

# Narrative techniques in reflective practice

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**This** article explores approaches from a number of disciplines which allow for the incorporation of various forms of narrative analysis within reflective practice. For careers practitioners, structured narrative techniques can allow for creative applications of career theory to interactions with clients. In addition, the strong link between narrative and meaning making has the potential to extend the impact of reflective practice beyond the development of practical skills and knowledge into a deeper examination of professional purpose and identity.



## The benefits of narrative are not just for clients

Much attention has been focused in recent years on the use of narrative within careers guidance and counselling (see for example Bujold, 2004; Cochran, 1997; Collin, 2007). The case for incorporating a narrative approach is made on the basis that individual career decision making is a multi-faceted, non-linear process which takes place within the context of the individual's developing personal history and within a constantly changing social, cultural and economic environment. Unravelling the web of complex interactions which contribute to career decisions is too demanding a task for reductionist analytical approaches alone, especially when career decisions and actions are usually formulated on the basis of personal and social constructions of reality. According to Reid and West (2011, p. 4), guidance and career counselling necessitates an understanding of 'the role and nature of narrative in processes of meaning making'. Rawlinson and Hooley (2011, p. 4) challenge careers practitioners to 'look around and see what can

be borrowed from others who create and/or study stories' in order to 'develop understanding and spark individuals in their explorations of their own career narratives'.

The arguments that are put forward for the applicability of narrative to the understanding and facilitation of career decision making could equally be applied to the task of examining and improving the process of career guidance and counselling itself. In this article I would like to take up Rawlinson and Hooley's challenge to borrow from others, but to apply these borrowings to the practitioner's reflective process. More specifically, I wish to explore ways in which the synergistic relationship between reflective practice and narratology can be used to build stronger links between theory and practice and to facilitate an exploration of the meaning and purpose of careers work. My intention in collecting together these borrowings is both to expand the purpose of existing reflective practices in careers guidance and counselling by relating them to ideas from narratology and to provide ideas for novel approaches for reflective practice. In reviewing the literature, I will seek not only to highlight examples of how narrative has been applied to reflective practice in careers guidance and other fields, but also to show how narrative techniques currently applied to clients could also be utilised to enable a greater depth of reflective learning for practitioners.

## Synergy between narrative analysis and reflective practice

Schön (1983) championed the idea of reflective practice as an approach which allowed the practitioner to navigate between the 'high ground' of an academic

knowledge base and the 'swampy lowlands' which represent the complex demands of everyday practice. In a similar way, Collin (2007) has argued that the discipline of narratology may provide a bridge to span the epistemological differences between post-modern narrative approaches to the study of career and the more 'scientific' traditional approaches to vocational psychology. Within career guidance, practice often exists in isolation from theory and research. An expanded approach to reflective practice which incorporates ideas from narratology may help to narrow that divide.

Mulvey (2011) has argued that continuing professional development for career practitioners should be existential in nature. Rather than just addressing factual knowledge or know-how, our professional development activities should also help us to examine 'knowing how to be'. According to Eby (2000, p. 52), 'reflection enables individuals to make sense of their lived experiences through examining such experiences in context'. Narrative, too, is strongly linked with meaning making and identity formation (Singer, 2004). A narrative approach allows for the extension of reflective practice beyond an examination of the 'how' of improving guidance competence to a deeper exploration of 'why', the meaning and purpose of guidance, as well as the 'who' of a practitioner's professional identity.

In gathering together a collection of narrative tools and approaches for this article I have attempted to focus on those which appear to provide the most potential for application at the interface between theory and practice. In addition I have picked techniques which encourage practitioners to ask questions about their self-defining choices and to explore their assumptions about the purpose and meaning of their work.

## Different types of narrative analysis

Although Collin (2007) has described four levels of analysis in narratology which could be applied to career research, for this article I will use a slightly broader typology proposed by Riessman (2005), also consisting of four types of narrative analysis.

1. Thematic analysis — focusing on the content of narratives to identify common themes and concepts.
2. Structural analysis — focusing on the way the story is told and the choices a narrator makes in constructing a persuasive account.
3. Interactional analysis — focusing on the dialogical process of co-construction between teller and listener.
4. Performative analysis — focusing on the embodied process of narration.

My reason for favouring Riessman's structure is that, whilst thematic and structural analysis may be of more interest to career researchers and theoreticians, the interactional and performative elements of narrative are especially relevant to the exploration of practice. Not only is careers guidance and counselling an interactive process between client and practitioner, it can also be seen as an improvised performance in which the practitioner could be called upon to inhabit a number of different roles in the unfolding story of the guidance interaction. Similarly, practitioners frequently engage in reflective activities through interaction with peers and mentors. This can often take the form of role play. An understanding of narrative analysis at the interactional and performative levels could be beneficial for enhancing such reflective activities.

Many traditional approaches to reflective practice within guidance concentrate on exploring what happened within an interaction and trying to identify particular themes and issues for discussion and development. As such, they are only addressing thematic analysis. I will start by looking at techniques that operate at this level and I will then examine the potential for using further levels of narrative analysis.

## Themes and intentions

An approach to reflective practice which operates at the thematic level of analysis is the self-confrontation procedure (Young, *et al.*, 1994). Based on contextual action theory, this involves asking the practitioner and the client to provide a commentary to a recording of an interaction. Within that commentary, participants are asked to identify and label particular 'projects' that

they were working on consciously or unconsciously during the discussion. These projects could be thought of as sub-plots within the overarching narrative of the discussion. For each individual, these projects may relate to the immediate concerns of the interview, but they may also relate to longer-term individual projects beyond the scope of the interaction. Each action within the discussion is analysed to evaluate the extent to which it contributed to the progression of the various projects. This analysis encourages an exploration of the interaction between the framed narrative of the guidance discussion and the wider narrative streams within the lives of the participants. The process allows the practitioner to understand and take responsibility for the choices they made within the context of the interaction. As a result, this may increase the likelihood that they will be aware of their freedom of choice in subsequent discussions. Dyer *et al.* (2010) use this approach to account for 'counterproductive, paradoxical actions within the counselling process by addressing unconscious processes as links between immediate actions and larger projects' (p. 1). To increase the chances of identifying the authentic goals and intentions of client and practitioner during an interaction, it may be helpful to focus attention on projects driven by both approach and avoidance motivations (Higgins, 1997). For example, a practitioner's in-discussion aim to achieve the most positive outcomes for the client may come into conflict with motivations linked to a wider narrative of avoiding appearing or feeling ill-informed about particular occupational areas.

One way to investigate the possible meaning and purpose of these wider narratives is the use of archetypal plot structures and themes. Pryor and Bright (2008, p. 73) argue that 'while each individual's experience (and therefore narrative) is unique, we all have to negotiate a common range of developmental challenges as part of living'. Because of this, it might be possible to identify certain archetypal narrative themes which represent recurring issues in our developmental experience. These themes can be seen as 'systems of meaning' which may 'provide insight into how individuals interpret their experience and the degree to which they believe they have control over their circumstances' (Pryor and Bright, 2008, p. 74). Brooker (2004, cited in Pryor and Bright, 2008) has proposed seven archetypal plot structures ('overcoming

the monster', 'rags to riches', 'quest', 'voyage and return', 'comedy', 'tragedy' and 'rebirth' related to the themes of fear and challenge, opportunities and potential, purpose and achievement, exploration and transformation, misunderstanding and harmony, vulnerability and failure, and tribulation and insight). Asking both the client and practitioner to identify which archetypal plot best fits their perception of the client's story and of the practitioner–client interaction could provide an insight into their respective world-views and self-perceptions. If, for example, the client envisaged the guidance process as a quest in search of a magical positive outcome and the practitioner was more inclined to see it as a struggle against the monstrous obstacles conjured up by the client in order to hinder progress, there would be potential difficulties in forming a coherent working alliance. Having brought to light possible conflicts between client and practitioner systems of meaning, the extent to which they represent wider themes in the participants' lives which influence their respective interpretations of the meaning and purpose of the careers discussion can be examined.

Many developmental career theories contain narrative themes or sub-plots in the form of tasks and goals associated with common stages of personal development. Instead of looking for these themes in the life-story of a client, it could be instructive to conscript this thematic structure in the service of analysing the unfolding practitioner–client interaction. The interaction could itself be viewed as a developmental process which may demonstrate these same stages. It may be possible to gain a greater understanding of difficulties encountered in an interaction by exploring the extent to which preceding developmental tasks had been successfully completed. Taking for example the developmental goals of Erikson (Stevens, 1983), one could examine the retrospective satisfaction with the process of a career interaction on behalf of either client or practitioner (Ego Integrity) by first looking for acceptable and sustainable outcomes (Generativity) for both parties. Working backwards, one could then examine the building of an effective practitioner–client relationship (Intimacy) by asking whether sufficient attention had been paid beforehand to establishing a clear understanding of the relevant roles of the participants (Identity) or whether both parties had taken explicit responsibility for their

respective actions and established their levels of competency (Industry, Initiative and Autonomy).

By viewing the guidance interaction as a narrative, one could use the reflective process as a way of revealing more than just the helpful or unhelpful actions of the participants. Thematic analysis helps us to explore the wider motivations and archetypal schemas of the participants. It also provides an opportunity to use existing career theory in a novel way: to identify themes within the narrative of the discussion itself rather than just in the client's story.

## Construction and construing

One of the choices a narrator makes in constructing a story is how to portray the characters and their relationships with each other. Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius (2009) describe a framework which defines a set of universal narrative 'actants'. These actants may be real people or they may be anthropomorphised objects, abstract concepts or aspects of the narrator's own personality, each of which can play the part of a character within the construction of the narrative. They may take on more than one actant role at the same time or change roles during the course of the story. Three related pairs of actants are identified. The Subject is the main protagonist in the narrative, pursuing or attempting to dispose of the Object. Thus Subject and Object interact on an axis of desire. Interacting on an axis of power, a Helper attempts to facilitate the Subject's goal pursuit, whilst an Opponent represents the forces of obstruction or resistance. The Sender provides a sense of purpose to the Subject by initiating the pursuit of the Object; the Receiver is the ultimate beneficiary of this quest. Sender and Receiver interact on an axis of knowledge or transmission. Using these actants, Vilhjálmsdóttir and Tulinius analyse the narratives of four career counselling interviews, placing both the client and the counsellor as the Subject and examining what other roles they and other people play, either consciously or unconsciously, during the course of the discussion. Examining any conflicts between how the client construes the role the practitioner is playing and the practitioner's own construal of their role could lead to enhanced understanding of the dynamics of the guidance interaction. With an increased awareness of

the role in which practitioner and client may be casting each other comes the freedom to accept that role or reject it in favour of a more suitable or authentic role. For example, a practitioner might attempt to fulfil the role of Helper by challenging a client's possible misconceptions about their career goals. However, this might be interpreted by the client as putting obstacles between themselves as Subject and their Object of desire. The practitioner could then be perceived by the client as an Opponent. If, through reflection on previous interactions, the practitioner is aware of this possibility, they have the option to stay in the role of Opponent (which might be appropriate if it was beneficial for the client to face up to the challenge) or switch to an alternative role.

The choice of narrative perspective can have a profound impact on the potential meaning derived from the story. Action Identification Theory (Vallacher and Wegner, 1985) considers how individuals construe actions on a continuum from 'lower-level identities', describing concrete processes, to 'higher-level identities', which are more abstract and tend to involve ascription of causal effects, social meaning and self-descriptive implications. A greater level of competence and experience with a particular task tends to lead to higher-level action-identification, whereas inexperience or failure tends to result in the use of the lower-level action-identities. Less experienced or less confident practitioners may focus on the practical aspects of narrative reflection and may need support from more experienced colleagues to direct their attention to the higher-level interpretations. The level of construal used can also be affected by the perspective we take when recalling an event. Libby, *et al.* (2009) found that visualising actions from a third-person perspective was linked to a more abstract construal (understanding *why*), whereas a first-person perspective was associated with a more concrete construal (understanding *how*). It seems likely, therefore, that thematic exploration could be enhanced by experimenting with reflection techniques that encourage the practitioner to re-construct the narrative of the interaction from different perspectives. One way of doing this might be for the practitioner to construct three different accounts of an interaction (one from their own perspective, one from the perspective of the client and one from the perspective of an independent observer) and then compare the

possible interpretations of the participants' actions from each perspective. If practitioners regularly use video recordings of interactions as part of their reflective practice, they could try varying the position of the camera to record their own subjective viewpoint or that of the client, as well as the more common third-party perspective. This may influence the construal level of their own reflections and that of any feedback received from peers or mentors.

## Telling and listening

The act of telling someone your story can affect the level of construal. According to Vallacher *et al.* (1987, p. 317), when describing an unsuccessful action in a social context 'low-level identification effectively removes the self from the action and thus minimizes the damage to one's self-image that would otherwise be associated with failure'. Thus, reflection on a less-than-perfect client interaction might lead a practitioner to emphasise the lower-level of actions in search of a better *how* and to shy away from higher-level identifications linked to intentions and identity. However, Vallacher *et al.* found that social pressures to present oneself as either boastful or modest can override these considerations of performance. A fellow practitioner listening to a narrative may influence the level of learning by expressing an explicit or implicit preference for self-enhancement to produce higher-level interpretations or self-deprecation to produce lower-level interpretations.

Valuation theory (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen, 1995) has three main assumptions: (1) that when people recount events in their lives to another person they organise those events in terms of units of meaning ('valuations'), (2) that two overarching motives drive this construction (namely, self-enhancement and contact/union with others), and (3) that these motives are linked to the emotional content of the valuations. Based on this, their self-confrontation method involves analysing the separate valuations of an individual's self-narrative with respect to key emotions linked to the success or failure of the overarching motives. Valuations with similar emotional profiles are compared in order to identify underlying themes within a particular self-narrative. This approach is particularly interesting as it explicitly addresses the

emotional content of meaning within narratives in a structured way.

In an extension of this method based on the notion of the dialogical self (Hermans, *et al.*, 1992), the individual is encouraged to construct and analyse their narrative from different positions in the self or 'I-positions' (Hermans, 1999). For example, one could retell one's story taking the I-position of a professional helper or a continuing learner or a fellow seeker after truth. As well as identifying personal 'I-positions' from which to construct a narrative reflection, one way to apply this dialogical approach to reflective practice might be to take the perspective of particular theoretical or ideological approaches. To give an impression of how this approach could be used to apply a familiar idea in a new way, one could reflect on a client encounter by constructing a commentary (much like the commentaries that appear as special features on DVDs) in the form of a conversation between four people. Each commentator could represent one of Watts' (1996) socio-political ideologies (liberal, progressive, radical and conservative), arguing the case for their particular interpretation of the practitioner's actions and motivations.

## Performing and inhabiting

Sometimes just telling the story and analysing the narrative is not enough. Jordi (2011, p. 193) has suggested that the 'calling of reflective practice' is 'a dialogue between bodily felt experiencing and cognitive formulation and expression of that experience'. He highlights the concept of 'focusing' developed by psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin, which draws attention to moment-by-moment experiencing in order to increase awareness of a bodily 'felt-sense' of something outside conscious awareness struggling for expression. The aim is to dwell with this embodied sensation until one is able to 'formulate and make explicit this implicit and vague felt-sense of experience' (p. 192).

A reflective process which has the potential to access this unconscious source of learning is described by Andersson *et al.* (2010). Mindfulness-based role-play integrates a gestalt 'empty chair' technique with dialogical mindfulness. The practitioner re-enacts



or improvises an encounter with a client, playing both roles in turn. During this dramatisation the practitioner is encouraged to be particularly aware of the 'phenomenological experience in each of the respective roles' (p. 289) — words, gestures, posture, sensations, thoughts and feelings — without engaging in conscious evaluation of these phenomena. As well as increasing empathy with a client, it seems likely that this non-judgemental approach could elicit a certain amount of emotional authenticity from practitioners when reflecting on their reactions to guidance situations.

## Conclusion

In my experience of training and mentoring other guidance practitioners, I have observed that many of them have found it hard to engage with reflective practice on a consistent basis. Often, the introduction of systematic methods based on models or theories enables the practitioner to have more confidence in undertaking reflection and achieving usable outcomes. In examining the interplay between narratology and reflective practice, I have attempted to identify a number of tools and methods that could expand the repertoire of structured approaches available to guidance practitioners when reflecting on their work. In addition, I have tried to show how these techniques go beyond the honing of practical skills and knowledge. Combining narrative with reflective practice can facilitate a greater understanding of the, sometimes veiled, motives and intentions of both client and practitioner. It can also help practitioners to gain a greater appreciation of the meaning and significance of their work and can lead to a stronger sense of professional identity. It is my hope that room can be made for the inclusion of a broader understanding of reflective practice within the training and continuing professional development of guidance practitioners.

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