

Reconceiving Guidance and Counselling: Using Information in the Information Age

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Several different educational problems have been redressed by providing information to students. One such programme – the central issue of this paper – is career-oriented guidance and counselling, intended to help students choose an occupational path and an associated educational path; others include sex education, tobacco prevention, drug education, parenting education, and various other forms of ‘life skills’ education. More generally, market-like mechanisms such as vouchers and school choice rely on parents and students being rational, self-interested ‘consumers’, and information is one way of making these markets work.

Those who have promoted information have usually assumed that information can be acted upon – that it is sufficient to make decisions that are considered rational. However, this assumption is surely invalid in general, and it may be especially invalid for students (or parents) who are unpractised or unsophisticated in using information – including low-income students and minority students, who often seem to make decisions that are not in their own best interests. This paper therefore poses the question of what preconditions are necessary for individuals to use information in their own self-interest. In the ‘information age’, this becomes a particularly critical question because our culture is awash in information for those who can seek

it out – but, conversely, no amount of information will be sufficient for those who cannot absorb it.

The overall conception of information in a variety of educational programmes is simplistic and inadequate, e.g.:

- secondary schools where resources for guidance and counselling have been dwindling.
- community colleges where many students enroll without clear plans.
- four-year colleges with ‘student development’.
- short-term job training programmes where guidance and counselling have typically been missing.
- welfare-to-work programmes where the ‘caseworker function’ represents a distinctive approach to guidance and counselling.
- ‘youth development’ programmes.

While approaches in these different (and non-communicating) programmes vary, they tend to rely on the provision of information – rather than helping individuals with the task of using information. This is particularly evident in the one-stop centres being funded by the Department of Labor to provide individuals with information about post-secondary education and training options.

Conditions before information can be used

So what are the necessary preconditions in order for individuals to use information well? From examining the various literatures about decision-making, there is only one normative model of ‘rational’ decisions: the expected utility model of economics. However, this model – and its translation by other disciplines such as psychology – requires at least seven

conditions before information can be used ‘rationally’, three of them related to the capacity to understand information, and four of them related to requirements of the rational decision-making model:

1. **The authority of information.** Information which is not considered authoritative will not be considered, and the authority of information varies from group to group – a special problem in dealing with diverse groups with their own norms including teenagers, minority communities, ethnic communities including recent immigrants, and sometimes rural communities.
2. **‘Oral’ and ‘literate’ approaches to information.** The information provided in guidance and counselling, and various other educational programmes, often comes in written form – reference books, government publications, research reports, and computer-based versions of these. As Walter Ong (1982) and others have emphasised, however, many individuals and groups do not fully accept such ‘literate’ sources; in a more ‘oral’ tradition, the authority of the individual conveying the information is more important. This issue is especially important in the ‘information age’, where information is often available only in written form.
3. **The construction of information.** Particularly in an ‘information age’, individuals are surrounded by information in many forms, but they don’t necessarily absorb it unless they have the constructs or schema necessary for absorbing and cataloguing the information. This means that the information necessary for ‘rational’ decisions is

not exogenous to the decision – it is instead endogenous, collected as part of the decision-making process. Therefore information may not be ‘created’ or absorbed until individuals have reasons to do so, which in turn depends on their preferences.

4. **The existence of well-formed preferences.** All economic and psychological theories of decision-making assume that individuals have preferences – or interests, or needs, or ‘self-concepts’. But the development of these preferences are nowhere examined, and without them individuals cannot make decisions that can be considered rational in the conventional sense – and they may not be able to construct information from the flows available to them.
5. **Time perspective and planfulness.** Because career-related decisions require actions in the present taken on behalf of events in the future, they require the ability to deal with time in a meaningful way. (In economists’ terms, preferences include a rate of time preference.) But there has been little investigation of how and whether individuals come to develop the facility.
6. **Probabilistic thinking.** Because future events are often probabilistic, individuals making decisions need to be able to weigh alternatives with different probabilities. (Again, the economists’ expected utility model explicitly incorporates stochastic thinking, in the form of expected outcomes and risk preferences.) There is a considerable literature from psychology about the inability of individuals to behave consistently under different descriptions of probabilities, but there is little information about how individuals develop stochastic thinking.
7. **‘Empathy’ or counter-factual thinking.** The conventional conceptions of ‘rational’ decision-making requires individuals to

consider several alternatives, including some which have not been experienced or which will not be chosen. This requires the ability to imagine the consequences for the individual of counter-factual events. The inability to do so means that they are unable to consider a wide enough array of options – something that happens when, for example, young women fail to consider stereotypically ‘male’ occupations, or when students with parents who have not gone to college fail to consider college-going seriously.

Conclusions

This conceptualisation of how to use information leads in several directions. Firstly, while it does not dispute the need for information, it recognises that information may be necessary but not sufficient. It leads to a large agenda investigating how young people make decisions – in particular, investigating under what conditions young people have problems with these seven elements.

Secondly, this conceptualisation clarifies that certain ways of thinking – for example, the ability to evaluate impersonal information available in ‘literate’ forms, and stochastic and counter-factual thinking – are crucial not only in the disciplines (like maths and English) but are also critically related to decision-making. The current interest in constructivist teaching is not only a powerful way of teaching conventional academic subjects, but is also a way of preparing students in certain ‘life skills’ which are crucial to their futures.

Thirdly, this approach clarifies that, when schools engage in preparing students to choose careers (or make other crucial decisions, like those related to sex and drugs), their activities could range well beyond the provision of information. While it is not clear, for example, how preferences (including time preferences) are generated, an obvious answer is that they come from the experiences of individuals – and anything schools do to enrich these experiences may be helpful. The incorporation of work-based learning and service learning into schools, the greater use of project-based approaches, and the development of various themes around which instruction is focused are all ways that schools can expand students’ range of experiences – particularly students from low-income and minority backgrounds, or girls and boys who have not been exposed to non-traditional occupations. But merely providing experiences without the effort to extract their meaning for students’ own lives is inadequate, so this direction also calls for integrating such experiences more closely into the rest of the curriculum.

This paper is of course a conceptual or theoretical treatment of decision-making in an ‘information age’, rather than an empirical investigation of decision-making, and much more empirical research is needed to develop its implications. It is intended to direct thinking about a large class of issues in new ways, to recognise the inadequacy of simply providing information as a solution to complex problems.

Note

This outline for a paper is based on a NICEC seminar held in London.

References

Ong, W. (1982) *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. New York and London: Routledge.

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