Import Controls

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Globalisation offers big-time scope in the search for 'good practice'. But it also kills off much of what is distinctive in local cultures.

There is no denying that careers work is globally spread. But it is also locally rooted; and so, it is not idle to ask:

'How locally appropriate does a careers-work programme need to be, in order to be effective?'.

In coping with this question, the NICEC consultation on careers education (reported in the last edition of the Journal) does better than most international studies. It sets out cultural differences, particularly in the way Connexions is set up, but it seeks no 'the-same-for-everybody' consensus.

And it really would be crazy to urge the world-wide importation of other people's 'good practice', without first understanding why each culture develops its own distinctive form of provision.

Career is socially transacted - in response to other people, with them and for them. And we best know other people face-to-face. Career development must, then, first be understood locally. NICEC Associate Phil Hodkinson is the contemporary trailblazer for the development of such ideas. He sets out how a culture of up-bringing establishes habits-of-mind which shape the approach to working life. He cites good sociology in strong support of the position; but it is no less strongly supported by evolutionary psychology's growing understanding of the special value of learning in groups.

The implications of all this are startling: the usefulness of learning is not be found in lists of what people should learn, nor even in accounts of how they learn; it is best accounted for in terms of where - and with whom - people learn. A recent monograph, 'How Careers Really Work' (below), gathers the evidence, applies it to career management and illustrates how it accounts for career learning in a range of cultures.

The new thinking strongly supports Connexions, which - more than any policy-supported career programme - links career to local culture.

Cultures of career

Culture comes in all sizes: thinking big, it is possible to talk about Asian and American cultural differences; more locally, cultural differences are sources of reciprocal envy on both side of La Manche; and - on these islands - the Welsh, Scots, Irish and English make a point of seeing things differently. At neighbourhood level, jokes which might get roars of approval in some urban rugby club, are found wholly unfunny in certain parts of Hampstead.

Humour points straight at cultural attitudes: the risible identifies the insider, the valued, what can be changed... and what can't. It also identifies 'who can be expected to do what'. We start to take in those myths, its music and these images as children. And what we learn varies - between continents, nations, classes, ethnicities... and neighbourhoods.

Such learning is driven as much by feelings as by rationality. To the individual, it feels like no-less-than the 'the way things are'. People go on believing, long after they have forgotten how they learned. Beliefs accumulate and shape ideas about what 'we can do', what is 'beyond our reach', what 'I want' and what is 'not for me!'. And, so, the group infuses the self.

The career-development impact of such habits-of-mind is massive. And they are different in Haslemere, in Harlech and in Hamilton.

The careers-work cheeseburger

Careers work itself draws on cultural roots. In England, early psychometric-matching models felt good in a culture optimistic about the uses of science for recovery in a still-threatened society. Within twenty years, a more open and hopeful culture welcomed career liberation, rather than stability. But a battering of oil crises, recurring balance-of-payment deficits and discontented winters hardened our collective head, so that linking careers work to how the economy was thought to work seemed - at the time - like a

good idea. Even the DOTS analysis is not free of cultural references: it had its highly individualistic heyday when it seemed possible to believe that 'there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families'.

Then, as you may have heard, history ended. And, with nothing much to look forward to, we looked back. There is such a thing as post-modern careers work: a pastiche of purposes: community stability, economic benefits, educational standards, environmental protection, personal liberation, rational choice, and social equity. All of these? Really? They come in no particular order - no theme, no story... no history-in-the-making. Lost priorities.

It lays us wide open to globalisation; which has its own priorities - local priorities, are - in global terms - little more than clutter. Global-capital can super-efficiently deliver McDonald's, Murdoch, and Manchester United; but it really doesn't matter all that much where they are to be delivered. The search is for 'world class' standards - the ideal mixture of sugar and fat, the perfect body in the perfect home-and-garden, the winning team - all that true believers might dream.

Careers work also has its true believers. It is possible to bang the drum for careers work in much the same way that Man United fans shout for their team. They mark progress, not from history, but in score lines and on league tables - reached by the perfect mixture of economic benefits, raised standards and whatever else suits global purposes. And some international studies look no further than the benchmarks which set such standards.

Global standards require central control. But local purveyors really should examine, probe and evaluate the product, before they start banging the drum for it. Yet middle-men of standards rarely say anything about why - of all the standards they might have sold us - their standards are the indicators of 'high quality' for careers work. How do they know? It's a question even true believers should ask - come to think of it, it should be asked especially by true believers.

Meanwhile, back in Haslemere, we're dealing with a belief that there is, out there somewhere, some ideal recipe for careers work, to which our programme only approximates. Our quest is to knead what we have towards the ideal, until it becomes the global cheeseburger of careers work.

Restarting history

The NICEC consultation raised such issues - in particular about central control.

'All countries recognise a tension between making careers education guidelines prescriptive and giving schools flexibility and autonomy over the design of their programmes. Flexible guidelines allow schools to be more responsive to individual and local needs but may result in careers education being squeezed by competing priorities.

Prescription of "core" can result in the minimum provision becoming the maximum.'

Because people's work connects them to other people, and because the impact of learning is substantially influenced by the 'with-whom' of learning, then local experience must be heeded. But central directives cannot take account of local priorities; indeed, they suppress them.

International comparison is useful, but not so that Hamilton can import Harlech's goodies. Comparison is more valuable for the way it throws into relief what is distinctive about one's own work. International perspectives help us most, by helping us better to see ourselves. After all, who really knows Haslemere, who only Haslemere knows?

Looked at like this, international studies become less about disseminating the structures of provision and more about releasing the dynamics of change. And, in the dynamics of change, the distant-and-directive figures less prominently than the close-up-and-personal.

The local is asserting itself again. The Hay Group found it so, among effective head teachers willing to break the grip of central control:

'The most powerful characteristic shared by all our headteachers was a willingness, in some instances a delight, in challenging assumptions... A world of education with a pervasive regime or standards, statutes and regulations... can bring heads into direct conflict with the authorities. ... Some rules are bureaucratic restriction on the ability of schools to react appropriately to their unique circumstances.'

And the NICEC consultation notes how, modifying psychology-driven thinking imported from the US, Irish schools are now being encouraged to develop Connexions-like team approaches, involving home-school and community-based workers, as well as guidance counsellors. The University of Limerick training programme in Guidance and Counselling is a national leader for this trend - developing modules on career development in its social context and planning to train people in locally-rooted research. NICEC associate Rachel Mulvey looks after another version of such a programme - in the University of East London - where trainees are all engaged in locally based 'real-world' research projects.

Teetering, momentarily, towards grabbing at other people's solutions, the NICEC consultation noted the attractions of Welsh and Scottish developments. But, let's not apply for the import licence just yet: Connexions is a response to the intractability of social stratification - the process which traps people in their culture of origin. Connexions cannot work unless we can give more help to people who have taken from their culture a deep scepticism about the usefulness of

education. Such cultural habits-of-mind are deeply internalised in some English regions and neighbourhoods. If any nation needs a radical version of Connexions, England needs it. The Scots and the Welsh will speak for themselves.

It is often possible to predict reactions to Connexions on the basis of the political and institutional interests of the protagonists - strange how beliefs and interests coincide. We need a more thoughtful and independent analysis than that. As Hay, Limerick and East London demonstrate, practitioners - listening to their people in their neighbourhoods - are best able to inform it.

Where this dynamic of change kicks in, history restarts.

References

The Hay Group. (2002). No Barriers, No Boundaries - Breakthrough Leadership that Transforms Schools. Warwick: Heads, Teachers and Industry.

Bill Law. (2001). How Careers Really Work. Website: The Career-learning Café - Underpinning', http: www.hihohiho.com.

Note

Bill has transferred his work on the careers café to a new site: www.hihohiho.com. The new site contains all of the practical material so far developed for the café and will shortly contain more. Bill is no longer associated with The Global Careers-work Café.

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