no position to keep up with it. But, when it comes to process, people need professional educators who know how to pose the questions that stir up constructive engagement with the net. Or so we're entitled to hope.

One of the most useful scene-setting analyses of

the internet is suggested by Christian Fuchs and his colleagues (Fuchs, Hofkirchner, Schafranek, Raffl, Sandoval and Bichler, 2010). It is useful because it invites us to understand the internet not in terms of what it contains, nor even in terms of how it works, but in terms of the conversational process it calls on.

**web-1.0** is cognitive enquiring – searching sources for off-line use

**web-2.0** is interactive communicating – putting issues and seeking feedback

**web-3.0** is cooperative changing – sharing, probing and challenging

Each of these is a means of communication; and every such means has, sooner or later, been captured by powerful interests. Enthusiasts for the internet claim to be exceptions to this rule. The journey from web-1.0 to -3.0 is celebrated as leading to self-propelled independence, where the net's multiple connections outflank all that corporations and governments might do to contain them. Careers work figures in that negotiation between what the enthusiasts seek and the powerful impose. It has set up sites dedicated to careers work. A comprehensive analysis (Law, 2012a<sup>1</sup>) shows that some careers work on the net has sought to contain what is done on-line inside familiar off-line use. This article argues that the internet will not be contained like that. It sets out the outflanking of careers work by the internet. Careers work does not adopt the internet, the internet adapts careers work.

## On-line life

Web-1.0 carried more-or-less static pages - people used it like a library or a lecture theatre. But *FaceBook*, *YouTube*, *Second Life*, *Twitter*, *Linked-in*, *Skype* and *Xbox*

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<sup>1</sup> further references to this publication are referred to here as 'the analysis'

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are Web-3.0 events – not for library or lecture-theatre. This is where clients-and-students meet their friends and find new ones, where plans are hatched, alliances forged, and action rehearsed. While users were once outsiders and consumers they are now insiders and producers. We have no idea how far this can go.

The analysis finds varying degrees of this interactivity. Some expect an immediate response, others allow time for reflection. People may or may not know each other. Content may be abiding or transient. Access is increasingly portable. Tech-upgrades advance accessibility for some and retard it for others. They use a mix of numbers, words and images – variously animated. Users browse for hours and come-and-go in seconds. They find verified information and gossip opinion. Some sites protect disclosure. Some divert user information to other interests. Sites are used for fun, shopping, indulging obsessions, carrying out research and fomenting revolution. None of these pursuits necessarily excludes any other.

The analysis also shows that educators may or may not be up with this. Unsurprisingly, they are not comfortable with the full range of its uses in their programmes. They tend to seek clearly-bounded uses that support familiar schooling activities. There are calls for educators to catch-up with technology. On the evidence of the analysis that strategy is probably futile. A different line is to characterise the need for creativity, critical thinking and learning-to-learn. That need was less urgent in the quiet library, but it is becoming imperative in the noisy forum. In this thinking the website still provides the content; and technology remains the tool; it is critical thinking that becomes the process.

## Careers work on-line

The analysis shows that careers workers have taken a position similar to educators in general. They find the technology daunting. The range of careers-work activities is limited. There may not be much of an understanding of internet culture. Interest can get focussed on ready-made processes. There are also significant developments. A growing number of sites set out career-management experience in narrative terms. They mimic Web-3.0 social-networking. The need to retain attention means that an account of

labour-market experience is presented as though it were reliable labour-market information. There is also a temptation to favour ‘inspirational’ stories – which can mean that bad experiences of work-life are edited out. It can also mean that anecdotes are treated like facts (Law, 2012b).

Career-related blogging is also gaining ground. It is a call-and-response activity: career ‘experts’ canvass facts, suggestions and questions; people come back with reactions, feedback and comments. The process can develop lengthy and discursive keyboarded discussion, where everybody sees everybody’s. There are similarities with group discussion – like that set up in curriculum. And blogging raises familiar issues, for example concerning the assertion of self-interest by the loud and articulate – in both expert calls and user responses.

*Linked-In* may well be the preferred route for improving working-life prospects. It is a social-networking site which announces itself as a way for job-seekers to stay visible to potential employers and to learn from each other. It uses a combination of information and blogging formats. It also sets up on-line groups with shared interests. On-line games also figure in career-related on-line activity. They give practice in managing tasks requiring command of space, time and logic. We don’t know much about careers workers following people in their navigation of the processes – whether they are raising useful questions, or learning about their students-and-clients.

The analysis shows careers workers are relying on familiar techniques – derived from comfortably-familiar word-processors, data-bases, spread-sheets and calculators. Dedicated careers-work sites use Web-3.0 cautiously. But their students-and-clients are more adventurous. And, among careers-work commentators, Michael Larbalestier (2010) distinctively points to risks. His point deserves expansion – the risks are not going to be dealt with by uncritical enthusiasm nor curmudgeonly scepticism. But they do need to be addressed. Web-3.0 is sometimes celebrated as taking people to places where nothing is singular, agreed or enduring. It is true that what you find in any web location is quickly overlaid with updating, elaboration, illustration, and contradiction. Does this multiply-linked enthusiasm strengthen people’s grasp on reality – or weaken it?

## Enthusiasts

An influential enthusiast is Clay Shirky (2008, 2010), characterising the net as a 'consuming, producing and sharing' activity. It can multiply perspectives on, say, working life – and in ways which no expert source can outflank.

Enthusiasts see the net as an expanded living space where identity and options can be multiplied. We'll come back to an example of that – *Second Life*. A corollary of the belief is that the net empowers change agency. The net-based movement '*Occupy*' is a non-violent and articulate debating movement opposing arbitrarily imposed containments. It emerges, more-or-less simultaneously, world wide. Paul Mason (2012) claims that it is unprecedented – born of a unique alignment of interests, zeitgeist, and technology. It is a career-related event, strongly supported by young graduates, whose ambitions are thwarted by the failures of policy and commerce.

Most of such optimism is Web-3.0 based. It is taking clients-and-students into territories that influence the way they see themselves, their own work, and the credibility of careers work. It is easy to see all of this as 'empowering' – people can access more material, engage in more conversations, and – it is claimed – exercise more control. And that sense of liberation may well be exhilarating for people who don't feel at-ease with experts and professionals. The net offers them more congenial ways of finding out what is going on, and figuring out what to do about it.

If people are changing the way they learn, then careers work must change the way it helps. But we need to know more.

## Sceptics

Nicholas Carr (2010) points to the superficiality of the internet. His analysis includes evidence that brain plasticity can mean that tick-and-click activity may diminish concentration, persistence and resistance. That would be significant – personally-held sustained memory is where thinking is embedded in re-usable form.

Cass Sunstein (2009) signposts the net's insularity.

It reaches any separate interest group, forming each into an enclave welcoming 'people-like-us'. On-line friends are often off-line mates – situated by both url and post-code. Each meeting-point celebrates its own beliefs, values and expectations – based on what is worth listening to, worth doing and worth possessing. But enclaves enclose, and enclosure can entrap.

Both sceptical voices are influential. But they do not see a deliberate intention to harm, they see collateral damage. Social networking is disclosing. And corporate interests act on the basis of disclosure – what 'people-like-you' like. They form what are called 'long-tails', which comprise many different niches each avoiding alternatives – 'people not like us'. More seriously, protective barriers are breached by corporate interests who pay for 'deep-net' searches of disclosures. There are also predatory uses of social networking – some among acquaintances, some life-threatening. Savvy surfers are alert. But the 2012 analysis shows that habitual users are less sophisticated, they value the net for its ease-of-use, pay little heed to who operates a site, and do not probe the credibility of sources.

How does all of this fit to work-life? Work calls for reliability, as well as flexibility; it is about consideration for others, as well as self-fulfilment; it relies on understanding, but will listen to opinion; it needs sustained engagement, though there may be immediate rewards. There is no simple unravelling of the issues. But careers work needs to know how to work with students-and-clients on their use of what is easy to find, looks familiar and feels comfortable. It is an educator's job to invite people out of their comfort zones.

## Web 4.0

No genuine educator wants to shackle students; but no educator can liberate students from circumstantial influence. Education can, however, enable a student for independent autonomy in any circumstance. Not all behaviour that is circumstantially free is independently autonomous.

Web-3.0 celebrates whatever liberation the enthusiasts can find. But the sceptics have a point: Web-3.0 confuses appearance and reality, plausibility

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and credibility, looking and seeing, believing and knowing. Movements like *Occupy* – with its use of seminars, argument and exchange-of-view – has moved beyond the enclaved and playful uses of Web-3.0. It is signally the emergence of a more rigorous and challenging use of the net.

Working with those conflicts and confusions is the stuff of education. We might, then, think of an educative movement from Web-3.0 to 4.0. The conversational process would be critical thinking – questioning, linking, internalising. Table 1 sketches in some of the elements. They are worth careers-work attention if its workers find any of the attitudes listed on the left among their students-and-clients. The table suggest how...

- on-line looking becomes **reliable** seeing
- on-line connectedness links to **wider** realities
- on-line self relates to an **embodied** identity

**Table 1: people on Web-3.0 – careers work on web-4.0**

	3.0 experience	4.0 questioning
grasping realities	settling for immediate 'yes-no' ticks-and-clicks	engaging careful and sustained application-of-mind
	believing they know all that they need to know	facing that whatever they now know they could find something else
	valuing things with binary polarities - extremes of approval and disapproval	finding more aspects of life than at-first-sight seem obvious
	seeking simple answers from quick-fix sources	figuring out explanations and taking responsibility for action
reaching for links	acting without realising other possibilities	imagining other possible selves in other possible futures
	seeking confirmation of ready-made beliefs	learning from what is new, surprising and disturbing
	'liking' and re-visiting the familiar and undisturbing	welcoming and exploring unforeseen ways of seeing
embodying learning	taking appearance and what is easily found as reality	looking beyond appearance to realise inner life
	looking to familiar, spectacular and celebrity-iconic models	seeing that finding a quick 'like' is not knowing what to do about it
	working with sharp-and-fixed branded self-presentations	getting into self-repecting touch with their own natural bodily life

There can be a-bright-and-breeziness on Web-3.0. If well-enough protected that is fine for party-time<sup>2</sup>. But professional educators know that on-line devices are not just toys, they can be tools. The table maps – left-to-right – the migration of on-line virtuality into off-line reality.

<sup>2</sup> as many joyous teachers and careers workers can testify

## Careers workers as educators

Careers work cannot be judged by how far it improves the economy or changes behaviour. It can be judged on the useful relevance of the learning it enables. What happens after that is not in careers-workers' hands. Furthermore, no professional educator can hold back technology. But all professional educators, however misleading and damaging the net can be, can enable people to make good use of it. Careers workers are needed, not to manage a content nor master a tool, but to enable a process.

Educationist Lev Vygotsky's work (1978) anticipates the task – it proposes graphic learning tools-for-learning. The role of teachers is, then, to frame learning – the writer calls it 'scaffolding' – to support a movement into progressively-enlarging learning zones. Vygotsky's work reaches beyond the enclosure that Cass Sunstein fears.

Sociologists also anticipate the management of on-line identities. Erving Goffman (1959) shows how we each take different roles in different social situations – some private, others public. And David Riesman's (1961) analysis of the cultures of identity – inherited tradition, inner life and social expectation – tells of people juggling with where they come from, where they are, and who they are with. He assembles all into a basis for autonomous action.

Sociologist Neil Selwyn (2011) extends these lines-of-thinking into on-line life. He acknowledges that the tools will forever develop, but he claims that does not equate to progress – especially where appearance loses contact with reality. He urges educators to step back from the technology and be prepared to see it as strange, and needing investigation. He is inviting us out of comfortable habits-of-mind. He suggests that the students most likely to be damaged are the least likely to realise it – with consequences for entrapment, and therefore for restricted social mobility. He concludes that we are mis-applying technological solutions to cultural and sociological problems.

But Selwyn is countering the trend. The 2012 analysis shows vocational pressures on curriculum are assessing success on a subject-by-subject basis. It reports regret concerning the failure to use interdisciplinary work, which is claimed to be more likely to develop creative

change. One source comments that learning how to change things is the greatest gift that education can offer. A widely-held position is that there is more than one form of digital literacy. And, although the content and tools change, the ability to be critical in examining sources is learned for life.

## A learning web

Table 1 records what optimists welcome as evoking good feelings. But it also responds to what the sceptics say goes badly. It makes good use of bad news. The 2012 analysis shows that there is no more pressing issue for careers work than grappling with the hits and myths of on-line experience. It suggests three key concepts<sup>3</sup>, speaking of enabling a *grasp* of what is worth knowing, so that seeing can *reach* into learning for off-line living, which will lead to the *embodiment* of that learning...

1. **grasp:** getting a basis for appropriate, fulfilling and sustainable action
2. **reach:** enable learning for life in other settings, on other tasks and with other people
3. **embodiment:** becoming part of inner life – internalised as part of identity

The conclusion seriously undermines policy trends in consigning much of careers work to on-line use.

1. **grasp:** In his account of on-line learning Hubert Dreyfus (2009) proposes a six-stage sequencing of learning for action: practising as a 'novice', in real-life action becoming 'advanced', and then a 'beginner'; on the way to becoming 'competent', then 'proficient'; and eventually having 'mastery'. John Morgan, Ben Williamson, Tash Lee, and Keri Facer (2007) condense such thinking into a four-stage curriculum design, working from 'eliciting' data, through 'defining' the approach, on to 'making' a product, and then 'presenting' it to others.

The research-based career-learning framework (Law, 1996) is adaptable to a questioning process which parallels what both Dreyfus and Morgan and colleagues propose. It generates the questions that can move on-line looking into off-line seeing.

3 An extended account of this analysis was applied to the uses of narrative in Law, 2012b. This is a focused re-application to on-line learning. A fully-documented and illustrated account is at Law, 2012c

**Table 2: interrogating the net**

<b>sensing</b>	finding things out	have you got enough to go on?
<b>sifting</b>	sorting out what is found	can you get this into any kind of useful order?
<b>focusing</b>	checking out what is important	are there any surprises here – things worth following up?
<b>understanding</b>	figuring out how it all happens	can you see how things got this way and what you can do about them?

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This is a process – not setting out information but questioning in a way which people can learn for themselves. It is critical thinking – working with questions that affect life-chances. The questions are progressive – a journey where each step relies on a preceding step. They are interactive, each question is shaped by the preceding answer. And it is learning-for-action, leading to an ability to anticipate the consequences of action. Careers workers do not need to be technical whizzes, nor experts on content. They have a process which engages that tool in sorting out that content. It is the process which gives us our hold on survival – on the savannah, on the street and on the net.

Dreyfus urges process because people need to learn to do it for themselves. The way careers workers pose questions is a model for how their students-and-clients can do it. In a process-driven programme students find the content and educators ask the questions. That method is Socratic: it invites people into the habit of questioning what they find, and developing curiosity about who does what – and why. It is a partnership – educators and students learn from each other. There is no single authority. Client-centred counselling is an example. So is what is sometimes called ‘flipped learning’ in a classroom.

It needs the educator to know the students well

enough to anticipate what line-of-questioning can be useful. It needs sensitivity to what people might ask and need to ask. It needs the right language – Nicki Moore and Tristram Hooley (2012) show how basic that language must sometimes be. But, most basically, such a disclosing conversation needs mutual comprehension and reciprocated trust. And that means direct-and-personal contact.

**2. reach:** The idea of reach poses questions about how extensively learning is connected to life. Career learning needs to be carried from where it is acquired to where it is used – knowledge is gathered in one location and used in another. If career learning is not – in this sense – transferable, then it is not working. The evidence (Law, 2012c) is that transfer requires learning to be, at source, encoded with markers signaling where in life it can be used. Where students are reminded of life in their learning, they are reminded of learning in their life.

A useful framework is role thinking, which positions a person at locations, in relationships, taking on tasks. It includes work roles such as employee, entrepreneur and colleague. And all work roles are taken up alongside domestic, neighbourhood, citizen, and activist roles. A face-to-face conversation about the use of on-line learning can, then, be encoded by inviting off-line role-related markers – ‘where can you use this?’, ‘who will you be with?’ and ‘what will you be taking on?’ (Law, 2006).

A characterising feature of the internet is connectivity – linking one thing with another so that one image or idea becomes part of another domain. It migrates



an on-line thought into an off-line location. However, that expansive potential is hampered by the tendency for the links to assemble into enclaves, reinforcing rather than diversifying. That tendency is most tellingly embedded where career is narrowly focused on competitive on-line moves – Web-3.0 becomes an arena for a race to win employability. Much of on-line career coaching is voiced in such terms – ‘coaching’ is a sporting metaphor. But, the word ‘career’ is etymologically bigger than that: it is a double metaphor, imaging not just a race but also a journey (Law and Stanbury, 2009). The journey metaphor is exploratory. It has greater connectivity, linking to life roles stretching from the compliantly employable to the independently reforming. All of this is work. How much of it we reach depends on what wider off-line roles and realities we take into account in our search for ‘career’.

**3. embodiment:** The idea of ‘embodiment’ poses questions about the authenticity of identity. Dreyfus (2009) chooses the on-line simulation *Second Life* as the occasion for questioning how far on-line experience can represent off-line life. The website seems to do so. It offers the appearance of a total immersion in an alternative way of living. It accommodates its own characters, locations, encounters and narratives. There are resonances with career-management: visitors can deal with products, markets and academies. And they can earn income, in a currency with a dollar exchange-rate.

But Dreyfus is sceptical. The simulation conveys nothing of the risks, or commitment or shared meaning of human engagement. The ready-made menus of on-line interaction, its derived icons, and its re-invented avatars cannot convey the authenticity which comes through embodied, shared and situated encounter. Embodied experience means that posture, style, expression and proximity carry subtle and spontaneous communication. It is how we know each other, and enter another culture – and it is how another culture enters us. Dreyfus shows that that embodied contact makes what we merely say no more than part of how people learn from us – it is more complete because it places less reliance on words. Much of what happens is subliminal – scent and semiochemicals play a part. Virtuality miss-fires on all of this non-verbal signaling – we call it body language.

## Off-line narrative for on-line life

Conversational questioning elicits a narrative. The where-when-who-what-how-and-why tells a story. But the story has no uncompromised heroes. Educators are sometimes over-cautious. Policy is sometimes simplistic. Net users are sometimes gullible. Net enthusiasts are sometimes enclosed. And careers workers are sometimes self-serving. Although, the internet is in many ways a careers-work hit, there are myths – camouflaging both shortfalls and damage.

Careers work is well-equipped to deal with this. The professional case for grasp, reach and embodiment substantially repositions it in relation to both internet content and internet technology. And, if it has any validity, this analysis seriously undermines claims for the dominant usefulness of on-line careers work. And that radically repositions careers work beyond the grasp, reach or embodiment of current policy.

In order to enable clients-and-students to question the hits and probe the myths of on-line living, careers workers do not need to be expert users of technological tools – cohort-by-cohort of students-and-clients will do that better on a day-by-day basis. And impartial expertise is progressively less useful in a changing world where on-line students-and-clients connect and update on a minute-by-minute basis. But nobody does better what a professional educator can do in enabling people to take on board other points-of-view, to take one thing with another, and to take nothing for granted. Or so we may hope.

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## For correspondence

Dr Bill Law  
The Career-learning Café

[bill@hihohiho.com](mailto:bill@hihohiho.com)