

CANNEXUS 10

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Constructing a Career

Career construction theory proposes both a way of thinking about building a career and designing a life. Individuals make their lives and their worlds through stories, accordingly career construction emphasizes life portraits, narratability, and biographicity. Having clients compose a life portrait and then narrate their biographies to an audience activates the process of self-making and learning to become. Self-construction occurs as individuals craft their stories and tell them to significant others. While adolescents have internalized influences from their parents and incorporated identity fragments from their role models, college students and emerging adults must assemble these micro-narratives into a macro-narrative with some degree of unity, purpose, and continuity. In due course, each person must create an autobiography that both expresses their personal truths and transports them into the future.

The self-making embedded in career counseling may be viewed as a narrative art, a craft that can be learned and practiced. Writing an autobiography is a time-tested and empirically validated procedure for self-construction. There are various methods for life-writing. Among the many approaches to writing a life, I prefer the self-making strategies used in life-design interventions for two reasons. First, the approach shifts individuals perspective from how work will use them make a product to how they will use work to produce self-realization. Second, the approach does not prioritize the work role as the axis around which life revolves. Instead, it helps clients to consider how all their central life roles must be designed into a livable pattern that pursues their purposes and implements their self-concepts.

Life-design interventions rest on crafting a life portrait. From my perspective, a life portrait shares resemblance to an autobiography, yet it is more succinct, focused, and sharply drawn. The life portrait is a study of a person's life in depth, in progress, and in narrative. Composing the portrait does more than give voice to individual stories; it accesses different meanings and knowledge to open up possibilities and restart stalled initiatives. When career story telling is approached as a transformational process, essential elements of life are distilled and then felt, explored, and integrated. Having people practice their purpose informs their imagination with new ideas that stir intuition and reveal intentions. Rehearsing purpose promotes the expressive freedom to draw up a life plan that revitalizes the individual. It always involves considering what work can do for them as well as what work they might do. It does so by emphasizing mattering rather than congruence.

Mattering confers meaning and substance on peoples' lives by relating their stories to some pattern of higher meaning such as justice, knowledge, community, and beauty. In addition to explicating the meaning and mattering of past experiences, life-design activities forge links to the world that lies ahead by promoting intention and action. While mattering brings a person's experience forward, activity starts people living ahead of themselves. Life-design activities increase the authority that people have for their own lives. Although it may take only an hour,

composing a life portrait increases the quality of life, fosters agency, and improves the capacity to negotiate with other people. It assists individuals to more fully inhabit their lives and become more complete as they sustain themselves and contribute to their communities.

To help clients compose a self-portrait in words, life-design activities has them hold a mirror to themselves by asking four questions. Each question provides a different perspective or vantage point from which they may view the self. The first perspective looks at identity fragments that the client has organized as they do the individualization work. In responding to the question of “who did you admire when you were growing up?” individuals describe character traits that they admired in these models. This enables them to articulate a self-conceptualization.

A second question seeks to place that self on a stage in some theater by inquiring about vocational interests. The goal is to determine the type of theater or work environment wherein students envision engaging the self in activities. The question itself asks clients to name their favorite magazines and describe what attracts them to these publications. Alternatively, a counselor might ask for three favorite television programs or even websites. Each of these media takes people to another place and shows them a particular social ecology. In viewing the environment, the person observes certain types of people working on distinct problems. The places they prefer to go reveal their interests. Holland’s (1997) model of six types of work environments presents a vocabulary and classification system for organizing and understanding interest in the different work theaters.

Having determined a view of self and stage, or influences and interests, the third topic looks for a script for that self to perform on that stage. The counselor inquires about possible career scripts by asking clients to name their all-time favorite story, either in the form of a book or a movie. After clients name the book or movie, the counselor asks the client to briefly relate the story in the movie or book. In telling the story, clients usually are talking about their own possible futures. Typically, clients’ favorite stories portray clearly their central life problem and how they think they might be able to deal with it. In listening to the storyline, the counselor concentrates on how the script unites the client’s self-concept and preferred stage into a career script.

The fourth topic addressed in composing a life-portrait elicits clients’ advice to themselves by asking for a favorite saying or motto. These aphorisms articulate the best advice that individuals have for themselves right now. It is a form of auto-therapy in which clients repeatedly tell themselves what they must do to advance their story to a new chapter and in so doing become more of the self they wish to become. Individuals possess an inner wisdom with which to guide themselves. I have become fascinated with how well clients know implicitly what they must do next. It is included in the life portrait not just to have clients speak their own truth but to have them hear and respect their own wisdom and examine how to apply it directly to their concerns about career construction and life design. It sounds simple, and it is. Nevertheless, it is profound. The process reinforces clients’ authority in authoring their own lives. It builds confidence because individuals realize that the answers to their questions are within them, not in some outside expert. The counselor acts not as expert but as a witness to validate and elaborate the student’s intuitive solutions.

Having elicited stories of self-making, preferred work theaters, career scripts, and performance advice, clients should be encouraged by the counselor to assemble these micro-narratives into a life portrait, that is, a higher-level macro-narrative that incorporates all the partial stories. The

goal in arranging self, stage, script and advice is to reveal something. It is not a harvesting of images, but a poetic creativity that turns scattered stories and emotions into experiential vignettes that reflect the client's efforts to get a new life. The goal is to articulate and elaborate a narrative thread in the scramble of experience and thereby reduce that complexity to something that clients can begin to understand. Having composed a life portrait, clients may then lift it up for contemplation and reflection as they plan career scenarios and outline intended courses of action. As a part of their scenarios, clients should indicate how they will use the affordances of academic curricula and community opportunities to build a career and design a life. The scenario must concretely state how they intend to make educational/vocational choices and formulate tentative commitments. Whether done orally in transformational dialogues or in life-writing exercises, the goal is the same—to prompt meaningful activities that further self-making, career building, and life designing.

References

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