



*Photo: Colourbox. As reflective practitioners, it is also clear that understanding the purpose and nature of careers guidance, and its role in education and a life well-lived, also involves asking philosophical questions.*

## Reflection, Dialogue and Dialectic: Career guidance as philosophical activity

**Career guidance work is fundamentally philosophical in the sense that many of the most important questions encountered within it are philosophical in nature. When clients strive for meaning, value, purpose, clarity, and fulfilment, they are engaging with ultimate questions that require philosophical reflection.**

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The word philosophy stems from the Greek terms *philos* - love of - and *sophia* – wisdom. This search for wisdom involves engagement with deep, fundamental questions relating to core aspects of the human condition and beyond. In philosophy, values, judgements, truth, consciousness, language, and society are all areas of exploration - even basic claims about what is real or what we can know involve taking some kind of philosophical standpoint. Philosophy is as much an activity as it is a subject, and involves creative problem solving, critical analysis, reflection, and argument.

As reflective practitioners, it is also clear that understanding the purpose and nature of careers guidance, and its role in education and a life well-lived, also involves asking philosophical questions.

And yet, careers work is not commonly thought of as a philosophical activity. It is commonly structured in the form of coaching, counselling, or psychotherapy for one-to-one interactions, or presentations, lectures, or lesson-style workshops for group sessions. In this article, drawing from philosophical traditions, I will explore three examples of how careers guidance work could be approached as a philosophical activity. These are:

1. Practitioner reflection using conceptual analysis.
2. Dialogue in a group work setting using the Socratic Method in a community of inquiry.
3. Dialectic in a one-to-one setting using Hegel's thesis-antithesis-synthesis approach.

## Practitioner Reflection

Reflecting on our own practice is an integral part of trying to make sense of things as a career development professional and helps us to navigate the transition between the knowledge/understanding of research-based theory, and the application of everyday practice. Career learning expert Bill Law (2011) argues that affording ourselves the opportunity for self-interrogation helps us to consider how to 'position ourselves in the minds of other people' (p1) and why something might be a good idea. Considering these things in a 'cold' approach with more distance from our initial 'hot' thoughts after engagements with clients can also provide a useful, more objective opportunity to reflect (Lawrence-Wilkes & Ashmore, 2014).

A philosophical way to approach this 'cold' effort to self-interrogate and make sense of things is to engage in conceptual analysis. The process of analysing concepts can be approached in one of two ways: either by breaking them down into other concepts, or by identifying a 'real' or essentialist definition which says something about the nature of what we are defining. A concept with a 'real' definition has a specific nature or essence in the world which makes it what it is. An example of a concept with a 'real' definition would be water because it specifically denotes a particular thing in the world i.e. H<sup>2</sup>O. However, many concepts that we use in everyday language do not denote any one particular thing and can have other types of definitions instead. For example, some concepts have functional definitions i.e. they are defined by their use, not by their nature/essence, e.g. knife.

Let's take impartiality first, as something we talk about in career guidance. Does impartiality have a 'real' definition? If so, to what does it specifically denote? If not, what approach to defining it ought we take? What other concepts might it unpack into? How about other relevant

concepts such as social justice, meaning, purpose, value, or fulfilment? How might we define these and what connects these concepts and the practice of career guidance?

What about rich concepts such as the 'value of work'? In various philosophical responses, terms like meaningfulness, dignity, and autonomy come up when unpacking the value of work, but each of these in turn are complex concepts themselves. Does goodness have a 'real' definition? Career development practitioner Donald Lush (2018) argues that ideas of the good, whilst fundamental to the work of career guidance practitioners, are under examined within the careers space. If, through careers work, we are trying to contribute to the good in an intellectual, moral, or civic sense, how are we to understand or attempt this if goodness doesn't have a 'real' definition?

Furthermore, how are we to understand the meaning of education as a concept, and its relation to careers and employability? Practitioners seek knowledge in their reflections to develop their practice, but what differentiates knowledge from belief from opinion? Is knowledge a 'real' definition? How do we know when we have it? In the context of the key values of careers work such as avoiding bias and prejudice, and promoting competence, trustworthiness, equality and impartiality, these are particularly pertinent questions.

## Dialogue

Dialogue - a conversation between at least two perspectives (Ewegen, 2018) - has been a cornerstone of philosophical activity since the time of Ancient Greece. According to the writings of Plato (2018) and others, Socrates was famous for his method of engaging with others through dialogue and questioning. He innovatively used this process to explore concepts and reveal their complexities in order to promote better understanding. Bertrand Russell noted that in philosophy 'the first difficulty is to see that the problem is difficult' (2001) and Socrates' form of philosophical dialogue is designed so that this difficulty can come to the fore. The modern-day Socratic Method is a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue, where questions are asked to stimulate critical thinking and draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions.

Group guidance in careers is becoming an increasingly common setting in comparison to one-to-one work, and there are growing and good arguments for the benefits of its use (Meldrum, 2021; Edwards, 2024). Its aims of providing opportunities to broaden the perspectives and understanding of the participants in a way that isn't easily replicated in one-to-one guidance (Pyle & Hayden, 2015) suit the adoption of the Socratic Method as an activity.

One structured way to approach this form of dialogue is put forward by the organisation [Sapere](#) (2022) as Philosophy for Children and Communities (P4C) (see box for more information). There

is a range of evidence available that suggests that participants who engage with P4C develop their ability to respect others' opinions (EEF, 2021), think independently and critically (Gregson et al., 2008), and reason both verbally and non-verbally (University of Dundee, 2001) which clearly aligns with the aim of career coaching to help clients gain clarity and insight (Kauffeld et al., 2022). Research also suggests that engaging in the Socratic Method can help to develop a sense of belonging and community amongst those who participate in the dialogues (Altorf, 2019).

By asking questions that explore the values and beliefs which frame the participants' thoughts, the practitioner aims to give them the chance to identify their intuitions, challenge the coherence of their values, account for themselves and what they believe, and reveal their assumptions (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2003). This clearly sits well within the careers guidance space, which encompasses supporting clients to engage in self-discovery, find meaning and fulfilment, and understand the bigger picture (Hooley, Sultana & Thompson, 2017; Hambly, 2021).

## Dialectic method in career guidance

The distinction between the terms dialogue and dialectic is contested because the concept of dialectics is one that has taken on a variety of forms. Here, I will be addressing one specific type of dialectic as created by the 19th Century German philosopher Hegel (2018). This method has been used to address not only philosophy but many other areas too including politics, art, religion, and the sciences, and can also be helpful in areas of everyday life such as careers and relationships (Reuter, 2023).

Hegel's dialectic is a method of argument that relies on expounding a contradictory process between opposing sides. Unhappy with open dialogue as a method of finding answers because of its tendency towards scepticism, Hegel wanted to develop a method of argumentation that was more scientific. Hence, he developed a structure that was aimed at a linear evolution or development from less sophisticated definitions or views to more sophisticated ones which loosely goes as follows (Maybee, 2020):

- Thesis: The moment of understanding is a moment of fixity, in which a concept or form has a seemingly stable definition or determination.
- Antithesis: The "dialectical" moment is the moment of instability. In this moment, a limitation in the first understanding comes to the fore, and what seemed fixed passes into its opposite.

- Synthesis: The “speculative” moment grasps the unity of the opposition between the first two, and builds a new understanding that is the positive result of their dissolution or transition.

Thesis and antithesis represent two sides of the same coin; they are an idea/view and its opposite, and when those two things interact, there is potential for change. In acknowledging an idea’s opposite, it forces the thinker to consider a specific aspect that was not present in the initial idea’s understanding. Through the dialectical process, a thinker can acknowledge these weaknesses and use their improved understanding to develop a “speculative” idea that is more sophisticated as a result. This is seen as an evolutionary process because although all dialectical moments end in a synthesis, this synthesis may then become our new thesis which can again be tested.

One application of this style of philosophical activity in a career guidance setting is in a one-to-one appointment when an opportunity to challenge the client arises. For example, within Egan’s Skilled Helper Model, there are three recognised stages in career coaching: Exploration, Challenge, and Action-Planning (Egan, 2002). In the challenging stage, ‘the client is encouraged to consider new possibilities and perspectives’ (Nelson, 2007, p4).

Take, for example, the concept ‘success’. A clients’ understanding of this might be found and stated in a moment of fixity - they will likely have a particular understanding (thesis) of this idea. However, considerations around career success as a construct and its objectivity vary, and offering a challenge relating to this could reveal the client’s thesis to be inadequate or inconsistent. The practitioner and client can then use the dialectic process to explore pros and cons in two opposing ideas and try to reach a synthesis.

Hegel believed that reality and our thoughts and ideas are all wrapped up with one another, and because reality is always changing and dialectical in nature, our ideas need to change and develop too in order to try to find truth. As opposed to viewing issues or ideas that clients bring with them as obstacles in the way, the dialectical approach uses challenge as a catalyst for change, an opportunity to improve understanding and foster new insights. This clearly aligns with Ali and Graham’s (1996) view of guidance as navigation through which the practitioner helps the client to better understand themselves and find their own way forward.

## Conclusions

The above three activities are examples of ways in which one can potentially view career guidance work as philosophy, and it may be the case that careers practitioners reading can identify elements of one or more in their existing work. Reflecting on how to incorporate these

activities in a more informed, intentional and explicit way, I argue, could add value to the practice of careers guidance. Ultimately, doing philosophy as an activity involves a way of thinking about things that incorporates the 4 Rs: responsiveness, reflection, reason and re-evaluation in order that one might act more wisely, and improve the quality of our lives (The Philosophy Foundation, 2024). Isn't this, to a large extent, what careers guidance is all about?

*Guest editor Dr Gill Frigerio, University of Wawick, has processed and edited several articles on the career guidance in relation to other fields of study.*

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## Conceptual Analysis

Conceptual analysis is a key process used in philosophy to attempt to examine and clarify what is meant by particular terms. The process typically involves clarifying, breaking down, and assessing concepts in order to uncover their underlying structure. UK Careers practitioner and blogger David Winter (2011) argues for the relevance of this type of reflection on definitions and distinctions, such as meaning and value, when considering work-related activities

## Philosophy for Children and Communities (P4C)

P4C is an approach developed by Lipman and Sharp (Tibaldeo, 2023) that draws from the Socratic Method, as well as educational philosophers such as Vygotsky, to create a structured, group activity that enables a community of inquirers to collaborate and grow their understanding 'not only of the material world, but also of the personal and ethical world around them' (Sapere, 2022). There are 4Cs which shape the nature of the inquiry: Creative, Collaborative, Caring, and Critical. The general structure of a P4C session would begin with the introduction of a stimulus by a facilitator. Questions are then generated by the group, analysed and evaluated, before being voted on in order to choose one as the focus of the inquiry. At the end of an inquiry, the community reflects on the discussion and the question.