



Photo: Colourbox

Reading a career to become a career critic. Using insights from arts and humanities disciplines to develop career literacy

Have you described a personal career event differently depending on your audience, for example, telling it to: a parent; friends around the kitchen table; colleagues in the workplace; a recruiter in a selection interview?

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This article puts story telling onto the careers agenda, combining theory from career studies with practices inherent in literary studies and inviting careers workers to teach clients to become better career critics, alert to nuance and sensitised to the ways careers develop.

Providing careers information using narrative in the form of stories or case studies, is dismissed by the authors of the chaos theory of careers, Robert Pryor and Jim Bright (2008:81). They fear oversimplification and argue that stories 'tie up the loose ends of reality in a way that amounts to oversimplification of complexity'. But the fact remains that people hear career stories in many settings. Career guidance professionals can teach ways to unpick the 'oversimplification' so our clients can learn from all the career stories they encounter in informal as well as formal learning contexts. This practice involves the essential knowledge and skills of communication and comprehension, common in arts and humanities disciplines.

Narrative approaches and key concepts in the career literature

Taking a post-modern turn of direction, career literature since the 1990s has included narrative approaches as a reaction against limitations of earlier objective, positivist theories. Larry Cochran in 1997 summed this up saying 'the central problem ... is not matching but

emplotment'. A different stance is taken by Australian scholar Paul Gibson (2004), drawing attention to telling and re-telling, authoring and re-authoring of personal stories in a process that presents and fashions identity. He argues that a counsellor helps a client to become objective about their own story, illuminating pre-occupations which can be embraced or rejected.

Mark Savickas (2021) places story firmly in the centre of Career Construction Theory to deepen understanding of a career narrative from different points of view including objective reputation and subjective adaptability. He introduces concepts within his Life Portrait model to help clients author their own identity project using narratives, themes, character development and scripts – all terms borrowed from literary studies.

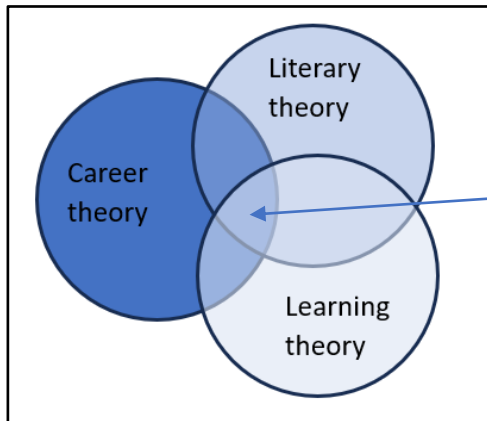
Drawing heavily on Mark Savickas, a group of Swiss psychologists led by Jerome Rossier (2021) present narrative approaches in an integrative framework in which the telling of career stories captures concepts of self, space and time. By intentionally linking past, present and future a narrator creates coherence, which for an individual can be a therapeutic episode of meaning making, self-authoring, re-authoring and identity confirmation.

Career guidance professionals can go further and teach our clients to apply narrative analysis to the career texts of other people as well as their own career project by combining concepts from a broad range of theory in the career literature.

Literary analysis and key concepts from UK stance

The study of narrative in fields beyond career often refers to the work of educational psychologist Jerome Bruner (2002) who describes readers as being 'prone to inferential errors'. We can be seduced by neat endings and should be alert to the ease of making assumptions about causation, 'post hoc ergo propter hoc' (after this, therefore because of this). Critics help to surface bias and counterfactual questions are common practice in the humanities.

With awareness of these broader cultural concerns, we know our clients encounter real career stories in many forms in many different places. In conversation with friends, reading biographies in books and magazines, interviews broadcast as entertainment on TV shows, radio and podcasts, in literature and art, as well as in formal career learning classrooms. They also encounter fictional careers in novels, films, TV series and so on. Literary studies have effective tools to reveal hidden meaning in texts and I will draw on some common themes used in the UK. Teachers of literature and language facilitate learning about plot, sequence, causation, character, roles, narrative voice, audience, performativity, and the significance of endings. Teaching clients to use these tools increases our learners' sensitivity, ability and confidence to understand text they encounter in any setting. As a Careers Consultant, I believe there is value in surfacing these tacit skills so clients can develop habits and apply them in all career conversations. They can become a career critic.



Learning about career criticism sits in the intersection between career, literary and learning theories.

Diagram 1: The intersection of career, literary and learning theories, centring teaching of career criticism.

Application

In Management Studies Jennifer Tosti-Kharas and Julie Levinson (2023) have applied a cultural studies approach using film texts to teach students in higher education in the US about career concepts. Accepting that a career is a text, and bringing learning theory into the mix, means we can create methods to teach people to read stories of career in more theoretically informed ways. I have developed a framework of learning tasks, based in pedagogy, to develop skills of career criticism. Questions to start the activity are listed below. Imagine a career classroom, with access to video and as the practitioner you carefully select and show a clip of a person with relevance to your group telling their career story.

Learning tasks:

Discussion question to surface career concepts	
Events	What? Questions to do with events, actions, the plot and structure of the text. What is happening? What is the timeline and sequence of events? What's missing?
	Follow up: <i>What? Relate the same questions about your personal career story.</i>
People	Who? Questions relating to the people and characters presented in a text. Who are the people involved in this story and what are their roles? What part do they play? What's their relationship with the protagonist? What influence do they (not) have? Who are the people absent from the story?
	Follow up: <i>Who? Same questions about the people in your own career story.</i>
Style	How? Questions to do with performative nature of a career text How is this story being told? What patterns and themes do you notice? Emotions? What is missing?

Follow up: *How? Questions about telling your career story.*

Four theories of career development:

Four theoretical approaches of career development

Discussion based on these questions can draw out examples of career concepts from wider career theory, both classic and contemporary. Four theoretical approaches are appraised to provide examples.

1. From person and environment fit theories, we might note actions and processes that draw individuals to work and demonstrate congruence and vocational identity. Adjusting to types of work and different environments reflects concepts of work adjustment identified by Jane Swanson and Madalyn Schneider from the USA.
2. Developmental process can be identified in the transitions through the story, the tasks undertaken. We can name roles and draw on the developmental tasks of mini cycles created by Donald Super to identify phases of growth, exploration, establishment, maintenance and disengagement in different roles.
3. The influence of other people will resonate with practitioners familiar with Bill Law's UK based five modes of community interaction, which transmit motivation through the presence or absence of: feedback, support, modelling, information, and expectation.
4. The way the story is told, maybe using metaphor and cultural references, might elicit themes from the relational theory of work proposed in the USA by David Blustein. Dignity, meaning making and the relationship between work and broader life concerns may be elicited by analysis of the way the story is presented.

Teaching and learning, a pedagogy for teaching career criticism

Drawing on active learning processes, specific tasks can be created to draw readers more closely into a text and we can use a selection of the following examples.

Learning activities and tasks
grouped by the same three subheadings:
What? Who? and How?

<p>EVENTS</p> <p>What happens?</p>	<p>Draw a timeline representing the events of the narrative and show any gaps or areas of confusion.</p> <p>Describe causes of change in this series of events.</p> <p>List the difficulties that were overcome.</p> <p>Write counter-factual questions relating to this narrative and try to answer them.</p>
<p>PEOPLE</p> <p>Who is involved?</p>	<p>Identify the different roles presented in this text. These might include work, study, family and friendship roles.</p> <p>List the characters mentioned in this text and present the relationships between them diagrammatically.</p> <p>Write questions to the main character asking why they did certain things. Ask another group to answer your questions by referring to the attitudes and behaviours of this character as evidenced in the text.</p>
<p>STYLE</p> <p>How is this being told?</p>	<p>Use dramatic voices to re-tell the story from different points of view.</p> <p>Prepare an alternative presentation of the same story told to a different audience (for a different purpose).</p> <p>Imagine entering the editing room, what will you find 'on the cutting room floor' and why is it there?</p>
<p>COMBINED</p>	<p>Role play the main character in the story and complete these statements as if in a private conversation with a trusted friend:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What I really like about my job is ... • What I can't understand about my working life is • What I most want to happen next is ... <p>Review your opinions about the story and prepare an argument to present as a commentary explaining and analysing your version of the narrative.</p>

Practitioners who have used these activities in their classrooms reported the following:

- *This process made me think about the text for a lot longer. I made notes and this meant I engaged with the material more deeply.*
- *It was an aid to identifying critical incidents.*
- *I realised that my personal response to the story was not the whole story, it's just one perspective.*

- *I learnt to not take stories at face value and take opportunities to learn from everyday interactions.*

Conclusions

Returning to Bruner, 'narrative is an invitation to problem finding, not a lesson in problem solving'. Good career critics can listen attentively, observe and concentrate on a text, apply a series of questions to the text and interpret it. Digging beneath the surface of a career story is powerful learning. If taught by career theorists, I believe it also develops vocabulary to describe career development and articulate opinions about it.

My intention is for our learners to enjoy studying career stories. They can develop their personal career theory informed by these learning experiences to apply to their own development. I hope you and your learners can have some fun interacting with career texts through creativity and playfulness.

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Guest editor [Dr. Gill Frigerio, University of Warwick](#), has processed and edited several articles on the topic of career guidance and other fields of study.

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