Telling Stories [*]:
using three scene storyboarding in careers work

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Abstract

This article draws out the potential for using narratives in careers work. It provides an introduction to a particular technique called 'storyboarding' which uses a combination of text and graphics, and shows how useful this innovation in career guidance can be in enabling people to manage their own careers. Links to free-to-download handbooks and material are provided in the references.

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Introduction

For a number of years now there has been a focus on the use of narrative techniques in careers work, particularly in careers education. Narratives such as role-plays, simulations and open conversation, extend the careers-work repertoire by sequencing events and experience to show how one thing leads to another. In addition, they hint at explanations of what has happened, and anticipations of what might happen. However, much of the writing on narrative in careers work while extremely interesting can be hard to translate into something practical (Winter, 2009). Bill Law, the man behind Career-learning Theory (Law, 1996) and Community-interaction Theory (Law, 1981), has recently been working on the use of storyboarding as a way of exploring and understanding career choice.

Storyboarding

Law's three-scene storyboarding is a narrative-based technique for setting down career-management experience. While some methodologies which report only what people immediately say are fit for some purposes, they show little of how talk is rooted in experience. According to Law (2008c) in order to understand what is going on in the real-time momentum of career

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first published in *Guideline: Newsletter of the Institute of Guidance Counsellors*, March 2013

management we need to look deeper than what can be immediately found, and need better to understand background cultural influences on the way people manage their careers.

In storyboarding, individuals sketch a sequence of key scenes in the development of their career thinking - key events and influential moments. This setting down of a significant episode in their work-related experience enables them usefully to reflect on that experience. It is then processed in three stages of reflection focusing on a turning-point - an episode in a person's life when a possible change-of direction comes into view (Law, 2010b).

Scenes, Episode and Turning Point

An episode is a short sequence of where something significant happens. Storyboarding focuses on 'turning-point' episodes with their possible changes of direction.   This can be any especially remembered event in a person's life - played out in a range of settings such as at home, on the street, or in a curriculum project. It is when people do something, talk to somebody, or go somewhere which opens their eyes to some other possible self in some unforeseen possible future. It comes as a surprise. It provokes curiosity. It therefore asks people to recall a time when:

>   they made up their mind about what to do, or

>   they changed their mind, or

>   they knew they might change their mind - but didn't

That experience becomes the middle scene in a three-scene episode. It is the 'big scene', and is preceded by an 'opening' scene - which portrays how things were before the turning-point. It is succeeded by a 'following' scene - which shows how things are then. The episode can be of any formal or informal event in wider life that the person takes to be significant.

The process sets out a thinking-feeling account of experience in its social context, sorting out the the three-scenes, and hinging on the middle-scene turning-point - pointing to a possible change-of-direction. It can show, then, how the future need not be like the past, which (Law, 2012a) states can often come as a surprise. In the process this is the 'big scene' - the middle scene in a three-scene episode.

This special attention to turning-points, and the possibility of change-of-mind, means that the episode can be interrogated - 'why this?', 'why her?', 'why now?' - leading to an appreciation of how things got to be the way they are. Storyboarding therefore sets out past causes of present effects.

The method Law (2008c) suggests, is best used first on other people's stories. The purpose is to enable individuals to probe a story and to do that to the point where they are able to take control of their own story in a useful, fulfilling and sustainable way. The exercise also provides an

opportunity for participants to attempt to speculate on possible future stories as a form of creative envisioning and action planning.

Focus on a turning-point is useful, Law (2008c) suggests, because it seeks out emotional-and-social as well as rational and planful influences on career management. And this is important because it highlights anything that might bring readiness for a change-of-direction - a requirement for flexibility. By reflecting on 'before, during and after' movie-like scenes of a particular turning point in a person's life, processes encompassing thoughts and feelings are elicited and clarified. When used in career guidance, Law claims (2008c) such reflection ultimately promotes a greater self awareness, leads to a clarification of career goals, and aids decision making and transitions.

Distinctive features of stories – 'people', 'places', 'talk', 'events' and 'meanings

Law (2008c) argues that each story needs to have at least some of the following elements: (i) who is around, (ii) where they meet up, (iii) what they say and think, (iv) what happens, and (v) how they see all this.

> People -   Who has been influential in this person's story? Who else could enter the story and change the plot?

> Places -   How has the background of the client influenced their story? What new locations will they encounter?

> Talk -   What has been said to this person? What are they saying to themselves?

> Events -   What has happened to influence this person? What do they consider normal?

> Meanings - How have they decided what is important? How have they dealt with disappointment?

A well-rounded story invites an examination of some of the most significant features of experience - 'sequence', 'other people', 'point-of-view' and - in particular - 'turning-points' and 'change-of-mind'.

In storyboarding, people set all of this down in a filmic account of what is going on in their lives. The elements and features resemble a movie storyboard, not unlike a cartoon. Individuals recall an episode in terms of the 'who?', 'what?', 'where?', 'how?', when? and 'why?' of a narrative. In filmic terms this is 'characters', 'dialogue', 'location', 'plot', 'sequence' and 'motivation' - all key features in career-management (Law, 2008b).

Storyboarding, according to Law (2008a), was first developed to assist teachers and advisers to enable students and clients to manage career. The method calls on a wider range of thinking styles and is, he argues, accessible to more people than conventional learning methods can accommodate.

He also argues that features of storyboarding which engage students and clients in the process include:

> graphic storytelling

> using words and images

> setting down work-related experience

> for other people's stories and my own

> helping me to see myself as an individual and with others

> interweaving my thoughts and feelings

> as a basis for action

Storyboarding in action

Using a loose A3 paper-based format, individuals work on an episode which has especially influenced how they see things, and what they want to do about them. The formats are designed to take words-and-images portrayals of what is going on. It is also possible to use the formats in a words-only mode - as if people are writing a scene-by-scene screenplay.

Most people probably need to make more than one draft, before getting it into an order that makes sense to them. The format has three areas, so that a single narrative is set down and reviewed in three stages:

> Area 1: remembering - gathering memories and sorting what might be jumbled recollections into useful sequence; what was the turning point (the 'big scene'), and scenes showing what was going on before (the 'opening scene') and what it was like after (the 'following scene')

> Area 2: showing - assembling the most important thoughts-and-feelings into a words-and-pictures account of the three scenes - with people, in locations, engaging in talk, and experiencing inner thoughts and feelings

> Area 3: futuring - saying what new action this person can now take

The filmic technique sets in motion a process of assembling a layered, dynamic and significant narrative-over-time; this according to Law (2008c) is not a representation of some objective 'truth', but is 'personalised' - calling up a subjective 'voice'. Its 'truth' is in showing this way-of-seeing as a basis-for-action. It assembles recollections into a flowing sequence; which portrays people, locations and events in ways which are capable of evoking thoughts-and-feelings of both disappointment and hope (Thrift, 2008).

Process and outcomes

In producing a storyboard, and taking part in review and focus, individuals are asked to work on:

> sorting out the inevitable muddle and inescapable dynamics in their own lives

> facing up to the uncertainties that this brings

> opening-up their own questions - 'why this?', 'why then?', 'what now?'

> recognising new possibilities - in encounters, location

> wondering what might happen if they were to recount the story another way

Being more dynamic than a worksheet and more subtle than a checklist, storyboarding can reveal more than tick-box responses or pre-structured interview schedules will find. Such discursive disclosure is necessary to any useful understanding of what people think, feel and do about career:

> a move already made

> a move in mind

> the influences of inner-life and other people

> options that are against-the-grain of family, friends and background expectations

> what people think important to say to friends and family about making their own move

> what they think important to say to recruitment people

> what these ways-of-seeing mean for future planning

Law (2008c) argues that work at this breadth-and-depth matters most when home-and-neighbourhood influences suggest what seem like 'natural' moves - carrying people along in a way that may not be clearly brought into focus. It can, he says, take account of how people move-on in both rational and other-than-rational ways. Intuition, impulse, instinct, habit, encounter, luck and accident can all feature in storyboarding.   Storyboarding can therefore bridge what other methods arbitrarily separate (Law, 2008c).

It is capable of showing links, e.g.

> thinking to feeling

> personal to social

> teaching to learning

> planning to impulse, and

> learning to action

Being able to locate such links is essential to any understanding of what is going on in people's lives, especially in the lives of the excluded, the disabled and the poor. It is also necessary in order to appreciate how 'bright' people sometimes settle for 'dull' jobs, and how 'good' people somehow get caught up in 'bad' moves. Storyboarding cannot supplant fact-and-factor paradigmatic methods. It is designed to be used where paradigmatic methods do not reflect what is going on in people's lives (Law, 2012b).

> *'We will reach no useful understanding of how to help in any of these situations*
> *until we appreciate, in their terms, how people see these things.'*

(Law, 2010a, p.4)

If you are interested in learning more about this innovative technique you can access Bill Law's free to download material by following the links provided in the references.

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