10.20856/jnicec.3906

Guidance: Too many lists, not enough stories

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This article was originally published as:

Law, B. (2003). Guidance: Too many lists, not enough stories. (Chapter 2) In: Edwards, A. (ed.) *Challenging biographies: Re-locating the theory and practice of careers work*. Occasional Paper Trinity Term. Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University, Department of Career and Personal Development. 25-47.

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The author argues for a new start on developing contemporary guidance. It could, he argues, significantly change all aspects of careers work: including careers education, personal and social education, and their integration with mainstream curriculum - in all sectors. The argument is for the greater use of narrative-led methods, and - therefore - for weakening the grip of outcome-driven thinking. Narrative thinking, though harder centrally to control, 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. Narrative thinking therefore promises significant new ideas for programme development in Connexions, Education for Citizenship and life-long guidance.

Introduction

The 'DOTS' analysis sorts the elements of career into useful order, by clustering information into categories for 'opportunity', 'self ', 'decision' and 'transition' (Law and Watts, 1977). DOTS was, however, developed as a means of sorting careers-work *provision*; it does not much help us understand how careers themselves are actually *managed*. For that, we need more subtle ways of understanding how people learn.

In particular we need: (1) to take account of the social context of career learning, now acknowledged in the design of Connexions; (2) to link learning for worker roles to consumer, partner, volunteer and citizen roles; and (3) to portray career learning as a continuously adjusting response to life-long-change. DOTS is limited in all these areas.

DOTS is an analysis, ordering the elements of career into columns - often as lists. Narrative orders the elements into sequences - as stories. Donald Super's (1957) account of 'growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline' - one of the earliest theories of career development - was more a story than a list. I argue here that we now need more of the subtlety of the story, and one which can take account of changes in the experience of contemporary career. This is not a 'post-DOTS' argument, for the abandonment of past thinking; it is a 'new-DOTS' plea, for a much-needed extension of existing thinking.

I argue that biographical writing is now a significant resource for that work. Published biography is, of course, a story; and it always portrays elements of career development. But biographical writing is an increasingly a prevalent form, with many variations:

in diary, autobiography and memoir; in journalism, humour and gossip; as well as in lyric and poetry. It is set out face-to-face, in writing, in print, on radio or tv, on stage, on disc, tape and film. It is a huge, accessible and growing resource.

Story as learning

The link between story and learning is ageless: sagas, myths, legends, fables and parables are among the earliest teaching-and-learning methods. Contemporary educators understand the value both of stories that we tell and stories that learners tell.

Putting learning into useful order

But lists and stories are not the only ways of putting the elements of career into useful order. We have a range of ways of sorting learning. Some are set out on the right in table 1; it suggests four broadly distinguishable frames of reference - ranging from lists to stories.

The analysis reorganises Jerome Bruner's (1986) broad distinction between 'paradigmatic' and 'narrative' ways of learning (here re-labelled 'lists' and 'stories'). The analysis may best be thought of as a learning spectrum, shading from 'lists', through 'boundaries' and 'links', into 'stories'. Few experiences offer only one of any of these learning hues. But, if there are four broadly distinguishable ways of learning here, the question is 'do stories offer any advantages over other parts of the spectrum?'.

Against narrative

Jerome Bruner (1986) says paradigmatic ways of knowing are validated by verification, logic and falsifiable truth. Narrative, he says, appeals - in a more diffuse way - to what he calls 'believability and meaning'.

Table 1. How advisers and teachers help learners put learning into useful order

Frames of reference which...	For example...
...make lists of elements: setting down facts and perceptions	...items-by-item checklists and worksheets - in class-work ...alphabetical directories of opportunity - in resource centre
...work within boundaries: separating facts and perceptions into significant factors	...interest-framed data bases - in ICT work ...factor-by-factor agendas - in structured interviews
...identify links: mapping the cause-and-effect connections between facts, perceptions and factors and events	...freely identified themes - in loosely-structured interviews ...built-up decision-trees - in discussion work
...tell stories: sequencing events - encounters, feelings allegiances and intuitions - into what is 'then', 'now', and 'for the future'	...learner-led disclosure - in counselling-type interviewing ...autobiographical writing - in curriculum work

The hard-headed won't take this as a recommendation for narrative. People who want to feel safe, orderly and accountable will cling to lists and boundaries. Narrative works in looser ways, infused with feelings and diffused by relationships. It is true that stories sequentially portray change; but they do not isolate specific causes-and-effects, they only vaguely show how one thing leads to another.

It is harder to find quantifiable evidence of learning in a 'fuzzy' story than in a well-defined list. Some researchers share with policy people a belief that it is not worth saying unless it can be said with verifiable precision. Supporters of narrative may put up their hands, and say that they are less interested in the structure of accountability and the problems of verification than they are in the dynamics of change. None of this will impress true policy wonks.

In favour of the way we think

Novelist A.S. Byatt remarks, 'narration is as much part of human nature as breath and the circulation of the blood'. And so it seems; stories feel more concrete, more engaging and more useful than do clearly categorised learning structures at the other end of the learning spectrum.

Some of the explanation for why this is so can be found in evolutionary neurology and psychology.

Drawing on neurological evidence Antonio Damasio (1999) finds a number of levels at which the story can be told. He distinguishes what he calls 'biographical consciousness' from 'core consciousness'. Through core consciousness an organism, driven wholly by feeling, instinctively seeks safety and comfort. But, in a learning organism, the feelings of core consciousness become part of a unified portrayal of what happens - Antonio uses the metaphor of 'a movie in the brain'. It is an accumulation of overlapping and more-or-less 'fuzzy' accounts of what we each experience and can recall. It takes us, beyond instinct, towards an imperfect but developing appreciation of how things are and how they work.

But Antonio goes on. As a species, he claims, we have the additional ability of being able to locate ourselves in that story. We not only see, and we see ourselves seeing - each a witness to our own life. This is more than 'self awareness' listed alongside 'opportunity awareness'; it is a single story of self-in-the-world, which is why Antonio uses the term 'biographical consciousness'.

According to evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (1997) this ability is useful to us, for the way it locates 'place', 'path', 'motion', 'causation', and 'agency'. Put another way, it gives us a way of asking the 'where?', 'what?', 'when?', 'who?', 'how?', and 'why?' questions of life. Medical journalist Jerome Burne (2001) surveys the evidence to indicate that stories we tell are as basic to our survival as the tools we use. It is, he says, why gossip is so prevalent; gossip seeks a useable understanding of what happens. Finding that understanding is positively pleasurable. Literary academic H Abbott Porter (2002) agrees, pointing to a small number of recurring master plots in human story telling ('girl-meets-boy…' is among the most common. Each of these plots has a special significance to the survival of the species).

There is an important career-management point here. Our capacity for narrative means that we most naturally make a *unified* account of self-in-situation - less separation of the 'S' from the 'O' in DOTS. That, in turn, means that we can see ourselves both as effects and causes of what happens 'out there'. This has survival value - we learn for action! There are a lot of young men and women, sitting in a lot of classrooms, to whom this is going to come as a big surprise.

How to write 'better' biography

A publisher's test for a good story is called the 'water-cooler effect': do people talk about it? Celebrity biographies pass the publisher's test, but fail in other ways.

How good can biographical writing be? According to our story-guru, H Abbott Porter, good narrative allows inner conflicts, flaws, confusions and uncertainties to appear. They also, he says, counterpoise this inner tension with external tension. All of this means that there is uncertainty about how the story can be

resolved - it depends on what view prevails. That is the narrative tension - different ways of reacting to the same events. As literary critic James Wood puts it, 'there is something about narrative that puts things in doubt'.

We can draw implications from all of this. The 'story teller' must show enough about what is happening, but not so much as to bog down the audience. The story needs to have enough room for different interpretations, so that it is interesting. It does that by offering each member of the audience the chance to learn in his or her own way. This is not, then, didactic or moralising stuff. Good story telling is more subtle that - scaffolding learning, but not seeking to compel it.

Good biographical writers each offer a distinctive 'take' on these qualities. Table 2 illustrates how.

All biographical writers can do some of this. None can do all of it. Some careers-work case- studies have very little of it. None of it can be learned from manuals on research methodology.

Yet, it seems that it is part of our humanity to learn like this.

Where is the power?

The art of the biographer can make research - and even policy - interesting. Narrative has power, to the point that politicians deliberately seek 'a story' to represent their ideas (Hunt, 2001).

What power? We have already come across the elements of narrative power: a story has characters

Table 2. Biographical stories - differently told

> disclosing of 'good' and 'bad' feelings for other people	Terence Stamp 1989	autobiographer
> accepting ambiguity - such as concurrently holding people in contempt and affection	Terry Eagleton 2001	memoirist
> informality in conversation, eliciting trusting disclosure	Richard Sennett 1998	sociologist
> open accessibility and warmth for people, releasing what otherwise would be hidden	Paul Willis 1977	researcher
> having seen and heard enough to appreciate the significance of what people say	Studs Terkel 1975	social commentator
> humour, not just for the laugh, but for the incisiveness	Jeanette Winterson 1991	novelist
> interweaving lives, showing gains of the one from the troubles of the other	Tom Courtney	biographer
> courage to probe what other people do not want probed	Nick Davies 1998	journalist
> imaginative empathy and regard for the character	Carole Angier 2002	biographer

(people), in a situation (setting), engaged in dialogue or soliloquy (talk), involved in plot (events), and leading to some resolution (meaning).

All five elements raise issues for the management of career. For each element this chapter selects four signposts to further development in careers work. Twenty running hares is more than we can chase here. But, at this stage, we need the ideas.

Table 3 sets out the five - and the twenty.

Table 3. Five story elements - with twenty signposts for careers work

A People	1 encounter 2 allegiances - and letting go 3 feeling and tensions 4 driving events
B Setting	5 roles - linking setting and person 6 inter-linking roles 7 different 'selves' in different settings 8 culturally varied role
C Talk	9 learning 10 culture 11 changing minds 12 imagination
D Events	13 luck and learning 14 resolving through explanation 15 other-than-rational resolutions 16 this and other stories
E Meaning	17 meaning and facts 18 meaning and person 19 turning points and the crux of the matter 20 multiple meanings

A People

Biography portrays people - their abilities, allegiances, feelings, assumptions, beliefs and values. But the story adds a social context to the 'S' column in DOTS. There are, then, signposts beyond DOTS:

1 **encounter:**

2 **allegiances - and letting go:**

3 **feelings and tensions:**

4 **driving events:**

1 Encounter as structure

Terry Eagleton (2002) constructs his memoir as a procession of encounters - deeply layered and in tension with one another. Early on we meet his working-class father; towards the end we meet the élitist tutor who admits him to Cambridge - at about the time his father died…

> 'It burst on me like a strange kind of forgiveness. The gatekeeper had let me in, though it was my father who had turned the key. Greenway had accepted me as a literary type; had my father ever done as much? Perhaps this was one reason why I kicked so hard against Greenway when I got to Cambridge. His world was the Law which had brought my father to his ruin, but it was a Law which my father was asking me to love.'

It is evidence for 'community-interaction' theory (Law, 1981). But it is more: it has a depth and dynamic - manifesting forgiveness (where the theory might have settled for 'feedback'), acceptance ('expectation') and love ('support'). It can persuade a reader why and how Terry will now move on. The articulate can express it, but we all experience it.

Encounter frequently marks transition between episodes in biography. That step is often a letting go and a moving on.

2 Allegiance and 'letting go'

DOTS has no room for encounters. And, so, it misses the way in which career change can be not so much a matter of new information as of changing allegiance.

Terence Stamp (1989) hails from London's East End; his move on to the West End entailed a difficult letting go.

> 'There are certain moments when you know that if you hadn't been there, or met that person, you would never have taken a particular road. Meeting David Baxter was one of those milestones…A psychological tug-of-war complicated my life… Those trips up west with him were invariably followed by an uneasiness which left me clinging for days like a limpet to my old mates and haunts.'

Terence eventually made the move, with career consequences which - it turned out - David had anticipated better than Terence.

Researcher Paul Willis can portray that tension. At some level of awareness his 'Joey' always knew that something better was possible. It is the research method, but is also the researcher's accessibility, which allow Paul to describe Joey in some depth. We can understand why Joey would not 'let go'. And we can also appreciate that it might be a mistake (see Career-Learning Network, 2002a). Great stuff! - and it all depends on the character.

3 Feelings, 'roundedness' and tensions

Much of what we call 'feelings' are a deeply-laid responses for managing threat or promise (Goleman, 1996). Both can be found in the way journalist Nick Davies (1998), speaks for another Terence. Terence left school at 16, and had - so far - resisted the enticements of criminality.

> 'The younger people were angrier, less respectful, willing to take more risks and to organise themselves. They had grown up without the

> solid certainties of life in Jamaica, rejected by the society around them, feeling insulted and disrespected. Now they advertised their hostility…But ever since he had been a child in Spanish Town, Terrence had dreamed of becoming a lawyer…[But] the reality was that he was living in a ghetto, where he was far more likely to become a pimp.'

Nonetheless, Terence signed up to study law. The skills he will learn merely *permit* Terence to do that work; it is fear and anger that *drive* him; and hope that *beckons* him. We could list the skills; but if the fear and the hope are un-woven from the story it falls apart. To try would be to compress character in the interests of being easily understood. And, as H Porter Abbott (again) observes, such 'flat characters' are for formulaic writing, '…restricted to a narrow range of predictable behaviours…a reduction of the human to the mechanical'. That is for celeb biogs, not careers work.

Because DOTS disregards social life it also misses what all narrative portrays - conflict or (in Greek) '*agon*'. The word is cognate with 'prot*agon*ist' and 'ant*agon*ist', characters since the dawn of drama. H Porter suggests a learning purpose for drama: 'conflict in narrative provides a way for a culture to talk to itself about, and possibly resolve, conflicts that threaten to fracture it'.

Terence's feelings are rooted in allegiance: his work is to be for, with, and in response to his people. But allegiance implies the likelihood of conflict, as Terence will discover (see Career- Learning Network, 2002a).

4 Character and plot

'Rounded' character means portraying 'skills'; but it means portraying them in a life of 'feeling' and 'purpose'. And it means seeing all of that in a network of old allegiances - and new ones. It also means understanding that all of this risks tension - perhaps conflict. So skills are just a part of the picture; perhaps a small part; perhaps a not-terribly-significant part.

In the moment the actor enters, a glance, a posture, a remark will set the action in motion. The action is the product of inner life - her own and those of her acquaintances. Through the use of narrative Terence and Joey can learn to understand how they are the present effect of past causes. But - if they will - they can also learn to see themselves as the present cause of future effects.

But they will not learn enough of it from the formula 'S into O plus D equals T'. It needs a story.

B Setting

The setting for career development comprises the locations where learning-and-action unfolds. Different settings enable different learning in different roles. The signposts to action here relate to:

5 roles - linking setting and person:

6 inter-linking roles:

7 different 'selves' in different settings:

8 culturally varied roles:

5 Role, person and situation

'Role' is a narrative term, it is a variant of 'the roll', on which ancient drama scripts were wound. In sociological use, a role is a social position - such as 'woman', 'worker' or 'citizen'. Insofar that there is agreement, 'role expectations' are assigned to the people occupying the role - a kind of script. But sociology also acknowledges that role occupants influence roles, through their own 'role conceptions' (Biddle and Thomas, 1966). And so, although people are assigned roles, they also create them. Role is, then, almost always the forging - from something handed down - of something new. There is both holding on and letting go - both stability and change - in 'womanhood', 'worker', 'citizenship'…in all roles. How that happens can only be told in a story.

Again, in considering story as a framework for career, we find something that is neither 'self ' nor 'opportunity' - role is a-self-in-a-setting.

As we have seen, story involves conflict. Some conflict is external - between self and others 'out there'.

Terence's conception conflicts with other people's expectation in that way. But some tension is wholly 'in here'. Journalist Peter Lennon's (1998) interview with Jonathan Miller portrays an example. Jonathan speaks…

> "'Everything that has happened to me in the theatre, including my exit for medicine, has always been the result of my being pathetically susceptible to someone knocking on my door with a frisbee in their hand saying 'Do you want to come and play?'…"There was [before that] a whole series of people who I looked up to, admired and who set standards for me and expected much…[The conflict] is suddenly realising at the age of 65 that what I have done in the theatre world is simply not worth what I left." "It was unintentional," Rachel [his wife] put in sympathetically, "and you never did anything cynically." "I know Rachel thinks I exaggerate these things.'"

What a career, and what an insight into it! 'Doctor' and 'theatre director' are roles, as are 'family member' and 'spouse'. In drawing upon them Jonathan speaks both of what is 'in here' and 'out there' - in one breath. The issues - 'what can I do?', 'what am I expected to do?', 'what might I have done' - are all, neither 'S' nor 'D'. They are, in any and all of those roles, simultaneously both.

The idea of 'role' is as central to any worthwhile concept of careers work as any idea can be. And DOTS has no place for it.

6 Roles inter-link

The stories we have already looked at do not allow us to think of work roles in isolation from other roles. Becoming an academic, a school-boy, a lawyer, or a theatre director cannot be properly understood in isolation from a person's other roles. Being a son, a friend, a neighbour, a spouse bears upon becoming a worker. Almost all of these links belong to almost all of the stories we have looked at.

In contemporary society new conceptions of roles - as lover, parent, partner, consumer, volunteer and citizen - are being re-negotiated. We should also put criminal roles on that list. They all bear upon being a worker; indeed, they are all seen as alternatives to conventional work roles.

In some deeper sense all roles are work roles. All roles are a position, in a setting with a task that pursues some end. That end may be for survival, for fulfilment or for achievement. In some cases the alternative role offers the more promising route to the end.

Ideas of life-role are necessary to the concept of the 'boundary-less career' (following Arthur, et al, 1999). To understand such links is to open up a more extensive map of possibilities for careers work than we have yet imagined. Ideas of life role are necessary to developing those possibilities. The use of story is necessary to the method.

7 Different roles manifest different aspects of self

Role expectation is pressure. John Mortimer (2000) speaks of resisting that pressure, referring to his mother's wifely role.

> 'What was it that made my mother stay with my blind…and, in many ways, impossible father?… She had been an art student, had read Bernard Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*. She shipped herself out to South Africa before the 1914 war…So why do they do it?…Is staying on to put on other people's socks the mark of a truly heroic character?…Of course, my mother did have her temptations. I can remember times when she would steal away in the middle of dressing my father and leave him with his braces dangling…, make herself a cup of tea and waiting till he had learned not to class her among the cretins.'

Freedom from the pressure of role expectation is never an option. But re-conceiving a role in new terms always is. This wife's other roles - their positions, settings and tasks - fed her own ideas about being a wife; she would be no less committed, but much less biddable.

Life's continuous back-and-forth movement between roles - now artist, now mother, now lawyer, now friend, now director, now spouse - is *the* enabler of role re-conception. We all need a 'repertoire' of roles to manifest all that we are - and can become. Indeed - as welcoming young men and women back from their work-experience frequently demonstrates - people's very identity can seem to change as they expand their life-role repertoire. It may be more helpful to say that new roles reveal new aspects of self; they reveal a roundedness of character which is always there, and which it is the work of education to find. Careers work could do more.

8 Role is a cultural phenomenon

Role scripts - such as those for wife, worker, and citizen - are different in different cultures.

Culture is a group response to what sociologist Irving Goffman claims is the most basic of all questions - 'what is going on here?'. Groups develop shared beliefs about the way things are, what can be changed, and what must be protected. Culture is transmitted in all the story forms mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Humour is often important: sociologist Jason Rutter argues (and Joey's story illustrates) that 'having a laff ' is one of the ways in which cultural 'outsiders' are marked off.

For that is one of the prime functions of all cultures - to mark off positions. 'Women's' work', 'our kind of work' and 'valuable work' are all culturally defined.

Phil Hodkinson and his colleagues (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2001) drawing on the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, point to how culture perpetuates beliefs. Those beliefs are often deeply internalised by individuals, and crystalise into habitual forms of life-role management: the 'out there' inhabitance nurtures the 'in-here' habit. Bourdieu's term is '*habitus*'; and it - yet again - breaches the boundaries set up by DOTS.

Habit can inhibit career development. Even in the young; perhaps especially in the young. In her partly autobiographical novel, Jeanette Winterson (1991) is funny in pointing up the discomfort of ill-fitting cultural habit. The occasion is the classroom reading of a primary- school essay.

> "'This holiday I went to Colwyn Bay with our church camp." The teacher nodded and smiled. "It was very hot, and Auntie Betty, whose leg was loose anyway, got sunstroke and we thought she might die." The teacher began to look a bit worried, but the class perked up. "But she got better, thanks to my mother who stayed up all night struggling mightily." "Is your mother a nurse?" asked the teacher, with quiet sympathy. "No, she just heals the sick."…"Very good, but I don't think we'll have time today. Put your work back in your tidy box and do some colouring till playtime." The class giggled. Slowly I sat down, not sure what was going on, but sure that something was. When I got home I told my mother I didn't want to go again. "You've got to," she said. "Here, have an orange.'"

The test of good story is recognisable authenticity rather than sterile veracity. And there is authenticity in the way in which this young woman finds roles in tension: pupil with believer, believer with writer, writer with pupil. Little of this could be understood at school, some only at home, some not yet by anybody - not even, for the time being, by the child. But she vaguely and persistently senses that something is beginning to hurt, and an orange will not help.

For some in her school-room the tension will be slight, and will not matter - they can be confident and relaxed enough to deal with it. But careers work must do better by people for whom deeply-embedded *habitus* will breed serious *agon*.

C Talk

Things like this are often expressed in what can be called soliloquy. We are all engaged in a more-or-less continuous process of background thinking, through which we each deal with our own version of the basic question - 'what is going on here?'. And its supplementaries: how did it get this way?', 'what is now important?', 'what can be changed?' - and what am I going to do about it?', Soliloquy is a feature of narrative: the most compelling example

begins 'To be, or not to be…'. You might call that 'action planning' - if you thought the official term does the human phenomenon any justice.

Soliloquy is a conversation with a virtual other. Gossip is the most prevalent example of addressing the basic question, and its supplementaries, with a real other.

The four careers-work-relevant signposts relate to:

9 learning:

10 culture:

11 changing minds:

12 imagination:

9 We learn through conversation

Studs Terkel shows how a taped conversation provoked a significant experience of learning. 'On one occasion,' he recalls, 'during playback, my companion murmured in wonder "I never realised I felt that way".' Telling it - being what we have already called 'a witness to our own life' - is one of the deepest ways in which we, as a species, learn.

The usefulness of telling it is the major premise of the careers interview. It is also how Jeanette's little girl learned in her classroom conversation. There may be fewer opportunities for young men and women to converse in classrooms now. If that is so it would be a serious loss.

Theodore Zeldin (1998) urges the usefulness of stories in such processes. We need more stories, he argues, to help people to see how they can live together 'as equals, with humour and self-confidence but without arrogance'. According to Jonathan Rose (2001) it was published story tellers who did that for the Victorian working classes. Stories offer 'allusions, characters, tropes, and situations' that could help people learn to make sense of their own lives. Jonathan offers countless examples. One is of a workhouse laundress struggling to improve her mind by reading a novel, and coming across a reference to *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son*. In her first visit to any library she found the book:

> 'I read my first mythology. I learnt my first real history…With Lord Chesterfield I went travelling the world. I would fall asleep reading the letters, and awake around three o'clock in the morning my mind deep in the fascination of this new world, where people conversed - nor just talked…Dear, dear, Lord Chesterfield; snob or not, I owe him so much.'

It was Catherine Cookson.

In making his appeal to an appropriate literature Zeldin is not pandering to celeb-biog obsessions; he makes a more subtle point. In the past, reading stories furnished minds with the words and concepts we need to make sense of our lives.

There is widespread alarm among educationists concerning how policy pressure constrains learning conversation in school (Carnell and Lodge, 2002). We should wonder whether that pressure has also damaged careers work. We should also wonder what we can do about it.

10 Conversation is framed by culture

This is Jonathon Rose's point. He doesn't make the obvious point about accent and dialect being detectable in conversation - though that is, often enough, influential enough on life chances. He argues that the characters, the dialogue, the beliefs, the values, the feelings and allegiances expressed in stories, frame the terms and concepts in which conversation is conducted. There is more than one way in which such talk can help or hinder us in presenting self to opportunity.

Culture is that strong: a single culture can entrap; cultural diversity can liberate. This was always part of community-interaction theory. Here is a poignant commentary on that aspect of the theory. Lenny James's (2002) seems to attribute some part of the entrapment of his own people to their culture - its beliefs, feelings, allegiances ('ghetto love')…and dialogue.

> 'Ashley had the brains to be anything he chose. But he put aside his potential for a life on the street. That should hurt us, anger us, and shame our community. It does me. What hold does 'ghetto love' have on our young men that even the brightest of them can't break free of it?… Our community has been involved in two conversations, running concurrently. The first conversation has had us talking to the wider community about how we want to be treated… Then there is the second conversation, the conversation the black community has been having within itself…To say out loud that we are not happy with the way we do things might sound like betrayal…Our young men need alternative means of self-identification to the street…They are not less black if they educate themselves, or less of a man because they refuse to settle an argument with a bullet.'

Ashley is 'Asher D' of the 'Garage' band *So Solid Crew*.

I doubt that Lenny James is seeking black middle-class success stories, to provide heroes for such young men. It is true that biographies were once mostly to celebrate the heroism of the successful and influential. But that kind of writing no longer works so well for our society. Contemporary audiences want to learn as much from the disclosure of failure as from the parading of success (Evans, 1999). Good writing needs that kind of tension. And, for our purposes, this may be no bad thing.

Careers work needs more stories; but we need to *use* them more imaginatively than by parading so-called heroes. More on this later.

11 Conversation changes minds

Theodore Zeldin sees conversation as learning. Gossip is an example. So is effective therapy. The class-room should be. As should a careers interview. Here is Mary Karr's (2001) account of her maths teacher's attempt.

> 'He's telling you that you'll need math more than you know. "Actually," you say, "I intend to be a poet, sir."…"How you plan to get folks to pay you for it?" This stumps you a minute. Finally, you say, "I'll sell my books." "How much you think that'll make you?" he says…You want to say he's being unfair. But you can't quite locate the unfairness of it…You peel the bottom of one sweaty thigh up from where it's stuck to the chair and tug down your skirt…Your parents never give that concern the slightest credence. "Shit, you can do whatever you feel like, Pokey", Daddy would say, while your mother would claim "those idiots wouldn't know poetry from piss ants." Briggs waves his hand saying, "Let's drop the poet thing. It's true you don't need math to write poetry. But any other task you undertake will require a thorough grounding in mathematics."…You know better than to invite him into the various lives you've constructed for yourself - an apartment in New York, a beachcomber's hut, a Victorian mansion surrounded by a maze-like garden. Your own silence nudges you to the edge of tears…'

Tears mean feeling, and feeling might mean threat, or promise - or both. Is there a change beginning here?

If there is, daddy and mother seem not to help much. And Mary ignores Briggs's questions. But, like Stud's Terkel's contact, becoming a witness to her own life moves Mary towards a realisation of how much she cares about poetry. If that is it, it is an important change - though no more than a change in mind.

She moved on, from being a 'raggedy kid', to becoming a poet, an academic and a memoirist. Mary seems to acknowledge significance in the encounter: Briggs seems to have helped, though inadvertently.

Careers work must offer a more reliable form of help. It would be based on an understanding of what Mary can do with the help we offer.

12 Disturbance, imagination and 'moving on'

Mary is overwhelmed by unvoiced feelings. Feelings are not always taken into proper account by academics. Some academic historians deride biographers for putting feeling above logic. But historian and biographer Ben Pimlot (1998) defends biography: 'it is', he says, 'an unpredictable and picaresque adventure…

Lives themselves are always unexpected'. In life, child Mary understands the need to feel this disturbance, better than does mathematician Briggs.

In life and writing it is the non-formulaic which disturbs. Ready-made formulae reassure; but we are all disturbed by at least some part of our own stories. Learning theorist Jean Piaget's term for the learning experience describes a form of disturbance. It is, he says, 'disequalibrium' - our natural uneasiness in accommodating new knowledge. We may try, like Briggs, to neutralise the feeling by assimilation of what we find to 'what we have always known'. But then we lose the new learning, to what Antonio Damasio calls the comfort sought by core consciousness. Living-and-learning is not a comfort zone.

For an account of uneasy soliloquy, eavesdrop on Tim Lott (1997). Tim is a successful and comfortably-off publisher. Here he is, reflecting on 'some dumb instinct', which…

> '…tells me that this secret of life - the secret that someday will be revealed to me – lies, not lodged in the world itself, but in the way I make sense of it all. My thoughts feel cheap, ephemeral, unsatisfying; and I want them fleshed out… And there is something else. Perhaps on some level I feel that there is something in Kate [his girl friend] that disdains me. I feel sure that she loves me, but, when we are drinking with my loud friends in a loud bar…I see something in her eyes…University it must be, if I am to be properly reinvented.'

Tim is provoked into searching for some possible self in some possible future. He calls it 'dumb instinct'? Damasio would disagree about that: it is not a core, but biographical consciousness which provokes such day-dreaming. So what is it: imagination? intuition? what? (More, also, on this later.)

Some might think Tim should be grateful for what he's already got. Some careers workers might. But, if careers is to link - in any meaningful way - to education, then careers work must be able to process such restlessness - for Tim, for Mary…and for Joey.

All these stories show the importance to career of encounter, culture, allegiance, tension, change-of-mind and moving on. You will have noticed that most have more than one of these elements - almost any could be used to illustrate almost any of the elements. Of course they could: life does not sort itself into the lists and categories of analysis.

But, in all, the stories seriously outflank conventional notions of information, advice and guidance.

D Events

Our narrative man, H Porter Abbott, observes that 'as soon as we follow a subject with a verb, there is good chance we are engaged in a narrative'. Plot is a sequence of verbs. Action-driven blockbusters need little more. But good biographical material also needs a lot of nouns and adjectives, portraying 'rounded' characters who drive the plot. It all needs not only action verbs but what, elsewhere, I have called *learning* verbs (Law, 2001): understanding is the basis for sustainable action.

Readers of biography also use learning verbs. They look for a resolution of the story, but they each learn their own version of that resolution.

All of these features of plot are useful to careers work; the four signposts concern:

13 luck and learning:

14 resolving through explanation:

15 other-than-rational resolutions:

16 this and other stories:

13 There may be luck, there is unfairness, there must be learning

Luck is an event: an unforeseen, coincidental happenstance. Narrative tension is wound into situations where the character fails to notice the approach of unforeseen danger. As it sneaks up, we want to cry out 'look behind you!' - especially in pantomimes and career interviews.

Luck may be indiscriminate and unfair; but it correlates with culture. Career possibilities which - in Mary's neighbourhood - might seem to need amazing good luck, can - to the likes of Jonathan Miller - seem as natural and expected as the sun's rising. A cost which - to a successful publisher - would be an acceptable investment, would - to Joey's people - put an option so far out-of-reach that it might as well be on the moon. As political philosopher John Rawls beautifully argues, if we had any real sense of its unfairness, we would want to minimise the impact of birth-position 'luck'.

In fiction resolution is unsatisfying if it seems to depend only on luck. We would feel that Charles Dickens had cheated if there were no more to Pip's life-chances than Magwitch's gifts. Pip is a thinking kid; he knows what to do with his luck. Different people deal with luck in different ways, some better than others. In this respect, there may be some analogies between being lucky in work and in love: in both cases, experience helps us to recognise 'that's for me!' - and to know what to do about it.

That may also be why we generally find biographical writing more satisfying where resolution depends on learning, rather than luck. That is what careers work may - in part - be to help people learn how to make good use of luck.

But, most of all, it is to make luck matter less, and to make eyes-wide-open learning matter more. In this respect we cannot yet claim to have made much progress.

14 Learning as resolution

We work through the events in an episode (like those quoted above), or in a whole story, in order to reach a resolution. Resolution is a way of knowing, not just how things come out, but of understanding why they do so in this way. Career learning is the enablement of that understanding. It enables us to know what to do in our own story - moving us towards its resolution. Career-learning theory sees this understanding as being able to connect causes to effects - however fuzzily. That is why story resolutions can often be paraphrased along the lines 'so *that's* why she did it!'

A grasp of causality has survival value. We need stories to help us to see cause and effect. Story - guru H Porter Abbott takes this quality to be close-to-essential to what he calls 'narrativity'. It is the quality of a story which helps us to see events as order rather than chaos. Literary critic Andrew Rissik (1999a) makes a parallel point, characterising good biography as able to 'instruct us how to alter the future by showing us the havoc and damage wreaked by the past'.

An appreciation of the need to link causes to effects suggests one of the most useful questions in careers guidance - 'So what gave you the idea of doing that…?' Briggs should have asked it of Mary. But answering open questions relies on practice in conversational narrative. Good open questions are the most difficult to ask - and to answer. Mary didn't even try; the question was wrong. There was no resolution for her in the causes and effects that interested Briggs.

Without some feeling for how our learners seek to resolve their stories, we cannot know how to start a guidance interview, how to bring counselling to an end, or how to design progression into curriculum.

15 Rationality is not all we have

Mary senses unfairness, but can't yet get a clear fix on it. Tim finds he can act on what he calls 'instinct'. Sense and instinct - useful to career planning? We return to the question: is careers work only interested in information and rationality, or is there something else important going on here?

We already have the terms to refer to other-than-rationale ways of knowing - 'tacit learning', 'intuition' and 'imagination'. But they have not yet been much used in career thinking. Researchers Phil Hodkinson and his colleagues (1996) rightly point to the need for a new direction - using the term 'pragmatic rationalism'. But what is rational about Mary, and pragmatic about Tim?

DOTS cannot help to answer the question. Furthermore, it may not be entirely at home in the contemporary world. It is not just rational; it describes the content rather than the processes of learning:

it says nothing about the way we know things. Yet, in all of the stories quoted here we witness other-than-rational ways of knowing. Ancient rational philosopher Socrates is reported to have asserted that 'an unexamined life is not worth living'; representatives of today's cultures might retort 'an unlived life is not worth examining!'. In our society 'just-do-it' impulse and 'new-age' superstition are regarded as serious options for basing significant action.

It seems that, whether rightly and wrongly, people are searching for other-than-rational ways of dealing with their lives. We can come some way towards this need. I would limit myself to the bet that there are useful intuitions in career management. Mary and Tim have them; but we need to know more. The term 'pragmatic choice' signposts a possible new direction for that understanding of career. But we have not yet set off on the search.

For example, where does pragmatic rationalism stand in relation to tacit knowledge, to intuition and to imagination? And, for that matter, where does all of this stand in relation to culturally-learned responses - such as prejudice or superstition? And where do such learned responses stand in relation to the biologically-rooted feelings we call instinct? And does the word 'instinct' really do any justice to the heart of Tim's decision?

Biography points to non-rational ways of knowing. But we don't yet know how to describe them? How, then, will careers work be able to support and enhance them? Not by studying DOTS.

16 This and other stories

We are each at the centre of our own here-and-now story; but every plot, however heroic, is also a sub-plot for another story. You are an episode in other people's sagas, and they in yours.

Furthermore, each story has its own scale - of time and of setting. Of time: there is a story-line in Mary's few minutes of conversation, in Tim's months of deliberation, in Joey's years of self justification, and in Terence's and Asher D's generations of suffering. Of setting: the setting may be a corridor, a pub bar, a neighbourhood, a culture or the planet. However interesting biography may be in personal and local terms, Ben Pimlot's historian is right to remind biographers of the larger scale.

It is not that 'big-and-long' story is important, and 'short-and-small' is trivial; it is that each story stands in relation to others. And so each story can offer entrances and exits to others. That short-small-sad episode is not the end of everything. Nor, for that matter, is that big- bright-triumphant moment.

In all of these senses, there are very few stories which can stand alone.

If Briggs ever gets round to helping Mary, a key question may well be 'Do you have any sense of what can happen if…?' It would mean Mary opening that exit door from 'raggedy kid', to a story she had already started telling herself - of some other self in some other future.

She didn't tell Briggs. But with the right kind of help, she might have. Being able to see one's here-and-now story in the broader context of wider events, or in the alternative context of other possibilities, these possibilities open doors to both learners and helpers. And they may go against some of the grain in some counselling thinking (particularly where it emphasises the need for here-and-now immediacy and exclusive empathy with the learner). The study of narrative offers us some new thinking to do.

E Meaning

Story has meaning - whether poignant (dry your tears!), instructive (pay attention!), funny (pull yourself together!), or all three (the best of all stories!) Plot resolution usually offers a clue to meaning. But not everybody agrees with the author's intentions. The four signposts here for careers work concern:

17 meaning and facts:

18 meaning and person:

19 turning points and the crux of the matter:

20 multiple meanings:

17 Meaning is more important than fact

In some important sense it doesn't matter whether the child Jeanette Winterson wrote that essay or not. What we really want to know is why a mother's facile reaction would have begun to change a child; this is where the story's meaning might be found.

Mary Evans (1999) suggests that, because biography is increasingly concerned with private meaning, public information may actually hinder the audience. Biography-as-scholarly-research is now accompanied by biography-as-empathetic-insight (for example, in Carole Angier, 2002).

There is, of course, a risk: so important is meaning that we are prepared to maintain belief in an implausible story, in order to retain belief in its meaning. We can be quite gullible about this, especially if the meaning engages attention-grabbing issues - unhappy childhood, getting rich, being a celebrity (all three references guarantee a six-figure advance). But the primary significance of this search for meaning is not that it can mislead us (of course it can!) it is that we are somehow left hungry if we fail to find it. For Andrew Rissik (1999b) doing no more than gathering information is '…like searching a dead author's pockets and finding only keys, credit cards, cheque book and driving licence: they tell us something of the life, but not what we really want to know.' Some progress files are like that.

There is also a signpost for careers-work research here. Gathering material that can help to uncover meaning in a life is rare skill: how did Paul Willis manage to get in so many facts, yet keep us in clear sight of what they meant to Joey and each of those other lads? Research data is always sculpted, but not always with such telling authenticity.

18 Meaning as theme

H Porter Abbott (whom we have already met) offers rather simple advice on finding meaning in stories: 'Look', he says, 'for what repeats itself.'

That process of looking finds links: things that, somehow, remind you of other things in the story. The links are within and between elements of character, dialogue, plot and setting. The resonance they sound suggests a theme for a life. Such a method featured in Abraham Maslow's (1970) work (he drew on what was known of public figures). It led him to his well-used hierarchy of human needs. 'Themes' and 'needs' are not so dissonant, as concepts for the human condition. And there is some confirmation of what he argues in our short quotations; you can find people searching for 'material well-being', or 'safety', or 'attachment', or 'esteem', or 'influence', or 'discovery', or 'aesthetic' or 'self-actualising' satisfactions.

But let's not be precipitate: Abraham Maslow's is a crude analysis and certainly not beyond doubt. Biographer Ulrick O'Connor (1991) probes, by looking for the most significant clues. He uses the metaphor of 'inner sap' to locate the essence of a story. And he seeks it in a word, a gesture, an intonation, a posture… often enough some transient but compelling moment. 'No matter', he says, 'how a biographer has submerged himself in archive or interview, he should keep such incidents before the mind's eye - working from the inside out.'

In career-development thinking Mark Savickas (1995) has done more than anyone to develop the usefulness of life themes to the helping professions. He enables us to look for clues in persistent memories, recurring dreams, favourite stories, repeated phrases…Beyond a certain level of practice you don't have assiduously to search, you start spontaneously to recognise where people are most fully telling what is going on in their lives.

This way of understanding behaviour can be linked back to Antonio Damasio's neurology- based understanding. He suggests that biographical consciousness - the 'movie in the brain' - enables us to imagine a life beyond both instinctive and biographical concerns. The way we need to think in order to deal with the world, also allows us to imagine more than we have yet experienced. He claims that the clarity with which such possibilities can be incorporated into the 'movie' is why people feel that they might be prepared to risk personal fulfilment, for the sake of some more valued purpose. Jonathan Miller knows about this.

Such ideas about career development seriously undermine notions of career as solely about securing and maximising material well-being. People work for other reasons (if that were not so, there would be no able people in careers work or education). But we still need to say how contemporary work offers meaning to people's lives.

19 Turning points and crucial questions

There is, often enough in stories, a turning point. It may be no more than an encounter, a discovery, a remark, a hesitation. But it is one which catalyses a question - going to what we call 'the crux of the matter'. That question is about some element - of character, dialogue, setting or plot - which may, until now, been overlooked. But it is the key to understanding the story. It is the big moment in narrative fiction. It offers the prospect of plot resolution - you begin to see how things are coming out.

Researchers Mary Mallon and Laurie Cohen (quoting L R Cochrane) nicely illustrate the point - at the movies: 'Attempting to understand a career transition without a recognition of how the individual accounts for that particular adventure within a whole life is akin to walking in on the last scene of a movie. "Without a grasp of what came before and what is at stake, the scene is apt to seem fat and overdone. However, if one has seen the movie from the beginning, the same scene might be deeply moving, highly meaningful and entirely appropriate"'.

Our own Mary never allowed her maths teacher to ask the crucial question. And so he asked the questions he knew how to ask. Maybe we should have some sympathy with his reluctance - to press hard on the crucial question is high risk. Psychiatrist Adam Phillips sounds a dramatic parallel warning to opinionated biographers, 'the subject of a biography', he says, 'always dies in the *biographer's* way'. Whether helper or biographer, our questions, allowing only our answers, impose our meaning.

Death resolves everything. But - between now and it - who is able to help Mary, or Joey or Jeanette find the crucial question? There are plenty of people - in families, schools, cultural groups, government, commerce - ready to volunteer.

And what is it, exactly, that makes careers advisers and teachers any better at asking it? In this volume Hazel Reid (2003) raises a key issue for the use of biographical ideas in careers-work training.[1]

20 How to live with multiple meanings

Adam's warning is an acknowledgement of what is, for our purposes, a *strength* of biography. It is a strength because any sign of an author-imposed meaning can provoke an audience into critical reflection. And this is a good thing.

But to realise that good, we may need to worry less about the distinction between fact (Captain Robert Scott) and fiction (Captain James Kirk). Adam worries about biographers attributing to Robert the qualities of James. Such misattribution occurs: Mary McCarthy admitted to it: her early biography made her father more 'dashing' and herself more 'lost' than - on critical reflection - she felt was justified.

And, in some writing, the distinction between fact and fiction crumbles: some biographical writing is both - sometimes deliberately so. Recent 'lives' of Pontius Pilate, Caravaggio, Charles Dickens, A. Wainwright, Marilyn Monroe and Ronald Reagan include explicit invention. Indeed early biography and fiction were read by the same audience for much the same purpose - which was, for some people, enlightenment (Holroyd, 2002).

We must acknowledge the possibility of self deception. In one study (reported by Elizabeth Loftus and Mayranne Gray, 2002) people who had been shown phoney ads featuring 'Bugs Bunny' at *Disneyland*, came up with accounts of having met him there. They could not have: Bugs belongs to Warner Brothers.

1 This refers to the original volume in which this article was published.

We lie, we invent and we fool ourselves; but a quizzical audience need not be deceived. Terence Cave (1993) is undismayed by the trends; 'A lot of readers', he claims 'know how to commute between fiction and reality.' He explains: 'This is fashionably post-modern… the play between reality and fiction, or truth and fiction, is clearly meant to be comprehensible to a relatively wide public'. Fellow journalist Decca Aitkenhead agrees. She finds deception un-worrying because, she says, it is so easily detectable - converting 'life' into 'copy' is almost impossible to do well. And all of this helps to explain Alison Utley's (1999) claim concerning a public rejection of formulaic biography: 'there are too many, they all sound the same, they are too shrill, they cannot all be true.'

It makes biography (good and bad) a potentially powerful tool for learning-for-life. It means that, if we can't find a well-equipped scepticism among our learners, we should help them to become more quizzical. It is possible. And the thinking use of biography is a method. H Porter Abbott implies as much: we do justice to biography, he argues, not by *rejecting* the author but by educating the *reader*. And the most difficult thing a reader has to do, claims H Porter, is 'to remain in a state of uncertainty'. We are referring here to a subtle but contemporaneously necessary set of skills: knowing how to live with multiple meanings - asking what, for my purposes, can be trusted …and what can't.

People do not - cannot - always tell the truth. But this no more excludes the use of biography in practice than it does ethnography in research. All such material is the product of an ability to tell a story. And that ability is flawed - none of us do it perfectly. But the flaws are detectable, through noticing inconsistency, lack of authenticity, and an appreciation of people's search for self-justification.

In research, this is a plea for the critical use 'case study' material. Respectful appreciation is not the same as gullibility. In practice, it is a plea for helpers to help learners to question biography. For, in quizzing other people's lives, we each learn to question our own. This would be the realisation of Jonathan Rose's case; he calls it the primacy of the reader in the use of narrative - a story is useful, not for how it is told, but for how it is heard.

Which points us to the imaginative use of story in practice.

Using fewer lists, making more stories!

The people's research?

But first, a final nod in the direction of research. You may understand why I hesitate to use the term, but biography is - in a demonstrable sense - 'the people's research'. It provides a basis for thought and action which they-who-run may read - to hand in every bookshop and library.

Sharing sources with our users in developing understanding of career could usefully counter-balance the other powerful alliance in our field. The other alliance is the one between policy, commerce and academia (Philo and Miller, 2001). In our own, as in other fields, policy interests have enlisted such help to construct formulas which now dominate practice (Law, *et al*, 2002). We need an independent basis for explaining what we are doing (Law, 2003b).

Biographical material serves such purposes well: it is a practically limitless resource, which we share with our learners; and on whose behalf it can speak.

Using other people's stories to make sense of your own

We are not evolved to learn in order to raise standards, achieve targets or manifest outcomes. Taking tests and sitting exams are, for most of us, uncongenial. When the examination is completed the target may or may not be reached, but the learning is often discarded. As a species we learn for action. We remember best what seems most to be useful. For most of us, most of the time, the meaning of learning is knowing what to do about it. We are back to Irving Goffman's question: and it is the challenge to careers work - to enable learners to know 'what is going on here?' and 'what will I do about it?' (Law, 2003a).

Jonathan Rose has shown us that this is what people do with literature - use other people's stories to make sense of their own. He further suggests that a

significant sector of working-class people have used literature as a springboard for telling - and in some cases writing - their own story.

It is why gossip is so prevalent and soap operas so popular. Contemporary media are extending the scope with reflective observation -'*Big-Brother*-type 'reality-tv' shows are not all wholly driven by prurience and voyeurism (Crace, 2002).

In table 4 all of these processes would move - by one route or another - from top-left to bottom-right.

These processes suggest big extensions to current practice. They call for open and sensitive management of disclosure, enquiry, case study, real-time role play, community-based learning, formative action planning, and personal reflection (Law, *et al*, 2002). Few lists are needed here; even games and simulations offer no more than tasters to the depth and dynamics of these learning processes.

Towards the left in table 4, people are working with other people's stories - biographical material. Towards the right, on their own stories - in records and profiles. The challenge for this 'horizontal' movement is to transfer useful learning from (left) the learning setting to (right) the living use (Law, 1999).

In the upper row, people are like researchers - gathering information and sorting it into useful order.

In the lower row they become their own theorists - seeking to understand how things get to be the way they are, and how they can be changed. The challenge for this 'vertical' movement is to enable progression from basic observation to useable understanding (Law, 1996).

Jonathan Rose's view suggests that upper left is a natural starting point - where people begin to make sense of other people's experience. He is thinking about formal writing; but other people's stories also come as diary, journal, song, rap, scrapbook, album, film, video; they also come as tv soap, 'reality-tv' and cartoon; and they come, of course, as face-to-face disclosure - such as learners sometimes find in work experience and shadowing.

Portfolio development is an obvious area for development. And writing-as-therapy (Bolton, 1999) suggests ideas for one version of this process. But the methods for setting down material are wider. Writing-as-therapy is a form of disclosure (Wright and Man Cheung Chung, 2001); and, for our purposes, performance-as-learning, cartooning-as-learning and photography-as- learning are among the many methods that need to be developed (examples can be found in Career-Learning Network 2002b).

There are real possibilities here for significant new developments in contemporary careers work. And - because what is suggested is particularly appropriate

Table 4. Routes to the use of stories

	getting stories	**making a story**
enquiry (learner research)	gathering material, setting it in useful order	assembling 'the story so far'
reflection (learner theory)	pointing to key features and hunching themes and resolutions	anticipating possibilities and planning what to do

progress learning ↓

transfer learning →

to the delivery of Connexions, Education for Citizenship and life-long guidance - there is a degree of policy mandate.

What is ruled out is a straight imitation of some other person's life (even Richard Branson). The process is more subtle, more creative and more respectful of learner identity than unreflective hero worship would allow.

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