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Narratives and career guidance: from theory into practice

Hazel Reid and Malcolm Scott

Introduction

What do we 'see' when we look at photographs of ourselves as children? We recognise the child and we may remember the location, or recall feelings connected to the favourite toy, the new outfit or the school uniform worn with pride. But, there is a feeling of separation – is this child related to who we are now? We recall past events as fragments, but there is also a sense of continuity alongside the many changes we experience as we age. If we believe that the choices we make as adults are influenced, although not determined, by our childhood selves; what use can we make of our memories? How can both young people and adults be encouraged to tell the stories that are meaningful to them in terms of their current need for career guidance? And if they do, is it helpful? This chapter discusses an on-going project which is exploring these questions in order to assess the usefulness of a narrative-based approach in career guidance work. It considers the power of storytelling and the context for developing a new approach, before describing the research project, the approach used and the findings that are emerging.



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The power of stories

Throughout history, cultures have embraced storytelling to shape identity and to impart listeners with an understanding of cultural roots and origins. Stories continue to shape our own identity, arising from our personal, cultural and social circumstances, and provide a continuing fascination in their ability to reveal the forces that have shaped that identity. The popularity of the BBC television programme 'Who Do You Think You Are?' is evidence of this, along with the proliferation of published biographies, autobiographies, diaries and obituaries which all offer the reader an insight into how the individual's identity was created. The success of soaps and 'reality TV', along with the cult of celebrity and gossip columns, provides further evidence of society's embracing of this powerful medium. This has been further developed more recently with the phenomenon of social networking sites, allowing individuals the opportunity to tell their own stories on a seemingly equal footing.

Stories therefore have the power to shape experience and the stories we tell about ourselves count for something: they are, in that sense, 'telling tales'. However, the phrase 'telling tales' may suggest that they may be regarded as suspect versions of the truth, evoking the picture of a child being 'told off' for telling untruths. But, the story that the client is asked to *re-call* in the context of a career guidance interview, is not merely a factual report of a memory, but is a *re-interpretation*. Stories then live on in the present – providing current shape to the teller's experience. In this way, the teller has begun to construct a present reality out of past events. Used within a guidance context, the analysis of stories is not the main focus. It is as the stories are told *out loud* that there develops a sense of continuity about who we are, how at this turning point, a decision can relate to the continuity of a life theme. The point of doing this therefore is to engage the client, to encourage them to reflect at a deeper level and enable them to gain greater self-awareness in their search for a meaningful career/life identity.

Why this, why now?

Established matching models of careers guidance (for example, Holland, 1985; Rodger, 1952) have always had inherent limitations in that they tend to assume some stability on the part of both the client and the opportunities being explored. The increasing pace of change within the world

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of work suggests a more dynamic approach is required, which reflects both the rapidly changing world and the potential for growth within the client. The influence on career guidance of the Connexions service in England (and the wider inclusion agenda elsewhere), has seen a move towards a more holistic or counselling approach when working with clients. This is not just the case for those practitioners working in an 'intensive' role, but is also evident among career guidance practitioners helping clients explore barriers to decision-making or successful transitions. Ensuring the client has the opportunity to 'tell their story' has been a starting point in many approaches to counselling (for example, Egan, 2007) and fits within a guidance context, especially when related to the goal of guidance in its broadest sense: that being to enable people to create satisfying lives for themselves. Research suggests, however, that trait and factor (matching) approaches are still the most common technique used in guidance interviews (Bimrose, 2010 – this volume), whereas career choice and decision making takes place within a social, historical and cultural context which is far more complex. Within this changed landscape, knowledge about 'self' and the opportunities that fit our view of self and the working world can be viewed as socially constructed - malleable rather than fixed. Choice and decision making therefore become a far less certain affair. That said, building new and flexible models for the 21st century, with all its postmodern concerns, is, by implication, not a straightforward task. The research task reported on here was to explore constructivist approaches that could be applied and evaluated for career guidance within a UK setting.

So, what has happened so far?

The project to explore a constructivist approach for career guidance in 1-1 interviews in the UK, was set up by Hazel Reid and Linden West of Canterbury Christ Church University, and involved eight guidance practitioners (seven from Connexions Kent & Medway). A review of current literature was undertaken, followed by three meetings to plan the way forward. Following a discussion of the literature, it became clear that a development of the narrative approach was the most likely option. The group liked the Savickas approach (1997, 2005) and valued the opportunity to see the model in action through watching and critiquing a DVD (Savickas, 2006), and later experimenting with the approach within the 'safe' space of a group meeting. It was agreed that the Savickas' systematic approach, which provided a structure that could be incorporated into a known process model of interviewing (Egan, 2007; Reid and Fielding, 2007)

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was useful, but that it needed adaptation for the more diffident and less 'direct' style of interviewing in the UK: where guidance practitioners do not view themselves as 'counsellors'. In making the latter point we are conscious of three things: firstly Savickas is clear that it is the client's words and phrases that are feedback and that an analysis is not the aim; secondly, we are making assumptions about a 'UK style of interviewing' and finally, the boundaries between guidance and counselling are not clear cut.

Interviews with young people using the Savickas approach were then recorded in a number of settings, transcribed and the transcripts supplemented by the practitioners' reflections on the use of the model. Preliminary findings were disseminated by practitioners at Connexions Kent & Medway staff conferences and events during 2008, and a workshop presented at the Institute of Career Guidance annual conference at Cardiff in November of that year. The work has also been presented by the researchers at national and international conferences (for example, Reid and West, 2009) and has been published elsewhere as the work has progressed (Reid and West, 2008; Reid, 2009).

What framework have practitioners been using?

The figure outlines the framework taken from Savickas (2005, 2006) and adapted for career guidance interviews that took place during 2008 in the South East of England. Savickas states (2006) that there needs to be a period of reflection after the meeting where the client has an opportunity to 'test' the ideas. It is in the follow up meeting (which may not be 'face-to-face') that 'reality checking' takes place – shaped by subsequent reflection and the experience of the action taken. For instance, if 'being a vet' does not appear to be achievable, how can the client set realistic goals to work towards being a successful veterinary nurse or animal care assistant, or the pet shop assistant that everyone goes to for the best advice?

Follow-up questions used via the 'phone or email included:

- What did we get wrong?
- What are your reflections on the discussion and the initial action?
- What are the goals now – are these the same or different?

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- What further action is required?
- How will that be reviewed?
- What else needs to happen?

Beginnings – negotiating a contract.

- Questioning: How can I be useful?
- Asking: Tell me why is this important now?
- Explaining: Format, number of meetings, note taking and so on
- Identifying: Topics and related issues
- Agreeing: Aspects of confidentiality, how to proceed – an agenda.

Middles - exploring the story.

The task is to create a space where the person can ‘play’ with ideas: to move beyond their expectations of what ‘an interview’ should be. This can be both surprising and challenging for the individual, and the practitioner will need to be persistent and not ‘give up’ too quickly. As always, genuineness and honesty are important; e.g. ‘The reason I asked that question is ...’ or ‘What I’d like to try here is... it may help you to think about... how would you feel about trying that?’. It is at this second ‘stage’ that Savickas’ six favourite questions are used:

- Role models when young (these can be a ‘real’ person or a character from a book, TV show, cartoon) – try for three
- Magazines / TV shows (favourites, ones that are looked at regularly)
- Hobbies / free time interests (e.g. ‘What do you like to do in your free time?’)
- Books – all time favourites (could be films or other entertainment media)
- Favourite saying/motto (best describes an approach to life), could be a tee-shirt message or a ‘tag’
- Favourite school subjects / and those disliked.

The exploration continues by visiting stories from childhood. Savickas suggests the stories selected reflect the current dilemma that brings a person to career counselling at this ‘turning point’ – it reflects their *pre-occupations* in both senses of the word (Savickas, 2005, 2006); past in present and present in the past. These are the *telling* stories, meaningful (rather than factual) at the present time. The stories *rehearse* the problem and can lead to insight and potential solutions. Questions focus on:

- Identifying the 1st significant story – what happened next (getting the detail)?
- Asking for two more stories – if the person is really stuck it **may** be helpful to prompt, e.g. ‘How about when you were in primary school... when you moved up into secondary school?’ It is also important that they know the story is not being judged; they do not *recount* a story to impress the listener
- Summarising the essence of the stories by turning them into headlines for a newspaper
- Listening for the first verb – the first things they say
- Summarising the stories – ‘feeding back’ actual words and working with the person to identify potential themes
- Relating these to the presenting issue at the start of the conversation
- Working at joint identification of the life interests
- Relating these to future education, training and/or career goals.

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Endings - Having identified the goals, there is agreement on what action is required:

- Identifying potential action
- Evaluating potential action
- Clarifying the action steps
- Checking /asking – ‘So, what has been achieved today?’

Figure 1: The Savickas narrative career counselling model (our adaptation) (Reid, 2009)

Findings from the project thus far

Having been trained in the three-stage model, structure was always going to be important with any new approach. While most of the group followed the structure as outlined above, this was used in a flexible, rather than rigid way. Indeed, through serendipity at least one practitioner adapted the approach further and ended up following the framework, but the other way round. The starting point became the stories, whereas Savickas saves these until later in the interview. However, the approach seemed to work, with the stories somehow settling the client, enhancing engagement and participation and building their confidence. What is important to remember here is that it is not the model that is important but the engagement of the client – the point is getting them to talk in a way that is meaningful for them. For some clients it may be useful to use just the six questions and not explore stories and for others exploring role models – ‘the people, characters that inspired you when you were young’ could be the most powerful tool. It is not essential that *all* aspects of the model are used.

In all the interviews, what did prove vital was a clear explanation of the process, as well as making sure the client (and other interested adults such as parents/carers and school staff) understood the theoretical concept that underpinned the approach. A phrase such as ‘the theory goes that the stories that come to your mind are connected to the decisions you are trying to make’, provides the client with that understanding and gives them a sense of ownership of the interaction; encouraging their active participation, alongside obtaining their permission to interact within a client-centered context. The approach had the effect of inspiring participation from shy, reluctant or withdrawn clients, while encouraging deeper thinking from other more confident young people. Encouraging the client to tell their stories proved invaluable in gaining a much clearer insight into their present situation, or the constructed reality in which they operated. The

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stories therefore allow the adviser to get to know the client, avoiding superficial interactions; and developing the story builds confidence in both the adviser and the client to discuss the deeper issues that often emerge. Probing the story for the detail, rather than just naming the event, also seemed to be crucial to the success of this approach. It was the nuances, the background and the responses to the question ‘and what happened next?’ that seemed to encourage the client to become most reflective; leading to greater insight into the life themes and their links with current and future interests.

Moving on, the group noted that careful use of language helps to address the issue of power between the adviser and the client. The Savickas’ opening phrase of ‘how can I be useful?’ was adopted, rather than the traditional ‘how can I help?’ The latter places the adviser in a more privileged, ‘expert’ position. Other phrases were adapted for the UK context; particularly regarding the motto which became a slogan, perhaps to be printed on a badge or tee-shirt. As with any guidance interaction, it was clear that the process should remain within the boundaries of the career guidance context. In ‘looking at stories from when you were growing up’, we are not asking the client to ‘tell me all about your childhood’. Several of the practitioners expressed some concern that the stories and issues raised could lead the adviser to stray across the boundary into a counselling role; but it proved to be the case that any such issues were contained within an effective guidance setting, later supporting the referral of the client to more appropriate support if required.

As the practitioners worked with a variety of clients in a range of settings, it was possible to gauge the effectiveness of the narrative approach with several client groups; including the unemployed and some clients with additional needs, as well as the confused and/or academically able with a looming deadline for university application or 6th form course choice. It was particularly pleasing to note that the approach seemed to be equally effective across each of these client groups. The ‘sample’ was opportunistic and no claims are made here for wider generalization: as a qualitative piece of research the aim was to gather ‘telling’ case studies for wider dissemination.

It was during the discussion of the stories with the client that the main development of the approach within the UK context seems to have taken place. In the DVD example, Savickas appears to intervene more during this stage and, in the groups’ view, seemed to take a greater lead

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in terms of finding the significance of the stories for the client. Again, with (for want of a better phrase) typical 'British' diffidence and a tentative exploration of the client's feelings, practitioners found that it was more helpful to encourage the client to begin this identification of likely themes. Many clients seemed to have no problem drawing the strands together and understanding the insight that had been provided. Others found this more difficult, but in most cases, a gentle intervention from the adviser along the lines of 'well, I'm wondering if ...', accompanied by one or two ideas, generally gained a confirmation from the client, leading to further examples of how the issue had affected their life. It was the client-centeredness of this approach to the discussion that seemed to give it the greatest power, and to provide the client with that 'eureka moment' of understanding.

Close attention to the Savickas DVD reveals that what Savickas does is feedback the actual words and phrases (noted down) that the client uses. He does not offer an interpretation, but reflects back the key points and phrases that the client *has been enabled to articulate*. It is also noteworthy that it is the client that shifts from recalling to interpretation when they turn the essence of the stories into headlines for a newspaper. It is at this point that many clients may find deeper meaning, related to the current issue that brings them to guidance, and where important life themes begin to emerge. For others this may happen sooner (if the questions are asked first) and a discussion of role models or family mottos prove insightful enough. Through this approach the life themes are brought to consciousness and related to possible career goals, where they can be developed. This is expressed in the powerful phrase where career choices can help us to 'actively master what we have passively suffered' (Savickas, 2006). For example one client's stories told of sibling rivalry, always being outshone by a younger sister. Her 'eureka moment', which was not reached without difficulty, was to move beyond what she perceived as the career expectations of her family and to explore her more deeply held interests where she felt she could be 'first' rather than 'second best'.

Other points to consider

A 'standard' interview slot of around 40 minutes is not enough time to undertake a narrative interview if using the entire model. In most cases, it was the lack of the client's progress during a previous three-stage model interview that led to the adviser suggesting another appointment to

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undertake a different approach. Fifty minutes seemed the average time taken, but several lasted an hour, and the follow-up appointment or contact also needs to be arranged.

A narrative career guidance interview is not required for every client. The three-stage model is generally an effective approach for the majority, but having the skill to undertake a narrative interview can be seen as having another 'tool in the box' to help those clients for whom the three stage model is not effective. The narrative approach is therefore not designed to replace an existing way of undertaking guidance work, but can be seen as providing the adviser with more flexibility to work effectively with, perhaps, more 'difficult' clients towards assisting them with decision making and transition. The framework that was devised for this approach became the basic structure, but was never a check list. The questions need careful explanation and adaptation according to the client's circumstances and the responses need developing appropriately; depending on the flow of the interview and the ground covered. As indicated above, for many clients it may be that the greatest insight into their situation comes from the role models, the motto or the stories. Consequently, flexibility in using the approach is vital, as the adviser has to identify and develop the most fruitful aspects with the client to enable them to make the most progress. Savickas suggests that family members should not be included among role models offered by the client. He argues that these are given to, rather than chosen by, the client, and as such, are generally less helpful in identifying admirable qualities. In most cases, this proved the case in our narrative approach, but on at least one occasion, a family member was included, among others, as the inspirational quality identified by the client seemed to fit with their ultimate goal. However, it seems that, again, flexibility may well be the key to how this is used.

The client's headlines for the stories provided a pivotal point where the crucial insight is obtained by identifying the first verb, thereby assisting the client to begin their own interpretation. Many clients find this difficult and need more space for thinking time. Clients often need encouragement to relate the first story they think of, and an explanation of why this is important (that is, that it usually relates to the decision they are currently considering) often helps. Stories told to impress the adviser are seldom useful. Some of the stories told by clients will be troubling by nature and may generate their share of tears (and the adviser may also be affected emotionally on hearing the story, particularly if it resonates with their own experience). It is the responsibility of the adviser, however, to encourage the client to work through these stories to identify the issues that are leading to the current 'block' or difficulty with decision making or making a

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transition. It would appear to be the strength of the narrative approach to guidance that these issues are identified through its use, and can be dealt with and addressed, to assist the client to move forward. The supportive role of the adviser is noted here, in listening to the stories while also containing them. What the narrative approach offers is a 'safe' space for this containment, within the usual boundaries of confidentiality in a guidance setting. In other words, never underestimate the power of being listened to.

The practitioners engaged in the project found it helpful to use the approach with each other before using the framework with clients. This provided the opportunity to try out the theory, to see if the links between the stories and constructed adult life existed, and to gain practice using the narrative approach. And, it was comforting to discover that all the usual guidance skills applied, just as with the more established guidance methods. A point to bear in mind here was that this was not role playing a client, but practising using one's own responses and stories. The difficulty here is that practitioners are less likely to be at a point where they are trying to make a career decision, or stuck at a transition point (although, of course, that may not be the case).

Feedback on using the narrative approach

So, in order to develop use of the approach the practitioners needed to apply it in 'real' interviews. The final meeting of the group provided an opportunity to listen to examples of applying the approach and to discuss further development. Practitioners' evaluation on using the approach included the following comments:

- A powerful way to get clients to think in deep and unexpected ways
- Gets to the root of the indecision and leads to more positive outcomes
- The client was transformed when he started talking about his achievements in early childhood – now starting to make positive comments about himself
- Even when the childhood story was quite painful or negative, it worked well because they were in control - this is the story the client had chosen to tell and they put their own interpretation on it.

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Beyond the usual brief feedback that a practitioner will seek at the end of any guidance intervention, practitioners were also asked to ensure that they captured the views of their clients on what would have been a very different type of interview. Listed below are some of their feedback comments:

- That was interesting – I wasn't expecting that!
- Yes, definitely useful. Given me lots to think about – opened my eyes quite a lot actually and made me think more, rather than making rash decisions
- Yeah, I've had a careers interview before but this one – it's been really good actually – never really considered this properly before
- Personally, it's been quite interesting – I'm having to decide the way I want things to go
- (Phone follow up) Thanks for the interview. I've been talking to my mum about all this stuff now
- It was good – we experimented on this and tried it out together to see what came out.

This last comment is pleasing as the ethos of the project has been to work collaboratively with a sense of shared purpose between researchers, practitioners and clients. But perhaps the most powerful comment was from the client who said, 'I did Pathfinder, but it came up with fish farmer and was so 'in your face'. I've never thought of all this before, **and it all came from me!**' The last part was said whilst pointing at her heart or 'soul'.

Conclusion

The project enabled practitioners to offer support to each other in experimenting with a new approach for guidance interviews and to build confidence in using it with clients. Several comments on how this use of a new approach affected practitioners were noted, of particular relevance were:

- I was uneasy using a different approach and felt slightly out of control
- At first I was exhausted trying to remember what to do and felt like a student again

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- (It was) difficult to move away from your usual script – but my script may not fit the client.

What became clear as the project developed was that some practitioners were more comfortable using the Savickas model than others. For some it was difficult to find the time and confidence to try a new approach, which may suggest there is a need for more structured training in its use. A new approach can be used effectively within a 45 – 50 minute interview, but initially it does require more thinking time until its use becomes more familiar. As part of the analysis phase the researchers (Hazel and Linden) recorded a dialogue where they considered the themes that arose within the transcripts and the possible impact and constraints felt by the practitioners in using a new approach. Of the eight practitioners, one became part of the group because of an interest derived from a taught module on our Masters programme and was not a trained guidance professional. For this person the underpinning understanding of guidance and counselling principles were, not surprisingly, not evident in their work, but this has provided a useful contrast to the work of trained professionals. Of the remaining seven practitioners, three withdrew subsequently due to pressure of other work: an indication that using a new approach can be challenging on a number of fronts. The remaining four practitioners are still using the adapted model, some more than others and not all of the time. Interviews have taken place with these practitioners to explore the auto/biographical resonances of the work, in order both to evaluate further the usefulness of the approach as well as to think about wider training policy. This will be the next stage in the story of moving from theory to practice in the use of a narrative approach in career guidance.

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Profile

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Other recent publications on narrative or constructivist career counselling include:

Reid, H.L. and West, L. (2011) Struggling for space: narrative methods and the crisis of professionalism in career guidance in England, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 39, 5, 397-410.

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