

The biased careers consultant: An autoethnography of two perspectives

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Abstract

This article is an autoethnographic reflection of my experience working as a careers consultant in the university I graduated from. Drawing on the ideas of constructing identity and Systems Theory Framework, I have considered the positives and drawbacks for the careers consultant as an individual, as well as potential impacts on the students supported, and implications for practice. This account seeks to support career development professionals to navigate the balance of delivering CEIAG as an 'insider' with lived academic experience, and also as an 'outsider' providing a professional service.

Key words: Autoethnography; higher education; professionalism

Introduction and context

I work as a careers consultant in Queen's University Belfast (QUB), a university I graduated from almost 20 years ago. In a career mostly defined by Happenstance (Krumboltz, 2009) I now also have my faculty school as part of my caseload, speaking in lecture theatres I once attended as a student, in several cases now a work colleague to those who once taught me and marked my assignments. I occupy a strange in between position – as an outsider I am a professional service provider who can see 'the bigger picture', the diversity of options available and how Arts, English and Language (AEL) students can access the workforce. As an insider, an English and art history graduate who also completed modules in drama as part of my degree, I understand exactly how much these students love their subject, the barriers they have faced to get to this stage, and how fiercely connected they feel to their school and discipline.

To try and further support this school in improving their employability and student satisfaction outcomes, I completed a masters research dissertation, interviewing 12 final year AEL students completing a work placement module. I found myself speaking with

12 past versions of myself. This caused me to question and examine my position and professional identity, fulfilling these multiple roles as a career development practitioner, a lecturer within a curriculum, and an alumna of the school.

Autoethnography has been used as a tool by higher education professionals before to examine their identity in changing employment circumstances (Leitch, 2018; Franklin, 2019; Kumar, 2021), and it is comforting to know that the tension felt by occupying multiple roles is something I am not alone in experiencing in the sector. Identity is a fluid and dynamic idea which includes how we are socially perceived and constructed (Castells, 2004). In this case study, the central identity is that of 'careers consultant', but that identity is modified when the social or physical context changes. When situations change the role becomes more subjective (Billot, 2010). The 'careers consultant' finds themselves speaking as an assignment assessor in an education meeting, or as someone with previous industry experience from the front of a lecture theatre. Previous literature has highlighted the strong correlation between subject and academic identity as an anchor upon which academics can base their role and position (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Delanty, 2008; Fanghanel, 2012). But even within these more clearly defined university roles, there has been room for nuance, with Clegg's (2008) academic respondents bringing their personal experience and characteristics to their professional identity. If these professionals, with more clearly defined positions within a university space, are expanding and evolving their identity, what about those professional service staff who inhabit multiple spaces in multiple roles?

McMahon and Patton (2018) included career identity in their review of the Systems Theory Framework, acknowledging the impact that multiple external factors can have on the individual, and the fluidity of the position. Career identity 'influences how we view our work and how we behave in the workplace' (Lysova et al., 2015, p. 39). LaPointe (2010) highlighted the importance of the physical and social situation, that career identity is co-constructed in relation to interactions with others. Thus, the individual can play and perform multiple roles depending on the interaction taking place. Within the Systems Theory Framework it is acknowledged that the individual does not exist in a vacuum and is influenced by a variety of factors, including individual intrinsic characteristics, the surrounding social system (including people and location), and the wider environment and society (Patton and McMahon, 2006).

This autoethnographic study addresses the question:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a careers consultant working within their alma mater school?

This exploration requires understanding the experience of the careers consultant, in addition to the perspectives of students. The implications for individual practitioners and for career services will be highlighted.

Methodology

Autoethnography offered the tool to examine my own individual experience while also setting it in a wider context for careers staff who work both in and outside the subject

areas they have a background in, and the implications for practice. As a research method, autoethnography extends the horizons of study to 'accommodate subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on the research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist' (Ellis et al. 2010, p.3). It also allowed space to link the theories from literature to the lived and narrated personal experience (Holt, 2003; Sparkes, 2002). Previous writing has focused on practitioners moving from industry to academia (Franklin, 2019; Shreeve, 2009; Learmonth & Humphreys 2012) but little research has looked at professional services careers staff who have in-curricular responsibility within a school and the potential experience or bias they bring in their pedagogy.

Within the initial study only a small percentage of students could be included so the opinions could not represent the entire AEL student cohort. I asked for volunteers after a lecture and 12 individuals made contact. Despite the small number, the self-selected students were motivated stakeholders, in their final year of a three-year degree, who had chosen to undertake a double work placement module and had experience of the careers service. They were close enough to graduation to be considering life after university, and could also reflect on their previous three years.

Throughout the process of collecting data with semi-structured interviews I consciously kept a neutral position, adhering to the script I had produced to ensure no answers could be deemed influenced or coerced, aiming to gather data that came solely from the interviewee. Noticing how difficult I was finding this method of communication has prompted me to examine other communications with this cohort, whether in one-to-one careers consultations or lectures, and how much of myself I bring to the interaction to build a story or illustrate a teaching point. I became conscious of when I shared personal examples or anecdotes during both curriculum lectures and employability sessions. During one-to-one appointments, I noticed when I disclosed that I was a QUB alum and the subjects I studied. Autoethnography, a research method designed to 'examine significant experiences from the standpoint of someone who has been through them' (Cousin, 2009, p. 11) presented itself as a useful tool to explore how a practicing careers consultant navigates embracing changing roles and the influences from multiple systems they bring with them.

Ethical concerns when choosing autoethnography as a method was something I considered at length. During the initial research the interviewees knew me as a careers consultant and lecturer, and I was conscious this positionality could influence a participant who wanted to impress or show engagement, to say what I wanted to hear. I had to reaffirm my role as researcher and maintain a neutral position to gain honest student feedback. My position in this paper has changed yet again to that of research subject. The challenge has been to reflect on my own behaviour and interactions with the distance required for effective analysis, while engaging with the lived experience of the situation.

I was conscious of my own motivations when undertaking the initial research, and my expectations of students' perspectives. Interviews were conducted with a consistently applied structure and questioning. I queried my own neutrality every time I wanted to ask a follow up question, what did I think the student had missed or was I trying to elicit a response. Autoethnography has allowed me to examine those grey areas and reflect on the impact of collecting and analysing the data. It has also made me examine my own

career identity and what image do I want to portray. Edwards (2021) asked if ethical autoethnography could exist when it is one perspective being presented and describes the ethic of the self, that 'the researcher has an obligation to describe and investigate their own experience authentically' (p 3-4). There would always be the risk that the autoethnographer 'strives to achieve a version of the self and an account of events that is consistent and acceptable to their own conscience' (Lee, 2018, p. 313). If I completed this autoethnographic research and concluded practices needed change, would I be open and willing to address this and what potential impact could this have, personally and professionally.

Results and discussion

Findings in relation to the research question, 'What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of having a careers consultant working within their alma mater school?' can be understood by a simple separation of benefits and drawbacks.

Benefits

There were two main stakeholders involved in these interactions. The first are the students in the faculty assigned as part of the consultant's caseload. They are connecting with someone who has literally been in the same position that they currently inhabit. Letting the student know that I am also an AEL graduate builds instant rapport and I have often referenced modules or texts to help break the ice in a conversation. While I have never described my CV in detail, I have used examples from past work experiences to illustrate teaching points such as transferability of skills, or examples from past job interviews, with the aim of exposing students to instrumental and associative learning experiences they can relate to (Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976). This is one of the four pillars of Krumboltz' Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making, and increasing the number and variety of these experiences can support a student broadening their horizons for action. An example I use to highlight transferability of skills is describing working in the finance department of a large manufacturing company with an English degree. The ability to proofread, spot mistakes and scan read large amounts of information, skills I had learned from my degree, meant I was able to transfer this to analysing multiple types of data, applying the same skills to financial documents. I recovered significant sums of money for the company, a job I found very satisfying yet would not have been on my radar as an undergraduate considering routes into employment. I can evidence the successful transferability of skills to multiple sectors, highlighting areas of employment a student may have overlooked, but also the need for creativity and innovation to manage different professional identities throughout a career.

The consultant's position as an outsider (not an academic member of the faculty), allows sufficient professional distance to be honest about the realities of competitive job markets. This encourages the students to take the necessary steps to position themselves to be the right candidate when the opportunity arises. By referencing past personal and student experiences, both successful and unsuccessful, I can provide practical interventions and realistic timescales to support students in their career management development. Using the communication channels available, as well as face-to-face conversations, has allowed me to highlight opportunities students might otherwise have missed, for example

encouraging pursuing relevant graduate schemes, training courses or funding programmes which fell outside their planned time to look for employment. Engaging with students early in their degree programme has meant less uncertainty and panic decisions in final year and increased confidence in their career management skills.

However, the career consultant's position as an insider (alumna of the faculty) offers two other facets to an interaction. The first is a genuine, lived empathy appreciating how passionate arts students are about their subjects and the importance some can place on the need to use their subject in their future career. Discussing applying their transferable skills to other sectors is not something these students often want to consider and, having experienced a three-year degree in the same institution with passionate and inspiring academics, I understand the determination many have to make this happen. In my years working with this group, I have seen students rise to meet and exceed these expectations and have learned never to question the determination of the individual. I often reference two students I had the privilege to work with who now work as national broadcasters. Students in lectures are inspired by the end result of these examples, but I can break down the steps these graduates took over their time at university, each year building on experience and contacts. I can discuss their resilience and creativity, gaining experience and skills in non-traditional settings, the initiative they took to leverage opportunities and actively seek out opportunities to network and gain sector experience. In a sector of non-linear career routes these examples can help provide a general framework and plan of action which both encourages and challenges students to the realities of the sector. When students begin a careers consultation meeting by explaining their query, they often struggle to articulate the exact problem and will finish with 'do you know what I mean?' And yes, I do. We can then start to untangle the threads together.

The second benefit to the insider careers consultant is the genuine interest in the sector, which supports the information pillar of Careers, Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG: Gatsby Charitable Organisation, 2014; CDI, 2021). When my outside interests include writing, art, drama, media and performance, I am following this sector closely outside of any professional capacity. The student is tapping into up-to-date information from a variety of industry specific sources which have been built up over time, supporting their commercial and industry awareness. This authentic interest in the sector can bring an increased awareness of opportunities, initiatives and aligned organisations. Having a longitudinal viewpoint of relevant sectors has also allowed me to see changes and patterns affecting recruitment processes and what employers want. Being able to pass this information on can support students to build up a portfolio of skills, increasing confidence in their abilities and expanding and effectively using a sector specific network.

The second stakeholder in this setting is the careers consultant. Advantages I have perceived include regaining the feeling of belonging to a subject area I have invested in. Working in a school and location I experienced as a student brings a familiarity of surroundings, practices and material content. I can talk with academics and support staff knowing the faculty structure, streamlining communications and increasing confidence during interactions. While my experience was a significant time ago and there are many new staff, I have still remembered and respected the faculty structure, recognising the key job roles to work with, building relationships with clerical and professional support staff, and remembering the best resources to disseminate information. It was easier

to integrate into this school as a new careers consultant than other subjects, which had different organisational structures to understand. Not having to navigate unknown protocols leaves more time to be student focused, to tailor and develop content, and to work with academics with a greater awareness of their pressure points and how the careers service can best support them. This has led to greater job satisfaction. Preparing and researching for these subjects is something I genuinely enjoy as it aligns with my interests and strengths. While I have enjoyed the challenge of working with other subjects, there is always the unknown of not experiencing the sector as a practitioner, as opposed to the confidence of speaking about a sector I have worked in. Supporting students in these schools has the added benefit of being exposed to fresh and new ideas as they are emerging. Students I have worked with previously have won awards and credentials even before graduation and maintaining contact as they thrive in their careers has only added to my own industry and commercial awareness. While not working in the sector directly, I am closely linked to those who are, again increasing confidence and credibility to talk about the workplace in a relevant manner.

Drawbacks

As a careers consultant occupying this unique crossover position, I must remember that one individual's experience is exactly that, just one experience, and will not apply to the population as a whole. Each career case study has many external systems impacting directly and indirectly on decisions made, opportunities available and the networks accessed (McMahon and Patton, 2018). How I experienced one job role and sector was unique to me at the time I was there and is being viewed through the lens of hindsight. I must always be aware that, even within personal examples, this was my experience and my recollection. I always make sure to offer balance. Workplaces, sectors and job responsibilities change quickly and the same role but in two different organisations might be vastly different experiences due to the company culture and values. With these caveats in place, I always encourage students to seek their own experience and build their own opinions, that my examples are not to be taken as direct instruction but to be used to inspire creative thinking and encourage the students to use resources available to them at their stage of career readiness and management.

Reflecting on my experience has forced me to ask myself some uncomfortable questions. Do I treat students from other subject areas differently and how does this fit with industry standard codes of ethics surrounding impartiality (CDI, 2019; AGCAS, 2022). I have discovered the answer is more nuanced and is less about equality than equity (Minow, 2021; Paul, 2019). I have always strived to be impartial when working with students and passionate about seeing individuals achieve their goals. But different groups need different help. For example, I also work with accounting students, a sector I have never worked in. I can deliver effective CEIAG to this group, but have worked to bring employers into sessions so they can describe and discuss company culture. I have less in-module contact with this cohort due to the extensive employability support they get from their course and a relatively linear career path. In contrast I spend significantly more time with AEL students in-module, breaking down the recruitment processes they might encounter, helping them identify skill sets and the importance of proactively seeking opportunities. This group does not have multiple creative employers coming on campus in the same way accounting and financial services companies attend. While I enjoy working with multiple faculty groups,

I have recognised different subjects will have different barriers to employment, and as a careers consultant I can have the ability to try and support filling those gaps. Schools do not need the same support, they need differentiated tailored support with students knowing they are being listened to and encouraged to develop career management skills.

Implications for practice

To bring the methodology of autoethnography full circle is to consider how the individual experience maps against others also working in this space and possible impacts for professional practice (Belbase, Luitel and Taylor, 2013). Should careers service managers actively seek out future hires with a direct background in a subject area or should they place more importance on the transferability of skills between industries that can support a student's exposure to a wider range of options available. Would assigning staff caseloads dependent on their backgrounds impact which institutions and roles job seekers would apply for, knowing that not every education setting offers the same subjects. And what about those careers consultants who did not have a positive engagement with their background area of study and would prefer to distance themselves from their experience and possibly past industry involvement?

Having reviewed my own experience, not initially working with AEL then gaining the school during a re-structure, my job satisfaction as a careers consultant has increased. I was given the option to change schools, and being part of this decision-making process has increased my job autonomy and confidence. Where there is space within a department to allow discretion in caseload allocation, engaging with careers professionals could give a greater sense of job satisfaction and staff retention. Completing my research on this subject has reignited this passion. One of the findings, highlighted by each interviewee, was the attitudes of others when they say what they study. I had expected opinions of arts education to have improved and was surprised at the similarity of experiences so many years apart. This has spurred me on to keep advocating for this cohort. As one student said, 'Can you please keep shouting that we don't all want to be teachers!' I am trying.

Ultimately the key stakeholder is the student who is receiving the support. Are they aware of their consultant's background and does it matter? Not every student will enter the workforce using creative skills directly linked to their studies so not every student needs creative background input. For those students who do value vocational insights, do they have value from someone removed from the sector, and does their viewpoint carry enough credibility to inspire action? Perhaps the fact that students can hear how someone has completed their same course of study, has taken the transferable skills gained, and adapted them to multiple industries to build a career, can relieve pressure and give confidence that they do not have to make one definite career decision, that Plan B and Plan C are still options, and their career is theirs for the defining and developing.



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