

## changing metaphors for careers-work

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Spike Milligan could have been right about walking backwards for Christmas. And maybe Doc Brown's De Lorean really does take Marty McFly *Back to the Future*. It depends how you look at time. And there's more than one way.

We talk about time as though it were a road stretching onward. It is a metaphor. We resort to metaphors when we run out of direct observations but still need to make some deeper sense of experience. So we find other ways of talking about it.

And, when it comes to metaphors, there is always a choice. But we should be careful about the ones we choose.

Time is one of those abstractions. And so is career. And we have a choice of metaphors there too. You'll find two in this article:

- > career as positioning - in a race;
- > career as travelling - on a journey.

Both have been around from the beginning. But one is now growing in influence - think of *Dragons' Den* and *The Apprentice*. So, does one metaphor work better than the other? And would that be the one that is becoming more dominant? Or the one that could yet prove to be more basic?

This is not just word play. How we talk shapes what we do - and how we do it.

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Metaphorically speaking, George Lakoff can upset your intellectual apple cart. He talks about the way the words we choose influence the way we see things - and how they shape what we do (1 - below).

We say, for example, that time 'marches on'. But time is not a person and it doesn't march, strut, sidle or segué - though we might usefully think of it making all of these moves. But we do think of time as moving on. And we see ourselves as facing forward on that path - 'keeping up' but sometimes struggling not to 'get behind'.

But it makes just as much sense to say we are moving backwards along that path. There are cultures which choose to see time that way. And they have a point: after all, we can look back, but we can't look forward. So which way are we facing?

We have a choice about how we look at time. Which is why, when a meeting is to be 'moved forward', I have to check which way to turn the pages in my diary.

**concrete brains.** When it comes to time-talk all those words and phrases - 'backwards', 'forwards', 'keeping up', 'getting behind' - are metaphors. It is not talk of time 'as it is', it is talk of time 'as if it were'. Not *'is'...*, but *'as if'...*

Not all talk is metaphorical. We can talk more confidently about bodies, locations and movement. Indeed our brains are set up to think in these clear 'who-what-where' terms. That is because it has always been useful to be able to tell your mate that there is a big animal, over there, running this way. The more efficiently you can get that information across, the longer you both will live. (But, be aware, telling your mate to move the departure time 'forward' could give some predator its breakfast.)

**why metaphors.** 'Who-what-and-where' talk served us well enough on the pampas. But, since those far-off days, our lives have got more complicated - and interwoven. And the more that is so, the more we need to wonder 'why' - why people do what they do, what *drives* them and what *beckons* them. But our brains have less clear and verifiable ways of picking-up on that. So we resort to metaphors - concrete images for abstract concerns. And that means that, whatever metaphor we choose, we might have chosen another.

If it were just talk it might not matter. But the way we talk influences what we do. And metaphor can smuggle suggestions into our heads, while we're not looking. Some people therefore argue that we should avoid metaphors. But it's hard to stop doing what we don't know we're doing. And George Lakoff shows that much of what we say and think is conveyed through unnoticed metaphors.

George is not talking about the decorative - and sometimes ham-fisted - metaphors that are used to grab our attention. He is talking about subtle - and often insidious - allusions that we barely notice. Here's a classic: what could be wrong with talk of 'tax relief'? Well, first-off, it's a metaphor. And a metaphor which visualises our contribution as if it were a pain to be eased, or an imposition to be resisted, or a siege to be lifted. We could choose to see the payment in another way; but there are people who want it seen this way. So pushing metaphors can be spin-doctoring. And spin-doctoring needs us not to notice.

But enough of politics, let's talk about careers. Career is, of course, talk of 'who-what-and-where' - concrete stuff. And, in early career thinking, 'who', 'what' and 'where' were pretty-much the elements of 'matching' theory. 'Pegs-for-holes' is a metaphor. But, as the career-management process has become progressively more reflective, layered and dynamic, then we have needed career-talk which is also about what drives people and what beckons them - meaning and purpose.

**metaphors of career.** The word 'career' is rooted in the Latin for 'path'. And those Romans used it in two ways: it could speak of a carriage-way, but it could also speak of a race-track. These were not metaphors - you may have heard that the Romans had a clear grasp of the 'who-what-and-where' of both racing and journeying.

But - maybe because the word 'career' is that flexible - we've held on to it, and used it metaphorically. Metaphors are not just linguistic devices or literary

embellishments - they are ways of seeing. The race-track metaphor gives us an image of 'careering' along. The carriage-way metaphor gives us an image of being 'carried' along. And once either metaphor gets a hold, we go on thinking - developing the image...

career as a race	career as a journey
where there is a <b>challenge</b>	so that you can <b>explore</b>
for which you need <b>coaching</b>	which means <b>moving on</b>
so that you can <b>compete</b>	to where you may <b>detour</b>
by getting over <b>hurdles</b>	and find new <b>horizons</b>
looking for an <b>inside track</b>	which might mean <b>letting go</b>
and <b>getting ahead</b>	so watch out for the <b>turning point</b>

'Career' is speaking here of meanings and purposes - what drives and what beckons. Neither makes much use of any verifiable 'is'; they make much more use of a metaphorical 'as if'. Our big word - 'career' - is not speaking here of facts, but ways of seeing.

The two images are worth our attention: they are each located in contemporary culture; but they are differently located. On the one hand, sport is a dominant preoccupation. But talk of 'winners' and 'losers' is not restricted to sport - and punching-the-air-while-whooping is displacing restrained applause. Let's not agonise about whether we like it or not, the deeper reality is that a lot of people are strongly attracted to the urgency and edginess of competitive and other extreme experience. Did we ever think that the imagery would not shape how people see working life? Think of *Dragon's Den* and *The Apprentice*.

But not all people. For, on the other hand, there are people who entertain doubts about the impact of competition on the quality of life. They think about it for their own families - seeking to maintain work-life balance is not exactly a competitive attitude. But they also think about it concerning the well-being of the developing world, the protection of other species and the safety of the global environment. The imagery is of being watchful, moving forward by stages and being alert to consequences - needing to think again would better resonate with such concerns. They are all work-related. Did we ever think that careers work might overlook those concerns?

Both metaphors are useful. It would be a serious mistake to get hung up on only one.

**metaphors for living.** Each has consequences for what we do: if career is a race our work is to help people get into a winning position; if it is a journey we help people to explore other possibilities.

**positioning.** From starting-gun to finishing-line a race needs single-minded focus - you don't change your mind in the middle of a race. No looking-to-left-or-right, no distractions, no time for surprises. And, down to the wire, its me-on-my-own.

The race metaphor for career-management fits well with metaphors for careers-work. Students and clients are 'customers'; we are a 'service' industry. Like coaches at the gym, our job is to get things the way our clients want them. We are valued and held to account for how completely we 'deliver' that commodity.

The race metaphor is now probably the more dominant of the two. Some of your clients and students certainly see you this way - and so might their families. But suppose the journeying metaphor could explain more and suggest a wider range of help? That would make it the less dominant, but the more basic, thinking.

**travelling.** You journey in your own time. Perhaps with travelling companions. And they may distract you. But if they do, it need be no bad thing. Because you can change your mind. And arrive at some unexpected place. Somewhere which, when you set off, you did not know existed.

Market thinking can come up with some compelling metaphors for our work; but 'travel agent' would not be one of them. Work like this calls for an education profession, not a service industry. Our clients and students are our partners-in-learning, not our customers. And we will be judged on how usefully we push on, not on how completely we follow student-and-client expectations.

The Café has an examination of how such partnerships for learning can be developed for careers in the curriculum (2 - below).

And we still need to know more about how our students-and-clients and colleagues see these things. Research findings are on their way to The Café (3 - below).

**metaphors for linking.** Whether for 'race' or 'journey' careers work lives in a world which is shared with others. But the different metaphors have different consequences for how we would see those partnerships.

**linear partnerships.** The 'race' metaphor calls up straight-ahead thinking. Positioning starts from achievement, moves ahead through qualifying, and is taken forward by the gatekeepers on opportunity. In that thinking careers guidance is a link in a straight-forward sequence - moving from achievement, through guidance, into selection and on to recruitment.

We share much of what we know about that forward movement with human-resource people. And we can readily agree with those gatekeepers on what constitutes the basis for a life-long pursuit. Selection-and-recruitment shares a lot of ideas with careers-education-and-guidance.

There is much talk of partnership models for careers-education-and-guidance. And the linear basis is no bad basis for making those links; but it is not the only basis. Our students and clients now need to find more links in what they work on

with us. They certainly need to recognise how their work links to their lives in more ways than linear partnerships can find.

**lateral partnerships.** The 'journeying' metaphor calls up sideways thinking. And contemporary working life increasingly calls on that kind of laterality. The more interwoven our lives become the more necessary it is to be able to see things from another angle. And not just in the working world but for personal and social well-being.

We share this thinking with other areas of well-being, drawing on more exploratory sources of help. Lateral partnership makes links with a more broadly-based curriculum, more exploratory counselling, and with mentoring informed by a wider range of experience. In this thinking careers work becomes a life-wide exploration. Some branches of that cultural thinking still waits to be explored by our people.

Cultural thinking speaks of the beliefs, values and expectations that people take on-board from their upbringing. It shows how that experience is fragmenting into enclaves. And, critically for our work, it shows how those enclaves shape access to opportunity - for all of economic, personal, social, spiritual, civil and environmental well-being. You can find an account of the ideas-for-action that this thinking calls up in *The Café* (4. below).

Policy thinking has already sought to map careers work into that wider frame. Connexions now looks like an opportunity we too-easily let go. But the current QCA proposals on learning for well-being in the National Curriculum is similarly lateral in its thinking. It sets competitive standards alongside more broadly based concerns for well-being. In policy thinking well-being is beginning to count for as much as tightly focussed achievement. Academics, both secondary and higher, are wondering whether the qualification mill is all that they want to be serving. The journeying metaphor is not falling on deaf ears.

**shifting metaphors.** Metaphors define nothing; they give us ways of seeing. We worry too much about defining our terms. Any definition we make now will soon be out-of-date. But we think too little about why we see things the way we do - and what impact that has on what we do.

And so there are claims for a paradigm shift in careers-work thinking. They have so-far turned out to be no more than conventional wisdom with bells and whistles. (*The Real Game*, for which the claim has been made, is based on little more than matching - with some hokum.) Such claims do no more than decorate existing habits-of-mind. Maybe more fun, but not much more useful.

The term 'paradigm shift' is over-used. It actually means a different way of seeing things, which is so pervasive that it changes all our thinking. It happened when Copernicus first realised that we are not at the centre of the universe, when Darwin saw that we are animals, and when Einstein got a finger-hold on the link between mass and energy. In all three cases there were practical pay-offs - for navigation, for health and for warfare. And it has been these consequences that most grab our attention.

But, even then, the paradigm shifts do not entirely take over. We know it's not right, but we still talk of 'sunrise' and 'sunset'. Even people who know us to be first

cousins to chimpanzees are yet to give the thought the attention it deserves. And the fact that microwaves and iPods work with quanta of mass-and-energy, seems - to most people - to be the least interesting thing about them.

And so journeying imagery needs to show practical uses. The metaphor requires less on comparing analytical lists, and more on probing sequential stories. You can find an examination of how this is so in *The Café* (5 - below).

New paradigms may not displace old ones; but they outflank them. Their ideas succeed because they are more encompassing. Which means that they can explain more and enable us to come up with more effective ideas for action. And there is this: a race cannot encompass a journey; but a journey can encompass a race. The journeying metaphor will give us our more encompassing and, therefore, more powerful ideas.

Do we need our own paradigm shift in careers-work? It's probably long overdue! And the journeying image is the more promising place to look.

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An interactive version of this appears at  
The Career-learning Café  
[www.hihohiho.com/magazine/features/cafmetaphor.html](http://www.hihohiho.com/magazine/features/cafmetaphor.html)

**1. on metaphors;**

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

**2. on partnerships for learning:**

Bill Law (2008) Relocating careers-work in curriculum.  
[www.hihohiho.com/moving%20on/cafcriculum.pdf](http://www.hihohiho.com/moving%20on/cafcriculum.pdf)

Bill Law (2008). 'Careers work in the curriculum - ready for anything'. *Careers Education and Guidance*, June 2008.

**3. on cultural thinking waiting to be explored:**

Bill Law (2006). Careers-education-and-guidance out of the box  
[www.hihohiho.com/underpinning/cafculture.pdf](http://www.hihohiho.com/underpinning/cafculture.pdf)

**4. on how students and their helpers see careers:**

David Stansbury and Bill Law (in preparation) *Perspectives on Careers in Higher Education - Points-of-View of Students, their Advisers and the Academics*. Website.  
[www.hihohiho.com/moving%20on/cafcriculum.pdf](http://www.hihohiho.com/moving%20on/cafcriculum.pdf)

**5. on the shift from comparing lists, to probing stories:**

Bill Law (2008): Narratives for well-being - how we can use stories and why we should. [www.hihohiho.com/magazine/mkngtwork/cafnarrative.pdf](http://www.hihohiho.com/magazine/mkngtwork/cafnarrative.pdf)

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