

A Postmodern Approach to Career Education: What Does it Look Like?

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Professor Wendy Patton
School of Learning and Professional Studies
Queensland University of Technology
Kelvin Grove Campus QLD 4059
Australia

w.patton@qut.edu.au

Tel 61738643562

Fax 61738643987

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Abstract

Changes in our concepts of work and career reflect a move from an industrial era to what has been termed a postindustrial, information or postmodern era, an era wherein our concepts of career guidance also need to change. A number of authors have commented on aspects of career guidance practice which need to incorporate changes, such as career education and career counselling (Guichard, 2001; McMahan & Patton, 2000; Watts, 2001). This paper will add to the call for greater application of constructivist approaches to career education. It will critique current practices and present strategies which reflect such approaches.

The rationale for career education has its original roots in industrial era notions of education and career. The traditional concept of career focused on job for life within a framework of vertical progression. The choice of job or career tended to be made at the “end” of formal full-time education, and as education led on to work, the role of education was to facilitate the transition between these two systems. The role of career guidance broadly was as a mechanism to facilitate the larger sorting process and the individual choice process at the transition between school and work (Watts, 1980). Within this context, career education was a curriculum designed to prepare individuals for the transition. Early definitions reflected the importance of preparing individuals for career decision-making through a systematic and integrated curricular process, and were primarily derived from the work of Hoyt and his colleagues in the United States of America (Hoyt, Evans, Mackin, & Mangin, 1974), and Watts and colleagues in the United Kingdom (Law & Watts, 1977).

Early work in Australia was heavily based on work in these countries (Morgan & Hart, 1977). Cooksey (1979) defined career education as “concerned with the development of skills, attitudes and understanding which will help students live and work in the adult world” (p.7) and this underpinned much early program development (Queensland Education Department, 1984). In 1992 the Australian Education Council adopted the following definition: “Career education in Australian schools is concerned with the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes through a planned program of learning experiences, which will assist students to make informed decisions about school and post-school options and enable

effective participation in working life” (p. 6). This latter definition has formed the basis of a subsequent definition that is included in the Australian Blueprint for Career Development draft developed in 2003 (Miles Morgan, 2003).

As indicated in these definitions, much work in career education focused on preparing young people for the transitions within school, and the transition from school to work. In addition the emphasis of this work was largely information based, with activities centred around work observation, work experience, self-learning activities, and job investigation activities. Traditionally, very little attention has been paid to the large number of influences on career development as identified in more recent theoretical formulations such as the developmental-contextual approach (Vondracek, Lerner & Schulenberg, 1986) and the Systems Theory Framework (Patton & McMahon, 1999).

However, as has been well documented, the changes in constructions of career and education have changed dramatically. Watts (1996) describes these changes in terms of a “careerquake” where traditional foundations are being shaken as technology and globalisation change the nature and structure of work. In addition the “nature of the relationship between organisations and workers has changed from one based on tenure and loyalty to one based on economically driven short-term contracts” (Patton & McMahon, 1999, p. 182). As such there has been a change in the psychological contract between worker and employer and the career position needs to be constantly renegotiated. Such a process requires much greater responsibility on the part of the individual to enact their own career building process. Security in the work place is now defined in terms of an individual’s employability, not in terms of tenured employment. As such new definitions of career have emerged, with Watts (2001, p. 211) describing it as “the individual’s lifelong progression in learning and in work”. Patton (2001) notes that many existing notions of career are static and emphasises the need to construct active definitions of career development, describing career development as “the process of managing learning and work over the lifespan” (p. 14). McMahon, Patton, and Tatham (2003) note that “the term ‘life/career’ has become widely used and what clearly needs to be acknowledged is the active role the individual needs to take in his or her ongoing career development” (p.4). We are in an era of “do-it-yourself career management” where individuals are being challenged to play a greater role in constructing their own career development. Workers are encouraged to act as free agents, developing personal enterprises and marketing personal skills. Individuals increasingly need to focus on employability rather than job security, and learn the skills which will assist them in taking responsibility for the direction and evolution of their own careers. What needs to be created as secure is the individual, and the individual’s knowledge and skill currency, not the job.

In keeping with its industrial era traditions, career education is steeped in the theoretical tenets of trait factor theory, an approach which evolved out of the concepts of Frank Parsons (1909) and the work of differential psychologists. Parsons identified three key elements of career selection, including self knowledge, world of work knowledge, and “true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts” (p. 5). This framework has been the key underpinning to the structure of most career education programs since their inception in the 1970s (in the UK, Watts, 2001; in Europe, Guichard, 2001; in the US, Hoyt, Evans, Mackin, & Mangum, 1974; and in Australia, McCowan & McKenzie, 1997; Morgan & Hart, 1977; Patton, 2001). In practice, career education has been commonly presented as having four aims: self-awareness, opportunity or world of work awareness, decision-making awareness or decision learning, and transition learning (Law & Watts, 1977).

However there are a number of critiques of this formulation. First, the matching approach between self and vocation, based on a typology determined external to the individual and presented with the presumption of stability of types, has been shown to have a number of flaws. For example, a presumption of the relationship between interests and occupations being aligned in particular structures as in the Holland hexagon (1992) and the circular formulation of Anne Roe (1957) has been shown to be problematic. Further, these structures have also been demonstrated to not be culturally appropriate (Rounds & Tracey, 1996; Watson, Stead, & Schonegeval, 1998). In addition, Guichard (2001) questions the applicability of predetermined categories (of interests and values) to individuals, as opposed to their own construction of meaningful categories. Guichard emphasises that emerging work in subjectivity is suggestive of the importance of meaning making as determined by the individual. Patton and McMahon (1999) also assert the value of the individual theorising the relevance of relevant influences on career decision-making for themselves.

Second, career education has been criticised for being more focused on what Watts (1980) has termed social bookkeeping, suggesting that students were encouraged into areas based on a perceived analysis of market needs. These inequalities existed in low socioeconomic areas (Roberts, 1977) and in areas where racial differences were features (e.g., South Africa Akhurst & Mkhize, 1999; Watts, 1980). As Watts noted, the emphasis was often on “socialisation as opposed to individualisation” (p.7).

Third, traditional career decision-making is portrayed as a linear rational process where objectively derived data is used as its basis and little attention is paid to the complexity of individual and systems’ influences. Questions have been raised about the rationality of much decision-making (e.g., Langer, 1994). The application of cognitive rationality is even more questioned in a world where a number of authors promote the importance of preparation for positive uncertainty (Gelatt, 1989) or happenstance (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1998). Further, the presumption in career education models was that support to make the decision was appropriate at crucial decision points; however we know that career decision-making is not a single event focused on choosing a career but rather is an ongoing process wherein an individual constructs a career.

The role of constructivism in career education

Theoretical critiques raised in this paper so far suggest that career education needs to move from the industrial era, trait and factor, one transition point career decision approach which it has employed to date. While the influence of constructivism has been felt in career counselling, it has not been significantly applied to career education. Active participation in meaning making by the individual is fundamental to constructivism (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993). Peavy (1996) suggests that the generation of personal meaning and the “promotion of reflection on the implications of both new and old self-knowledge” (p. 10) are the primary objectives of constructivist approaches. Thus the objectivity of typology and other information sources informed by the logical positivist worldview is replaced by subjectivity as individuals are encouraged to define themselves and their environment, and to refer to the subjective sources of their knowledge. Peavy (1997) proposes that the aim of educative approaches from a constructivist stance is to “open up avenues of movement, promote empowerment, support transitions, and assist the client gain eligibility for more participation” in their preferred future (p. 180).

Fundamental to the creation of meaning is the concept of holism. Events, behaviours and attitudes can only be understood in connection with the context in which they are located

(Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993; Patton & McMahon, 1999; Savickas, 1993). Thus constructivist approaches emphasise the forging of connections between individuals' experiences and various elements from their system of influences (Patton & McMahon). Contrary to the trait and factor approach, it is not so much the individual ability, value, or belief that is targeted, but rather the meaning that clients ascribe to these constructs as a result of connection with other elements of their system of influences. Meaning or learning is generated from within the individual in relation to his or her experience of the world (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, & Perry, 1992). Constructivism embodies the reflexive process identified by Giddens (1994) whereby individuals construct their own identity in an ongoing process thereby connecting personal and social change continuously.

A number of authors have provided broad guidelines for the inclusion of constructivist perspectives in career education (Brown, 1998; Doolittle & Camp, 1999). The key difference in the application of constructivism to career education as opposed to career counselling is in the nature of learning and teaching and assessment. Within a constructivist approach "active learning and engagement in authentic activities takes place in the social culture of practice" (Brown, p. 11). In addition to these principles, Doolittle and Camp emphasise the importance of relevance to the learner's prior knowledge and present status of content and skills; the importance of formative assessment for the purpose of guiding future learning experiences, and of learning outcomes which focus on real world competencies; the role of the teacher as guide and facilitator of learning; and the importance of a curricula and pedagogy which encourages multiple perspectives and representations of learning material. This paper will now explore these principles in the practice of career education.

An approach which emphasises an active learner necessitates a new role for students. Contrary to an information loaded instructional approach, it is vital that all aspects of the learning process are designed for each individual learner. As such the integration of teacher role, curriculum, and learning and teaching approaches, needs to be centred on developing active learners, learners who are prepared for a future wherein lifelong learning is a core competency. This notion is emphasised by many writers. For example, McMahon, Patton, and Tatham (2003) emphasise the importance of managing life, learning and work, Mirvis and Hall (1996) assert that workers need to learn a living rather than earn a living, and Krumboltz and Worthington (1999, p. 314) similarly emphasise that "learning how to adapt to changing conditions in the workplace will be one of the essential skills for success" (p.313).

Law's (1996) career learning theory presents as an attempt to outline a process whereby individuals develop this active process of engaging with their world. Law posits a progression from an early experience of sensing career –related information and impressions, through to sifting and sorting these impressions into repeatable and recognisable patterns, and finally through to focusing and understanding information available about occupations, about self, and about relevant external factors. Law's model emphasises the individual's process of organising and interpreting information from a number of sources. Amundson, Parker, and Arthur (2002) similarly emphasise the imperative for individuals to learn to intentionally act on environments of change, drawing on an understanding of the individual as a self-organising, active system – "The common thread is that people make sense of the world of work through subjective interpretation of their own career experience. In living through the complexity of economic life, they draw new insights and formulate new strategies that make sense of this complexity" (Amundson, Parker, & Arthur, p. 27). Our curriculum and our learning and teaching methods need to be developed to foster this approach.

A constructivist language shift also needs to be employed to describe those responsible for career work in schools. The change of focus from teaching to learning, and from education to the learner, necessitates more appropriate terms being used to describe the role. Gysbers (1990) suggests teachers could be regarded as “advisors, learner managers, or development specialists” (p. 6). These examples serve to illustrate how language can be used to construe meaning. Patton and McMahon (1999) suggested the term career development facilitator. In focusing on the individual learner, it is important to acknowledge that career education may occur intentionally or unintentionally (McMahon, Patton & Tatham, 2003) or through formal and informal processes. As such a curriculum program may be only one part of a career development process.

Acknowledging this shift in the whole career development process also necessitates a shift in focus on the role of schools in career education. Under the industrial era view of education school was viewed as a part of a linear progression through certain life ages of an individual. Language surrounding this view has developed, for example school to work transition. This language had implications for the separateness of the two systems (Watts, 2001). Thus developmental curricula were designed as a “one-size fits all” (Charland, 1996, p. 133) for all students. Constructivist approaches demand that each individual be encouraged to develop learning systems appropriate for their own developmental needs. As such broader systems involved in transition from school activities (e.g., more flexible school and work relationships with formal accredited outcomes such as links to apprenticeships, school/industry partnerships with flexible, individual determined pathways, and community based learning activities) are being developed. These connected curriculum and school structural practices are integral reflections of constructivist approaches.

Similarly, within the industrial world view of education, career education and guidance programs are still often viewed as extracurricular activities taking time away from the curriculum that really matters and which is assessable. Collin and Watts (1996) describe the situation of career guidance in the industrial era as a “marginal social institution, largely concentrated around the transition from education to employment” (p. 394). As part of a broader set of career guidance activities, career education needs to be viewed as performing an integral role in preparing young people for the future, a view which is gaining impetus internationally (OECD, 2004; Patton, 2004).

Within such a system, schools need to be viewed as learning communities wherein all aspects of their functioning are designed to develop active learners and connections are made continually between learning in school and in the broader community. Learning from this perspective challenges the division of the curriculum into discrete areas, and in particular challenges the traditional separation of career and other learning. It supports the long held view that career development learning works best when integrated into the curriculum rather than as a marginalised extra (Gysbers, 1990; McCowan & McKenzie, 1994, 1997). McCowan and McKenzie (1994) commented that career development facilitators should be able to link career education “to curriculum and classroom practices and these in turn to student development and the world of work” (p. 33). Practices of career development learning facilitators which reflect these constructivist approaches include experiential learning, problem-based learning, student-directed learning and mentoring.

Formulations of learning based on constructivist approaches emphasise student outcomes as relevant to students and to student futures, “... constructivism emphasize (s) the concept that knowledge serves an adaptive function. If knowledge is to enhance one’s adaptation and functioning, then the knowledge attained (i.e., content and skills) must be

relevant to the individual's current situation, understanding, and goal" (Doolittle & Camp, 1999, p. 8). As such constructivism emphasises relevance to an individual's goals. In career education, this relevance in the 21st century is linked to competencies needed for lifelong learning. A large number of authors have identified such competencies. For example, Jarvis (2003) refers to what he terms career management skills, skills which give people legitimate confidence in their ability to construct fulfilling lives. Jarvis asserts that Knowledge Age workers need –

- Focus, on who they are and what they have to offer;
- Direction, knowing options and how to be prepared to maximise opportunity;
- Adaptability, the skill of making the best of change; and
- Healthy self-esteem and self-knowledge to counter uncertainty and doubt.

Similarly, career initiatives in a number of countries are developing frameworks of lifelong career development programs which are structured around competencies. The Draft prototype of the Australian Blueprint for Career Development (Miles Morgan, 2003) has been structured around the Canadian Blueprint for Life/Work Designs and the National Career Development Guidelines developed in the United States (Hache, Redekopp, & Jarvis, 2000; National Occupational Information Coordinating Committee, 1996). In Australia these competencies are structured around three main areas (Personal management, Learning and Work Exploration, and Career Building) and across four main life or development phases (Acquiring Knowledge; Experiencing Acquired Knowledge, Integrating Acquired and Applied Knowledge, and Striving Towards Full Potential).

From a constructivist perspective, developing career competencies involves more than just the cognitive activity of aligning self, occupational information and contextual information. It is the processing of this information which is crucial to the individual's construction and integration of knowledge and skills as relevant to him/her self. The individual's career story is the collection of images of the way the individual sees him or herself in the world. While the informational aspects of the self (e.g., interest, abilities) and of the world of work constitute the content of the story, it is the individual's constructions of these and the positioning of them within the story – the individual's narrative about self – which provides its uniqueness for each individual. And it is the individual's understanding of his/her role in the construction of the story that is a signal point for the authenticity of the learning process. Integral to this authenticity is the nature of assessment processes applied. These approaches need to include journal writing, development of career action and career renewal plans, and construction of personal portfolios.

Summary

Viewing career development learning from a constructivist perspective challenges traditional positivist views on knowledge and learning, teaching and learning, the content of learning, the outcomes of learning, and the approaches used to facilitate learning. For example, there is less emphasis on instructional teaching practices and a greater role for the teacher as career development facilitator, adviser, guide, mentor. Corresponding with this is a change from an emphasis on information provision to one of construction of knowledge using learning processes. The role of learners changes from one of passive recipient to one of active participant and constructor of their own learning. Similarly learning objectives are no longer predetermined but an attempt is made to foster learning objectives to be generated by each individual in relation to their environment and in relation to specific goals and outcomes determined by the learner. Learning is centered on the needs of the individual learner.

Constructivist learning approaches provide opportunities for learners to explore their subjective career narratives, make links between past and present, and make plans for the future. Collin and Watts (1996) suggest that this approach focuses on three tasks: “helping them to ‘authorise’ their careers by narrating a coherent, continuous and credible story; helping them to invest their career narrative with meaning by identifying themes and tensions in the story line; and learning the skills needed to perform the next episode of the story” (p. 394).

A postmodern approach to career education adopts very different theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings than approaches based on trait-factor notions of career choice and industrial era notions of education and work. This paper has presented a rationale for adopting a constructivist approach and has discussed ways that career education may be reconceptualised to provide lifelong support to individuals in managing learning and work.

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