

Career studies as self-making and life designing

Mark L. Savickas

Savickas, M. L. (2009).
Career studies as self-making and life designing
Career Research & Development, 24, 15-17.

Advocates of career studies in higher education propose teaching undergraduate students about careers, the labour market and employability. According to McCash (2008), exploration and research about careers should empower students by helping them to focus on 'life purposes and meanings and the more prosaic matters of achieving these ends' (p. 6). The recent International Career Studies Symposium, held at the University of Reading, sought to elaborate the content of a career studies curriculum and demonstrate ways of teaching 'career.' As a participant in this symposium, I asserted that career construction theory offers to a career studies curriculum a model for conceptualising and understanding work lives (Savickas, 2005). Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of a curriculum space for studying the self and a practical method for self-making and life designing (Savickas et al., in press).

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 emphasises life portraits, narratability, and biographicity. Having students 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 students craft their stories and tell them to significant others. While adolescents have internalised 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 short, college students must create an autobiography that both expresses their personal truths and transports them into the future.

So, if college students make themselves and their worlds through stories, some portion of a career studies curriculum should spark their story telling. It should prompt students to elaborate, refine, and validate their stories; extend the stories into the future; and populate the stories with details and particulars that make both them and their stories more realistic. The developmental task or social expectation that moves this identity work asks students to

get a life by consolidating their identity fragments and making tentative commitments. Erikson (1968) explained that college students must confront the crisis of identity-formation versus role confusion with efforts to integrate their inner experiences and outer world into a meaningful psychosocial niche. Practically speaking, students need a clear and compelling story with which to get a life and construct a career. An autobiography is life-enhancing, even life-giving, when students find wisdom in their own experiences and direction for pursuing their purposes.

A career studies curriculum must contribute to self-making and life designing by prompting students to reconstruct their past, gather new stories and experiences, and anticipate the future in terms of possible selves and preferred scenarios. Furthermore, an effective career studies curriculum must encourage students to compose a macro-narrative for their lives and narrate it to their audiences in a way that elicits social support.

The self-making embedded in career studies may be viewed as a narrative art, a craft that can be learned and practised. 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 students' perspective from how work will use them to make a product to how they will use work to produce self-realisation. Second, the approach does not prioritise the work role as the axis around which life revolves. Instead, it helps students 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 student's life in depth, in progress and in narrative. Composing the portrait does more than give voice to student 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 practise 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 revitalises the individual. It always involves considering what work can do for them as well as what work they might do. It does so by emphasising 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 student experience forward, activity starts students living ahead of themselves. Life-design activities increase the authority that students have for their own lives. Although it may take only a few hours, composing a life portrait increases the quality of life, fosters agency, and improves the capacity to negotiate with other people. It assists students to more fully inhabit their lives and become more complete as they sustain themselves and contribute to their communities.

To help students compose a self-portrait in words, life-design activities have students 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 students must organise as they do the individualisation work involved in career studies. In responding to the question of 'who did you admire when you were growing up?' students describe character traits that they admired in these models. This enables them to articulate a self-conceptualisation.

A second question seeks to place that self on a stage in some theatre by enquiring about vocational interests. The goal is to determine the type of theatre or work environment wherein students envision engaging the self in activities. The question itself asks students to name their favourite magazines and describe what attracts them to these publications. Alternatively, an instructor or counsellor might ask for three favourite television programmes or even websites. Each of these media takes students to another place and shows them a particular social ecology. In viewing the environment, the student 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 organising and understanding interest in the different work theatres.

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 instructor or counsellor enquires about possible career scripts by asking students to name their all-time favourite story, either in the form of a book or a movie. After students name the book or movie, the instructor or counsellor asks the student to briefly relate the story in the movie or book. In telling the story, students usually are talking about their own possible futures. Typically, students' favourite 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 instructor or counsellor concentrates on how the script unites the student's self-concept and preferred stage into a career script.

The fourth topic addressed in composing a life-portrait elicits students' advice to themselves by asking for a favourite saying or motto. These aphorisms articulate the best advice that students have for themselves right now. It is a form of auto-therapy in which students 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. Students possess an inner wisdom with which to guide themselves. I have become fascinated with how well students know implicitly what they must do next. It is included in the life portrait not just to have students 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 students' authority in authoring their own lives. It builds confidence because students realise that the answers to their questions are within them, not in some outside expert. The instructor or counsellor 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 theatres, career scripts and performance advice, students should be encouraged by the instructor or counsellor 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 student's efforts to get a life. The goal is to articulate and elaborate a narrative thread in the scramble of students' experiences and thereby reduce that complexity to something that students can begin to understand. Having composed a life portrait, students 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, students should indicate how they will use the affordances of academic curricula and college 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 contribute to a career studies curriculum meaningful activities that prompt further self-making, career building and life designing.

References

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York: Norton.

Holland, J. L. (1997). *Making vocational choices: A theory of vocational personalities and work environments* (3rd ed.). Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Hunt, C., & Sampson (2006). *Writing: Self and reflexivity*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

McCash, P. (2008). *Career studies handbook: Career development learning in practice*. York, United Kingdom: The Higher Education Academy.

Savickas, M. L. (2005). 'The theory and practice of career construction.' In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.) *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (pp. 42-70). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Savickas, M. L., Nota, L., Rossier, J., Dauwalder, J. P., Duarte, M. E., Guichard, J., Soresi, S., Van Esbroeck, R. & van Vianen, A. E. M. (in press). Life designing: A paradigm for career construction in the 21st century. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*.

For correspondence

Mark L. Savickas
Professor of Behavioral Sciences
Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine