

Life Design: A Career Counseling Paradigm for the Global Economy

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According to a South African saying, when the music changes so must the dance. As the form of career changes from stability to mobility to reflect the labor needs of post-traditional societies, so too must the form of career counseling change. The vocational guidance of modernity and the career education of high modernity now must yield to the life design of post-modernity. Counselors today are formulating a new science of intervention with constructs selected to help clients negotiate a life-time of job changes without losing a sense of self and social identity. To better assist clients in designing their lives for the 21st century, many career counselors now concentrate on identity rather than personality, adaptability rather than maturity, intentionality rather than decidedness, stories rather than scores, and action rather than behavior.

A New Paradigm

These constructs of identity, adaptability, intentionality, narratability, and action contribute to the formulation of a new paradigm for comprehending vocational behavior, which in my case I call career construction theory. This theory of vocational behavior is accompanied by a general model for intervention that concentrates on flexibility, employability, commitment, emotional intelligence, and life-long learning. My colleagues and I have called this general model life-designing. Life designing offers a general model for career intervention. Life-design counseling is an identity intervention that cultivates intention and action through story telling. When people seek career counseling they have a story to tell. They bring old stories to counseling and they want to compose a new story with the counselor. Life-design interventions assist clients to elaborate and revise their identity narratives to comprehend and confront the traumas and transitions that a previous version of their life story could not accommodate. Successful narrative identity processing helps a client figure out how to make a new place for oneself in the world.

Life-design intervention rests on a new general model for counseling. The general model for vocational guidance is to (a) enhance self-knowledge, (b) increase occupational

information, and (c) match self to occupation. The general model for career education is to (a) assess development status, (b) orient the individual to imminent developmental tasks, and (c) develop the attitudes, beliefs and competencies needed to master those tasks. The general model for life-design intervention is to (a) construct career through small stories, (b) deconstruct and reconstruct the small stories into a large story, and (c) co-construct the next episode in the story. Let us consider each element in turn, starting with construction of a career story.

Construction

When individuals are dislocated from their current stories, they begin narrative processing of their biographies. Some individuals seek counseling to assist them in this identity work. With these clients, life-design interventions begin by having them describe both (a) the incident that dislocates them from the current episode in their story and (b) their goals for a new scenario that they want to co-construct with a counselor.

Then counselors ask clients to narrate micro-narratives, or tell small stories, that demonstrate how they have constructed their self, identity, and career. Life-design intervention focuses on narration because stories are the construction tools for building identities and careers out of complex social interactions. Storytelling makes the self and crystallizes what clients think of themselves. The more stories they tell, the more they develop their identities and careers.

Individuals compose stories to organize events in their lives into a sequence. Each educational and vocational position that they have occupied may be viewed as a short story or chapter in the novel of career. In career construction theory, the sequence of positions in a résumé presents the story that we generally think of as an objective career.

Deconstruction

In some cases, client stories include dominating demands or insidious ideas that suppress more life-enhancing alternatives. Counselors must always think carefully about how a client's stories might be deconstructed to reveal self-limiting ideas, confining

roles, and cultural barriers. In particular, counselors must be sensitive to ideological biases regarding gender, race, and social status. When stories require deconstruction, counselors may discuss with clients what a story assumes, overlooks, omits, forgets, or inadequately addresses. The goal is not to destroy the story but to access different meanings and new knowledge that open up possibilities and restart stalled initiatives.

Having listened closely to how a client constructs her or his career story, and maybe deconstructing some of its ideas and incidents, it comes time to reconstruct the small stories into a large story.

Reconstruction

Narrative processing of identity constructions gathers micro-narratives about important incidents, recurrent episodes, and self-defining experiences. In working with the micro-narratives, the counselor actively gathers the story threads and weaves them together into a unified tapestry of individuality. Integration of small stories about the self in social situations reconstructs a large story or macro-narrative about identity.

The macro-narrative reconstructs experiences to make sense and to sediment values, attitudes, and habits into a grand story about the life. The person becomes a character in a world that she or he has constructed. Thus, as the identity narrative tells of pattern and progress in the life, it confers personal meaning and social mattering. The macro-narrative of identity explains clients' past, orients them to the present, and guides them into the future.

To do this, the identity narrative highlights the occupational plot and career theme in the sequence of small stories. Plots structure the sequence of episodes into a coherent whole, raising some facts to prominence while ignoring others. E. M. Forster explained that a story tells what happened while a plot tells why it happened. Forster exemplified this difference between story and plot as follows. "The King died, and then the Queen died" is a story because it has a sequence. In comparison, "The King died, and then the Queen died of grief" is a plot because it adds causality to the sequence.

Having elicited several micro-narratives or small stories from a client, the counselor must eventually emplot them. This means to place the micro-narratives about what happened into the context of a macro-narrative, or large story, about why it happened. Emplotting the sequence of episodes into a larger story adds explanatory links and causal coherence to the experiences that may otherwise still feel random. So in life-designing, reconstruction means to configure and integrate agent, goals, means, and interactions to form a unified and meaningful identity narrative or life portrait.

Thus, emplotment reconstructs a subjective career from client constructions of an objective career. The explicit *occupational plot* tells about the client's journey to reach certain goals and elaborate the self in social context. The explicit plot tells of the outer journey and why it happened. It is augmented by a career theme that tells about the inner journey and what it means. This *inner journey* traces an emotional odyssey shaped by a central conflict with its associated needs and longing. The implicit theme adds meaning and purpose to the plot of the macro-narrative. Although the theme may explain emotional transformations, it is more timeless and abstract than the plot.

The career theme provides a unifying idea that, through reoccurrence, makes a life whole. The thematic pattern weaved by this underlying idea provides the primary unit of meaning used to understand the facts of the occupational plot. As individuals incorporate new experiences, they use the implicit theme to digest the plot episodes by imposing the pattern of meaning on them. When individuals face challenges and disruptions, the recurrent pattern in the macro-narrative theme directs, regulates, and sustains their behavior.

In addition to the central idea that the life serves, the career theme also carries the character arc, that is, how the person changes over time. The arc portrays where the individual started, is now, and wants to end up on some essential personal issue. The character arc begins with some flaw that propels and moves the individual. Usually, the flaw arises from something missing in life, something that the individual longs for and needs. To overcome this limitation, fear, block, wound, or weakness, they seek to attain some goal that fulfills the need. In due course, they overcome the adversity and transcend

their flaws as they become something more than they were. In this way, individuals use work to become more whole and complete.

Having reconstructed an identity narrative from the client's micro-narratives, the counselor then presents to the client a draft of her or his occupational plot, career theme, and character arc.

Co-construction

The counselor begins co-construction by presenting to the client a draft of the reconstructed identity narrative, calling it a "life portrait." A first goal in narrating the life portrait to clients is to have them lift it up for contemplation. Reflecting on the life portrait typically leads to the client editing the identity narrative. This revision involves amendments that correct mistakes, adjustments that come to terms with old conflicts, and alterations that enhance self-esteem.

However, revising the macro-narrative involves more than just giving accurate voice to the client's life story. Clients need to modify the portrait to make it more livable. That is why they came to counseling. The process of elaboration and revision opens the possibility for re-arranging story elements. Client and counselor join together to candidly craft a move in meaning with which to confront choices.

The co-construction of the life portrait seeks to incorporate the current dislocation in a way that clarifies priorities, mobilizes central tendencies, and increases the possibility of transformation and development. This occurs as client moves in meaning open new vistas and reveal pivotal pathways. With new language, fresh perspectives, and expanded horizons clients may reorganize their meaning system and clarify what is at stake in the next episode of their career story.

This self-clarity enables clients to make their intentions more apparent to themselves and the counselor. With this new found clarity, the client envisions the next scene, forms intentions, and begins to act. Then the client is ready to face challenges and disruptions using plot and theme to direct action.

Action

A good story about the self encourages a client to make career transitions while holding onto a self that is even more vital and intentional. A revised identity narrative enables an individual to meet the uncertainties of transition with comforts recalled from the past. Life-designing forges links to the world that lies ahead by promoting intention and action. While scripting the next scene brings client experience forward, activity starts clients living ahead of themselves. According to Shakespeare, “action is eloquence.” And, the necessary action is to turn intentions into behavior infused with meaning. Action inherently holds meaning from the past while it carries the person into the future. Through action, not verbal expressions of decidedness, clients engage the world. Going further and deeper into the world answers the questions brought to counseling. Action prompts further self-making, identity shaping, and career constructing.

To conclude the consultation, counselors ask clients whether they have accomplished the goals they brought to counseling. I usually end with a sentence that summarizes what has occurred by consolidating the co-constructed story and explaining how it relates to why the client sought counseling. Playing with the French etymology of the word tension provides a comprehensible structure to explain to clients the outcome of counseling. The client brought to counseling some tension in the form of a story stretched too far. Together client and counselor paid attention to the tightness in the story. Then they reconstructed an intention to move the story in a new direction. Following counseling, the client engages in story extension through purposeful action that relieves the initial tension and elaborates identity.

Hopefully, clients leave counseling having experienced a process of transformative learning that has brought them into contact with their deepest sense of vitality. If so, they are able to narrate a more comprehensible, coherent, and continuous identity narrative. Buoyed by biographical agency and ripe with intention, they should be ready for action in the real world and prepared to deal with new questions that will emerge. So empowered, they begin to write a new chapter in their life stories, narratives that extend the occupational plot, deepen the career theme, and bend the character arc.

For more information on life designing and career constructing go to
www.Vocopher.com and click on media files.

Recommended Resources

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