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'A giant from whose shoulders we might all see further': Bill Law's contributions to careers work in schools

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In this article Bill Law's work and influence on careers programmes in schools is reviewed. It focuses in particular on his contributions to careers education theory and practice, and to the professional development of careers teachers. It is neither an exhaustive nor a comprehensive account, but a personal review based on 36 years of friendship.

Dr Bill Law

On 8 April 2017 the careers sector lost one of its most original and creative thinkers, the world at large lost a citizen who cared deeply about young people's futures and I lost a friend and mentor. Three years and a day earlier Bill's friend and colleague Peter Daws had passed away and, writing a tribute to Peter, Bill adapted the phrase about 'standing on the shoulders of giants' for his concluding sentence.

> 'He is my giant, and from those shoulders we might all see further.'
>
> (Law, 2014)

I can think of no more fitting way to encapsulate how Bill's work should be seen. So many of Bill's ideas and projects have laid the foundations of the good practice that exists today, and which is continuing to be developed. A key purpose of this article is to ensure that the links between developments being implemented today and Bill's work are acknowledged by contemporary and future careers workers. The development of careers work in schools remains unfinished business: something that Bill himself recognised. He never truly retired and in his final weeks he was still posting ideas on his website and blog.

I first met Bill in 1981. As a newly-appointed head of careers in a school in Cambridgeshire, I registered for the Postgraduate Diploma in Careers Education and Guidance at Hatfield Polytechnic, a part-time course that occupied me from 2pm to 8pm every Thursday for the next two years. Bill was one of the lecturers on the course and delivered a module on integrating careers work across the school. He inspired me then, and has continued to make me think ever since about what we do and why we do it.

In this article I examine his work on careers education and on teacher training, but I have organised my thoughts and commentary around questions and axioms that will be familiar to anyone who had the privilege and pleasure of attending one of Bill's workshops.

'Is what schools do under the heading of 'careers education' really careers education, or is it just careers training?'

Bill will be forever associated with the DOTS model of careers education, which he developed in a project with Tony Watts forty years ago (Law & Watts,

1977). And it is right that he should be. This simple framework still provides the basis of curriculum frameworks not just in the UK but in many other countries as well. The three aims in the framework for careers, employability and enterprise education, promoted currently by the Career Development Institute in England (CDI, 2015), can be traced back directly to self-awareness, opportunity awareness, decision-learning and transition learning. The Blueprints of career management competencies developed in the USA, Canada, and Australia are organised into: self-development; learning and work exploration; career planning and career management. Occasionally in education we get something right and it stands the test of time. Of course we need to keep the model under review, and update it for contemporary times, but the basic underlying theory is sound.

However, Bill was never entirely happy with how the DOTS model was used. He also said that it was designed as a review tool, rather than a planning framework. I do not think he ever thought it was wrong: he just thought it was not enough. He started to develop the model further and to introduce the concept of progression into career learning. This culminated in Bill's career learning theory (Law 1996). He argued that the DOTS framework was useful in helping to determine what careers education programmes should cover, in terms of curriculum content, but that it was limited in its use as a planning tool as it did not inform decisions about the order in which the content should be sequenced. He proposed a model that set out stages in learning about self, opportunities, decisions and transitions: sensing; sifting; focusing; understanding. Bill suggested that one of the problems for careers education in schools is that all too often we ask pupils to deal with quite challenging and complex ideas before we have helped them to acquire more basic knowledge and skills. Another of his workshop sayings was 'we ask young people to make career choices before they have enough to go on.' Twenty years on, Bill's career learning theory can still be applied to the design of careers programmes in schools.

One of the features of Bill's work was to continuously challenge practice and he would often ask if what we did in 'careers education' was not really 'careers training'. By this he meant, were we *training* young people in the skills to succeed in their careers, but not *educating* them about careers? To adapt the language from work-related learning, he would say we were training pupils *for* career, but not helping them learn *about* career. He would not deny the need for career management skills but, again, this was not sufficient for Bill. He wanted young people to understand the world of work and the nature of 'career', to question why work was organised as it is and to be active in determining the future of work.

Bill's influence on careers education did not stop at the theoretical level. He wrote several resources that provided a wealth of practical materials of careers teachers to use in the classroom. His influence at a policy level was however more limited. Only once was he asked to contribute to writing curriculum guidance for schools. When the National Curriculum was introduced in England, Bill and Tony were invited to contribute to the drafting of the guidelines on careers education as a cross-curricular theme (NCC, 1990). In the final published document, the concept of 'roles' had been added to the DOTS framework and this introduced an element of learning about work and its place in people's lives; but this was dropped from the national frameworks that came later.

Bill's contributions to the development of careers education theory and practice have been highly influential: it is a matter of regret that they have not been picked up more fully by policy makers. In 2006 his thinking captured the imagination of a senior officer within the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), as the organisation led a consultation on reforming the secondary school curriculum. Bill's paper on life-role relevance in curriculum (Law, 2006) addressed the tension between designing a curriculum around traditional subject disciplines and putting personal and social development at the centre of the school. Such a radical shift in the balance between intrinsic and anticipatory values of the curriculum proved to be a step too far for the politicians but, as Bill wrote at the end of his article:

> '…if policy were to prove less supportive than we might like it to be that would not rule out

wholly locally-driven action. You could develop something more practical, really bold and much smarter.'

That quotation sums up Bill's philosophy: try to influence policy where we can but if we fail, then get on with developing the best possible practice, based on what we know and believe. Bill's work over more than 40 years gives us plenty of ideas and materials on which to draw.

'Young people need to meet the likes of whom they've never met before'

Bill often described careers work in schools as being about who gets to do what. He went on to argue that young people need to meet as wide a range of people as possible, including in particular people whom they were unlikely to have met before within their familiar contexts. He suggested that teachers should broaden pupils' horizons and help them see opportunities beyond their immediate environment. This lies at the heart of Bill's community interaction theory (Law, 1981).

In work on this theory Bill talks a lot about people's encounters with others and how they challenge stereotypical thinking about future job opportunities, in terms not only of gender but also of social class. There is a lot of attention in contemporary careers work in schools to enabling pupils to have several encounters with employers and employees. Much of the focus is on the number of encounters. Bill's concerns would be about the quality of the encounters and how they were then used as a basis for learning about work, career and yourself.

The issue of encounters with employers is the subject of two of the eight Gatsby benchmarks of good practice that schools are being encouraged to use today as a framework for reviewing and developing their own careers programmes (Gatsby, 2014). Taken as a whole the benchmarks identify eight components of a comprehensive careers programme in a school, although it could be argued (and I am sure Bill would) that they do not adequately state the case for explicit careers education in the curriculum. It is interesting to observe that an often overlooked chapter of the book that introduced DOTS to the world of careers (*op. cit.*) includes a framework that sets out eight stages of the development of careers work in schools, starting with a collection of careers information leaflets, progressing through to guidance interviews and curriculum programmes, and ending with integrating with the wider community. Bill was to go on to develop this framework further as a structure for a teacher training resource (see below), but he would recognise the links to the Gatsby benchmarks today.

'We haven't been good at attracting the best of the profession'

Bill started his professional working life as a teacher, of religious studies, and it was as a teacher, of careers teachers, that I first met him. He loved teaching and the intellectual engagement with a group of students. Much of his early work as founding Senior Fellow of NICEC consisted of leading workshops, literally across the length and breadth of the country. It is no surprise, therefore, that when the then Department of Education and Science (DES) were looking for someone to write a training pack for careers teachers in the late 1980s they approached Bill.

The DES and Employment Department had published a seminal policy document *Working Together For A Better Future* (DES, ED and Welsh Office, 1987). This included a recommendation that secondary schools should make sure that those responsible for careers had had up-to-date training. The then National Association of Careers and Guidance Teachers (NACGT), of which Bill was an honorary life member, had campaigned for training for careers teachers and viewed this as an important breakthrough. Bill was commissioned to write an open learning pack (DES, 1990). This was in an era before the arrival of the internet and online resources. The pack consisted of eight workbooks of open learning materials, with titles that reflected the various components of careers work that Bill had identified. The materials were intellectually challenging but rooted in practice. Unfortunately the pack survived for only a few years, because of a lack

of investment in tutorial support, but with appropriate updating the materials would still be relevant today.

There are many further examples of materials authored by Bill some time ago that are still of current relevance. Shortly after completing the *Careers Work* pack Bill was invited to lead a team to produce a training resource for members of school staff, other than the head of careers, who might be asked to contribute to the careers programme. The project, called 'Getting Involved in Careers Work' was managed by the then National Council for Educational Technology (NCET). It was mainly a vehicle for testing out some new technology in the form of an interactive video disc. As the hardware soon became redundant, the resource has not survived but the quality of the written supporting materials was excellent and they would be really useful for careers teachers today as schools seek to involve subject teachers and tutors more in contributing to the careers programme.

Bill continued his interest in training careers teachers, by running workshops both in the UK and overseas. He also contributed to two NICEC research projects on professional development. He led one project researching the different forms of staff development for careers work (Andrews, Barnes & Law, 1995); and when I later led a project on the career development of careers co-ordinators (Andrews & Barnes, 2003), Bill worked as a consultant to the team.

In the past twenty years there have been a few attempts to establish a national professional qualification for careers teachers in England. The most recent example is Teach First's careers and employability leaders programme. The evaluation of the first pilot found that it was as much a school development programme as a training programme for individuals (Hooley, Dodd & Shepherd, 2016). Bill would have welcomed that. In the 1980s he led a BP-sponsored programme at CRAC called 'Learning for a Changing World'. Each school was represented by two members of staff who attended three separate training sessions, over a period of several months, using the time between sessions to undertake review and development work in their schools. This is yet another example of how things that Bill worked on several years previously are being set up again now, but not always with clear references back to his work, which would help to ground them more deeply.

Bill believed strongly that well-designed professional development for individuals could enable them to be agents for change back in their school. But he often expressed concerns that careers work did not always attract the best of our teachers. I sense that part of the explanation lies in how the role of careers teacher is viewed both by teachers in relation to their own career progression and by those recruiting teachers into more senior positions. Bill and I saw evidence of this in the career development of careers co-ordinators project and I have come across similar findings in recent work researching careers leadership in schools. Although the role of careers leader gives the postholder substantial experience of working at a whole-school level, and of linking to the school's wider community, this is not always recognised by headteachers and governors recruiting to the positions of assistant head or deputy head. At an individual level Bill inspired so many careers teachers. We owe it to him to continue to work to raise the status of the role.

'If you are not confused, you are not paying attention'

To learn from Bill required an investment of effort from the learner. Some people were put off by his apparent over-complication of issues, but if you persevered and paid attention, you gained insights that brought new meaning and understanding to your work. Bill's workshops were challenging and hard work, but enjoyable and rewarding at the same time. He wrote and spoke with a great deal of intellectual rigour, drawing on a range of disciplines: he read widely and voraciously, as witnessed by his two book-lined studies. He would not attempt to over-simplify matters to what he called 'tick and flick' lists. He wanted us to join him in thinking about what we were doing and why.

This approach did not make Bill easy to work with at times. When you thought you had produced a final draft, Bill would have another set of questions, but the end product would be improved by those further challenges. He should have been a professor: he certainly looked the part but, more importantly, he brought that level of intellect to his work. As I have

indicated, I also think policy makers should have paid more attention to his work. I once shared a taxi with Bill and a senior civil servant at the DES: it was clear that at a personal level the civil servant had a lot of respect for the quality of Bill's work but perhaps it was too challenging for the politicians, who wanted answers on one sheet of A4.

Last word

In this article I have touched on the highlights of Bill's work on careers work in schools: the DOTS model; the stages of development of careers programmes; the community interaction theory; his career learning theory; his work on resources for professional development. Those contributions alone give us a lot to build on.

The UK Government has been promising a new strategy for careers for over 18 months now. Bill was always intensely interested in the political context for our work but he remained sceptical of the influence of policy on practice in schools. He would probably advise us to examine the theories, review the best practice and get on with implementing improvements. His catalogue of work gives us more than enough to be getting on with. All of us dwarfs can stand on his shoulders.

When I moved into advisory work and consultancy, I often invited Bill to lead sessions for teachers and careers advisers. In my introduction I always used to say that he inspired me all those years ago and that he still made me think. I miss my friend but he will continue to make me think.

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