

Bongos, Jockeys and Young Victors

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Guidance must say how it improves people's lives. The more ways we can do that the better. The easier it is to understand what we say, the better. Concerns with raised standards, economic benefits and employability have, it is rightly claimed, attracted positive political attention - and have probably helped us to survive.

But survival is only part of the agenda: and now is the time to re-focus - seeking more precise links between guidance causes and helping effects, with more attention to what we can show are credible effects, and offering a clearer focus on what is essential to our work.

It raises questions about the roles of research-and-development organisations in this field. Intellectual rigour is assumed, but for what purpose? Advocacy? Commentary? Critique?

Much hangs on credibility, a perennial issue for think tanks. These players in civil society have much to teach us about ensuring a sustainable future for careers work.

According to a MORI poll, Victor Meldrew has been resurrected as a forty-something, with a yet longer list of gripes - about working hours, career uncertainty, work-life imbalance, job-pointlessness and work stress.

What is there to gripe about?

Nobody could accuse the careers-work field of ignoring the way in which work is changing. We have plenty to say about the demands that work now makes on people - for skills, mobility and self-management. But there is more to say. We need to understand the effects of eroded work contracts, changing workplaces and attenuated working relationships. Any essential account of career development demands an understanding of the impact of change on personal well-being and on domestic and neighbourhood life.

A global environment connects everything to everything. Our contemporaries can make links that would have been lost to their forebears: consumers recognise the politics in purchases; parents understand child-care as work; and volunteers see *the www* as a tool for pursuing their purposes.

And, in career development, 'self' into 'opportunity' doesn't always go: where people cannot find purpose in a work role, they look for it elsewhere. We need to understand why and how criminality features in this calculation.

Academic John Gray insists that globalisation is, at root, exponentially improved ICT. But communication both links and separates. It is true that people can access all kinds of media images. But they tend to access the sources with which they already agree. The logos, the raps, the beliefs and the values of contemporary communication isolate as much as they connect. This is what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls the 'tribalisation' of our associations - the converse of globalisation.

Maybe Victor is having trouble coming to terms with his children. It is sometimes cosily suggested that parents are the big influence on children's career; but there is more to it than that. The Learning and Skills Council have recently found that a good many mums and dads - in the interests of peace and quiet - prefer to steer clear of the subject. The essential fact is that past experience - one's family's and one's own - no longer helps a person to see future possibilities in the way it once did.

And so, as this year's BBC Reith lecture suggests, lurking beneath the surface of Victor's unfocussed unease are issues of trust. Who can he turn to for credible answers about his work - and his children's. Guidance professionals will want to claim that they can be trusted. But how would Victor know?

For that matter, how would we?

Questions are important

In order to trust, a person needs an estimate of the other's credibility. That means being able to bounce one idea off another; and that, of course, means more than one source.

Economics commentator Jeremy Rifkin looks to 'civil society' as a source of alternative perspectives in the contemporary world. The concept is sociologist Antonio Gramsci's: he suggested that an overlapping range of ideas for action is organised around three centres - government, markets and civil society. Civil society includes professional, religious, cultural and social organisations. It means that Victor can make sense of his life in terms not wholly defined by political and economic interests.

Distrust of government and commerce is, for well-publicised reasons, widespread and deepening. Yet, it would

be a kind of desperation to assume that all national politicians and senior business people are liars, and that any other voice must - therefore - be more trustworthy. It is not like that; it is that, although civil society may not necessarily bring 'the answers', it can come up with another way of usefully asking the questions.

Non-government organisations are civil society's growth area. They focus on human needs, and what can be done to meet them. Some are big-time, in the media every day: 'Amnesty International' speaks for the oppressed in all societies; 'Médecine Sans Frontières' is watchful for people in seriously damaged societies; 'Mind' offers direct-access support to the deeply distressed and their families. They undertake probing enquiry, analysis and the dissemination of ideas for action.

But not all of Amnesty's people are lawyers; nor Médecine's, medics; nor Mind's, therapists. They each need more than 'the profession' can provide - to credibly bounce one idea off another. They also need media savvy.

Guidance has its NGOs: The Guidance Council, The International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance and NICEC belong to civil society. All NGOs have modest beginnings: Amnesty got started because Peter Benenson thought that ordinary people's letters could persuade governments to release political prisoners. To some extent he was right.

But, although our NGOs are not yet big-time, some will be. The trends say that some such organisation will eventually establish itself in a global role. There are more than 30,000 global NGOs, and there will be more. They grow in parallel with a strengthening of corporate and a weakening in government power (offering some validation to Antonio Gramsci's original proposition). The big-time NGOs are probing organisations; asking the questions that government and commerce would rather evade.

Guidance asks 'how is career development best enabled?'. But that central question can - without distortion - be reformulated into 'who gets to do what in our societies?'. And, in such terms, this agenda is well worth setting alongside Amnesty's, Médecine's and Mind's. Trust depends - more than on anything - on what questions you are prepared to ask. The emergence of a probing NGO for guidance is not only probable, it is desirable.

But we should be careful: NGOs are not as pure as the driven snow; Greenpeace is serially accused of bias (though the indictment is usually leveled by some 'enterprising' corporation or 'deregulating' government). Victor must decide such matters on a case-by-case basis. What is important is that he is being given more to go on than could come from agro-chemical conglomerates and the politicians whose support they enlist.

Success encourages mutation: NGOs can now thrive on the boundaries between civil society and government, and between civil society and markets. Business-organised NGOs are referred to by anthropologist Tessa Morris Suzuki as 'BONGOs'; and government-run NGOs as 'GRINGOs' (of which QUANGOs are a sub-species). These hybrids sometimes represent what journalist Alex deWaal calls 'the co-option of dissent' - recruiting formerly independent voices to their own purposes. On the matter of trust: BONGO and GRINGO *bona-fides* can be questioned. And Victor should take account of the fact that some survivors rely on sexual-selection (appearance) rather than natural-selection (substance).

Civil society probes in other ways: academics and journalists are also enquiry-driven. Media commentators Greg Philo and David Miller claim that academics have become quiescent, leaving journalists to ask what some interests do not want answered. Journalist Nick Davies has done as much as any academic to portray the impact of change on people's lives. And, to be fair to academics, sociologist Richard Sennett undermines the banalities of management-speak, with his accounts of the erosion of understanding and attachment at work.

What unifies credible journalists, well-grounded academics and *bona-fide* NGOs is that they ask good questions - questions that we most need to be answered in order to know what most needs to be done. They also get those questions answered. It is a rare ability. Guidance needs to do it. And young Victor needs it done.

What makes good questions?

Nick Davies and Richard Sennett report what some don't want to hear; they create discomfort. They are nuisances with:

- clear focus;
- acceptance of complexity;
- concern for the local;
- uncluttered view of interests.

In a word - 'independence'.

1. Focussing the essentials

A criticism of organisations like Greenpeace is that they shape agendas to reflect prevalent fears. It is understandable: survival depends on a broad base of support. But, in Antonio Gramsci's terms, the move crosses the border, from 'civil' to 'market', or to 'political', territory.

We have - from time to time - also been drawn. During the 1980-90s the Confederation British Industries published a series of booklets supporting guidance. The focuses were national economic competitiveness, employable skills and

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work-relevant education. These are employer interests; and this BONGO is there to press them. But the message was infused with the rhetoric of 'putting individuals first', and so it seemed right for guidance to hitch its wagon to the CBI - its status, visibility and access to government.

But the skill-based and individualistic ideas articulating this series of publications was already professionally out-of-date. We already knew that emotionally-laden motivation is at least as important in career development as skill acquisition. And we were beginning to understand that individual career development is - for good or ill - fed by the encounters, expectations and structures of social life. Nonetheless the CBI came up with a concept of an individual, engaging a skills-based 'careership', driven by market forces. And guidance was vulnerable to policy whim, and the CBI formula offered hope of survival.

I made a mistake. There were, at that time, some strong and subtle minds in the CBI - not least of them Howard Davies's. We might well have won a hearing for a deeper and more dynamic conception of career. In particular, I had begun work on getting DOTS out of its social vacuum, through community-interaction theory. But, having found what I needed for practical purposes, I did not follow through for policy purposes. Phil Hodgkinson, who later restarted work on the social context of career, remarked that community-interaction theory had never been fully articulated. He was right.

The most important feature of any research programme is not the elegance of its methodology, but the direction of its enquiry. From the time of the CBI publications, guidance veered dramatically - trying to demonstrate economic benefits, raised standards and improved employability.

And we still don't know whether we can deliver them. We don't even know for sure whether they would serve national interests: former CBI director, Adair Turner, in his book *Just Capital*, now argues that 'national competitiveness' was an impossibly muddled idea, with a far-from-simple relationship to worker skills. A recent report from the Institute of Social and Economic Research relates the personal version of that national story: there is no straightforward correlation between doing well in education and career success.

You can't blame guidance for being concerned with survival. But we also need an independent and probing NGO to point out the downside effects of that preoccupation.

2. Simplicity not simple-mindedness

Life's complications can overwhelm, but over-simplifying them is also dangerous. Acknowledging only one factor in the situation is to create a 'single-input system'. Systems-specialist Mark Taylor suggests that this is how things get frozen into inflexibility and uniformity.

The trouble is that 'multiple-input systems' also have their problems: often enough falling into disorder. So, in working on problems, it is good to bounce one idea off others - but not too many others.

Take non-accredited careers-education courses: which are usually institutionally marginal. To get off the margin, we might say, we must be accredited. Single-input, single-response.

A multiple-input version would look deeper: there is a relative lack of transfer-of-learning in accredited courses, but transferability is an absolute requirement of careers education. Look wider: careers education is part of a movement for life-role relevance in curriculum, but this would be hampered by separate-subject status. Look for the dynamics: examinability risks losing much of its resources, coverage and processes, but it is these which give the best of careers education its impact. And so by playing only for position we could wind up with high-status futility. We would not be the first.

Important complexity does get hidden. Take policy: there are always more possibilities than the launch-event envisages. The progressive professional elaboration of the initially simple Technical and Vocational Education Initiative was critical to its success.

Dealing with complexity means knowing the difference between facts and factors: facts sift into factors; and factors give us our key concepts. There are always a multitude of facts, but they must be reduced to an optimal number of factors. Three-to-five is manageable ('D', 'O', 'T', 'S' - count them!). One factor is at least two-too-few. And so 'single-input' is a fixated mouse, aware only of the cheese. But, 'multiple input' is a disordered rabbit, with too many ways to run. Us rabbits need liberating simplicity, and them mice offer only entrapping simple-mindedness.

Take Connexions: which must work with the deeply-embedded allegiances, attachments, and feelings of 'the excluded'. But it also seriously disturbs the structures of careers work; it provokes a scramble for resources; and it badly needs to learn how operationally to manage diversity and conflict. Your mouse might think he knows where the cheese is, but my rabbit can get very confused.

Argument number one for complexity is that simplicity ignores too much. We need to be able to sift complexity into useful order. Such thinking is hard won, bouncing one idea off another. It is not achieved by masking troublesome complexity: that would be simple-mindedness.

And so, evidence-based practice cannot be a single-input guide to action. Research results in careers work are rarely conclusive because of the complexity: too many variables, variations, and variabilities. Mapping the links between research questions, findings, contexts and indications are

classic examples of the need to take one thing with another. It is why former senior civil servant Neil Williams (2002) says that government methods for gathering and using evidence need extensive reform.

An independent NGO would map the way.

3. General for local

You don't know what schools should do about accrediting careers education, nor do I. And neither does the QCA. These are local decisions, based on local understanding of the factors.

Guidance is an applied field: our job is to work out how to use knowledge. The only place where knowledge can be used is a locality; there is nowhere else. However central-generated, the factors we identify must, then, be locally recognisable.

This is argument number two for complexity: complexity is power. The more inclusive the factors, the fuller the grasp of reality and the more options there are for action. Where complexity has been taken into account, there is always something useful that can be done.

DOTS was a good example. It reviewed salient facts and set them in a comprehensive frame – with a broad sweep. The result is scannable: 'self into opportunity, plus decision, equals transition'. It survived while it was wide enough to take account of pretty-well all the facts, for pretty-well any programme.

Organisation-development theorist Michael Fullan shows how people who are expected to deliver a new programme must be helped to understand both its operation and its rationale. This always requires working with others - on the key local facts, how we must adapt the action, and who is in the best position to do what. It is impossible to manage such a process from a distance. An NGO can usefully frame the factors; the pertinent enquiries will be local.

Academics have been known to look askance at local action research. But we must understand how 'what works' works differently in different localities.

4. Learner interests

In an earlier stab at 'career conversations', Charles Truax and Bob Carkhuff acknowledged that people in helping roles were - on average - no more helpful than just leaving things to take their course. But Charles and Bob were persistent, and disentangled from the data a significant finding: while helpers didn't do much to jack up *average* improvement measures, their efforts did pump up *standard deviations*. And so, for every client significantly lifted up the scale by helpers, another was significantly depressed. Help can harm. Inadvertent damage to clients is not uncommon in personal services (medicos call it 'iatrogenic illness').

Are there any possibilities for collateral damage in contemporary careers work? You bet! And recent trends are among the culprits. It is not that these trends are, in themselves, bad; nor is it that, case by case, the damage is massive. It is that improvement in quality might depend, as much as anything, on bucking the trends – at least to some extent. Some independent-minded careers workers are already bucking - not entirely, but enough to acknowledge the duty of care.

Bucking the trend sometimes means avoiding the most insidious form of 'producer-capture': not cynical exploitation of vulnerable clients, but doing harm, at the very moment we are most strenuously trying to help.

Such issues can only be resolved on the basis of a willingness to examine impact on real lives. Market-driven customer satisfaction surveys will not do this: it needs deeper insights; in particular, it needs a well-founded understanding. Developing that understanding is the only conceivable justification for theory. If theory is any good, it will help us to explain the difference between what we tried to do, and what we actually did. It will also help us to know what to do about this.

Ill-founded understanding can be discarded when political whim no longer needs it. Careers-work commentator Suzy Harris recently repeated Inge Bates's half-forgotten warning: 'Guidance is a malleable concept'!. That means that muscle can easily push it into any shape muscle favours. The need to grapple with commercial and political muscle persuaded Antonio Gramsci of the importance of civil society. Guidance is not exempted from the responsibility.

The trends described above were set in motion at the time of the CBI papers. Policy analyst Kanishka Jayasuriya traces a general policy shift over the same period. It moves from concepts of 'welfare' for clients, to concepts of 'contracts' with clients. But, he argues, all has been made to rest on simplistic ideas about what he calls 'a "privatised" understanding of individual autonomy'. He finds its consequences deeply unfair.

So, when we see this wholly in terms of learner interests, do we?

Independent tactics

The list on page 28 is fourteen items for a strategic NGO agenda. A careers-work NGO should produce a 'briefing' on each of these, and more – much as Greenpeace and Demos do. Both are, in that sense, think-tanks.

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trends require us to work...

which means we need to know how...

1 ...with policy-driven funding regimes - programmes are re-shaped into fundable and, therefore, commercially-significant forms	...to enable cooperation between nominally 'competing' providers and maximise what even 'privatised' providers can offer
2 ...with markets - commercial relationships are being edged into dealings between providers and learners	...to avoid penalties for more vulnerable learners
3 ...with targets and performance indicators - accountability measures proliferate	...to deal with possibilities that they do not point to real effectiveness, and resist their arbitrarily shaping our work
4 ...with centrally-generated advice - policy-founded advice on practice is freely offered	...however over-stretched, to develop deeper, wider and local bases for action
5 ...with change at work - we respond to the changing demands for skills, flexibility and self reliance	...to help with the impact of change on life-structures, social attachment, personal engagement and on finding meaning
6 ...with lists of behaviours and skills - such indicators are used as predictors of successful career development	...to question the validity of these predictions, and be alert to the consequences of their use for the commodification of learners
7 ...with choice - choice has been allowed to become the central concept for guidance	...to take account of differences between (say) 'choice' and 'impulse', and how the formulation of present 'choices' is prejudiced by early experience.
8 ...with computer-assisted guidance - CAGs is widely urged	...to avoid the premature 'fixing' of career intentions in impressionable learners
9 ...with progress files - various forms of profiling are used concurrently for learning and selection purposes	...to avoid the consequences of these conflicting agendas for inhibiting learner disclosure
10 ...with work experience - work experience is frequently treated as a more-or-less self-contained programme	...to position work experience as access to people, places and tasks - in a more completely designed and embedded overall learning programme
11 ...with kite-marking - quality markers are widely used	...to appreciate that indicators need not mark appropriate and effective help, and to avoid the distortion that can result from their inappropriate use
12 ...with anti-stereotyping - almost all of our work nods in the direction of fairness concerning gender, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality and special needs	...to engage the real dynamics of stratification - so that origin does not predict destiny and inter-generation disadvantage is not perpetuated
13 ...with designated outcomes - QCA-canvassed outcomes are largely content-focussed	...to attend to the processes of career learning - so that they enable transfer-of-learning and learning-to-learn
14 ...with Connexions - discussions are about resource competition, feared losses to achieving clients, the erosion of past structures, and the impact on helping roles	...to seek ways of effectively organising diverse human and material resources into a locally deliverable programme

Think-tanks are enquiring, analysing and disseminating NGOs. Will Hutton's emergent Work Foundation is an example. Others, like IPPR, have had their independence challenged – on the suspicion that funding makes them too careful about what they say. That's for BONGOs and GRINGOs. The issue of 'who gets to do what in our societies' needs an INdiGO - an 'independent non-government organisation'. The tactics must also be independent, engaging abilities like the best of our academics and journalists.

INdiGOs are originators, Any half-decent workshop 'jockey' can put together an engaging staff-development event - on any agenda. Jockeys ride other people's beasts (or spin other people's discs). INdiGOs don't follow agendas, they set them.

Hence probing enquiry. Any competent 'jobbing' researcher can assemble a methodology for what the client wants to know. An INdiGO formulates the questions.

Chris Warhurst and Dennis Nickson, at the Work Foundation, fuse academic and journalistic abilities in enquiry, analysis and dissemination. And, in so doing, they exhibit an important NGO quality: media savvy which attracts the interested attention, not only of careers-work 'insiders', but also of society-at-large. In contemporary careers work, that means attracting the interested attention of social, youth, education-welfare and voluntary workers.

And then there is Young Victor. We need the young victors - Peter Benenson's 'ordinary people'; and we need them in action-mode. No think-tank in our field has yet credibly engaged the people whose lives are most affected by the issues of who-gets-to-do-what.

That's why we need a think-tank – to activate civil society with GetUpNGO.

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Reading

Kanishka Jayasuriya (2002). 'The new contractualism - neo-liberal or democratic?'. *The Political Quarterly*, 73 (3),

Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000). 'The ambiguity of NGOs'. *New Left Review*, 2,

Greg Philo and David Miller (2001). *Market Killing - what the Free Market Does and What Social Scientists Can Do About It*. London; Longman,

Neil Williams (2002). 'Evidence-and policy - towards a new political-administrative settlement'. *The Political Quarterly*, 73 (1),

Upcoming material

With Kath Wright of Careers Essex, Bill is working on *How to Integrate Connexions and Citizenship with Curriculum*. Further news will appear on the Career-Learning Café Website - www.hihohiho.com.

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