



Career writing: Creative, expressive and reflective approaches to narrative identity formation in students in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether creative, expressive, and reflective writing contributes to the formation of a narrative career identity that offers students in higher education a sense of meaning and direction. The contents of writing done by students who participated in 2 two-day writing courses before and after work placements and of a control group were compared. Employers were also asked to evaluate students' performance. Writing samples were analyzed using the Linguistic Index Word Count program and an instrument based on Dialogical Self Theory. Work-placement self-reports were gathered, examined, and used as anecdotal evidence presented in the form of case studies. The results show that career writing can promote the development of career identity and holds promise as a narrative career guidance approach.

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1. Introduction

Young people preparing for work need career guidance that will see them through unpredictable journeys. Traditional career-choice models are no longer working (Jarvis, 2014), as they do not successfully address the compounding factors of complexity, individualization, labor market insecurity, and the need for social and emotional competence in the workplace (Cherniss, 2000). As well, parents are frequently ill-equipped to help their children in making suitable career choices because of this increased complexity and the disappearance of the 'grand narratives' that used to guide choice making (Meijers, 2013). Studies also show that few students are intrinsically motivated in their studies and a majority have no idea of their career direction (Gatto, 2009; Holt, 1995). Dropout rates in European secondary and higher education are between 30 and 50% (Eurostat, 2008), which is partly a result of rather random educational choices. A Dutch study (Borghans, Coenen, Golsteyn, Hijgen, & Sieben, 2008) estimated that the societal costs of students taking longer to complete their studies as a result of unsuitable choices was 5.7 billion euros a year. Not only the 'cafeteria of options' (Guichard, 2009, p. 252) makes it difficult for young people to make choices but also the fact that the labor market has changed drastically in recent decades. There is a marked increase in contingent labor contracts and job insecurity (Goldstene, 2013). At the same time, the educational system has not kept pace with the resulting need for students to become more proactive; instead education continues to emphasize "rational–cognitive conceptions of knowledge and cumulative–linear models of learning" (Briton, 2012, p. 48).

Employers are looking for intrinsically motivated employees who not only have technical skills and knowledge – which is where schools still focus most of their energy – but also possess the so-called 'soft-skills' (Hillage, Regan, Dickson, & McLoughlin, 2002; Lafer, 2004; Schulz, 2008). Indeed, the role of emotions in career learning is key for a number of reasons. First, there is a need to cultivate emotional competence in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983) because of the economy's focus on service provision. Second, *affect*

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effects choice making overall (Kidd, 2004; Meijers & Wardekker, 2002), and third, psychological factors must be attended to in the face of setbacks (Krumboltz, Foley, & Cotter, 2013) and insecurity (Pryor & Bright, 2011). Where guidance and education used to be focused on head and hands, there is now a requirement to also develop the heart (Claxton, 2006).

We propose that career writing can help students cultivate affective development, improve intrinsic motivation, and contribute to their ability to make suitable choices. The idea posed by Lengelle and Meijers (2014) is that students must learn to construct flexible and emotionally salient personal narratives that replace the stable and standard 'grand narratives' of the past. In this qualitative study, we evaluate career writing's usefulness with a group of third-year Dutch bachelor's students.

2. Career writing

Career writing is one of several narrative approaches to career construction (Cochran, 1997; Savickas et al., 2010) and draws its forms and practices primarily from the field of writing for personal and professional development (Bolton, 1999, 2010; Hunt & Sampson, 2002). It is intended to help individuals construct a career identity in narrative or poetic forms and does so by facilitating the exploration of life themes and life's disorientating dilemmas (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). The three types of writing that fall under the umbrella of career writing are creative, expressive, and reflective writing. Table 1 shows the definitions and distinctions.

Creative writing in the context of career writing refers to the writing of fiction or (fictional) autobiography, with the potential of gaining self-insight (Bolton, 1999; Hunt & Sampson, 2002). The idea here is that one's truths are often told in the form of "lies" made up to tell a story; the facts may not be accurate but the words reflect the thoughts and emotions associated with lived experience. Academics and practitioners of writing for personal development have found that fiction can be a way of exploring professional issues that are too problematic or not accessible enough to deal with in any other way (Bolton, 1994).

Expressive writing research has been done in the past three decades into the therapeutic effects of writing in the face of job loss (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994), workplace injustice (Barclay & Skarlicki, 2009) and other traumatic experiences. In this context, expressive writing refers to writing where an individual is encouraged to explore his/her deepest feelings and thoughts about an emotionally charged or negative life event (for an overview see Pennebaker, 2011).

Reflective writing refers to putting on paper one's thoughts about life events in a way that can "take us out of our own narrow range of experience and help us to perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints and potential scenarios" (Bolton, 2010, p. 10). Reflective writing means one evokes the observer in one's work and words. This form of writing is in principle non-fiction and requires the questioning and de-construction of existing identifications that might stand in the way of one's agency (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009). In this context, existing identifications might refer to beliefs such as "I am not good at setting my own course ..." or "My siblings are more successful than I am" *Reflexive writing*, an extension of reflective writing, involves 'doubling the self' (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 4) and working directly with the self as multi-voiced, so that we are both 'inside' and 'outside' ourselves simultaneously while also "retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self" (Bolton, 2010, p. 4). Where reflective writing refers to the presence of a conscious observer of our experiences, reflexive writing invites more voices to the table, not only to be observed but also to be embodied and tried out. In short, reflective writing allows us to watch the many (inner and outer) characters on the stage of our lives, while reflexive writing lets us get on the stage and try on the various selves.

3. Problem

We proposed that 2 two-day career-writing courses – one before and one after a work placement – would foster the construction of career narratives among participants as compared with students who did not do the course (referred to here as controls). That career writing might indeed show beneficial change was based on research that showed that experiences alone do not lead to a person's learning and development (Bloch, 2005; Flum & Blustein, 2000), but that *experiences and a dialogue* about those experiences contribute to real career learning (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011).

Table 1
Creative, expressive, and reflective/reflexive writing.

Category	Creative	Expressive	Reflective/reflexive
Brief definition	The writing of fictional pieces for the purposes of personal and professional development.	Writing about one's deepest thoughts and emotions surrounding a painful experience for the purpose of processing life events.	Writing from life experience, reflecting to gain insight, constructing meaning and direction, and questioning pre-existing identifications.
Primary form	Fiction	Non-fiction	Non-fiction/inquiry
Role or archetype	Artist	Healer	Scientist/philosopher
Chief qualities	Creativity Imagination	Expressiveness Openness	Reflexivity/examination structure
Vital drive/goal	Play exploration	Pain/resolution (re)connection	Insight/a sense of order
Pitfall/dangers	Superficiality, flights of fancy	Rumination, feelings of disempowerment and victimization	Over-intellectualizing and rationalizing

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