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Narratives at work: the development of career identity

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Well-developed career stories are becoming increasingly important for individuals as they navigate an unstable and unpredictable labour market. Existing narrative approaches in career guidance do not yet clearly identify the learning process by which career stories are created. In this article, a model of transformation-through-writing will be introduced to help explain the learning process that occurs when narratives are used for constructing career stories. We propose that this learning process occurs stepwise in four cognitive stages: sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding. To progress through these stages, an internal (with oneself) as well as an external (with relevant others) dialogue is needed. The case study used to illustrate the process is a story of unemployment and effectively shows how narratives can be created through expressive and reflective writing and how such a process may foster career learning in response to a boundary experience.

Keywords: career development; narrative approaches; identity

Introduction

In a complex and dynamic world in which careers are largely contingent (Pryor & Bright, 2011), a career story helps a person define who s/he is and how s/he should act within a career context. It does so by creating and providing meaning and direction (Wijers & Meijers, 1996) and by constructing a sense of causality and continuity about one’s career path (Linde, 1993). In this article we clarify and demonstrate how a narrative approach can be used in career guidance, using an example of a career crisis. Central to our argument is the concept of ‘career identity’ because it is this concept that is considered essential in helping individuals to deal with the emergence of a boundaryless career (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005), the growing emotionalisation of work (Hochschild, 1983; Sennett, 1998) and the individualisation of society as a whole (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004). A career identity is part of the self, which according to Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) can be defined as a dynamic multiplicity of positions or voices in the landscape of the mind, with the possibility of dialogical relationships between these positions or voices. A career identity can be defined as a dynamic multiplicity of personal (in contrast to social and cultural) positions or voices regarding work. Assuming that narratives are the key schemes by which human beings make their experiences meaningful (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988)

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and understand temporality (Abbott, 2002), a career identity expresses itself in (i.e., takes the shape of) a story told by a person, expressing his/her life theme(s) (Savickas, 2005, 2011) and the way s/he identifies her/himself based on these life theme(s) with a specific occupation or career (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). We posit that if a person has the tools to be able to re-’story’ his/her identifications around work, that s/he will be more able to navigate the changing world of work, make meaning and sense of career changes, and deal more effectively with ‘disorientating dilemmas’ (Mezirow & Associates, 1990) in the world of work, even seeing them as opportunities instead of setbacks and/or failures.

1. The development of a career identity

In narrative approaches to career counselling, the point of departure is that ‘narration can be used to form a subjective construction of meaning that emplots self as a main character in a career-defining story’ (Cochran, 1997, p. 55). According to Cochran, a career story is composed of episodes, i.e., unified sets of events that stand out from others and have particular significance. He distinguishes seven episodes: elaborating a career problem; composing a life history; founding a future narrative; constructing reality; changing a life structure; enacting a role; and crystallising a decision. In Savickas’s Theory of Career Construction (2002, 2005) three areas are emphasised: vocational personality; career adaptability; and life themes. Savickas, like Cochran, advances the idea of life themes at the level of personal narrative and subjective career; he positions life stories in a way that show they are the crucial threads of continuity that make meaningful the elements of vocational personality and career adaptability. Career-related stories express the uniqueness of an individual and explain why he or she makes choices and explicates the meanings that guide those choices. Career stories ‘tell how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow’ (Savickas, 2005, p. 58). Savickas also purports that individuals generate their own career life themes. A career story develops via four micro-narratives (Savickas, 2010, 2011; see also Savickas et al., 2010) that are ‘activated’ by specific questions a counsellor asks: a story of self-making; a story of preferred work theatres; a story regarding a career script; and a story of performance advice. Lastly, he says students should be encouraged ‘by the instructor or counselor to assemble these micro-narratives into a life portrait, that is, a higher level macro-narrative that incorporates all the partial stories’ (Savickas, 2010, p. 16).

The problem is that it remains unclear how the different episodes (Cochran) or micro-narratives (Savickas) ‘fuse’ to become a coherent macro-narrative or career story. Cochran seems to assume that the career narrative is already present in the individual on an unconscious level and that if the career counsellor presents the proper questions or assignments, a person will be able to take the various elements, become conscious of them and (re)construct his or her narrative. Savickas (2011) states that counsellor and client together go through the process of constructing vocational stories, deconstructing the stories, reconstructing them into a macro-narrative and then co-constructing the next scene in the occupational plot. Central to this process is ‘a poetic creativity (of the counsellor, FM/RL) that turns scattered stories and emotions into experiential vignettes that reflects the students’ efforts to get a life’ (Savickas, 2010, p. 16). However, it remains unclear what the essence of this poetic creativity is and why it is needed.
In line with the significant emphasis Savickas places on the role of the experienced counselor, LaPointe (2010) argues that a career identity is not constructed by the individual alone (a constructivist approach) but can only emerge and exist as a result of an interaction with others (a constructionist approach). Rather than residing in the individual, identity manifests in discourse. ‘Narratives as the site for identity construction are not free-standing, self-contained units but are always embedded in the local conditions and emerge as a result of interaction’, says LaPointe (2010, p. 3). A career identity is therefore the result of a co-construction (Cohen, 2006). From this cultural-historical point of view identities emerge as a result of interaction and negotiation on the basis of a reflective capacity vis-à-vis the available positions and the particularities of a given time and place. Continuity in identity stems from a history of having been continuously positioned in particular ways as well as having invested in and becoming emotionally attached to certain positions. ‘The possibility of individual agency, choice and change is made possible by the multiple and contradictory positions in a given situation and the reflective capability of the person as an embodied being to adopt alternative positions – to imagine otherwise’ (LaPointe, 2010, pp. 3–4). Career identity, therefore, is a practice (‘doing identity rather than having one’) of articulating, performing and negotiating identity positions in narrating career experiences.

The construction of a career narrative corresponds strongly with the reflective abilities of the individual. LaPointe seems to conceptualise these abilities as self-contained characteristics of the individual; capabilities that he or she can apply when and where necessary. However, research shows that direct introspective access to higher-order cognitive processes is limited. Simon (1955) states that human beings rarely have all of the relevant information they need to make a rational decision and that, even if they did, they do not individually possess the cognitive capacity to use it. The matter is compounded by the fact that empirical evidence suggests that intuition plays an important role in decision making (Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren, & van Baaren, 2006; Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006) and that conscious rational thought tends to overreach its bounds in addressing problems for which it is less well suited (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009). Students who must come to a career decision by thinking often make choices they are less satisfied with than students who make those decisions intuitively. The reason for this is that individuals ‘change their minds about how they feel’ as a result of reflecting, according to Wilson and Schooler (1991, p. 191). Furthermore, neurobiological and neuropsychological research shows that human emotional responses occur before cognitive responses (Damasio, 2000; Pinker, 1997; Stuss & Anderson, 2003). The result is, as Schwartz (2004) suggests, that in complex situations individuals simply ‘jump to conclusions’. Humans normally choose the first option that works, i.e., that they believe works (Coleman, 1989; Klein, 1998). In a non-dialogical situation, the judgements thus formulated are mostly based on pre-programmed ways of thinking and belief and therefore perpetuate a tendency to get stuck in already existing stories (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). What has previously worked by trial and error becomes a ‘heuristic’ that is used, not reflexively, but as a reflex – even when it is not suitable for coping with the new situation. Tversky and Kahneman (2000) interpret this type of ‘irrational behavior’ as a systematic error or shortcoming in the cognitive system; a form of irrationality, in which people use a number of heuristics to come to a decision or judgement that may not take into account the complexity of the current situation. In summary, in a situation that overwhelms, people are inclined to base
their decisions on pre-programmed ways of thinking; prejudices and outmoded coping strategies make their already existing stories a default narrative.

That people in uncertain situations have the tendency to demonstrate irrational behaviour is a dilemma for career counsellors that can be remedied by using an approach that focuses on career exploration (i.e., concrete experiences in work settings) in the development of a career identity. Supporters of this approach, such as Flum and Blustein (2000) and Bloch (2005), advocate a lifelong adaptive process of career exploration that is as unplanned and fortuitous as it is planned and systematic. They maintain that the exploratory process provides the individual with both cognitive and affective feedback that can be used in the appraisal of an experience. Central is an attitudinal component, characterised by ‘openness to the natural vicissitudes of life experiences’ (Flum & Blustein, 2000, p. 382). These authors, however, do not clarify the way in which individuals can use career exploration to create career identities (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011). Indeed, the learning processes that would be required and the conditions necessary for such learning are not discussed by them. They seem to assume that experiences will lead to career learning as a matter of course. However, individuals do not automatically learn from what they experience; they are naturally not open to new experiences because they respond primarily from emotional centres and may even attempt to flee from the situation instead of formulating an intention to learn (Hensel, 2010). Research into the moral development of individuals (Kegan, 1994; Kegan, Broderick, Drago-Severson, Helsing & Portnow, 2001) shows that only a minority of respondents have or develop the required openness that Flum and Blustein identify as important for learning.

Krieshok et al. (2009) also emphasise the importance of exploration in the formation of a career identity. Based on extensive brain research – in particular studies focused on the neuroanatomy of decision making – they argue that both reason and intuition are essential to the development of an adaptive rationality. Adaptive rationality ‘emphasizes experiential learning in the interest of engendering a state of affairs in which decision making is optimal as a result of the accumulation of experience and information’ (Krieshok et al., 2009, p. 284). Adaptive rationality takes shape via occupational engagement. It develops via an ongoing focused contact with people and the world with the goal to accumulate relevant information and experiences. Through occupational engagement, vocational and self-schemas evolve. Important here is not only the exploration of career possibilities, but also enrichment. Enrichment ‘implies a process of increasing awareness via experiential activities that increase the decision-maker’s fund of information about his or her self in the world’ (Krieshok et al., 2009, p. 284). Its goal is to allow for experientially informed decision making at many and various points in the future (i.e., the development of intuition). In other words, the basic mechanism by which rationality and intuition become richer is experience acquired via engagement. ‘As we consider intervening in this system, the model suggests we would do well to teach people to think and feel about experiential information in a more intentional way. While the bank inevitably becomes richer passively, it becomes much richer via intentionality’ (Krieshok et al., 2009, p. 285).

Naturally, the ‘bank’ will be filled by each experience, but the question remains as to whether individuals actually become richer, i.e., are able to demonstrate new behaviours. If experiences in both work and with others are qualitatively similar, an individual might not learn much either cognitively or intuitively. Dewey (1933)
warned educators that mere ‘doing’ or activity was not enough to produce learning. Research by Merriam (2004), Hoare (2006) and Manners, Durkin, and Nesdale (2004) shows that most adults, who have a lot of experience behind them, barely have a developed self-image. And yet Krieshok et al. (2009, p. 285) formulate a long list of requirements that the adaptive career decision maker must live up to: they must be persistently engaged, not rely exclusively on innate talents, be wary of narrowing vocational options, be lifelong learners, cultivate a sense of foresight in respect to trends, never completely foreclose, remain flexible and willing to act despite fears, be reflective, have an awareness of the limits of reason and intuition and – last but not least – have a zen outlook (i.e., an ability to view a situation with detachment). Most students (Holt, 1995; Prawat, 1998) and adults (Kegan, 1994; Kegan et al., 2001) possess few or none of these traits, which begs the question: which learning processes lead to the development of both the rational and the intuitive components of the career identity? Based on the previous arguments, a learning theory is needed that should not see identity as self-contained, should see reflective abilities as a concept that needs explaining, and should not assume that experiential learning automatically results in completion of cognitive learning phases which would result in a better intuition and better insight into the self.

2. Identity learning: a model

In this article, we present a model that tries to explain how a transformative learning process (Bateson, 1979) occurs when written narratives are used for constructing a career identity. We illustrate this with a story of job loss. The model (see below) developed from observations we made about students and the learning process they embark on as they write and rewrite their life stories. Additionally we continue to expand it based on existing learning theories. In that sense, the model has developed in both inductive and deductive ways. The case study

The story we use to illustrate our model was written by Edith Robb, who was enrolled in a graduate course called ‘Narrative Possibilities: The Transformative Power of Writing, Story, and Poetry for Personal and Professional Development’ at Athabasca University, developed and taught by one of the authors. Edith’s story focuses on her response to sudden unemployment and illustrates effectively how career learning takes place. Although the story is not applicable in all career change contexts, the example of a ‘boundary experience’ (i.e., life-altering situation or event), a person’s constructive response to it, the inherent challenge to a person’s identity, and the subsequent need to develop a new career story, applies in a variety of career contexts. This case study was chosen, in part, because it is a particularly vivid and compelling account of how narratives can unearth life themes as well as various voices and positions and may allow individuals to become more effective actors in the world of work. The story also shows that educational institutes can offer practical narrative approaches, supported by developing models on the use of writing in personal and professional development. The case study does not prove and has no pretention to prove our theoretical model in a scientific way, but demonstrates possibilities for career enrichment and indeed shows how the decision maker’s fund of information about his or her self in the world increases.

The course ‘Narrative Possibilities’ (MAIS 621) and the foundational course ‘Writing the Self’ (MAIS 616) are courses within the Master of Arts Integrated Studies programme at Athabasca University (http://mais.athabascau.ca). Topics
covered in the courses are: journal writing: the history, reflections, and methods; poetry: approaches to writing it as well as reflections on its therapeutic potential; fiction: instructions how; analysis of the fiction, in particular how life themes emerged inadvertently in the pieces written; problem solving with writing (a variety of methods for working with writing and life issues). In addition to the genres and actual writing, students read and reflect on subjects and questions such as: what writing and research is being done; what methodological issues researchers face; what is ‘the self’ (does it even exist; how is it ‘constructed’?); uses of writing in teaching and therapy; the downsides of writing; and final reflections on how a student’s own writing has changed during the course of the previous weeks. Three final assignments are required to complete the course. They include a portrait of self, a practical writing application (e.g., writing with prisoners in a penitentiary; writing for mothers who are suffering the ‘empty-nest’ syndrome; writing for PTSD sufferers), and a position paper. During the entire course students are required to keep a journal using the proprioceptive writing method (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002), an approach that includes the prompting question, ‘What do I mean by . . . (word or phrase)?’ and four concluding questions that prompt further reflection, in particular about topics they might have thought about but did not write down. This method is designed to welcome the expression of thoughts and feelings and also provides instructions for reflection.

In an ongoing dialogue, the course facilitator/instructor provides feedback on the poetry and fiction, helps keep discussions going, and encourages students to explore various exercises, ideas and directions they might not have seen or thought to try. She also specifically guides participants through ‘The Work’ (Katie, 2002), a particular writing exercise which at its foundation asks, ‘Who would you be without your story?’ The course’s process seen as a whole is in that sense paradoxical – it focuses on writing narratives that build a sense of self and identity, but also employs methods that ‘strip’ notions of ‘self’ and require students to question their identifications. The facilitator, in addition to providing technical feedback (e.g., ‘here you could use more descriptions – show, don’t tell the reader what you experienced’), also provides more intuitive or poetic suggestions for developing the work and developing reflexivity (e.g., ‘the themes that I felt emerged here were: questions of shame and voicelessness’, and ‘in the story you wrote “USELESS” with capitals, did you notice that?’), or ‘the poem seems to be asking a question and you may find writing another one with possible answers will serve as a kind of complement to what you’ve already written’).

The group discussions also contribute to the insights those taking the course develop and influence the ways in which they choose to construct their narratives. They gain additional ideas from reading each other’s work and also point out things to each other that shed insight (e.g., ‘I had not dared to write about mental illness, until you did. It took the stigma off for me’). Additionally the final assignments, which are the academic ‘products’ of the course, require students to construct ‘pictures’ of who they are. As previously mentioned, one of the final assignments is to write a portrait of self, though students have also learned during the course that a consistent or comprehensive view of who they are is not possible. They become aware that their identities are ‘constructed’ within a social, cultural and psychological framework and that how they view and present themselves is influenced by social forces, for instance shame and esteem (Stuart, 1998), and that they are, as postulated above, indeed a dynamic multiplicity of voices and positions.
**Boundary experiences**

At the heart of the model is the idea that life themes, which provide the unity in life (hi)stories (Savickas, 2002, 2005), can be defined ‘as the affective and cognitive representation of a problem or set of problems, perceived or experienced either consciously or unconsciously, which constituted a fundamental source of psychic stress for a person during childhood, for which that person wished resolution above all else, and which thereby triggered adaptive efforts, resulting in an attempted identification of the perceived problem, which in turn formed the basis for a fundamental interpretation of reality and ways of dealing with that reality’ (Csikszentmihalyi & Beattie, 1979, p. 48). Therefore, the beginning of the learning process we describe usually starts with a response to pain or suffering or to what Bühl (1935); Bühl & Allen, 1972) refers to as a ‘boundary experience’ – an experience whereby an individual encounters the boundaries of his or her existing self-concept and cannot cope with the situation and its exigencies (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009; Meijers & Wardekker, 2002). One hits the proverbial wall and one’s sense of identity is challenged, diminished or even lost and this results in the inability to act with confidence. This may be a cognitive problem (e.g., not understanding the situation or not having the required knowledge and skills) but more often it is of an emotional nature. Prior identifications and bonds block an adequate response (González Rey, 1999; Van Woerkom, 2010). Robb’s story illustrates her encounter with such a crisis:

The work took 38 years. The woman remembers her first hesitant steps into the grey-walled newsroom, the endless clackety-clack rhythm of the old Olivetti’s, the sea of head and shoulders visible over the paper-strewn desks . . . . The lay-off took 38 seconds. (Robb, pp. 1–2)

A career narrative is created in a process of transaction (Rosenblatt, 2005) or interaction (LaPointe, 2010) between an individual who tries to understand a boundary experience via a story and his/her audience. If this story is repeated or merely retold in slightly different permutations, the result is a ‘short circuit’ in which a vicious cycle of fear, complacency, anger or hopelessness ensues and a person becomes trapped in his/her first story, leaving him/her ‘suffering’ or ‘stuck’. In the model a short circuit means that a person becomes trapped in the fight, flight or freeze mode characteristic of a first story (see below), unable to move forwards.

In the three weeks that followed, I became physically sick and mentally distraught. Sleep eluded me, crying jags left me weak, and the practicalities of rebuilding a life in shambles seemed overwhelming . . . . Nothing eased the pain except nightly visits to the journal. Looking back, I became a master of the woe-is-me discourse. (Robb, pp. 1–2)

The aim of writing is to work towards a more empowering perspective or ‘second story’. This may include a shift in perspective, acceptance or meaning constructed. Second stories may serve for a time (i.e., until the next boundary experience) and then eventually feel like ‘first stories’ again. Indeed, they are stepping stones in a narrative that is ever-evolving. The difference between the first and second stories is not absolute – the second story does not represent the creation of a completely different identity, but is rather the expression of an evolving identity. In order to break the identification a writer has with a ‘first story’, the writer ‘must first develop
a degree of detachment’ (Griffin & Tyrrell, 2002, p. 40). Students specifically report the benefits of having someone function as an ‘observer’ of their work:

What I needed in addition to the writing was a witness. Someone to read what I wrote and acknowledge it. (McGinnis, 2008)

It is as if those writing their stories strengthen their own inner observer simply by knowing they will be read (which is part of a dialogue). Many students also describe a sense of relief when reading other course participants’ stories and in finding a learning environment that does not, in the first place, focus on grammar and ‘proper ways of writing’, but allows for personal exploration.

Between the first and second story, there is a ‘transformational space’ in which many different writing exercises can be employed. But even being a seasoned journalist did not mean that Edith could use writing immediately to gain new perspectives. In fact, rushing to gain new perspectives without experiencing her feelings would not have resulted in a ‘felt-theory’ or second story that would hold true, feel authentic and be real balm for her anyway. The emotional pain – just as other emotions (Frijda, 1989) – was a necessary signal that something was amiss and that a quick solution would not be forthcoming.

There was a blur of practical, well-meaning advice, some from people, and some from books. Get a resume. File for unemployment insurance. Search Workopolis and Monster.com. Consider doing something different. Start networking with a vengeance. That all worked on the surface... (Robb, p. 3)

Edith’s sensed that there was no point in covering over or trying to change what had happened from the outside. She could not put her life back together in the way it had worked for the past 38 years. Because she was enrolled in the Master of Arts Integrated Studies programme at Athabasca University, she had been in the habit of keeping a personal and work journal and had already noticed that writing helped ‘alleviate angst’ (Lieberman et al., 2007). On a further search, she enrolled on the ‘Narrative Possibilities’ course and was introduced to the idea that writing could indeed be a healing art. It is worth mentioning that although Edith was an experienced writer in the professional realm, she did not think to use writing as a transformational tool until the course introduced her to these possibilities and she could begin, with guidance, to explore and express her feelings and experiences.

... as I read provocative works by interesting authors ... I looked at things I had never previously considered, embraced viewpoints I had once dismissed, and listened to voices that once only whispered in the background. (Robb, p. 4)

**Learning stages**

A career narrative develops in the interplay between the conscious, the unconscious and experiences (Krieshok et al., 2009), whereby experiences first result in ‘tacit knowledge’ (Jiang & Chun, 2001; Reber, Gitelman, Parrish, & Mesulam, 2003) that has to be made explicit by cognitive learning in order to stimulate self-directedness (Brookfield, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 1990). The Piagetan model of cognitive career learning used here was developed by Law (1996, 2010). It distinguishes four stages in cognitive development in which the
episodes of Cochran (1997) and the micro-narratives of Savickas (2010) may be recognised: sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding. Sensing is the stage in which information is gathered (from various sources, in particular those that are emotionally compelling), but no explanation or perspective is yet developed. Sifting is a sorting process which moves a person ‘towards the issue of causality’ (Law, 1996, p. 55). One compares one’s circumstances with those of others and starts to develop analogies and, from those analogies, constructs and concepts start to emerge. In the focusing stage actual viewpoints are formulated. These viewpoints are still fragmented, but they are an attempt to string together feelings and ideas that arose during the sensing and sifting stages. The focusing stage ideally segues into the understanding stage and the insights and fragments start to become a second story. This process is referred to as episodic learning, which means the learner puts the events into sequence and clarifies the who, what, where, when, how and ‘why’ of what has happened (Law, 2008). This process is usually a combination of ordering the material, articulating the ‘big picture’, and drawing conclusions. It should be noted that the learning model described by Law does not clarify how the macro-narrative takes shape. The model assumes that processing an experience leads necessarily to clarity (i.e., understanding) and the development of a coherent reflective narrative of lived experience.

**Sensing**

As mentioned earlier, sensing is the stage in which information is gathered (from various sources, in particular those that are emotionally compelling), but no explanation or perspective is yet developed.

That night it happened to me, I tried to write in my journal something optimistic or hopeful, but the tear-stained pages just show a series of starts, starts, and scribbles. I abandoned prose for poetry to express my despair.... (Robb, p. 3)

In this first stage, emotions are explored and described. Gaining an awareness of one’s feelings as they happen in the body is important (Cochran, 1997, p. 61). This way of learning relates to the concept of mindfulness, which can be described as bringing one’s complete attention to the present experience, deliberately observing one’s internal experiences in an accepting, non-elaborative and non-judgemental way (Baer, 2003). Feelings (i.e., emotions) drive attention (Frijda, 1989; Gross, Sheppes, & Urry, 2011), which drives learning. Understanding should, therefore, be conceptualised ‘as an experience linking reason and feeling instead of an experience of controlling emotions’ (Van Woerkom, 2010, p. 348). Based on empirical research on the ‘success factors’ of psychotherapy, Gendlin (1981, 1996) proposed that attention should be paid to the physical experience emotions brings about and then translate these into symbols and metaphors. In a Dutch study on effective psychotherapy, Van Loon (1996) showed that clients used sensory symbols that have an inherent power for restructuring the life story. In this stage one may even discover a powerful or sustaining metaphor, but the main focus is on becoming aware of feelings, thoughts and memories so that the writer might ‘give them a voice’.
On being redundant

Pin-striped and pressed,  
Ramrod straight and unblinking  
I firmly clutch the neatly-typed sheet marked  
Severance.  
The clock stops, the sun blinks off,  
My world closes pending renovations. (Robb, p. 3)

Edith uses both concrete images, which evoke emotion, as well as the powerful ‘ramrod’ metaphor as if she has literally been punched in the stomach. Her line, ‘The clock stops, the sun blinks off’ shows the depth of despair that her job loss brought about. The final line of the poem, ‘My world closes pending renovations’ could be seen as a sign that Edith somehow knew that the ‘transformational space’ would be a place where she would have to remain a bit longer before a shift in perspective or sense of well-being would be possible. In this stage the caterpillar cocooning is an oft used metaphor, but ‘renovations’ is fresh and more original. The reason that using concrete images and metaphors works better than talking about the event or interpreting their meanings too soon is that the brain receives and processes trauma primarily in a non-verbal way (Stuss & Anderson, 2003). It requires courage or the kind of awareness that Edith has when she says:

... I understood that the road stretched two ways, backwards and forwards, and going back was not an option ... mine was to branch out into a series of byways that would change my life forever. (Robb, p. 4)

Sifting

Sifting is a sorting process which moves a person towards the issue of causality. A person starts to see connections between his/her experiences and those of others, perhaps even identifying patterns. These insights are still fragmentary, but they become the building blocks of a newly constructed narrative. A kind of sorting process takes place and the individual is no longer overwhelmed and bombarded by all the thoughts and feelings that are inherent to the boundary experience and the sensing phase. Note that the stages do overlap and that regressions are normal, as well as leaps that lift the veil on what the second story may eventually look like.

On cold winter nights that followed my lay-off, I wrote and wrote, for the first time not on a deadline, not determined to get from point A to point B, but to simply express my thoughts and penetrate those others I was exposed to in the course. (Robb, p. 10)

Poetry’s form and structure make it a good sensing and sifting exercise, as it limits word use and thereby focuses attention on what is most salient. And because it often relies heavily on image and metaphor, analogies can be readily born from it. With it the writer can construct what may be referred to as an ‘antenarrative’ (Boje, 2001). ‘Ante’ or ‘before’ relates to ‘the complex, multi-voiced, fragmented, incoherent and ambiguous state before a well-aligned narrative can be said to exist. A narrative has
the qualities of plot and coherence, and “antenarrative” is the previous state of affairs’ (Van Lente, 2003).

**Laid off**

Born in the winter of my fifty-sixth year,  
I am delivered from my four-decade world of routine  
Into the no-visibility blizzard of uncertainty.  
I wail.  
I weep.  
Slowly the renewed of springtime arrives  
And I follow the sun-brightened road  
Seeking signposts for real truth to replace false ones  
I write.  
I read.  
Like the bird flying without knowing the sky’s dimensions  
I dare to be creative without a contracted point of sale. (Robb, p. 12)

In the quote and poem above, we see Edith sorting her thoughts, as if lining them up to understand what she is doing and where she might be going. We might say she is creating an outline or skeleton of elements she will need on which to grow a new embodied life and perspective. And although her poem is about her job loss, the reader senses an archetypal progression in the poem. It could have just as easily been written about a serious diagnosis, the death of a loved one or mid-life divorce. When we move from sensing to sifting, we see ourselves gathering and sorting through our initial angst and the possibilities we uncovered upon entering the transformational space. There are also hints of focusing and understanding stages in her poem, particularly in the lines where she speaks of ‘springtime’ and ‘sun-brightened road’. Here we catch a glimpse of what her second story might feel like, though she has still not constructed a new or full understanding of her circumstances, which would include a shift in perspective, acceptance or meaning found. What is also noteworthy about this poem is her willingness to live with uncertainty. This is paradoxically a prerequisite to moving forward. Her reference to the bird that does not know ‘the sky’s dimensions’ almost sounds as if she is inviting herself to be courageous. If a bird can fly in the vast unknown, why can’t I, she seems to say.

**Focusing**

In the focusing stage actual viewpoints are formulated. These viewpoints are still fragmented, but they are an attempt to string together feelings and ideas that arose during the sensing and sifting stages. Here are a few snippets from Edith’s work that show focusing:

I willed myself to let go of one assumption a week and to do that for the duration of the course.  
I started to listen, really listen, to conversations and I heard things in new ways. I read new books and magazines, and discarded old ones, including the newspapers that had
dominated my life for most of four decades. I dared to let my imagination go in
directions it had never travelled. I began to understand that some stories needed to be
told, even if they weren’t saleable.
At this point in my resurrection, I encountered the work of Charles M. Anderson and
Marion MacCurdy in their book *Writing and Healing*. When they described trauma
survivors, I could immediately identify, ‘We feel powerless, taken over by alien
experiences we could not anticipate and did not choose. Healing depends upon gaining
control over that which has engulfed us. We cannot go back and change the past’.
I felt the relief of letting go of a living lie, and daring to explore the real worth of once
impenetrable corporate institutions. I questioned persistently why I had let my life fill up
with busy without seeing its emptiness. (Robb, pp. 8–9)

Here we see Edith describing her own process, in which sensing and sifting starts to
blossom into focusing, which brings her to the exciting brink where her new
perspectives and ideas reach towards ‘understanding’. She is re-storying her life in a
way that brings new meaning and ultimately choice.

Each night my journal was full of questions about faith, and how I could have any, and
how it can be betrayed. My quest became as spiritual as it was practical; I wasn’t
just looking for a replacement job now; I was looking for work that really mattered.
(Robb, p. 9)

It is as if she is collecting the puzzle pieces to construct her new perceptions – the
development she will ultimately sum up as ‘job loss’ to ‘life gain’. This leap, made
only through the hard work of staying with the difficulty and feeling the emotions,
becomes an almost delightfully concise way to capture both the first and second
stories.

**Understanding**

The focusing stage segues ideally into the understanding stage and the insights and
fragments start to become a second story. This is an illustration of the process of
episodic learning as described above. The writer puts the events into sequence and
clarifies the who, what, where, when, how and ‘why’ of what has happened. This
process is usually a combination of ordering the material, articulating the ‘big
picture’, and drawing conclusions.

I began to heal. As they [Anderson & McCurdy, FM/RL] defined it, I changed ‘from a
singular self, frozen in time by a moment of unspeakable experience, to a more fluid,
more narratively-able, more socially-integrated self’. (Robb, p. 9)

In the final stage, the writer may describe feelings of wholeness and relief, but this is
not merely a restitution narrative. The story that Edith tells herself is a ‘quest-
narrative’ (Smith & Sparkes, 2004). She is the heroine of her own tale, which started
off with being ‘ramrodded’ and in need of ‘renovations’ to at times ‘suddenly awed’
and describing her situation as a ‘pilgrimage of reflection and renewal’ (p. 15). She
now even dares ask herself, ‘How few of us get to rebuild our lives to our liking?’ (p.
8). Note that the second story may not be any truer than the first. What is really
important is the creation of an ‘internally persuasive’ story (Bakhtin, 1986).

Edith is aware not only of her healing but also of the fact that it is a ‘storying’ and
‘re-storying process’. In her final paragraph she writes:
Being laid off is fodder for a story. A tale told twice still yields insight into both the teller and the listener. Writing the story, telling the story, creating poems about the story, are all means of bringing forth resurrection of the worker with a stronger self and a soul that guides them to new directions with fewer boundaries than before. (Robb, p. 18)

It is rather poignant here that Edith ends with the idea of ‘boundaries’, as our model also begins with a boundary experience where a real limitation or stricture is felt. That a boundary experience well digested should lead to a sense of ‘fewer boundaries’ is a sign, one might say, that the transformational space has been successfully traversed.

**The importance of dialogue**

As mentioned earlier, the learning model described by Law assumes that processing a ‘boundary experience’ leads necessarily to clarity and the development of a coherent reflective narrative based on lived experience. In the first section of this article we referred to empirical evidence that shows that developing a coherent reflective narrative is anything but an automatic process. Because emotional responses occur before thoughts (Damasio, 2000; Pinker, 1997; Stuss & Anderson, 2003), in the processing of a boundary experience feelings of fear, sadness and anger dominate (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995), resulting in avoidance and irrational behaviour (Tversky & Kahneeman, 2000).

What, then, makes successful career learning (i.e., a learning process resulting in a second story) possible? To understand this, the development of a career story must be understood not only as a cognitive learning process but as a dialogical learning process as well (Figure 1). A story can only be developed when its episodes are tested by reality constantly and the only way to do this is by telling the story to relevant others (Cochran, 1997). As Bakhtin (1981, p. 345) puts it succinctly, ‘the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s’. The ‘motivational engine’ that drives career learning is dialogical in nature because the ‘I’ is actually a kind of ‘polyphonic novel’, a combination of various voices embodied as one person (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Although written by one person, the polyphonic novel is spoken by many ‘sub-personalities’ (i.e., inner authors of the story), characters or I-positions. ‘As different voices these characters exchange information about their respective Me’s and their world, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self’ (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992, pp. 28–29). The dialogical self is not static and is inherently transformed by the exchanges amongst I-positions (the internal dialogue with ourselves) or with other individuals (the external dialogue). A career identity, therefore, is co-constructed, socially situated, and performed in interactions. According to Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2010), this co-construction is a practice of positioning, whereby ‘master narratives’ (Davies & Harré, 1990) and discourses – as LaPointe (2010, p. 2) puts it – ‘position individuals and construct their identities in the interaction between narrator and audience. [...] Positioning refers to the process through which people can adopt, resist and offer the subject positions made available in discourses and master narratives’.

It is noteworthy that the internal and external dialogue are only separate in the way we conceptualise them. In practice, they inform each other in an ongoing way; they are in fact merged. How we interpret our lives is very much a ‘psycho-social’ phenomenon (Damasio, 2005; Gross, 2006). People are motivated to engage in an
internal and an external dialogue because each dialogue satisfies one of two core human needs: a ‘sense of autonomy and control’ and ‘being part of a wider community’ (Hermans & DiMaggio, 2007). To be happy we must feel in balance with ourselves and be connected with others.

From the perspective of Dialogical Self Theory, the trajectory from a first to a second story ideally starts with the formulation of an I-position, the subsequent broadening of this I-position by means of a dialogue to other relevant I-positions, and runs, via consecutive dialogical shifts, from these I-positions to a meta-position and from this meta-position to the formulation of a promoter-position (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Winters, Meijers, Lengelle, & Baert, 2012). By inviting ‘I’ positions, we mean that an individual is asked to enter the dialogue in a multi-voiced way. Life experiences may even be discussed in ambiguous and contradictory ways. Then a meta-position becomes valuable. It allows the individual to look at one’s I-positions from a distance. In the model the observer or witness in the centre represents this position. This allows for a usefully detached overview of a situation.

In the process of this meta-fuelled awareness, a person says, ‘I am this multi-voiced self, but also more than that’. In career learning this means that we develop and express various perspectives without becoming ‘married’ to them from the outset. The integrative understanding gained through a meta-position is intended to lead us to action or at least the intention to act with respect for the complexity or changeability of our work environment. The ‘position’ that is capable of such action is called a promoter position and allows an individual to make a choice or take an action.

As she was working through her distress, literally using writing to ‘get out of herself’, Edith created both imagined and literal dialogues with others. Here is a poem she wrote from the point of view of a junior staff person she helped train. The
poem is a kind of internal dialogue, but also shows a need to ‘connect’ outside oneself. It also shows Edith’s growing ability to allow the observer or witness to be present in the midst of the drama.

The mentor

She cries for me, her make-up in rivers down her cheeks
As I am marched out in the impersonal grip of the executioner.
When she arrived, on shaky steps of self-doubt
I had seen her worth and welcomed her under my wing.
She read my survival manual
And thought she could last a storm.
Now the survivor is vanquished
And her world needs reconstructing,
Since the game has changed forever.
I cry now as I remember her tears;
She cries now too,
Remembering my lack of them. (Robb, p. 16)

During her ‘resurrection’ Edith also reached out to five other long-term employees who endured devastating lay-offs. This was not only a sign of her progress in healing (to get beyond or out of the ‘self’ and first story) but it was also a way to motivate herself and create a richer and safer environment to continue her dialogue.

A safe and enriching context

From educational psychology we know that a learning environment that allows transformative learning processes, besides being dialogical, must be safe and enriching (Simons, Van der Linden, & Duffy, 2000). One of the things we mean by safe is that it must help break through the sense of isolation that those who are dealing with difficult issues often feel. A boundary experience not only gives a person the feeling one is no longer capable of acting confidently, but often leaves him/her feeling like an outsider. By safe, we also mean that the relationship between learner and facilitator must be based on respect, openness and trust. Those facilitating writing aimed at empowerment or identity formation must recognise ‘the importance of creating in the classroom a “holding environment” [...] within which participants can feel safe enough to engage more closely with their inner worlds’ (Hunt, 1998, p. 33). Such an environment is created by putting guidelines in place with regards to confidentiality and ensuring that the feedback provided is supportive and insightful. A ‘first reader’ (e.g., a teacher or counsellor) must be compassionate and the texts and examples that are offered must help students to contextualise their experiences.

A safe and enriching environment also means that the focus is not, in the first place, on understanding a boundary experience or explaining it, but on the relationship that allows individuals to find their own way of articulating experiences. Re-storying often starts with helping students to find the ‘right’ metaphors. From metaphors a person can move towards finding analogies, developing personal constructs and finally shaping coherent ‘second’ stories. This
idea is closely related to the notions of generative metaphor and frame restructuring proposed by Schön (1993), the concept of generative processes by analogical transfer expounded by Finke (1994), and Black’s (1993) argument that metaphors can generate new knowledge and insight by changing relationships between the things designated (see also Kearney & Hyle, 2004; Leitch, 2006). Writing ‘serves the function of organizing complex emotional experiences’ (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1234).

Edith has the last word on this:

We decide to write our way well. Through personal essays and poems, we labour to remember sensory details of the day it all happened, and speak in amazement at how fast our healing mind has already started to shut it out. (Robb, p. 17)

3. Reflections on the model and narratives
It should be clear from the above that narrative approaches can foster the development of a career narrative and provide ways in which a dialogue – the key element in career learning (Kuijpers et al., 2011) – is encouraged about the personal and societal meaning of work. In Edith’s case it is noteworthy that she went on to develop a new career for herself as consultant and writer. Her initial feelings of being a victim were transformed as she (re)wrote her story of being laid off. She uncovered in the writing process other aspects of her career identity – that dynamic multiplicity of personal positions or voices regarding work – and through her evolving narrative created new work for herself that would have been unthinkable at the beginning of her boundary experience. New positions were identified as part of an evolving career identity in which aspects of Edith’s earlier work (i.e., writing) continued to serve her but she expanded her activities in providing business advice. In a more recent note, she wrote to tell us that her communications firm is prospering. She clearly made the shift from ‘secure employee’ to entrepreneur, but perhaps more importantly the shift from victim to capable actor in the world of the boundaryless career.

Additionally the model presented offers concrete and practical, but hitherto not evidence-based ways in which university instructors might work with students and facilitate their learning with these creative and expressive approaches. We acknowledge that our case study does not prove the validity of our theoretical model or prove that the MAIS courses promote career learning. Whether narrative approaches make such learning processes possible would have to be explored in further research in the same way that further research would be needed to determine whether learning environments based on this theoretical model are more effective regarding the development of a career identity than learning environments based on other theoretical foundations.

The dialogical learning process and phases described can be applied to a variety of boundary experiences which, if transformed successfully, contribute fundamentally to career learning. Ultimately we all learn in response to practical experiences which challenge our concepts and identities and require us to feel, observe, converse about and reflect on those experiences while we co-construct our identities, reframe our experiences and in turn learn to navigate the world of work responsively and flexibly.
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