Turning to Narrative in the Training of Careers Education, Guidance and Advice Workers: Could this be a Way Forward?

Hazel L Reid

Introduction

In what is often described as a 'post-modern' and 'globalised' world, the work of career education and guidance practitioners has changed considerably. The training of those practitioners has also changed to reflect the demands they encounter in their current workplace. But, has that change gone far enough or do trainers still rely on established methods of learning, teaching and assessment? Across many disciplines there is what is termed a turn to narrative approaches for understanding human behaviour and action. The approach is seen as helping us as social actors to understand the diverse meanings given to action in a multicultural and interactive world. Working within an inclusive agenda, what can those involved in training do to introduce or extend narrative approaches into their courses? This article will make some tentative suggestions in the belief that focusing on the training arena is a good place to start. The article also aims to widen the debate and hopes others will respond and offer suggestions and criticisms to further our understanding of the potential of narrative approaches.

The turn to narrative

In the field of career counselling in the USA, Savickas (1997a) suggests that the turn to narrative approaches reflects a 21st century preoccupation with meaning in contrast to a 20th century focus on facts. In the UK there is a growing interest in the development of narrative approaches.

For example, Canterbury Christ Church University College held a conference in June 2002, entitled, 'Challenging biographies: relocating the theory and practice of careers work'. The aim of the conference was to introduce and explore biographical and narrative perspectives on the making of career. It sought to examine some of the tensions between what we viewed as narrow and overly classified approaches to guidance, which seem at odds with the dynamic realities of felt lives in a changing world. As the title suggested it set out to challenge our assumptions about career and how we train career education and guidance professionals. Three papers were presented at the conference, by Linden West, Bill Law and myself, followed by discussion groups and later, the publication (Edwards, 2003). The aims of the conference were grand! But, we knew we were opening a debate and had no illusions of our ability to provide definitive answers to the issues raised. The closing chapter in the publication is a dialogue between the contributors that sought to engage with the issues raised at the conference. It does not offer closure but reflects the evolving nature of this somewhat slippery discourse and a desire to take the debate further into the realms of practicality. To that end, this article focuses on one aspect of one chapter – namely the training of career education and guidance practitioners.

Preliminary considerations

Before progressing further, it may be useful to expand on three things. Firstly, what is meant by 'narrative and biographical approaches'? Secondly, what is the wider range of activities that could benefit from a narrative approach? And lastly, what is included in the training of career education and guidance practitioners?

An article of this length cannot explore what is meant by narrative and biographical approaches in any depth. In terms of career counselling, the work of Savickas (1997a, 1997b), Cochran (1997a, 1997b) and Peavy (2000) is significant. In the UK, Audrey Collin has also advocated the use of interpretative approaches for the understanding of career (Collin 1998, Collin & Young, 1992). Edwards *et al* (1998) have edited a collection of papers, which give interpretative perspectives on guidance and counselling. McLeod (1997) and Beesley (2002) have both written about narrative and counselling. A chapter on narrative and career guidance in the context of the inclusion agenda in the UK was included in an Institute of Career Guidance publication (Reid, 2002a).

So there is plenty to read but how can narrative be summarised here for the purpose of this article with its focus on training? What interpretative and narrative approaches emphasise is the need to explore 'meaning' by allowing the individual to construct a career narrative that resonates significantly with their values and interests for life, not just for work. What is being suggested here is a move away from rational or simplistic scientific 'matching' approaches to career interventions. People get to know and understand us by listening to the stories in which we reveal 'who we

are'. This idea of self is located in experience around significant life events. As a result we speak and we understand from a particular focal point. We also learn from stories and we construct stories to make sense of what happens to us. We can enter the world of someone else's story but our comprehension is always framed by our own culture and experience, derived from our socialisation which structures our view about what is normal, real or meaningful. The point is we need to understand our own stories in order to be aware of how we make sense of other people's stories.

There are times of course in guidance as well as in life, when we cannot make sense of other people's stories. When working with clients who we do not understand, because 'meanings' are not shared, we are not relating to their story, as our cultural experiences are different. And the concept of culture here is wider than ethnicity; we can experience this discursive confusion within our *own* culture. In other words our own stories are the vantage point from which we view the stories of others. What we see always depends on that vantage point. Perhaps what narrative and biographical approaches ask us to do is to stand somewhere else to look.

Introducing a narrative counselling approach in guidance work would require specialist training, but at the very least we need to give individuals time to tell their stories in their own way. For those who may find it difficult to articulate their stories, more time, and a variety of methods is needed. However, that does not mean that the rest of our clients or our students will find managing their career/life pathways easy. New approaches are needed here too to help them manage the biographical strains that modern (post-modern?) life places on them.

Horizons for change

In the area of research

So what is the range of activities that would benefit from a narrative approach? Linden's chapter (West, 2003) reflects on the risky nature of a 'post-modern' world and how this impacts on notions of 'career' and 'identity formation'. Within this he poses questions about the purpose of career guidance in an individualistic, life-long learning culture. Within a neo-liberal agenda, is guidance being used as a form of social control, masking 'ugly and increasing social and structural inequalities' by reinforcing the discourse of individual freedom and progression via education, training and employment? He points to how top-down policy impositions on guidance practice, with 'this overt intrusion of power and politics' is 'far removed from the values of Egan and Rogers' (West, 2003:10). Thus, Linden asks us to question where we want to position ourselves in terms of our own identity formation, our own professional narrative.

Linden's chapter uses four narratives taken from his own research projects. He has completed three major, what he terms, 'auto/biographical' studies over a period of ten years. Biographical methods for researching professional contexts are a reflection of the growing interest in subjective accounts in the social sciences. The approach is collaborative, recognising 'that we cannot understand why people act and think as they do, without their active collaboration' (West, 2002:11). In so doing, the approach recognises that people act in, rather than merely react to, their circumstances, albeit that this often involves immense struggle. The approach gives greater prominence to the active role people play in shaping their own social processes.

What Linden advocates is an approach to research which moves away from trying to assert things scientifically. A narrative approach to research can organise understanding in a way that gives meaning to experience rather than mere description. It can illuminate our understanding of the social and psychological context of others through their own sense of what is real. And, as this work is collaborative and offers space for reflection, it can be the foundation for building a new story.

This is not, however, overlooking the influence of social structures and suggesting that the world can be changed at the individual level. A narrative approach recognises that individuals interact in a social world and does not seek to separate lives from a wider reality. Clough suggests, 'narrative is useful only to the extent that it opens up (to its audiences) a deeper view of life in familiar contexts: it can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.' (Clough, 2002:8).

Accordingly, for those of us commissioning or designing research, or those of us supervising research degree programmes, can we find out more and can we encourage students/colleagues to consider narrative and auto/biographical approaches for their research projects?

In the area of career education and guidance programmes

Moving on, Bill Law (2003) suggests that greater use of narrative-led methods could be used to change all aspects of careers work. In this he includes career education, personal and social education and their integration into mainstream curriculum in all sectors of careers work.

Bill also recognises that by their very nature narrative approaches are unlikely to appeal to those more interested in quantifiable logic. He refers to the 'fuzzy' nature of evidence as produced through story (see also Bassey, 1999, on fuzzy generalisations in research). He warns against didactic stories in educational settings, as the story needs to have enough interest to appeal to different people in different ways. In this we recognise that no two people take the same learning from the same story.

He explains how biographical writing can be used as a resource for the understanding of contemporary notions of career and career management. What is offered in Bill's chapter suggests significant potential for the development

of careers work in contemporary settings, within the agenda of Connexions, inclusion, citizenship, lifelong guidance and beyond! This approach also includes a range of media and should not be viewed as reliant on the written or even spoken word. If used in the way intended, it could be accommodated within the aims of the new National Framework for Careers Education and Guidance (DfES, 2003).

For example, as a starting point for development Bill views work experience and profiling as prime examples where the development of narrative approaches could be introduced. Like the other two authors Bill does not suggest a headlong rush in the use of narrative approaches, but suggests we need to point to ways we could implement the approach in some areas. As he states, 'what the field does about adapting the ideas... must be done in localities, adapting, fixing, creating' (Law, 2003: 76).

In the area of training for practitioners in career education and guidance

One locality is the area of training. And by trainers here I mean those involved in initial training in higher education settings and in workplace settings, and those involved in continuous professional development delivering training to experienced practitioners on internal or external courses in a range of workplace settings. The latter includes professional organisations concerned with the development of career and guidance practitioners. Training now also includes courses undertaken by a range of personal advisers as well as career guidance practitioners. The latter working in Connexions in England will be known as personal advisers as the title of careers adviser is, regrettably, being lost.

The training arena then offers the opportunity to work from the ground up. So what are the specific areas where aspects of a narrative approach can be introduced or extended?

Turning to narrative and auto/biographical approaches in the training of practitioners

In the way we support learners

The content of the Qualification in Careers Guidance (QCG), delivered by higher education institutions (HEIs), is governed by the aims and learning outcomes of the Institute of Career Guidance which is the awarding body. The main alternative to this initial qualification, the Scottish or National Vocational Qualification in Advice, Guidance and Advocacy at level 4 (VQ), is also governed by specific knowledge and performance criteria. That said those that deliver the training can give value added content or vary the methods used. But does this happen and if not, why not?

Within HEIs, the provision of extra activities is constrained by the hours given to the course and by the number of students. Changes that may be possible within those hours will be considered later, but where is the space to listen to trainees' stories? For companies using the VQ training route it is problematic to find time to send trainees away from the workplace for training, to find time for someone to observe and assess the work and to find time to enable trainees to complete the qualification. Experienced practitioners are also hard pressed to find time to engage in continuous professional development when busy practice is demanding their attention.

So, how can we create some space for learners (at all levels) to reflect on their work in the context of their lives? On the QCG there is little time to learn about the wealth of experience that students bring to the course and even less time to utilise this, or discuss how the new learning is being incorporated into the old. Trainers may write about practitioners needing to find time to allow the client to tell their stories, and write about organisations needing to find time to for adequate support and supervision for their practitioners, but do trainers practise what they preach? Do we give trainees (QCG\NVQ\CPD and other Connexions courses) adequate pastoral and tutorial time, or are we all too busy getting on with the job of delivery? If we want to do more than pay lip service to the concept of the reflective practitioner, we need to create this space and then ensure that it does not get filled up with the rubble of other operational matters.

In the way we teach

In our training courses we could encourage practitioners to make creative use of narrative approaches for their guidance group work. There is safety in the use of pre-published worksheets but this often leads to 'death by worksheet' (Reid, 2000). In one-to-one work we need to be sure trainees can see the benefits and the limitations of a humanistic, client-centred approach and give them access to the material that will help them to incorporate both narrative and multicultural principles into their interviewing model (Sue *et al*, 1996).

Within education training, the use of narrative is understood as a valuable strategy for teaching and learning. But what about a specific example for use in the career guidance field? In career education sessions with clients we often use case studies but working with narrative can achieve far more than working with case studies. By using other people's stories, young people, who often have difficulty in articulating ideas about themselves, can be helped to identify their own life themes and interests. However, this is not restricted to work with young people, we all learn through hearing stories. We can encourage practitioners to use narrative by using the approach in our teaching. On the other hand, the difference between case study work and using narratives is not immediately apparent. What is the difference?

The authentic voice in a narrative has an immediacy that is lost when the story becomes written into a case study. The latter is often written to encourage the recognition of what

the trainer thinks is important. For example, when I write a case study for our students I will be considering particular learning points that I feel are essential and the story is 'manipulated' to these ends.

Working with case studies then is only engaging up to a point, according to the level of interest of the reader. In many respects this is because the presenter of the case study has already made an interpretation of the story. This may diminish the goal of active learning as the value of the story is weakened. Case studies are sometimes viewed by our students as difficult to work with, because they feel either constrained by the limits of the interpretation, or irritated that they have only a partial story.

Narratives, however, appear to provoke a different response. The narrative voice has a veracity that situates the reader as direct recipient of the story. Put another way, the story speaks uniquely to each listener. Un-interpreted, the raw story opens up thinking to the possibility of further and often deeper interpretation. It is difficult to argue with; clarity, ambiguity and first-voice speech give authenticity. We need to recognise of course that language is not neutral, but culturally determined. However, the language in narratives is original, connections and meanings are explanation-free and are not forced upon the reader in the same way as in case studies (Merttens, 1998).

When using narratives rather than case studies our students appeared far more interested and engaged. They produced perceptive comments, less held back by feelings that they were being tested in some way.

An example will illustrate this – here we were considering vocational choice theory

(This extract is taken from Reid, 2003:57-8)

First, a case study with questions (not included) to guide group discussion

Mark is a young person in care who has a record as a young offender involved in repeated car theft and 'joy-riding'. Lately Mark seems to have gained some maturity and now has a better understanding of rule-governed behaviour. For example he can now see the point of car insurance and how reckless driving can cause injury to others. However, Mark does not consider himself to have been a 'crazy' joy rider and feels he does know how to drive properly. He is now taking proper driving lessons and when he passes his test, he says, will probably buy a car.

Before he was placed in care, Mark tells you, he had problems at home and often broke the rules. He knows it is hard 'getting back on the straight and narrow'. In care there are house rules, he tells you, that you have to abide by and you have to sign an agreement. He speaks of his Mum with affection but is aware that his behaviour at home was sometimes silly, but disruptive nonetheless. He asks you, with momentary indignation, if you understand that people have different upbringings, which makes them behave in different ways with their mums.

What follows is Mark's story, told by Mark

As you get older you come to realise, know what I mean, that you shouldn't do it, it's not worth it. I didn't realise before about insurance, running someone over, but I weren't one of those crazy ones, you know. I can drive properly. I ain't not getting into a car and going Brrwhrrrrrrrrr (Mark made extremely loud and realistic car revving noises) 90 miles round the corner and all that. I drive like a proper driver. Fair enough, you think (he interpreted my thoughts rightly) 'they all say that!' but you know, most people in a car, they go speeding. That's what joyriding is all about. For me it weren't like that. For me it was more getting used to being in a car and driving the car. I'll take my test now, I'm learning, and then I'll probably buy a car...

It's hard getting back on the straight and narrow. Here they've got house rules. You have to abide by them, sign an agreement. There is rules at home but I break them. Sounds silly. Bang doors...I love my Mum but I've had problems all over my life, it's not easy (Mark raised his voice, as if indignant). People have different upbringings, do you understand. Some people are different towards their mums from others, know what I mean – so there you go (and he seemed to relax again). ...

Sarah Curtis (1999:60) *Children Who Break the Law*, London: Waterside Press, quoted in Law, B. (2000) *Autobiography: The people's career development research?* The Career-Learning Network, unpublished.

How much more powerful and engaging is Mark's story told by Mark! There is a sense of the real, active voice, which speaks more directly than the case study. You have to work with it, ask your own questions, and make your own interpretations. When using this story (and a contrasting story) on training courses, our active engagement with the material and the enjoyment and ownership of the learning that took place appears significant. Certainly by not determining what to learn, it seemed that more learning took place (Thorpe *et al*, 1993).

We all know Mark or someone like him. Trainees and experienced professionals have many tales they can tell which help to relate the theory of a training course to the practice they experience. We can all tell stories and can adapt real stories (whilst protecting confidentiality for our clients) to open up our thinking, our interest and our ability to learn from one another.

Designing training

So when designing training can we ask ourselves, what do we do already that could be developed into a narrative approach? Bill Law calls this the 'easier stuff'. And what

else could we do to increase our use of narrative and create auto/biographical opportunities for learners? Bill calls this the 'bigger stuff'. And it doesn't matter if it's a piecemeal and somewhat tentative start when trying to decide if this is indeed a real opportunity to be more effective.

In the way we assess

Standards have to be met: guidance practitioners need to be able to communicate effectively in writing. However, there are other ways of assessing knowledge and understanding that trainers already incorporate into their courses. Practical skills are usually assessed by observation and other areas of professional development are frequently assessed by portfolio work. But, not everyone finds writing a reflective portfolio enjoyable or even helpful, and this can often feel like 'trial by ordeal'. It is possible to achieve this in different ways other than via some endless paper chase. Can course requirements encompass creative ways of doing this?

One approach already used in NVQ work is the use of the professional discussion (Reid, 2002b). The professional discussion is **not** a question and answer session. As the title suggests it is a discussion, a guided conversation about the work that provides the opportunity for learning to take place. As such it aims to be reflective and evaluative and can be used for formative as well as summative assessment. And, the assessor learns too, as the nature of a guided conversation is such that the discussion is collaborative. The reflective nature of the professional discussion fits with the need for practitioners to have or develop the higher thinking and creative problem solving skills that are needed, alongside the practical knowledge and skills.

Anything that is shown to the assessor during the recorded discussion is assessed at that point and will not need to be included in the portfolio – the recording is the evidence. It is surprising the amount of evidence that is revealed in this 'rich', narrative discussion. Of course, recording technology can be used in other ways to provide evidence of knowledge and understanding. Although discussed here as an addition rather than a replacement for more conventional means of assessment, there is an obvious application for learners who may have additional needs.

Alternative approaches to assessment can also include peer review and peer and self-assessment, all of which can increase involvement, ownership, reflection and learning. These need to be integrated into any scheme of assessment and not used as a 'bolt-on' activity to solve an assessment problem for the trainer. Telling the story of your development and discussing assessment issues can be less threatening when shared with peers. This does need to be at the right time of development when individuals have enough knowledge to be able to give feedback to their colleagues and accept feedback from them.

Such techniques can help to develop collaborative ways of working which in turn can enhance an inclusive ethos. Preparation is important, along with a clear contract about the aims and objectives of such work. In 'working alongside one another', we can help to lay the foundations for supporting colleagues in the work place and for participating actively in support and supervision sessions or peer review and appraisal. It may also be another way of helping practitioners to develop their ability to work holistically with their clients. But like any other opportunity to tell your story, it needs an adequate investment of time in order to be meaningful.

Conclusion

This article has tried to reflect the opening up of a space in my thinking about the way we train practitioners. It has asked for trainers to consider enhancing or introducing narrative and auto/biographical approaches within their courses. It has looked at the three areas of tutorial support, teaching and assessment. It suggests that we need new ways of thinking that challenge our existing methods. In this respect, this is a reflection of the guidance world our practitioners navigate. It does not however, offer a cookbook of recipes on how to do this, but has suggested that a piecemeal approach is OK, for now. Time will tell if the approach is useful in the wide field of career education and guidance practice – I'm hopeful, but what do other people think?

References

Bassey, M. (1999). *Case Study Research in Educational Settings*. Buckingham: OU Press.

Besley, A. C. (2002). 'Foucault and the turn to narrative therapy', *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, **30**(*2*), pp.125-143.

Cochran, L. (1997a). *Career Counselling; A Narrative Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cochran, L. (1997b). *Career counselling as narrative construction*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Collin, A. (1998). 'Re-thinking the relationship between theory and practice: practitioners as map-readers, map-makers - or jazz players?', in: Edwards, R., Harrison, R. and Tait, A. (eds.). *Telling Tales: Perspectives on Guidance and Counselling in Learning.* London: OU/Routledge.

Collin, A. and Young, R. (1992). 'Constructing career through narrative and context: an interpretive perspective', in, Young, R. and Collin, A. (eds.). *Interpreting career: hermeneutical studies of lives in context.* Westport Canada: Praeger.

Clough, P. (2002). *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research*. Buckingham: OU Press.

Department for Education and Skills. (2003). *Careers Education and Guidance in England, A National Framework 11 – 19*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

Edwards, A. (ed.). (2003). *Challenging biographies: re-locating the theory and practice of career work*. Occasional Paper, Department of Career and Personal Development: Canterbury Christ Church University College.

Edwards, R. (1998). 'Mapping, Locating and Translating: a discursive approach to professional development', *Studies in Continuing Education*, 20, (*1*), pp. 23-38.

Law, B. (2003). 'Guidance: Too many lists, not enough stories', in Edwards, A. (ed.). *Challenging biographies: re-locating the theory and practice of career work*, Occasional Paper, Department of Career and Personal Development: Canterbury Christ Church University College.

McLeod, J. (1997). *Narrative and Psychotherapy*, London: Sage.

Merttens, R. (1998). 'What is to be done? (With Apologies to Lenin!)', in Parker, I. (ed.). *Social Constructionism, Discourse and Realism*, London: Sage.

Peavy, R. V. (2000a). 'A socio-dynamic perspective for counselling'. *Australian Journal of Career Development.* 2, Autumn, 17-22.

Reid, H.L (2000). 'New DOTS for New Contexts'. *Newscheck,* Vol. **10** (*7*), Sheffield, UK: Careers Occupational Information Centre.

Reid, H.L. (2002a). 'Are you sitting comfortably? Stories and the usefulness of narrative approaches', in Roberts, K. (ed.). *Constructing the Future: social inclusion, policy and practice*, Stourbridge, UK: Institute of Career Guidance.

Reid, H.L. (2002b). 'The professional discussion as an alternative to paper-based evidence for the NVQ in Guidance: avoiding 'death by portfolio building'!', *Career Guidance Today*, Vol.**10**, (*2*) Stourbridge: Institute of Career Guidance.

References

Reid, H. L. (2003). 'Narrative and career guidance: small talk or useful dialogue?', in Edwards, A.(ed). *Challenging biographies: re-locating the theory and practice of career work*, Occasional Paper, Department of Career and Personal Development: Canterbury Christ Church University College.

Savickas, M. L. (1997a). 'Constructivist Career Counselling; Models and Methods', *Advances in Personal Construct Psychology*, 4, 149-182.

Savickas, M. L. (1997b). 'The Spirit in Career Counselling; Fostering Self-Completion Through Work', in Bloch D. P. and Richmond. L. J. (eds.). *Connections Between Spirit and Work in Career Development.* Palo Alto, CA: Davies-Black.

Sue, D.W., Allen, E.I. and Pederson, P.B. (1996). *A Theory of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Thorpe, M., Edwards, R. and Harrison, R. (1993). *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning*, London: Routledge/OU press.

West, L. (2003. 'Challenging auto/biographies: careers and guidance in a 5 to 9 world', in Edwards, A. (ed.). *Challenging biographies: re-locating the theory and practice of career work*, Occasional Paper, Department of Career and Personal Development: Canterbury Christ Church University College.

For correspondence

Hazel L Reid
Principal Lecturer
Department of Career & Personal Development
Canterbury Christ Church University College
David Salomons Estate
Broomhill Road
Tunbridge Wells Kent TN3 0TX
Tel: 01892 507500
Email: hlr9s@cant.ac.uk