

From emplotment to employment: becoming a career critic

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Synthesising concepts from career and literary theories creates frameworks for a new approach termed career criticism. Careers can be seen as stories, conscious and unconscious texts; analysing elements such as structure, plot, narrators, and narrative techniques enables students to interpret surface and below-surface meanings of career stories. Techniques can be taught in formal career learning to enable clients to understand influences and consciously take action in relation to them. This paper draws on methods common in Humanities to present a model of career criticism. Developed in higher education, the approach could be applied to careers work in multiple settings.



Introduction

Career criticism is an approach to career learning combining narrative methods common in literary and career studies. In their NICEC article, 'What can careers workers learn from the study of narrative?' Hooley and Rawlinson (2011:7) challenged us to 'capitalize on the potential of narrative approaches'. I address their question by synthesising ideas about narrative in career theory and literary theory to develop a new approach that I am calling career criticism. Practitioners introduced to the approach were asked to reflect on it and their responses are included at the end of the article.

Key related examples from the broader literature include Frigerio and McCash (2013:56), who advocate using 'career development theories to engage in *multiple readings* of career' and propose career literacy for career coaches. Moore and Hooley (2012:6), compare career literacy with functional literacy making

the point that people who deliver 'careers information and education need to be aware of...career vocabulary, language and concepts' used by their clients. For me, career literacy involves developing students' skills, knowledge and understanding; for reading, listening, speaking and writing about career narratives.

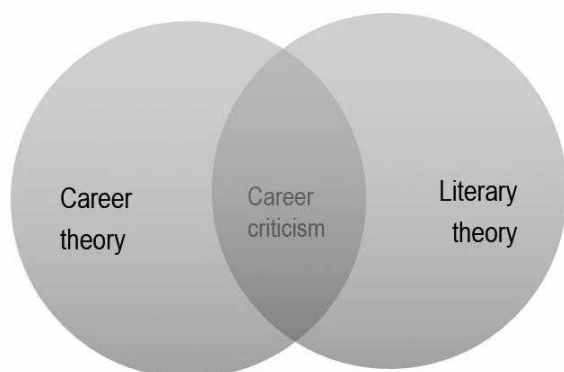
Narrative as a means to provide information about careers is dismissed by Pryor and Bright (2008:81) because stories 'tie up the loose ends of reality in a way that amounts to oversimplification of complexity'. However, stories are texts that can teach people about careers and, in education, practitioners can use them to create opportunities for learning. Looking below the surface, exploring the style in which a story is told reveals more about events and people. By teaching our students to use this technique, we equip readers to become duly critical, questioning such stories.

Career texts are both oral and written. Online publications such as iCould and the Vitae databases of career stories are produced specifically for education purposes. Others are created for different or multiple purposes, for example, to provide information about studying at a particular institution (marketing material); to show the career progression of former students (alumni profiles); to explain the background of current employees (biographies on employer websites); or for entertainment (Desert Island Discs). The different sources of a career story and its purpose may not always be explicitly stated or obvious to the reader. Another example of a written career text is a CV, constructed to tell a certain story for a specific purpose. In practice, educators teaching career concepts use all these resources.

Speakers, often alumni, invited to talk about their progression after completing a course, are common

in careers classrooms. Additionally, informal anecdotes from many sources contribute to people finding out about careers. Analysis using career criticism enriches these learning opportunities. The social nature of career learning means people not only listen to stories, they re-tell them, change them and others learn from them too. Being critical of stories by understanding their social construction is an essential tool for career tellers and listeners.

Figure 1. Combining narrative techniques from career and literary theory to highlight career criticism



This article reviews concepts in career and literary theory, combining the two to develop, explain and review a new approach to critical inquiry represented in the dark overlap of Figure 1, which I call career criticism.

Career theory

The study of narrative approaches in career theory began in the 1990s and relates to both telling and listening to career stories.

Telling stories. Cochran summarises his narrative approach as being different from earlier vocational theories because ‘the central problem... is not matching but *emplotment*’ (1997:ix). He uses literary concepts such as plot, character, roles, enacting and action to describe the nature of career stories, which he terms ‘dramatic units of life’ (1990:77). Cochran’s central theme is that careers counsellors can adopt narrative analysis to the life histories of their clients and re-construct the story to make explicit its patterns and hidden details. This assists clients in understanding their own life history, producing a new

version of the story and future narratives for the client to enact. The focus of Cochran’s approach is on one-to-one guidance and emphasises the role of the counsellor in re-framing a narrative with the client.

I think we can also teach clients to be independent, able to expose meanings and patterns in their own and other people’s stories. I propose pedagogy for career learning to enable students to become better critics engaging in listening, close reading and analysis of career stories.

Listening to stories. By encouraging his students to listen to the career stories of other people, Inkson (2007:228) concluded that story telling is good for the teller and good for the listener. To enhance listeners’ ability to elicit meaning from career stories he argues that subjective elements, objective elements, theme, plot and character must all be assessed.

Career stories presented to students by alumni and representatives of occupations or sectors are reviewed by Horn (2009:26) who identifies the limits of learning from interactions with external speakers when the ‘intended outcome of career research seemed to be an encounter with employers or employees, rather than an educational output linked to the learning from that encounter.’ Much more learning could be achieved if students were prepared and taught to analyse alumni narratives and made aware of their own idiosyncratic interpretation.

The construction, design and navigation of websites hosting career material lead readers towards a certain type of interpretation. Cochran’s (1997:6) comment about the manufactured ‘synthetic’ nature of narrative applies to each site as a whole. Each is a compendium of multiple stories, which can be interpreted. A collection of stories presented by a series of external speakers can be critiqued and assessed as an anthology of texts chosen, selected and edited by the course organiser.

Literary theory

Narratology, the study of narrative, has effective tools to increase understanding and reveal hidden meaning of texts. Close reading, common in literary studies, applies concepts such as plot, narrative voice,

character, points of view, sequencing, causation, endings and performativity. These help find answers to the pertinent question: how is this story being told? This assists interpretations but is unlikely to reach a final definitive answer as Bruner (2002:15) states: 'narrative is an invitation to problem finding, not a lesson in problem solving'. Before outlining the model, I will first offer definitions of the elements of narrative that later I will synthesise into my new approach.

Narrative voice. Who is it, why is she or he telling this story? An author chooses a particular narrator or group of narrators to tell the story and an audience might or might not trust that narrator. Focalisation involves a set of techniques which determine who sees what; and from whom the events are brought into focus. As different perspectives bring different versions of events, knowledge of the position or consciousness of this voice increases understanding of the events. Narrators can let readers look through the eyes of someone else and careers speakers sometimes report these additional points of view. Some examples of this would be 'Because my manager told me I was doing exceptionally well, I started to look for promotion...' 'My tutor told me I was not cut out for academic study...' 'My parents were really worried about my returning to study...' The points of view and influence of other characters are relevant.

Audience. A text is often created to appeal to an intended audience and this influences editorial decisions. When a careers speaker is representing a particular organisation or professional body, other motivations might influence the performance as the speaker is being paid to present that body in a positive light. This is particularly relevant if the speech is recorded and likely to be published on a website or other forum where it might be publically available.

Sequencing relates to the re-ordering of events, presenting them in a dislocated fashion rather than in an accurate chronology. The writing of a CV involves decisions about chronology. By grouping similar activities together under one appropriate sub-heading, the writer may dislocate a sequence to generate a new text serving a specific purpose.

Causation involves triggers to action and the distinction between connected and disconnected events. Forster (1927:87) makes the distinction

between 'The king died and then the queen died', which links two events in a time sequence and 'The king died and then the queen died of grief' which links the events by an explicitly stated cause. The cause of the second event is explained as being a consequence of the first. Porter Abbot (2002:37) argues that people are 'made in such a way that we continually look for causes of things'. In analysing narratives, readers should resist the fallacy that things that follow other things are caused by them. Readers are 'prone to inferential errors' (Bruner 2002:29) and need caution in drawing conclusions about consequence because sometimes, but not always, 'post hoc ergo propter hoc' (after this, therefore because of this). Individuals have their own biases in interpreting causation and career criticism helps expose these. To gain a fuller understanding of how careers develop, questions about what happened, and what caused the next event to happen, could be asked to look below the surface of easy explanations. Considering possible alternatives to the consequent events, if that had not happened then what else could have replaced it? Counterfactual questions, 'What if...?' might be asked at various stages of a career narrative.

The endings of stories. The last incident or event in the narrative may be assumed to be the end but the arbitrary status of endings concerns narratologists. T.S. Eliot observed that 'to make an end is to make a beginning' (Little Gidding, 1942, Verse V) and texts can have open endings. Soap opera survives by having no finale, in *A Thousand and One Nights* Scheherazade saves her own life by ending each story with a climax so exciting that the king re-calls her for the next instalment. The ending of a story may not be permanent or unproblematic.

Career stories have provisional endings but endings can come to define texts and sometimes, previous events tend to be understood as inevitably leading towards that particular end. The dénouement gives authority to the decisions and explanations of the author who constructed the text and might not allow for future events. Readers of career texts might benefit from allowing their imagination to predict future events and so acknowledge the impermanence of the ending presented in the story.

Foreshadowing occurs when a significant event is told in advance and the reader interprets the proceeding text with this in mind. This can lead

to false connections. When a careers speaker is introduced to an audience as being a particular type of worker, a teacher or banker, for example, a type of foreshadowing might occur. The readers of the text may make false connections between that role and the events that lead to it. It is possible to interpret the events leading to this role as being in some way relevant to that inevitable end point when this is not the ending, but just another in a series of events which is not yet complete.

Performativity means asking questions about a text to explore what it is doing or how it performs. Analysing techniques used in the creation of a text reveal their impact in shaping responses to the narrative. In some cases, unusual filming techniques might be interrogated; structured interviews sometimes include interviewers' questions that can be evaluated; accounts might be following a specific brief that may be hidden from the reader but could be explored to reveal intentions behind the brief. Some career stories appear as unprepared streams of consciousness and this form could be analysed too. Career texts have the capacity to influence readers' career decisions, so analysis of the format and how it functions deserve attention. Notions of performance are much more prevalent in literary studies than in career studies.

Career criticism

Combining concepts from the two theoretical stances develops techniques of career criticism, which help us understand more about the relationship between author and reader. To produce an informed commentary explaining what is happening in a career narrative means knowing more about its construction and to achieve this students can be taught to apply key questions aligned with clusters of concepts.

Table 1 shows how questions arise from clusters of narrative concepts linked to the events, people and style of a text. Table 2 develops these questions to explore what happens when we engage with a career story. In answering them, readers interrogate the text, assessing, evaluating, creating and acknowledging their own interpretations which, in group settings, can be articulated and defended. Having learnt the questioning technique, the critic can apply it to other career stories and to their own career situation so they will have:

1. Experience of applying a series of questions to a career text.
2. Skills to listen attentively, to observe and concentrate on a text.
3. Understanding different ways to interpret a text.
4. Ability to articulate opinions and vocabulary to describe careers.
5. Open mindedness about interpretations and acceptance of alternative views.



Table 1. Clusters of concepts related to a key question

Literary Theory	Career Theory	Combined Concepts	Key Question
Plot/action Temporality Causality	Plot Emplotment Changes	Events	What?
Narrator Characters Points of view	Characters Roles and identity Points of view	People	Who?
Audience Performativity Structure Foreshadowing Endings	Synthetic Style	Style	How?

Table 2.
A career criticism approach using three sets of questions

1 EVENTS

What? Questions to do with events, the plot and structure of a text

What happens in this story? What is the chronology?
 Were there any surprises in this story?
 Can events be presented on a time line?
 What causes the career transitions?
 Is there a pattern to the events?
 What could happen next in this story?

What? Questions about your personal career story

How do you order and explain events when you tell your own career story?
 How might you re-present your CV for different jobs?
 What can you change and what is fixed?

2 PEOPLE

Who? Questions to do with people and characters presented in a text

Who is telling this story?
 What roles are presented?
 Who else was involved in the story?
 What attitudes and behaviours are displayed, described and prioritised?

Who? Questions about people in your own career

Which people appear in narratives of your own career? What roles do they play?
 How can you enable people in your story to support your career progression?

3 STYLE

How? Questions to do with performance

In what style is this story told? What is the significance of this?
 Are there any re-current themes or words?
 Do you know why you are being told this story?
 Who is it for and what can you learn from it?
 Are there aspects of the story that appear to be missing?
 Why are these gaps significant?
 Have challenges been glossed over?

How? Questions about telling your career story

How do you present your story differently in conversations with friends or family?
 How does this change in a selection interview?
 How do you decide which parts to emphasise?

Table 3.
Learning activities

<p>EVENTS <i>What happens?</i></p>	<p>Draw a time line representing the events of the narrative and show any gaps or areas of confusion.</p> <p>Describe causes of change in this series of events.</p> <p>List the difficulties that were overcome.</p> <p>Write counter-factual questions relating to this narrative and try to answer them.</p>
<p>PEOPLE <i>Who is involved?</i></p>	<p>Write questions to the main character asking why they did certain things. Ask another group to answer your questions by referring to the attitudes and behaviours of this character as evidenced in the text.</p> <p>List the characters mentioned in this text and present the relationships between them diagrammatically.</p> <p>Identify the different roles presented in this text. These might include work, study, family and friendship roles.</p>
<p>STYLE <i>How is this being told?</i></p>	<p>Use dramatic voices to re-tell the story from different points of view.</p> <p>Prepare an alternative presentation of the same story told to a different audience (for a different purpose).</p> <p>Imagine entering the editing room, what will you find 'on the cutting room floor' and why is it there?</p>
<p>COMBINED</p>	<p>Role play the main character in the story and complete these statements in a private conversation with a trusted friend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What I really like about my job is... • What I can't understand about my working life is.... • What I most want to happen next is... <p>Review your opinions about the story and prepare an argument to present as a commentary explaining the narrative.</p>



Teaching and learning – new pedagogy for career learning

Techniques of career criticism can enable three learning outcomes:

1. Know that each career text can be interpreted in different ways.
2. Be able to analyse career texts in classrooms and other settings.
3. Understand how some careers develop.

Some examples of creative pedagogy for career learning are given in Table 3.

Research methodology

Trans-disciplinary methods, based in constructionist epistemology involved synthesising concepts from literary, career and education studies. Attitudes to narratives, collected in a survey of 15 careers workers, resulted in this new critical approach. This was applied to nine cases for in-depth analysis and then active participatory research, including interviews with six professional practitioners, was used to evaluate and refine the approach.

In reviewing the approach, careers workers reflected on their experience of applying career criticism to a sample from nine selected career texts created in

a range of formats. These included an iCould video; two employees' profiles on company websites (one written, one video); a university promotional video for postgraduate research and an invited 'live' speaker. The practitioners acknowledged the constructed nature of career narratives and saw benefits in enabling better learning from everyday interactions. One said, 'Everyone covers the tracks of their own fictions so ably, we mustn't take stories at face value'. Questions helped one practitioner to, 'Notice how I was being influenced; my personal response is not the whole story. It's opinion not fact and I picked up things that were unsaid.' They reported that the process helped them to 'think about the text for a lot longer'. 'I made notes and engaged with the material more deeply'.

The practitioners all said they would use the approach with university students to improve the quality of their career learning and development.

Conclusion

New ways to teach career studies encompass critical engagement with concepts of career development learning. Rooney and Rawlinson adopt a combination of approaches from literature and sociology in 'contesting the dominant discourse of employability' (2016:20). Techniques of career criticism are generated at the intersection between career and literary narrative. In group settings, learners can be taught to ask a series of questions, responding to career texts creatively and interrogating them deeply. Educational activities can be designed to enable learners to read more closely and increase their interest and collaboration in responding to texts. This helps to make sense of the complex nature of career development and techniques can be used in informal settings, bringing deeper levels of understanding to multiple career texts encountered in everyday life.

The strengths of combining other disciplines with career learning can be explored and core concepts from other disciplines tested. Trans-disciplinary approaches will continue to enrich the 'employability agenda', I suggest we keep addressing the question: What can career workers learn from the study of other disciplines?



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