

Sharing experience of careers work in different settings

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What do the practices of career support given to individuals in various settings have in common? Whether labelled career advice, career education, career guidance, career counselling, career coaching or career development, what are the differences between them? The answers to these questions could throw new light on practice in the career field and suggest ways to enrich it. However, the relative lack of contact between career professionals working in different settings – such as schools, colleges, higher education, public employment services, the voluntary sector, private-sector career services and the workplace – gives little opportunity to address these questions. We therefore propose that practitioners from a variety of settings should engage in dialogue; and, importantly, that researchers should also take part in this dialogue, and help to stimulate and disseminate learning widely across the whole career field.

We have set out a proposal for dialogue across settings (Collin and Hirsh, 2010) which can be seen as part of a wider development to break down the unhelpful compartmentalism of the various academic disciplines with an interest in the concept of career (Collin and Patton, 2009). We are seeking to put our proposal into effect by promoting opportunities for dialogue among career professionals and researchers who work in different settings. We hope that these dialogues will be held in such a way that the learning from them can be reflected upon and disseminated. Organisations might wish to include a dialogue event within their own programmes, or to ‘piggy-back’ such an event on to one of their scheduled meetings. Anyone interested in how we are taking these ideas forward, or in running a dialogue event and wanting some

support with its content, facilitation or reporting, will find our contact details at end of this article.

The present article reports on a half-day dialogue event held by NICEC in July 2010. Those invited included NICEC Fellows and Members, the members of the ‘dialogue action group’ (see Collin and Hirsh, 2010), and some other experienced and reflective practitioners. The 27 participants came from public- and private-sector providers, and included careers advisors in schools and higher education, organisational career consultants/advisors, academics and researchers. They belonged to diverse professional bodies.

The event was built around structured and concurrent dialogues on the three themes of ‘purposes and rationales’, ‘delivery models, tools, and approaches’, and ‘ideas and theories’, each as applied to careers work in various settings. The afternoon opened with brief introductions to these themes, after which the participants, having been briefed with a list of questions before the meeting, worked in the facilitated group of their choice. The event concluded with observations from the rapporteur, Tony Watts (incorporated in the ‘Emerging themes’ section below), and a summary of follow-up actions. This article is part of the process of reflection on, and dissemination of, the dialogue which took place at the event.

The purposes and rationales for careers work

Charles Jackson introduced the topic of the ‘purposes’ of careers work and its ‘rationales’ with

a quotation from Amartya Sen (1999: 85) about development. Sen saw this as the ‘capabilities of people to do things – and the freedom to lead lives – that they have reason to value’. Charles applied this to career, to emphasise the essentially moral purpose of careers work.

Two other broad purposes for guidance, from the economic/business perspective and that of social policy, often shape provision. For governments, such drivers tend to prioritise certain groups such as the low-skilled, the unemployed and benefit claimants. In business, career attention is often focused on high fliers, or people being made redundant. This leaves many people without much career support at all, making the issues of the extent of universal services, and how limited further services are to be targeted, all the more critical.

Charles suggested that careers work often has several sets of stakeholders: if we do not persuade them of the wider value of career support, then provision is not sustained. Deeper issues of purpose lie beneath the surface of debates about models of provision. These include: whether we are seeking to enable or to control individuals; whether guidance can address discrimination; whether we seek to influence the attitudes and actions of employers; and whether individuals are seen as responsible for their own employment difficulties.

This group’s participants were asked to examine the purposes and rationales for career support as seen by the different stakeholders in services in different settings. What rationales can more readily be sustained across stakeholders and in changing circumstances?

Varied rationales and service provision

The group strongly endorsed the moral standpoint of Sen’s quotation, and noted that it stresses ‘life’, not just ‘work’, and allows for many kinds of ‘value’ from the individual’s point of view. Participants

also explored the educational purpose for career support as helping individuals to learn to manage their career. This starting-point tends towards a universal and developmental purpose for careers work. It contrasts with the social policy and economic perspectives in which careers work is often seen as addressing the problems or ‘deficits’ of particular types of people, so leading to more targeted career services. Targeted services can be compulsory or voluntary for the individual. Voluntary services can lead to the better-informed taking them up (if they are seen as desirable), or can become stigmatised (if they are associated with disadvantage and deficit).

Clients who are in work or outside it

Career support may have different purposes for people who are ‘inside’ organisations or in work than for those who are ‘outside’ the active workforce. Some employers have devised career strategies to retain valued employees, but such approaches may further raise entry barriers for those ‘outside’ work, especially older workers or those leaving full-time education.

Varied stakeholders, different purposes

Among the stakeholders in career support are individual clients, practitioners, guidance-providing organisations and organisations funding or influencing the service. They commonly have somewhat different perspectives on the purposes of guidance. At times their interests are congruent, but they can also pull apart or directly conflict. The current thrust of policy rhetoric is to position individual clients more as ‘customers’ than as ‘clients’ for guidance, although what this means in practice is unclear.

Guidance as identity formation for the young

Many aspects of purpose, values and guidance practices are shared between professionals working

with adults and with young people. However, it could be argued that there is also a fundamental difference. Up to their mid-20s, most young people are still engaged in establishing a distinctive adult identity, and career support is intimately linked to the creation of that identity. Linked with identity is aspiration: guidance can, and sometimes does, play a significant part in motivating young people to learn.

Career support as efficient use of resources for adults

In the current fiscal and policy climate, the rationale for the state to provide guidance for adults may well be challenged (though since the dialogue, the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review's commitment to an all-age careers service is encouraging in this respect). Providing career support for adults can be seen as enabling individuals to make the most efficient use of whatever learning and work opportunities are available. Conversely, cutting such support may save money in the short term but lead to career decisions which are costly both for the individual and the economy.

Private-sector suppliers

Career professionals in private-sector suppliers are involved in outplacement and talent management on the one hand, and as providers of unemployment and welfare-to-work programmes on the other. They share many purposes and values with those working in public-sector agencies, but there is insufficient interaction between the two.

Employer-based guidance

Career support provided by or through employers creates some dilemmas for career professionals concerning impartiality and independence. Those working in these settings may be under pressure to see only those who are being 'counselled out' of the organisation, and not those whom the organisation is keen to retain, for fear that guidance may tempt them to leave. The purposes, price and nature of outplacement support may change as employers' policies and the labour market change over time.

Delivery models, tools and approaches

Christina Evans introduced this topic by sketching some of the delivery models and approaches used in careers work in higher education, schools, employing organisations and by independent practitioners. In addition to the formal delivery of career support by private- as well as public-sector suppliers, the importance of informal careers work – especially in the workplace – was emphasised. This can be as part of training programmes, networking groups, through self-help resources and via professional bodies. In higher education, careers work is often embedded in the curriculum through meta-skills development, emphasis on personal development and reflection, work experience/volunteering and activities with employers and alumni.

Christina also referred to: the focus on talent management in employing organisations; varying access to career support for different groups at different life stages; and finding the balance between treating career development as continuous ('keeping healthy') and addressing periods of crisis. Perhaps more important than differences in delivery models *per se* is the great variation in the quality and consistency of support available.

This group was asked to examine the practical delivery models for career support in different settings, tools and approaches, innovative models and how interventions are designed to help individuals take real action.

Varied practices, common interests

Participants found it difficult to generalise about differences in the structure and quality of career support between sector settings, as differences between organisations even in the same sector appeared great. The group felt that for good practice in any setting, we need 'institutional dynamism' and individuals with the vision and ability to influence policy and resources.

Although the mix of career activities varied between organisations, different settings were interested in a similar range of options – for example, group work as well as one-to-one interviews and methods using ICT. Another similarity across settings was the intention to embed career learning and personal development planning within the daily experience of learning and working.

Impartiality is an important concept for all career professionals, although there was some discussion of whether its real importance varies from one setting to another.

Partnerships of organisations and of people

Partnership working has long been central to good provision across all sectors. Schools work with external specialist services (and also with employers, parents and others), though these partnerships were seen as under threat by current policy changes. In HE there are internal partnerships (between careers services and teaching departments, for example) and also between HEIs and external employers and professional bodies.

Organisational partnerships require collaborative working between different kinds of people. For example, specialist career staff work variously with teachers in schools, with academics in HE, and with managers in employing organisations.

Access and entitlement

Settings have many different issues with regard to access and entitlement to career support. Entitlement is often not clear, and there may be a further gap between access policies and availability in practice. Some groups – for example, the self-employed and those working in SMEs – tend to have no distinctive provision at all.

Applying career learning to real decisions

A significant issue across settings is whether individuals can apply the career education they receive, and the career planning skills they

supposedly acquire, to real decisions. Are guidance and support services accessible to them when they are making decisions and most need that support? The group talked about career professionals having ‘recipes’ or practical understandings of how to make career decisions, which may not be fully conveyed in the way career education is delivered. This gap between theory and practice may in part be reflected in contrasting ideas about career guidance as a one-off experience or as enabling people to manage their own careers.

Ideas and theories

Lyn Barham suggested that the word ‘theory’ can refer both to formal theories and to the loosely associated ideas that inform practice. Practitioners may not draw explicitly upon the former, but what and how they practise will be based upon the latter, including their own personal theories. These may often be implicit and unacknowledged, and are informed by their ‘world views’, which are highly individual hypotheses about such basic issues as the nature of the world and how it can be known (Pepper, 1942).

Practitioners’ personal theories influence their response to ‘career’ in its various forms – institutional or individual, objective or subjective – and in particular to the latter, which is complex, highly individualised and nuanced. While subject to individual interpretation, the career is shaped structurally and is socially situated.

In the interaction between helper and client in careers work, their individual world views, understandings of career, and expectations of what for both of them constitutes ‘help’, will be brought into juxtaposition, possibly involving conflict and negotiation.

This group was asked to discuss how ideas and theories inform our understanding of the nature of careers and of the processes of career guidance and support, whether and how theories are used in practice, and whether new theories or ideas are needed.

The significance of theories that look below the surface

The discussion began with the significance of theories that recognise the political and social dimensions of the organisation of work and of labour. Such theories focus on how careers are socially constructed through the social structure and the division of labour, and draw attention to issues of power and gender. Aspects of identity are similarly constructed: the significance of this is seen when outsiders join an organisation and need to 'fit in'. Attention to how employees have to manage and deploy emotion reveals otherwise hidden aspects of work in service and care settings.

Explicit and implicit theories

Participants recognised that there are both explicit and implicit (or tacit) theories of career. Unacknowledged assumptions underpin the powerful 'discourses' of employability and league tables that are current in schools, universities, and the professions. At the same time, practitioners, clients and academics may articulate competing and critical theories. It was pointed out that it is important to contextualise ideas and theories.

Education and society

The group discussed the implications for careers work in education of how people connect to society through work. Schools tend to offer an individualised notion of career, based on predominantly psychological perspectives, and expressed in terms of individual 'results'. But if we see work and society as interconnected, then careers work in educational settings should have a citizenship dimension which embraces both a proper 'selfishness' and a caring for others. This is reflected in approaches that bring mentors into schools. These also develop the self-efficacy of young people.

The changing context of career

Some academics are examining the impact of global economic and labour market changes on traditional

patterns of work and learning. People's responses to such change may lead to disruption of their working lives but also to new connectivities and collective agency (Seddon, Henriksson and Niemeyer, 2010), giving new career development possibilities. At the same time, the group noted that we should not forget or neglect 'old' career theories and models. One of those mentioned was the 'old new' idea of the boundaryless career, though that may overstate how much contexts are changing.

Decisions and career development

This group recognised the need to pay attention not only to decisions and turning-points, but also to the periods between them. The Canadian and Australian Blueprints were cited as examples of a contemporary perspective that focuses on continuous career development. However, this can create a tension in practice: while some clients may value the opportunity to develop a toolkit of lifeskills, others may want help in dealing with their immediate situation.

Other issues for theory to address

Other issues mentioned as requiring attention in theory included: the linking of structure and agency; of the explicit and the tacit; of the organisation and its context. As with the 'Purposes' group, there was interest in how 'outsiders' negotiate careers. It may also be useful to examine how theory and practice in the career field might relate to the strong current interest in well-being and positive psychology.

Emerging themes

It seems that conversing explicitly across guidance settings decontextualised, and thereby clarified, some underlying principles and tensions. Issues emerging from this process included those of leadership, impartiality, partnership, entitlement and access. These took different forms in different settings, but were based on common principles and raised common tensions and dilemmas.

Various purposes and organisational constraints

A key theme of the dialogue was the tension between a broad and moral view of the purposes of career support and pragmatic views of its various purposes and organisational constraints. Indeed, participants were well aware of the different interests of the many stakeholders in careers work which takes place in various settings: public/private; in education/employing organisations; concerned with adults/young people; etc.

Impact on career support

Careers work is essentially labour-intensive, and organisational constraints may lead to variable access. Some individuals may receive career support via the educational or work organisation to which they belong; some as citizens. But access in many settings is targeted to particular groups of people and therefore restricted.

Organisational priorities also influence the quality and nature of career support, which addresses the needs of the individual but also the economic and organisational context in which it is being provided. In addition, stakeholders in career support have vested interests, for example in retaining pupils or employees, which may impinge on the impartiality and client-centredness of services.

Impact on career professionals

Professionals often find themselves having to resolve conflicts between idealism and pragmatism in individual cases, for example how to offer one-to-one support to an individual for whom on-line support is not appropriate. For them to manage such tensions calls for what is essentially political behaviour; strategies, tactics, and choices have to be made in the light of the particular context and available resources. The organisations with which they work need vision and leadership to give them clear goals and the support to achieve them.

Managing the tensions in careers work mirrors to

some extent the process of career development itself. Individuals' career development usually has to be negotiated within organisational contexts, with very uneven distribution of power, and sometimes with sharp distinctions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. One of the purposes of career support services is to empower people within these processes, in negotiating their sense of individual identity, of organisational identity, of social identity, and of social contribution.

Career support for life and at key moments?

Another strong theme across settings was that career support is potentially both an educational activity (skilling individuals for managing their work and learning) and also a support at particular moments of decision or crisis. The former tends to be developmental, preventative and aspires to be universal in nature. A similarity across settings (including employing organisations) is the intention to embed such career education into daily learning and work. By contrast, careers work aimed more at crisis support is often based on a deficit model and more likely to be offered only to some people at some times. An issue raised by two groups was the relationship between these two perspectives and, for example, whether career education goes far enough in equipping individuals to apply their career skills when they face moments of crisis or decision. This would be a useful topic for practitioners and researchers to discuss further.

Theory and practice

Careers work is carried out in a fast-changing environment. The nature of work, organisations, values, life courses, identities – and hence of opportunities, threats, motivations, aspirations, structures – are all changing. We need new ways of thinking about career, and still face huge conceptual challenges in making sense of our rich and ambiguous field. There are already many career theories, but few are practitioner-friendly. Professionals in all settings need clearer explanations of such theories as well as greater

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awareness of their own tacit and implicit theories. Academics need to work closely with career professionals on the application of theory to practice, preferably across settings, and especially in initial education/training and continuing professional development.

The process of dialogue across settings

Many found this dialogue a novel and refreshing experience, and it achieved a brief meeting of minds. Participants used their own examples to identify and explore issues of common interest. The discussions were too short and too broad, however, to permit a systematic identification of the similarities and differences between the settings represented. More formal research on professional practice in different settings would be valuable.

The dynamics and outcomes of a dialogue will inevitably be shaped by the roles and settings of its participants, and who they are will be determined by the nature of the organisation hosting the event. The role of a discussion facilitator is crucial in keeping a group focussed on both a topic area and making cross-setting comparisons. Note-takers are also essential, to enable the wider sharing of the dialogue.

Of the three topics we chose for this event, 'Delivery models, tools and approaches' gave the greatest opportunity for participants to share concrete experiences. There were more academics and fewer practitioners who discussed 'Ideas and theories', making it more difficult to relate theory to practice. However, we can see the overall event in some sense as theorising practice. One suggestion was that this could be done in a direct and specific way through using career theories with clients ('teaching the recipe', 'breaking the code'). Phil McCash (2008) has been promoting this idea through his concept of 'career studies' in higher education: there would seem to be considerable scope for pursuing this idea further.

In theorising practice in these ways, the conversation started here could be seen

as establishing dialogues not only between practitioners working in different settings, but also between practice and theory. In doing so, it may help practitioners to develop stronger tools for coping with, and also informing and influencing, public and organisational policies.

In a broader international context we can see this event, and others which may follow, as part of wider movement to establish closer working between the many professional associations to which career professionals belong. In Australia, for example, the Careers Industry Council of Australia (CICA) has been supported by the Australian Government to develop cross-sectoral professional standards. Here in the UK the work of the Careers Profession Task Force, and the subsequent establishment of a Careers Profession Alliance (which has already agreed a common code of practice), are promising recent developments.

Such top-down, institutional actions need to be complemented by a bottom-up process, driven by practitioner experience of the benefits of establishing common ground across settings. The dialogue described here can be seen as instigating such a process. The range of participants at this NICEC event meant that the conversation has started at two of the more difficult potential intersections: between the public sector and the private sector, and between education-based services and employer-based services. Current professional structures tend to reinforce barriers. But the discussions that have taken place here suggest that it should be possible to surmount them.

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The website <http://www.careerstudies.net> is being used to collect and share materials relevant to these dialogues across settings.



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