

Points of Departure

Bill Law (introduced by Lyn Barham)

For this final section, Lyn Barham had the privilege of re-reading Bill's *Points of Departure* columns, and of rediscovering the man in his own voice over and over. It was a challenging task to make just this small selection, which tries to capture the skill, virtuosity, wit and incisive insights in Bill's writing.

Points of Departure: how poignant that title sounds today. Points of Departure is the title Bill chose for a column he initiated in the NICEC Journal in 1997, towards the end of his long period as editor. He continued this contribution until 2004. These shorter, topical, aptly titled columns seemed a good place to capture Bill's inimitable grasp of purpose, complexity and hope in our work.

In 1997, Bill started in song:

Sportin' life on careers work

Oh! They ain't necessarily so!
 They ain't necessarily so!
 These policy capers
 In green and white papers,
 They ain't necessarily so!
 Their standards should make learning go!
 Bat that ain't what seems to be so;
 Because, my poor chil'un,
 You're bored by the million –
 What should be your friend is your foe!
 They say you'll get work that you like!
 D'yer think that they're taking the Mike
 'Cos promise ain't yet met
 So like what you can get,
 Or – otherwise – get on yer bike!

Don't tell all the chil'un
 That theory's a villain;
 'Tain't wrong to think a thought!
 What ministers want-see
 As outcomes of pol-cee
 Are cheap – so they're selling us short!
 This is serious stuff – not a toy!
 With research and some thought. And – Oh boy! –
 That sure beats crude guessing,
 And dim acquiescing
 In government target and ploy.
 I'm writing this paper to show
 They ain't nessa..., ain't nessa..., ain't nessa...,
 ain't nessa...,
 Ain't necessarily ... SO!

With grateful acknowledgement to Ira Gershwin and his talented brother

And then, of course, he moved into story. In 2000 he created the 'policy' story of careers, and followed it with his own contrasting story:

Career is a story. It might go something like this:

People need reliable and neutral careers information which they can link to what they know about themselves. Much of what is most important to careers management can be listed as personal skills and occupational types. Making the link between these two forms the basis for individual choices about education, training, and employment. Each choice requires skills needed to follow it through. Communication, numeracy, the ability to co-operate with others, and the use of information and communication technology are always important because they will contribute both personal and national wealth, and – maybe – to social stability. But underlying all of this is people's need to plan and manage how they will make their career moves; and this means not only getting hold of good information, but identifying preferences, arriving at choice and a strategy for implementing it, making an effective application, presenting yourself in a positive light, and negotiating the change that will come, as and when you are successful. When people show that they can reach these targets, they are assessed as good career managers. They can learn most of what they need for this in career lessons and guidance interviews – starting at around 13-14 years of age. The biggest hang-up to career is lack of employable skill. The biggest hindrance is low educational standards and achievement.

It is an easy-to-understand and reasonably comfortable story with the elements that are not too hard to measure. This is good meta-policy. The story is abstracted from pre-Connexions DfEE publications and is, pretty well, the end-of-century policy line on good career management. It suggests what we are supposed to do. So what has been lost? A contrasting story suggests what else we might do:

People pick up most of what they know about work and self from their mates and in the neighbourhood. What they believe is expressed in images taken from the media, and the net. These convey ideas about how things are thought to work, and the best way of dealing with them. There can be a strong sense of what is not acceptable; and, for some, crime is one of several alternatives. There are feelings: about who is to be respected, who shows respect, who can be trusted, and what me-and-people-like-me need. Some of this has to do with class, gender, race, and – increasingly – age-group. Such feelings can underpin good career management, but they can also undermine it – particularly where they crystallise as stereotypes. Such feelings are primed in childhood; they are deep and often unspoken. There are also values: some are consumer-driven; but increasingly prevalent are values concerning the environment, ethnicity, fairness and the third world. Furthermore, there are attachments: people wonder how their approach to work affects friends, a partner, and the children – and grandchildren – of that attachment. More thinking people take account of the impact of their work on people they have not yet met, and some they never will meet. Both self and work change, though people may be unclear about why. But, willy-nilly, it means that a person must repeatedly assemble and re-assemble ideas about how things are, and how they work. Career learning must be renewable. The sense of risk is high; a person needs to know how to grasp where causes and effects lie and how they work. That means knowing how to get reliable information, but it also means knowing who you can trust. The biggest hang-up to career is not knowing how to change your mind. The biggest hindrance is no time and attention to work through the possibilities.

It is, of course, the same story, but with different emphases. The second account says that career is...

...not only...	...but also...
about skills	about feelings
based on information	on what it means for my life
for me	for, with, and in response to other people
learning	learning how to learn
learned in formal education 14-19	in all the early and ensuing years
for contracted work	for wider concepts of work

The 'but also...' list is where we were heading before we got so high on the policy agenda. [...] Not much policy attention, until now, has been given to these developments. The explanation is probably meta-political: policy needs a readily measurable, easy-to-understand and comfortable way of understanding how career works; and the 'but also...' list is none of these. A plausible wheeze might seem more useful than such joined up and layered thinking. Policymakers must play their game as well as they can. Our game is different. We need ideas that help us do justice to our work. To allow policy ideas wholly to script that work entails a serious loss – a surrender to professional amnesia. Ideas are important. [...] If we were ever to get to the point where we must speak of the embattlement of our work, the battle would be for ideas. To lose it would be to lose our professionalism. The price would be too high.

For Bill, it is not even a step from story to complexity; they stand in an intricate embrace. He showed this in *The Power of Careers-Work Complexity* in 2001, at a time when we still thought Connexions might have a bright future:

How do careers really work?

The easiest assumption to make about how careers work is that a good match between personal attributes and job characteristics leads to an effective and rewarding career. There are advantages in such thinking: it suggests the relatively simple and accountable procedures of assessment, interviewing, and planning. Indeed, it can be programmed into an expert computer system linking person to work – quickly, precisely and cheaply.

All of this would be fine, if matching were all there were to it. But matching is not the only thing that happens in career management. And it is certainly not the most basic thing.

Firstly, there are *feelings*. Working life calls up feelings, as much any aspect of life: enjoyment and boredom, reactions to other people, responses to the way working life rewards and disappoints. Such feelings belong to time and place: they may not go into a résumé or onto an application form, and it requires a very special kind of interview to elicit and process them. Computers just wouldn't understand.

Feelings are often transient, but the fleeting moment can be decisive.

Secondly there are *other people*. Much of our feeling about work is directed at other people – who help or hinder, value or reject, understand or don't.

No career is ever made in a social vacuum. Career moves relate to other people: people you identify with and respect – or hold in contempt and reject. All alert careers workers sense the force of peer pressure on their clients. [...]

Which brings us, thirdly, to *culture*. Whatever else culture does, it frames beliefs about how things work and what is important. All cultures declare what men and women do, and how things came to be the way they are, what is contemptible and what – at any cost – must be preserved. And early-days experience of a culture is insidious. Beliefs survive long after experience is forgotten. Some part of your childhood

Points of Departure

and youth has gotten inside you: its values may have become your morality, or its assumptions in your truth, or its explanations the springs to your action.

I am bound to say that Tony Blair shows clear signs of understanding this – in the contexts of both local exclusion and global fears. Because, fourthly, culture is *capital*. Phil Hodgkinson and his colleagues draw heavily on the concept to convey the idea that the beliefs and values of upbringing give some people the edge in the negotiation of life chances.

Career work cannot ignore the culture of the people it seeks to help, and must respect it. But our ability to learn and re-learn means that culture need not be destiny. We can all move on.

Which takes off, fifthly, to career as *progression*. By the time some people come to guidance, much of what they have learned entraps them. Stereotypes, which are cultural phenomena, feature in this. These foundations of career can be laid in the toddler years, and hardened in group allegiances.

This is not a problem that guidance can solve. Tony is also right about this: it is a problem not only for ‘education’, but also for ‘education’ and ‘education’. And for some of our most entrapped people it is going to need a lot of sensitive, imaginative and progressive work.

And that brings us to the importance, sixthly of *point of view*. Career management commonly involves a struggle – between a person’s culture of origin and a changing world. Few are able wholly to reject their upbringing, but none should unquestioningly accept all that it has taught them. And there is the struggle: finding your own point of view. ‘Career management’ sounds pretty lame for this process. ‘Career engagement’ does it better justice.

And we are taking a leap beyond and matching theory – a leap of quantum proportions.

One of Valerie Bayliss’s parting gifts to career work was the suggestion that the way in which we do this work should pay more attention to ‘the way the brain works’. And that remark brings us, in a seventh step, to the importance of *inner life*.

Neurologist Antonio Damasio’s idea of ‘a movie in the brain’ is useful. Inner light is a feeling-laden movie of how things are and how they change, of where I am in that scenario, and of how other people – occupying different positions – see things differently. This autobiographic facility means we need not just see ourselves as the product of past causes; we can also see ourselves as the cause of future effects. It has obvious survival value; and the greater the rate of change, the greater value.

Which brings us to an eighth level of analysis – *purposefulness*. And here evolutionary psychology responds to Valerie Bayliss’s appeal. There is no survival value in searching for the meaning of life, inventing religions or dreaming of how to change the world. But, says Steven Pinker, in order to survive at all, we do need to work out how things work, to act purposefully, to imagine as yet unrealised possibilities, and to deal in trust. These are part of our finger-hold on survival, so the genes that support them survive. But, because we can do these things, we can also construct and develop value-laden work purposefulness.

It is what gives work its meaning – what Mark Savickas calls its ‘theme’. It can mean (and neurologist Antonio Damasio also develops the point) that people will risk comfort and fulfilment – even survival – for the sake of some valued purpose.

The contemporary world demands that we understand that – at all levels of the labour market, in all cultures, and among the ‘included’ and the ‘dispossessed’ – people seek such meaning in their lives.

The power of complexity

Eight layers of career engagement – subtle, layered, dynamic. This is the *New Thinking* – I have argued elsewhere – that we need for *Connexions and for Education for Citizenship*. The greater the complexity we can acknowledge, then the greater the opportunity to understand how careers really work, what can go wrong, and what can be done to help. Nonetheless, some people – whose feelings are under control, whose acquaintances are helpful and who are awash with cultural capital – may see little point in opening

up the deeper questions. But for others – with no real chance to understand what’s going on in their lives, who is pressurising them, why, and what the consequences might be – we must take more care, and more time, to deal with more complexity. You see the implication: the simpler conventions of careers guidance most help the people who least need help.

Song, story, complexity, and many words. Then, in 2002, Bill undertook time-travel to Paris in 1789:

What has 1789 got to do with careers work? Well, until recently it was hard to find a policy statement about careers work that did not have the word ‘choice’ in the title. And, suddenly, we have the word ‘connections’. It seems worth thinking about.

Indeed, it has been argued by the gung-ho that guidance evolved more fully in the ‘free societies’ because it was about choice. But, before we get too smug about that, check out this possibility: much of what passes for decision-making in the western world is little more than impulse.

The problem for career development is not so much for making choices; it is for enabling people to recognise the possibility of making a sustainable decision. And, in careers, that confusion always involves other people: decision-making can be overwhelmed by people who seek to influence me, and whose respect I seek.

So, did the revolutionaries miss out on the social context of liberty? Certainly not. Imagine this: peasants streaming into downtown Paris, yelling ‘nous avons trois priorités – liberté! liberté! et liberté!’ Until some member of the awkward squad yells...

‘Attendez vous a minute! There’s no real liberté without égalité. I mean, just pensez about it: if people go around asserting liberté, with no idea of égalité, then their liberté becomes someone else’s futilité! – and that can’t be droit!’

...‘Liberté et égalité!’

But they are not yet at The Bastille; and as it hoves into view...

‘Attendez vous, encore!’

‘Sacré Bleu! Maintenant quoi, Henri?’

‘I’ve been thinking: there’s no égalité worth having without some feeling for other people’s needs!’

(In another life, Henri would have made a pretty-good careers adviser.)

‘Mais Henri, do other people have needs?’

‘Oui! We must show care and respect for other people – a sense of attachment to others, a respect for their humanity, a valuing of their rights...’

‘...Oh! you mean “fraternité”?’

Well, I was trying to avoid chauvinistic language; but – if we can think of women as brothers – yes, fraternité!’

The demands are re-drafted...

‘What do we want?’

‘A society based on a thoughtful analysis of social conditions, which show that there is no worthwhile freedom – or possibility of sustainable choice – without justice; and there can be no defensible justice without some sense – on the part of each of us – of attachment to others; and this means offering due respect to other people’s rights, feelings and property!’

‘When do we want it?’

‘Now!’



References

Law, B. (1997) Sportin' life on careers work. *NICEC Careers Education and Guidance Bulletin*, 48, Summer.

Law, B. (2000) As Peter was saying before he was so rudely interrupted. *Career Research & Development: the NICEC Journal*, 1, October.

Law, B. (2001) The power of careers-work complexity. *Career Research & Development: the NICEC Journal*, 4, October.

Law, B. (2002) Libert ? Futilit ? ... Autonom . *Career Research & Development: the NICEC Journal*, 5, Spring.

For correspondence

Lyn Barham, NICEC Fellow

lynbarham@gmail.com