

# Bill Law's contribution to narrative in careers work: A story to be told

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**Bill** Law's work based on practice, research and theory is extensive. This article celebrates Bill's contribution to the use of narrative in careers work and, as he saw it, its relevance for the changing world within which careers work operates. It draws on his publications for NICEC and the conference papers given at Canterbury Christ Church University. It does not aim to be exhaustive in mapping Bill's contribution and, in keeping with the tenets of narrative, is a personal story drawn from the author's conversations with Bill and editorial work on the articles cited. But Bill did not ignore the political and Bill's attention to the social context is noted in the article. The final section includes Bill's rallying call for careers work to review, continually, its relevance and to contribute to social justice.



## Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.

You need to be old enough to recognise that the phrase above introduced an early afternoon radio, or 'wireless', storytelling programme for children in the UK. It was called 'Listen with Mother' and ran from 1950 – 1982. For me it evokes an almost physical reaction, a *re-membering* of time and place and family. It was a fifteen minute weekday ritual, where other activity stopped and the radiogram, the size of a small sofa, was switched on, in time for the valves to warm up, and attention given to the story told. What is it about storytelling that can have this effect? The power of storytelling, its meaningfulness in all societies is well known. Narratives are central to our ways of making sense of our lives and our interactions with the world 'out there'. Whether spoken, depicted or written

down, storytelling is at the core of what it is to be human and our relationships with others as we co-construct identity (and career identity).

Bill understood the importance in careers work of people's encounters with others early on in his writing, for example in his interdisciplinary Community Interaction Theory (Law, 1981). Narrative is also implicit in the move from descriptive nouns to active verbs in his Career Learning Theory (Law, 1996), which he continued to develop in publications, in practice and via the Career Learning Café ([www.hihohiho.com](http://www.hihohiho.com)). And what a 'telling' domain name that is for careers work.

In this article I highlight a fraction of Bill's work on narrative, drawing in particular on his contributions to articles in the NICEC journal and his presentations and publications in the Occasional Papers written for Canterbury Christ Church University. This is not an academic piece, and, as indicated, does not offer a neat summary of Bill's contribution with regard to the use of narrative for careers work. Before moving on, I want to say that I struggled with using the past tense in writing about Bill and Bill's work. I hear Bill's voice as I quote his words, and see his inquisitive look when I think of conversations when we did not always agree on a particular point. With Bill it was always a dialogue, a conversation – derived from the Latin: a wandering together with. So, I decided to stick with the present tense, as appropriate, use the first person singular and adopt an informal style.

## Meeting THE Bill Law

Prior to my own interest in narrative and careers work, I submitted an abstract to a CRAC/NICEC conference, which took place in April 2000. The

aim of my paper was to rehearse the early ideas for my doctoral research on clinical supervision within career guidance: this at a time of significant change to careers work practice in the UK. It was at the conference that I met Bill for the first time, although his work was part of the curriculum taught to our students at what was then the College of Guidance Studies (COGS) in the UK. In saying I had not met Bill previously, I had corresponded with him, via email, about an article I was writing for which he provided constructive comments. He then sent me a draft paper he was preparing for my comments, which made me feel rather important. I later came to know that this sharing of ideas at the developmental stage, with a number of colleagues, was an example of Bill's collegiality and drive to ensure his work would be both useful and meaningful.

I recognised Bill at the evening reception, held before the start of the conference. Wearing a trench coat and his signature fedora, he asked the person standing next to him, "Do you know what Hazel Reid looks like?" "She's right behind you", was the reply. Upon which I was enveloped in a hug along with, "Oh, sorry I think I should have introduced myself first!" A friendship was born. During the conference I spent time with Bill and enjoyed his company, his wit, his wisdom and gentle, respectful questioning about my work. His questions could be challenging, but always respectful and never threatening. One of the key note speakers was Mark Savickas and Bill and I, along with many others, attended a workshop Mark gave to demonstrate his narrative approach for careers counselling: that is, the career construction interview (Savickas, 2011). In the evening, with Audrey Collin (who had been writing about interpretive approaches for many years, e.g. Collin and Young, 1992) we had a long conversation about how Mark's approach could influence the development of career education and guidance in the UK. A short time after this conference Bill became a Visiting Senior Researcher at the Centre for Career and Personal Development (CCPD) at my university and made numerous contributions to teaching sessions and conferences over many years. Our students, alongside many new and experienced practitioners benefited from his input. When told that Bill would be running a teaching session, or presenting at one of our conferences, students would often say 'What THE Bill Law?'

## The contribution to narrative and careers work

In 2002, the CCPD conference was entitled 'Challenging biographies: re-locating the theory and practice of careers work' and a publication followed in 2003. It brought together three separate areas of thinking around narrative for careers work, namely in research, in career guidance and in career education. At the conference and in the publication, my colleague Linden West (West, 2003) discussed the importance of paying attention to biographical research methods for understanding career building in an uncertain world. I outlined the potential of applying the approach of narrative career counselling and questioned the feasibility within a volatile landscape for career guidance services in the UK (Reid, 2003). Bill's contribution (Law, 2003) entitled 'Guidance: Too many lists, not enough stories' was seminal; seminal in that it provided the basis for future development of narrative-led methods for career learning and development.

Narrative thinking, though harder to control [than outcome-driven thinking], is potentially more useful than lists of outcomes. This is because it is more congruent with the way people learn and with the way learning is shaped by attachment to group cultures.

(Law, 2003:25)

It was written in 'Bill speak' – immediate, engaging, but also drawing on an extensive transdisciplinary literature that makes the piece both erudite and thought provoking. The final chapter in the occasional paper was a dialogue between the editor and the three of us. We attempted to address some of the key questions that were raised from delegates at the conference and the emerging debate about the contribution of narrative (Edwards et al, 2003). Culture, feelings, learning and attachments are paid attention to in another occasional paper (Law, 2006) where Bill discusses labour market information and labour market experience. The work looks at what to learn, how to learn and what influences affect career learning and is written in Bill's narrative style.

Bill contributed to every biennial conference and publication held at CCPD, speaking and writing on a

number of strands of his work. However in the rest of this article I will focus on other contributions to the development of narrative thinking for careers work. Bill and I once discussed whether ‘careers work’ was a good enough term, I use it here to indicate that Bill’s contribution cannot be fixed within career education or, the preferred term, career learning and development, its impact is wider than this.

## Storyboarding for career management

In 2007 Bill expanded his thinking around the potential of narrative for careers work and had by then developed the Career Learning Café for the dissemination of his work. The café became and remained an active site for other thinkers/practitioners hungry for new ways of working. Always an advocate of the need to provide examples, Bill illustrated the use of narrative for career learning *in practice* on the website, for example, ‘Career Learning Narratives – Telling, Showing and Mapping’ (Law, 2007). His presentation and the publication from another CCPD conference, was based on a café monograph (Law, 2008a) and examined the ‘necessity, practice, and research potential in the uses of narrative’ (Law, 2008b:9). In both he launched his ideas about the potential of storyboarding for careers work. In the introduction he discusses the differences between career development, career management and careers work, before moving on to the thinking behind storyboarding. As in so much of Bill’s work he distinguishes between different aspects of the work via a step by step, bite-size unravelling of the terms he uses. Words are chosen carefully as he explains the storyboarding technique:

This chapter ... is based on the distinctive features of stories – ‘people’, ‘places’, ‘talk’, ‘events’ and ‘meanings’. ... This chapter shows how a well-rounded story invites an examination of some of the most significant features of experience – ‘sequence’, ‘other people’, ‘point of view’ and – in particular – ‘turning-points’ and ‘change of-mind’.

(Law, 2008b:10)

As I copy these words I hear Bill’s voice. The copy editor for the CCPD occasional papers and also the

NICEC journal, would ask me, “Will there be a Bill chapter?” She did not know him, but welcomed prior warning that the layout would be different – often landscape rather than portrait – the referencing style would vary from the standard guidelines and there would be extra work in terms of placing sections coherently on a page. And there would be diagrams – many diagrams in Bill’s ‘show rather than tell’ approach.

Bill explains at the end of the article why storyboarding is important. He speaks of the concept of change-of-mind for careers work – to move away from habit-of-mind. He shows how storyboarding can help students/clients to work against stereotypes and probe other possibilities. The approach is graphic (in both senses) and also playful, but derived from serious thinking about transitions and turning points. In saying it is playful, it is essential to highlight the social justice ethos that underpinned Bill’s work. This is nicely summed up in his final words in the article:

We, especially, need to understand the extent and dynamics of the damage caused by class, race, gender and other stereotyping. We really don’t know how frequently, or how intensively, that kind of damage is done. Storyboarding can help us to find out, and also find out what happens to transform that habit-of-mind into a change-of-mind. We really need to know that.

(Law, 2008b: 27)

Bill continued to work on storyboarding and the uses of narrative for careers work, and to share the work in publications and on his website. The work - his legacy in this particular area - is extensive and is encapsulated well in an article for the NICEC journal in 2012. In this article he reminds us once again of the power of narratives, ‘They reach from the walls of our caves to the displays on our on-line devices’ (Law, 2012:280). But let’s be clear, Bill’s belief in the power of storytelling is underpinned by in-depth reading and understanding of some impressive philosophical writing and debate. In the 2012 article reference is made to the works of Ricoeur, Bruner, Strawson, Damasio, Dennett and others. It draws also on contemporary research within the field of careers work... and it critiques it. As an aside, he bought the Ricoeur text twice in error and gave me the ‘spare’

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copy. We discussed it a few months later and Bill asked, "There is much to learn from Ricoeur, but did you find it an easy read?" No Bill I did not, but I read it because you thought it was important that I did.

Bill's 2012 article, amongst providing other insights, touches on embodiment, how creative approaches that encompass drawing, graphics, and imagery can locate feelings and meaning in a life that talking, even with a skilled and empathic other, cannot bring to the surface. Defences are important and not to be breached via an unthinking voyeurism. However, on completion of the creative exercise, such as storyboarding, a conversation with a 'helper' can be a modelling process that develops understanding of the significance of personal values and motivations that can be taken forward into career management (and may also identify what can be left behind). Bill describes it thus:

But the most telling embodiment is in the careers worker's questioning. By seeing how an educator probes a story, students [are] learning how to do it for themselves – the process is modelling. ... It is a two-way connection: the educator modelling an enquiring life, the student becoming disposed to question, to be curious about surprises, to take one thing with another, and – in finding a way forward – to take nothing for granted.

(Law, 2012:36)

### Moving with a changing horizon for careers work

Encouraging curiosity is a good expression for careers work, and Bill's storyboarding technique provides a practical tool in what is, euphemistically, a challenging employment context for many young people and adults. As Bill frequently reminds us in his writing, geography, place, space, time...and culture, are all aspects that influence life chances (Law, 2013). Careers work, Bill says, needs to engage with such complexities and continue to interrogate and update its own learning and development. In Bill's writing in books, professional journals, academic monographs, on the Careers Learning Café and in the many peer reviewed, international journal publications, he continually challenged us, practitioners / teachers / researchers / trainers / academics to re-think our approaches. In the

NICEC journal in 2015 in the abstract to his article, he wrote:

People are changing the ways they manage career. Careers work cannot afford to miss the opportunity this presents. And that calls for new thinking for a changing, challenging and crowded world. Seeing career management as a process of 'holding on' and 'letting go' is part of that thinking. It speaks of thoughts and feelings about what is and is not valued. The thinking is set out here [in the article] as a search for new meaning in policy, professionalism and practice. It radically expands the careers-work repertoire. More importantly it positions clients and students as agents of change.

(Law, 2015:18)

There is so much more that might have been referred to in this short article that celebrates Bill's contribution to narrative thinking in careers work, but Bill is telling me to avoid list making, be concise and stick with the meaningful narrative. The international community of careers work practice, training, research and theoretical development has lost a significant thinker and activist, and I have lost a friend - but Bill's legacy and his call for meaningful innovation will live on.



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