

Embodying integrity in careers education and guidance practice: Looking through the DOTS window

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Abstract

This article explores what professional integrity looks like in careers education, information and guidance. It draws illumination from the work of Bill Law, especially the DOTS model which he developed with Tony Watts. It encourages the reader to reflect on their own professional mindset and behaviour as career practitioners, offering questions inspired by the DOTS framework and suggests ways in which applying approaches which we might more usually apply to our clients might help us to develop our professional integrity.

Keywords: DOTS, careers education, professional integrity, values, ethics

Introduction

What does the description of a careers practitioner as 'having real integrity as a professional' mean to you? Does someone come to mind and is that person, Bill Law perhaps? Is it something that you would be proud to have said of you? What does integrity mean in our context of Careers Education Information and Guidance (CEIG) and how might the DOTS model of career education, Decision Learning, Opportunity Awareness, Transition Learning and Self-Awareness, which Bill Law and Tony Watts developed together around 50

1 Writing in a personal capacity.

years ago, now help us think more concretely about a concept as elusive as 'professional integrity' in CEIG (Law and Watts, 1977, 2003).

After 36 years delivering and leading CEIG in 10 university careers services, and with a perspective further enriched by my experience as an AGCAS Board Director 2016-2021, I am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on what integrity might mean in our professional CEIG context. My own professional experience is primarily in Higher Education (HE) and graduate-focused contexts, but I hope some of what I write here is also useful in CEIG delivery beyond the academy and for those readers who are careers professionals in other settings including private practice. Integrity matters in every professional context.

Conventionally used more as a term applying to professions that have fiduciary responsibilities, such as finance and law, professional integrity is in essence about trust. As a client of an accountant or a lawyer, my reasonable expectation of professional integrity is the approach, 'I trust you not to lie, cheat or steal, or to pervert my business to serve your interests'. Our core currency in CEIG is guidance, education, information and empowerment, rather than financial assets or legal advice, which prompts questions such as what does trustworthiness look like in that context, or more challengingly, where does our honesty lie? This is where I find illumination in applying the DOTS model to our own professional practice and exploring some questions catalysed by that framework.

Self-awareness supports professional integrity in walking our own talk

How is your own career health? Are you future-fit? How much are you actually following the advice that you dish out to clients? Is your self-awareness centred on your values and skills, or are you rather absorbed by your insecurities for which you are compensating with the ego-boost of your professional role? Is your self-awareness dynamic and open to change? Yesterday's confident practice, unless refreshed regularly, is today's arrogance and an invitation to creeping incompetence. We can refresh our self-awareness by applying to ourselves Bill Law's approach to careers learning, articulated in his work on new DOTS (Law, 2001) and based on the value of sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding (SeSiFU) in creating effective insights. The more we are aware of what we are bringing to any CEIG conversation or lesson, and where our limitations might be, the easier it is to get our ego out of the way and to deliver trustworthy and effective CEIG.

Transition learning challenges us to take own career risks

One of the paradoxes of careers work is that the comfortable are often coaching the client out of their comfort zone to take risks. Our own comfort can provide a calm base and broader cognitive bandwidth from which we support clients, but it can also reduce our empathy in appreciating how challenging risk-taking with your economic wellbeing and facing social rejection can feel when the safety net is fragile. What might our comfort zone comprise? Are we benefiting from the privilege of a permanent contract or the privilege of a second household income or other family capital? Where are we situated in social privilege such as race, gender or class? Some of our personal comfort zone may be intrinsic and cannot be changed. Other comfort zones may be life advantage for which we may have worked hard to achieve and which we value on behalf of ourselves and our families.

But part of professional integrity is looking at our comfort zone regularly and shaking it up a bit. It is naturally human to think that our success is mainly due to our efforts and while effort plays a key part, if we have success, we have also benefitted from luck. So, as well as self-awareness, part of walking our talk is to continually take risks, to feel the discomfort of being evaluated and to fail at times. Integrity comes from regularly facing and being humbled by what scares you, whether that is public speaking in a new context, interpersonal conflict at work, or death by spreadsheets. CEIG work can be so fulfilling that there is a temptation to stay in the satisfying and comfortable people-facing activities which drew so many of us into the business. However, we need to tackle a personal scary thing every month if we want to work with integrity; to find the right words and tone to encourage our clients to take the risks which they need to overcome on the way to achieving their own dreams.

We also need to master our own career transition skills and apply for jobs, secondments, awards, contracts and promotions. From my own experience, I was most effective as a careers coach when I was applying for jobs on my own behalf, sweating over every word on the application form and boring the cat with yet another rehearsal of my presentation. It reminded me that job hunting is so substantially an emotional regulation task under intense time pressure. Anyone who has recruited in the CEIG world has depressing stories of experienced careers consultants submitting substandard applications and lacklustre interview performance. What is going on here? Is it professional arrogance? Is it lack of self-confidence? Could it be addressed by realising that we too would benefit from talking to a fellow professional, or at least ChatGPT, about our approach to self-presentation, especially if it has been a while since we put ourselves out there to be evaluated. Taking the other seat and working through our discomfort deepens our integrity as a career practitioner.

Opportunity awareness keeps us current

We also demonstrate professional integrity by continually researching and adapting to the changes of the times we work in. There is no integrity in being the professional of 2016 (or 2036) in the working environment of 2026. Part of our integrity is being really alive to the present. What is useful to our clients NOW? One of the gifts of my four decades of working life has been a growing appreciation that much of the white noise of working life is temporary trends and buzz-words, and that much can be navigated with the sense that 'this too will pass'. However, though it may be transient, and some of it I have been eager to speed on its way, while it is today's fashion, it frames the environment that our clients must navigate in their job hunting and career development. And if we work in an organisational context, it frames the strategic landscape in which we must present narratives and perform, or we risk being seen as outmoded or irrelevant with consequent loss of impact on our ability to empower individuals. So we need to refresh our vocabulary to talk today's talk.

We need to put in the hours to listen, learn and keep up to date with the labour markets relevant to the clients we advise. Keep reading job advertisements, salary trends, industry news and, in 2026, have a view on how AI can help you do your job more effectively (and implement some of it) so that you have the credibility to ask the same question of your clients. Part of the trust we earn is in keeping up to date, refreshing our material and delivering honest and competent work. Time for that delete button for some of your old

favourite slides. One of the ways in which I find Bill Law inspiring was his continual curiosity about new approaches. Like him, keep evolving.

Decision-learning (and decision-making) is where integrity becomes wisdom

So much effective career development is about good decision-making: choosing the options that fit who we are and who we are likely to become; choosing how to spend our limited discretionary time in career enriching activities; basing our decisions on long-lasting principles or values; being realistic about how to make compromises when options are limited. Does that describe your own career management? Should I be taking career advice from you?

We also support the career decision-making skills of others. Have we invested the time to think about the different ways in which people legitimately make decisions. Reading Bill Law is always a good start. His work on community interaction and the importance of one's circle of influencers: parents, teachers, role models and peers has inspired me for over 30 years (Law, 1981). In a field which has often fetishised individual choice, Bill looked at the social context and how we are interdependent with it. If, as a client, I am going to stretch out of my community comfort zone to explore a vocational area where my social support is weak, then hopefully my careers consultant is bringing some integrity to this discussion to help me make an honest appraisal of new support structures and new behaviours which I may need to adopt in order to make and sustain social mobility jumps.

We often make good decisions when we balance the fashions and opportunities of today with what matters to us intrinsically, and when we stay true to our fundamental principles and values. It is that anchoring to values which people often pick up on when they sense integrity. How could someone, for example a client, tell that we value professional competency, honesty and impartiality (as much as that is possible for any human being) – where's the evidence?

The final test of integrity is whether we operate as if the work is bigger than we are (quick tip: it is, as the graveyard is full of people who thought that they were indispensable). Are we prepared to change our mind, and at times sacrifice our ego, when we discover inconvenient truths through our work? Are we actively experimenting, making mistakes and sometimes making fools of ourselves? Do people get the sense that we are in service to something bigger than our own small agendas but not taking ourselves too seriously? Bill Law embodied this sense of lightness as he created a website entitled 'hihohiho' inspired by the song which continues, 'it's off to work we go'.

In the way he approached his professional work and in the many models and ideas he explored and developed, Bill Law enriched the endeavour of professional integrity in CEIG. So go, walk that talk and stay current, credible and a catalyst for change. Take the opportunity to explore the NICEC Bill Law archive online, and next time you need a professional integrity refresh, ask yourself 'What would Bill do?'



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