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Publisher: Routledge

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## British Journal of Guidance & Counselling

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbjg20>

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Published online: 30 Jul 2013.

To cite this article: British Journal of Guidance & Counselling (2013): Narrative identity: writing the self in career learning, British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, DOI: 10.1080/03069885.2013.816837

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2013.816837>

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## **Narrative identity: writing the self in career learning**

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(Received 20 January 2013; final version received 14 May 2013)

We propose that writing can be employed to foster the kind of career learning required in the twenty-first century. The article offers insights into how writing exercises and approaches can be applied to help students construct their career stories in a way that allows them to engage in a dialogical learning process and work in a self-directed way. Creative, expressive and reflective writing practices are described and parallels are drawn between these and existing practices and theories in narrative career counselling. Key exercises in graduate courses for writing for personal development are discussed and a theoretical explanation is given as to why a particular order of approaches and exercises works best to promote career learning.

**Keywords:** career education; career guidance; identity; narrative approaches; creativity

### **Introduction**

The chief career challenge of the twenty-first century is to construct a career identity that is suitable for navigating the world of the boundaryless (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005) and protean career (Hall, 2004) in an ever more uncertain economy (Pryor & Bright, 2011). Such a career identity is a well-structured story, based on life themes, that explains 'how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow' (Savickas, 2005, p. 58). To construct such a story within an uncertain and stressful context, both cognitive and emotional elements need to be explored and incorporated with the help of a dialogue (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

In recent decades, narrative theories and approaches to careers guidance have been developed in order to address this challenge. Among others, Cochran (1997), Amundson (2010) and Savickas (2012) have argued convincingly that psychometric testing, based on the trait and factor model, is insufficient and outdated and that narrative approaches are useful in helping individuals in constructing a workable self-narrative. However, their approaches are highly dependent upon skilled and experienced counsellors who are adept at co-constructing narratives with students or clients from within a dialogical space. It is in fact particularly difficult for beginning practitioners to apply the narrative methods that have been developed (McIlveen & Patton, 2007, p. 232). Moreover, a study into the marketisation of career services has shown that unless counselling is publicly funded, few make use of these services

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(Meijers, 2001). To reach the majority of youngsters, career counselling has to be provided in the context of education. In their research regarding strong career learning environments in educational institutions, Kuijpers, Meijers, and Gundy (2011) and Kuijpers and Meijers (2012) make a strong case for the need for dialogue about concrete work experiences with youngsters in the process of developing their career identities. However, research has shown that teachers and workplace mentors are frequently unable to have such a dialogue with students (Winters, Meijers, Kuijpers, & Baert, 2009; Winters, Meijers, Lengelle, & Baert, 2012) due to a lack of experience and time. Moreover, the current socio-political climate of education in Western societies favours an approach to teaching and learning in which test preparation and scripted curricula are the preferred methods (Hillocks, 2002; Marshall, 2009). This focus on standardisation and high-stakes testing has led to a narrow view of what counts as teaching and learning (Franciosi, 2004; Hargreaves, 2003; Lipman, 2004; Luke, 2004; Ravitch, 2010) and these Standards Era policies do not focus on making time for narrative and dialogical encounters with students, leaving teachers even less experienced with this 'largely verbal process' that entails 'a collaborative relationship' (McIlveen & Patton, 2007).

In addition to the lack of time and experience that teachers have, McIlveen and Patton (2007, p. 232) paraphrase Reid's (2005) observation that there is also an 'ostensible lack of structures and techniques and tangible products' in the burgeoning field of narrative and dialogical approaches. And even with approaches like that of Savickas's life design, which is more widely known, experienced career professionals not trained in narrative methods frequently embark enthusiastically but also report feelings of inadequacy, fear and trepidation (Reid & West, 2011).

It should be clear now that these approaches are needed for clients and students as they build career stories for the twenty-first century and that therefore professionals are in need of training opportunities. At present too few individuals are benefiting from the potential of narrative methods for the reasons mentioned above. In response, we propose that narrative and dialogical methods are required that allow individuals to work on their career stories in a more self-directed way. In this article we argue that writing for the purpose of personal development can be developed into a narrative career learning method, an approach that is concrete and learnable by professionals who find themselves in counselling roles or for those who are working to construct their career stories without ongoing guidance.

### **Writing for personal development**

If we consider that the goal of narrative career guidance is to help a client in 'The process toward meaning and identity. . .' (McIlveen & Patton, 2007, p. 228) and 'As with a literary story, the plots of a personal narrative bring coherence, structure, and a heuristic through which to understand a person's story' (McIlveen & Patton, 2007, p. 228), there are several good reasons to believe that teaching students or clients to write for the purpose of personal development can be used as a narrative approach in career development. Indeed, 'conversation and writing are significant vehicles that essentially aim to construct themes for the client's self-understanding' (McIlveen & Patton, 2007, p. 232) and as this creative process is intrinsically self-developmental we are likely to find things out 'about ourselves of which we were not fully aware' (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 7).

Creative, expressive and reflective writing (or various combinations of the three) are well suited for helping individuals to explore and construct their career identities. Firstly, writing is an inherently narrative and dialogical process, in the same way that narrative career counselling is. Writing is a dialogical process because the writer always addresses a (real or imaginary) audience and because a text 'talks back' to the writer (Kellogg, 1994). Secondly, studies have shown that writing can be helpful and even therapeutic in processing life experiences (i.e. traumas and transitions) and constructing meaning (Pennebaker, 2011). We will begin by defining the three types of writing mentioned above in order to introduce, more fully, the field of writing for personal development and then reflect on the connections that can be conceived of between writing and narrative careers guidance.

### *Three types of writing: creative, expressive and reflectivereflexive approaches*

*Creative writing* (Bolton, 1999; Hunt & Sampson, 2002) for personal development refers to the writing of fiction or (fictional) autobiography for therapeutic purposes or to gain self-insight. The practice is based on the idea that '[c]reative writing is almost always fuelled by personal experience and so carries profound truths behind the fiction' (Moskowitz, 2002, p. 35) or as Picasso famously said, 'art is the lie that tells the truth' (<http://myth-understanding.blogspot.nl/2008/03/lie-that-tells-truth.html>). Indeed as Donald Winnicott (1971, p. 13) concurred, 'the creative process is intrinsically self-developmental...[I]n the creation of artwork the creative artist opens up the possibility of being transformed'. Academics and practitioners of writing for personal development have also found that '[f]iction is a way of exploring a professional problem that is inaccessible or problematic by any other means' (Bolton, 1994, p. 54). Students or clients might use a photograph of themselves to write from a childhood voice and in 'making up' what that voice would say, come to insights about themselves (Hunt & Sampson, 2002, p. 21). In a similar way, Savickas (2012) might ask a client to describe an early memory and recall the words that might have been associated with it. As our memory is imperfect, both Savickas's approach and creative writing from autobiographical experience are fictional in nature. It is noteworthy too that the 'intermediate area of experience' that is created between inner and outer reality as we write from various points of view (real or fictional) 'suggests that creative writing is considerably more dialogic than everyday speech or writing' (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 6).

*Expressive writing* is a term that is used primarily by researchers who have, for the past three decades, been studying the therapeutic effects of writing in the wake of traumatic events and the emotions associated with those events (for an overview see Pennebaker, 2011). The first studies were carried out in the early to mid-1980s; subjects were asked to write about traumatic experiences for 15–20 minutes a day for three or four consecutive days. Compared to those who wrote about mundane subjects, the health of those who wrote about traumatic events improved significantly (Pennebaker, 1997). Enhanced health was seen both in the activity of immune cells as well as in a reduction in visits to the doctor. Since then, much research has followed. A myriad of topics have been explored, including college performance (Frattaroli, Thomas, & Lyubomirsky, 2011), the alleviation of asthmatic and rheumatoid arthritis symptoms (Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999) and whether professionals could be helped by writing in the wake of job loss (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994). The job loss study focused on the benefits of writing about one's

deepest thoughts and feelings following a layoff and found that professionals who did so were much more likely to be re-employed within the months that followed the layoff than those who did not write or those who wrote about superficial topics. Researchers concluded that it was the emotional as well as the cognitive processing that made the writing a successful intervention.

Theories as to why writing helps have grown out of this extensive research base (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker, 2011); one of the main findings is that an increase in the use of causal words (such as because, effect, reason) is usually an indication that writing is indeed helping. Pennebaker also argues that the process of writing itself is key, as '*having* a coherent story to explain a painful experience was not necessarily as useful as *constructing* a coherent story' (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 11; italics in original). Interestingly, there are parallels here again with narrative-based career counselling. For instance Cochran (1997, p. 5) says that 'causality forms the plot of a narrative, elevating the sheer succession of chronology to a pattern of explanation'. Savickas's (2005) career construction theory – like Pennebaker's findings about what fosters well-being – emphasises the *process* of story construction and the ongoing development of a person's story. Both also speak about trauma and how the insights gained by exploring it are key to developing one's identity. In summary, both Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm and Savickas's career construction ideas and practice emphasise the importance of working with traumatic life events, the need and benefits of self-disclosure, and the process of constructing a narrative to better cope with life's eventualities – Pennebaker regarding life in general, Savickas focusing on career specifically.

Pennebaker's findings around expressive writing also speak to the importance of accentuating 'the positive parts of an upheaval...' while '...acknowledging the negative parts' (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 12), which corresponds well with Pryor and Bright's ideas about the 'value of failing' in career development and that career theories for the twenty-first century must include consideration of the 'complexity and its consequent inherent unpredictability' (Pryor & Bright, 2012, p. 69). In the same vein as Pennebaker, these career researchers maintain that 'given the inevitability of failure within a complex dynamical system, it is comforting to acknowledge that failure brings with it many gifts' (Pryor & Bright, 2012, p. 71).

*Reflective practice and reflexivity* are related terms used and defined by academics and practitioners in the writing and personal development field. Reflective writing refers to writing practices that are intended to 'take us out of our own narrow range of experience and help us to perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints and potential scenarios' (Bolton, 2010, p. 10). They include non-fiction and creative exercises; they involve 'reliving and re-rendering'. The exercises done as part of reflective practice may resemble those used by career counsellors. Just as Savickas (2005) asks a client what their favourite movie or book is as a way of finding out more about them, writing facilitators use prompts such as 'If your work were a book, film, play or radio programme, what would it be?' (Bolton, 2010, p. 45) to get students writing. In reflective writing, the explicit use and value of metaphors is also recognised, just as it is in career learning (El-Sawad, 2005; Mignot, 2004).

It is worth mentioning that writing is not a neutral activity, just as counselling is not; in both cases a conversation is taking place between 'author and audience' (or client and counsellor). The internal and external dialogue (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) represents and implies a dynamic exchange and an ongoing process of construction. There is a continuous interaction between individual, social and environmental

aspects, a process described as ‘recursiveness’ (McMahon & Watson, 2012, p. 214). Even if a story is already written down, it remains subject to discussion and ‘reconstruction’ (i.e. rewriting), much like a story that is co-constructed in a conversation between counsellor and client.

Reflexivity is not the same as reflection. While reflection could be said to involve taking something into oneself – a topic, an event, a relationship – for the purpose of contemplation or examination, reflexivity involves ‘*doubling* the self’ (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 4; italics in original) or acknowledging the self as multi-voiced, ‘so that we are both “inside” and “outside” ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up to the experience of “self as other” whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self’ (Bolton, 2010, p. 4). This is where writing (and writing practices) can be viewed as dialogical in nature and one has the chance, as Hunt and Sampson (2006, p. 7) describe Bakhtin’s ideas in their own words, to ‘give space on the page to the many different voices of the self and to enter into a relationship with them’. Although reflective practice and reflexivity differ as described here, in the rest of the article we will use either term depending on emphasis, while the one will often imply the presence of dimensions of the other.

The three categories described above all contribute essential dimensions to writing for personal development. While creative writing is a powerful way of constructing one’s story because it can access a person’s ‘selves’ and felt truths artistically and indirectly, expressive writing focuses on transforming emotional pain and emphasises the importance of the *process* of creating a coherent story. Finally, reflective approaches cultivate an individual’s ability to notice and observe patterns and engage more dialogically with one’s life material. And although creative writing includes fiction writing, expressive writing often contains autobiographical facts and reflective approaches are a way of looking at *all* that we create, the three writing approaches are not bound by these divisions or imply a need to stick to particular genres (e.g. journal writing, poetry, dialogue writing). Expressive writing research has found, for instance, that ‘writing about an imaginary trauma was almost as therapeutic as writing about a real one’ (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 143) and creative writing contains felt truths amid the resonant imaginings, while both the latter approaches are reflective in nature. Whether an individual writes in a journal, creates a fictional narrative about childhood experiences, pens a poem or creates a fairytale, if the process of writing for personal development is to be successful it will likely be creative and expressive as well as reflexive.

### **A course in writing narratives**

One of the authors developed and teaches two online graduate courses in which the above types of writing are incorporated and students write with both personal and professional development in mind. The courses are entitled ‘Writing the Self’ (MAIS616 course) and ‘Narrative Possibilities’ (MAIS621 course) (Lengelle, 2003, 2008) and are offered online (using Moodle) for groups of 14–20 students at a time. The courses were developed as part of the Masters of Arts in Integrated Studies programme for Athabasca University (Canada’s Open University) and fall under the focus area of cultural studies. All assignments are posted in the online course forums in Moodle and students engage in a discussion with peers that is also actively supported by the instructor. The first of the two courses has been running since 2003

with about 60 students participating each year, the second since 2008 with about 20 students per year.

Before we describe the content and approaches of the courses, we will mention some of the things we have learned about this type of writing in the (online) classroom. It has become clear that students can only benefit from writing for personal development in a self-directed way, when they have been introduced to specific approaches and exercises and to the theories that underpin them. It is not enough to simply give individuals time to write and hope that they will gain insight from the activity. It is also not effective – although many teachers and career counsellors are doing this – to assign journal writing as a kind of adjunct to other activities and then evaluate what is written by putting comments in the margins such as ‘this was a good reflection’ or even assigning a grade or suggesting grammatical corrections. This way of responding to what people write can reduce the likelihood that the activity becomes a dialogical learning process. Students are put off by corrective comments on their personal and creative writing; their willingness to take risks and explore other parts of themselves can be effectively silenced by being graded, and remarks like ‘good reflection’ suggest there are ‘bad reflections’ or that there is a ‘correct’ or ‘better’ answer, which is precisely the ‘standards’ educational mentality that does not serve us here.

What students require are clearly structured exercises to start them writing – prompts that stimulate creative, expressive and reflective writing. As a graduate student commented when reflecting on his own experience with teaching, ‘this is how to stifle creativity for 90% of your class: “Write/draw/paint anything you like!” or “Now you will follow my lead, step by step”’. Both extremes bring out the worst in them’. Writing without structure or focused activities can be intimidating and it is likely that students will fall into a ‘cycle of lament’ where the concerns and thoughts they had yesterday and the day before will be repeated endlessly in journal entries.

The resources serve to enhance the possibility of reflexivity and subsequent new dialogues and actions, which include ‘emerging tacit knowledge but mixed with explicit and/or evidence based knowledge’ (Taylor, 2011, p. 508). The readings range from instructions on writing fiction by Stephen King (2000), views of transformative writing based on psychodynamic principles (Moskowitz, 2002), to reflections on cultural implications and realities around written disclosure (Pennebaker, 2002). The latter are important as many frequently assume that to confess or divulge in writing or conversation is automatically therapeutic. In the West we are considered ‘the confessing animal’ (Pennebaker, 2002). However, Wellenkamp (2002) shows that Indonesian or Pacific cultures consider it bad luck to divulge traumatic events and have adapted different ways of coping. This can have implications for career narrative approaches, as there will be students and clients who may be ashamed to divulge or discuss struggles, fearing that they will not be resolved in this way but possibly enlarged. Further research on this topic would be needed to effectively address cultural differences (McMahon, Watson, Chetty, & Hoelson, 2012).

As well as a need for readings and structured activities, the facilitator’s way of being and the order of the activities are also essential for a successful experience. A facilitator’s aim must be to reduce the intimidation factor (e.g., it would be unwise to start with ‘write a sonnet about your career themes’) and allow students to do exercises that develop self-trust, competence and enjoyment in the writing process. In our experience students become willing to engage deeply with their life material in writing when a facilitator also draws on and shares personal experiences and cultivates a sense

of presence in the classroom (for similar experiences with mentoring see Philip, 2001). Career counsellors are also aware of this need for ‘residing in silence and wonder’ and cultivating a sense of ‘presence’. It can be said that the qualities of a good writing facilitator are the same as those of an effective career counsellor: ‘caring, awareness, silence, ontological humility, courage, humour, self-discipline and friendship’ (Hansen & Amundson, 2009, p. 39) and ‘self-respect, responsibility, generosity, positive regard, commitment and courage’ (Taylor, 2011, p. 509).

The order of the exercises and activities is important for two reasons. First, writing is a learned skill and trying different forms (e.g. poetry, dialogue) means that a student needs time and practice to develop various abilities and the confidence to venture more creatively. Starting by completing a list of sentence stems at the beginning of the course, for instance, is a more successful way to engage students than by asking them to try their hand at playwriting or fiction. Second, the purpose of embarking here is to go from a first to a second story (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009) or what McMahon and Watson (2012, pp. 215–216) refer to as moving from a thin to a thicker and richer story, one ‘more invested with hope and possibility’. As we have described elsewhere (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), this is a transformational process that involves both the engagement of emotions and the skills to structure a narrative. The aim here is to cultivate different (felt) perspectives and that is a learning process that happens in phases, which will be explained in more detail later in this article. It includes doing exercises that invite one to express feelings, welcome uncertainty and eventually write a (second) ‘story’ that goes beyond initial assumptions and fears.

In terms of the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), which has already been used as an analysis framework for career learning (Winters et al., 2012, 2013), the writing exercises as a whole must be shaped and ordered in a way that first fosters the expression of various selves or ‘I-positions’, then helps students to expand them, while creating space for observation and integration of the different selves we encounter (meta-position), and finally helps students to feel empowered to take action based on what they have learned (i.e. develop a promoter position). The underlying assumption here is that we can no longer define the ‘self’ via social, occupational or personal roles. Indeed individuality is now ‘constructed’ and ‘created’ and expresses itself as a polyphonic novella (Bakhtin, 1984). Our ‘self’ is in fact many ‘selves’ (Assagioli, 1971; Ford, 2010). The self is part of an extended, multi-voiced process in which identity is constantly created and innovated (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

In the following section, we will introduce the various exercises and approaches that we use in the graduate courses, and elaborate on how they contribute to the transformational process in dialogical terms. The development from a single to more I-positions and from there to meta- and promoter positions will be referred to as the dialogical learning process. The exercises will be arranged in the order in which we have found them to be most effective for writing skill development and transformative learning

### **Creative introductions: who are you?**

In workshops and courses, it is customary to start introductions based on questions like ‘What do you do?’ (i.e., what kind of paid work do you do?) and ‘What did you come here to learn?’. These prompts, if responded to, appear to provide answers to



the more pertinent matters, such as ‘Where do I fit and how do I want to develop myself?’. However, these questions are frequently and perhaps ironically dead-ends because a student is not able to answer them. The individualisation of society has resulted in a fragmentation of self and the disappearance of coherent role expectations and, as learning is a dialogical and narrative process, students often discover what they need to learn only as they embark and become engaged in the process with their facilitators and peers.

If a dialogical learning process is to take place, which is to have students, teachers and mentors engage in an alive conversation that has them reflecting on (work) experiences of the dynamic multi-voiced self, we must start with activities that have that learning process in mind. Below are some of the questions and sentence stems in the introduction to the graduate course ‘Narrative Possibilities’ (Lengelle, 2008) which is in part focused on professional development and includes a week devoted to career learning. Note how the questions already invite students to express more than one I-position.

*To introduce yourself, complete the following sentences*

1. *If I were on a transatlantic flight today, I would tell my seat mate these two true (or fictional) things about me.*
2. *Lines from a poem or other text that inspire me or have always sounded true for me are (please quote your source if you can):*
- 3a) *The one fear I have around writing (e.g. poetry/story) or the creative process is . . .*
- b) *I sense that an uplifting response to that fear might be . . .*
4. *Use 3 labels to define your roles in life (e.g. mother, computer analyst, amateur botanist) and three nouns or adjectives that you feel are more your essence (e.g. healer, shy-dreamer, soul-detective).*
5. *Write a sentence about yourself and then write it again saying the opposite. Write each so that they both feel true. (You might choose a word or description that feels familiar or has been used to label you.)*

These questions require reflection, are original (i.e. unexpected) and imply that ‘self’ is multi-voiced and capable of talking with and to itself. What we often see in the responses is that students enjoy the creative explorations, experience their own answers to concerns they have (e.g. 3a and b) and readily express I-positions and expanded I-positions. Without really noticing they have filled the page – which inspires and instils confidence that they are able to write – they also experience how their own answers might fit or feel. Students have reported that a response to question 3a and b has also reduced the intimidation factor (e.g., ‘I do not have enough experience in writing’; ‘I sense that an uplifting response to that fear might be, if I keep writing, more experience is inevitable’). Much like the varying levels of story-crafting questions, these introductory sentence stems include factual questions, questions that help people make connections between influences, and prompts which

'identify themes and patterns that are present in all stories' (McMahon & Watson, 2012, pp. 219–220).

An additional and alternate question that can be asked at the start of the course is 'To what do you dedicate yourself?' (Stafford, 2007). Instead of 'What do you do?', this question invites a broader response or conversation. Writing in response to this question also brings up I-positions already engaged with activities a person is passionate about and gives information about how one might want to 'act in the world' (promoter position).

What is important at the start of a dialogical learning process is that students are immediately prompted to express a 'multi-voiced self' and that they learn to write reflexively as a kind of engagement or conversation, not as a duty.

### Proprioceptive writing

The proprioceptive writing method developed by Trichter-Metcalf and Simon (2002) is a form of expressive and reflective writing suited to promote a dialogical learning process because it allows space for expression, focuses on listening to ourselves and asks additional probing questions. Students write to Baroque music on blank paper on any topic for 20–25-minute sessions; they are instructed to 'write what you hear' and 'listen to what you write' (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002, pp. 32–34). While 'free-writing' or journal writing activities without structured guiding questions will produce the expression of an I-position (and quite likely expanded I-positions), they will not necessarily lead to a meta-position. The instruction, 'listen to what you write' can, however, stimulate this. It asks the writer to take a 'helicopter view' which is what is required for making new combinations from the various I-positions. At various points and about various words or phrases that are written, the writer is asked to ask the proprioceptive question: 'What do I mean by?' (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002, pp. 34–35). For instance, if a student writes, '...frustrated by my new boss...', they have to clarify their meanings further: 'What do I mean by *frustrated by my new boss*?' (e.g., he is impatient; he did not take time to explain what my role was; he treated me like a child; he seemed like a very nice guy and I wanted to spend more time with him).

After a person has completed a Write (i.e. the product of the 20–25 minutes of writing), they are asked to write out the answers to the following four concluding questions (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002, pp. 39–41):

1. *What thoughts were heard but not written?* More I-positions can emerge here, in particular ones that may have been taboo (so-called 'shadow positions'; see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) or were whispering in the margins of someone's life and only surface by listening in again in response to this question.

2. *How or what do I feel now?* In uncovering one's passion by writing, accessing feelings is critically important. Writing with an aim to engage in a dialogical learning process is not only a cognitive process but an emotional one. Career learning is also a process that involves intuition and emotions and this question can prompt greater awareness of those aspects or positions.

3. *What larger story is the Write part of?* Here, again, a meta-position is stimulated.

4. *What ideas came up for future Writes?* This question may help give 'order and direction' to the writing that has been done and assist in formulating promoter

positions. More I-positions may also emerge as someone writes out the answer to this question.

The Baroque music that is used during the writing helps to keep students focused on the activity. Many have never spent 20–25 minutes writing without interruption and are surprised that they are able to sustain the activity for such a period. Because they are not restricted by a form (such as fiction or poetry) they can allow themselves to go in any direction, while having to probe more deeply into those meanderings with the proprioceptive question, than they otherwise would have.

In the courses, students are asked to post a summary of their Writes, but they are never asked to talk in great detail about what they have written. Students should be allowed to keep their Writes private. Some I-positions might never emerge if the writer knows s/he must admit to having them. Fiction or dialogue are often more suited forms to use for sharing and analysis and an evolving conversation with others.

### **Fiction**

As mentioned before, Picasso said that ‘art is the lie that tells the truth’. This is true of fiction writing, although authors are often defensive when asked if their writing is a reflection of their personal lives. Novelist John Irving denied that his focus on the absent parent in his work had anything to do with his own estranged father, but the theme returns in at least 10 of his novels. We write what we know; life themes and personal wounds emerge in our work – even, and perhaps especially, in fiction. Poignantly, those wounds are also what may drive us into particular careers; the work we end up doing is often a response or ‘solution’ to painful experiences in childhood. In the words of Savickas (2011), ‘what we have passively suffered we try to actively master’. In this way our fictional narratives offer important information about what is salient for us, even when literal connections are not easily discerned from the stories we create.

Students may not write about actual facts and people, but their characters are often composites of themselves or those they have met. Indeed, ‘creating feeds on memory in that it depends on the availability and retrieval of knowledge stored in the form of schemata. [...] Every act of creating relies to a degree on memory; in turn, every act of remembering relies to a degree on creativity’ (Kellogg, 1994, p. 22). That is perhaps why emotional truths are discovered when we ‘make up’ stories and why values and opinions we are most apt to emphasise in a story reveal things about us. Additionally, ‘writing and reading can allow people to live other lives and try things out symbolically, so that we can make better decisions about what we value and do’ (Warnock, 2000, p. 51). Trying things out symbolically is a kind of ‘serious playfulness’ that makes ‘uncertainty a positive force’ (Bolton, 2010, p. 71).

In response to a course prompt where students were asked to explore career themes using fiction as a starting point, Andrea wrote the following piece of fiction:

My assistant pulls diarized files and brings them to me for review and instruction. We discuss payroll and sub-contracts that must be reviewed and I speak to her of her potential in business management and accounting and my excitement at her continuing education. She is a major part of my succession plan and I hope to groom her into taking over the majority of my duties in the months to follow. We, however, still need to deal with the situation with my partners. My assistant desires to please, and it appears that her desire to please my two male colleagues carries a much higher value to her than

pleasing me. Ironically, if my colleagues wanted her removed, I would not let her go easily. But she doesn't seem to connect her future career to the only other woman in her employment world: a woman who is her senior, an owner, and her immediate supervisor.

Upon reflection, Andrea made the following discoveries about herself as she reviewed the story she had written:

...my assistant is one version of a younger me: born into patriarchy in the early 1960s behind four older brothers, working in careers with only men for authority figures, understanding safety only when authority figures (men) were pleased, and always choosing peace over conflict, regardless of the personal cost. I recognize that I longed for a mentor; a woman who would teach me how to be confident in what I know to be true and still be feminine, how to stand firmly and not allow myself to engage in co-dependent behavior, and how to not compromise myself for the sake of peace. I realize I was looking for a female role model; a pioneer from whom I could fashion my career and my relationships. I also realize that I see my older self as the mentor for whom I longed, and that through fiction, I could return to support and care for my lost younger self. (My reflection is entirely accurate (ouch)...).

Even a student as conscious as Andrea can find aspect of her 'selves' in her fiction that she did not expect to see, or become aware of what is in 'plain view' (e.g. her desire to mentor herself as a young woman) but not necessarily obvious. Writing a 'made up' story gives us a space to touch on themes that we might otherwise ignore or deny or fail to claim or emphasise. Finding ourselves in what we have written by having the text 'talk back to us' can catch us off guard and shed new insights. Notice the expanded I-positions and the meta-position that emerged here through a combination of being prompted, writing fiction, then being prompted again. The 'ouch' at the end catches our attention; it reveals that the narrative Andrea wrote and her reflection on it was emotionally compelling. It is a special moment when we can not only express our *selves* but see what is revealed about ourselves.

It may be argued that Andrea could have discovered these things by talking to someone or through her own private journal writing. However, the power of writing fiction is that often the parts (or I-positions) that are hidden in the margins of our lives appear on the stage. And if we have shared and shown others, we project on those readers a witness of our self-discoveries and once that happens we can no longer pretend we did not see what we saw. In both pieces Andrea wrote, we see how, as the plot thickens, so do the I-positions.

In a dialogue that might follow or in an additional prompt by an instructor, Andrea might explore whether she wants to take on a role of mentor for young women in the workplace. For instance, as an instructor we might ask her to write a response to the question, 'What do you want to do now that you see what you see?', thereby encouraging the development of a promoter position.

## Poetry

Poetry is suited to fostering the dialogical learning process for several reasons. First, poetry is sparse; the writer uncovering various I-positions and expressing them in a poem is forced to focus on key elements. S/he asks, 'what are the essential facts about statements like "I am a lover of the outdoors; I have a very methodical side to me." How do I get my reader to really see those sides of me?' Poetry requires us to focus on facts and images, and less on interpretation. Writing poetry also helps train one's

powers of observation. If a person is to be sparse with language and make that language powerful in its brevity, s/he must look carefully not at trite observations like 'it was snowing outside' but at what captures our attention about the scene: 'I saw the rounded ledge of snow that formed on the railing of the step'. In this same way, one is taught to observe one's selves. Much like the proprioceptive questions aims to do, poetry too asks, 'What do I mean by?'.

Poetry, however, is more than sparse and concrete language. It makes another leap that journal writing or fiction does not often do as directly. It employs metaphor, which, according to Siegelman (1990), cited by Mignot, 2004, p. 457), from a constructivist point of view 'blurs the distinction between literal and figurative language and also acknowledges the power of metaphor not only to define, but also to confine the construction of reality'. Metaphor is a way of tangibly describing what is felt or experienced. It can either be a 'substitution' for something literal or it can be 'generative' and contribute to the actual construction of a (career) narrative. For instance, when it is too stark or threatening to admit, 'I'm stuck with regards to my career progress', a student or client might instead write, 'I'm buried up to my neck in sand and each time the waves get a bit closer; soon they'll go right over my head'. This metaphor can give a student or facilitator a much better idea about the nature of a personal crisis and may even hint at a solution. By making the metaphor a literal 'object' of conversation, new insights can develop and the conversation can be usefully diverted from the individual to the exploration of possibilities (for examples of the use of poetry and metaphor in a career context, see Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

The following poem was written by Edith, a graduate student, who used her course work to write about her experience with sudden redundancy. Her story was also used as a more extensive case study (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Despite the fact that Edith had spent 38 years working as a journalist, she did not discover or know writing to be a transformational process until she took the 'Narrative Possibilities' course and wrote about her career crisis.

Laid off  
 Born in the winter of my fifty-sixth year,  
 I am delivered from my four-decade world of routine  
 Into the no-visibility blizzard of uncertainty.  
 I wail.  
 I weep.  
 Slowly the renewed of springtime arrives  
 And I follow the sun-brightened road  
 Seeking signposts for real truth to replace false ones  
 I write.  
 I read.  
 Like the bird flying without knowing the sky's dimensions  
 I dare to be creative without a contracted point of sale. (Edith Robb, 2009)

Notice the metaphors in the poem as well as the I-positions they imply (e.g. I-born; I-an employee of 40 years; I-with no visibility; I-in the blizzard; I-when springtime arrives; I-on a brightened road; I-seeking signposts). The meta-position starts to emerge in the last two lines: I-as bird (with a view) but not knowing where the sky begins or end; I-as someone who is living with uncertainty, but still going on.

Although there is no promoter position in the poem, the last line hints at continued work efforts, even without the former rewards and securities. There is even hope that Edith will be able to create an action plan at the end of the poem, because the seasons are changing; eventually it will be time to go outside again. The blinding blizzard will be behind her. Most recently, Edith told us she started a successful business as a freelancer and that writing contributed enormously to her ability to revive and recreate her occupational life.

### Dialogues

Writing dialogue seems fitting if one intends to teach a 'dialogical' approach to career learning; still it is not entirely clear what is meant by using dialogues in this context. If the self is a dynamic multiplicity of selves, some of which can be discovered by writing fiction or discovering or expanding upon metaphors in poetic prose, what kinds of written conversations with self and others might serve in fostering a dialogical learning process? Just as with the other exercises, students require a prompt to begin writing a dialogue. The following exercise was posted in one of the graduate courses as a supplemental exercise.

*The Exercise:* Take a piece of paper and tear it so that you have six little separate strips. On each one write one of the following words: Unemployed, Employed, Observer/Witness, Wisdom, Labour market, Victim. Fold the pieces of paper so you cannot see what is written on them. Choose two of the pieces of paper randomly and start a written conversation, much like you would if you were writing the first lines of a play.

In response to the exercise, Carla wrote the following dialogue, which combined creative, expressive and reflective elements:

**Employed:** I'm busy.

**Victim:** You're always busy.

**Employed:** I am being useful and used. My skills are needed by someone. That is what is honourable and acceptable.

**Victim:** I really do not want to be like you. You're selling out for money.

**Employed:** I need to make a lot of money so I can do the things I really want to do.

**Victim:** Yeah, when you're dead because you do not have time to do what you want to do, and here I sit looking at all the tools to play the music, and I have to wait for you because you're busy. When you're not busy you're tired. When you're not tired you're doing something for someone else. When are you ever going to smell the roses and spend time with me?

**Employed:** I'm busy making good money. I am helping people. I'm helping you and the rest of the family.

**Victim:** That's just an excuse. You're as bitter about this stuff as I am. If you were really doing what you wanted to do, you would be happy. You're just copping out and being like everyone else. You left me behind and you're not getting any younger.

The instruction after letting the first two voices speak is to add a third or fourth. It is important that one does so in an unhurried way so that each voice gets to offer its gripes, issues, responses and insights. In the course, Carla was asked to invite the 'witness/observer' and 'wisdom' to the table as she reported that she was currently employed. It became an expanded dialogue where meta-positions slowly emerged and eventually even a promoter position developed. Here are several pieces to illustrate:

**Witness:** You know you both are on the same page from different perspectives. Why do not you learn from each other? Try out each other's suggestions. (. . .) It sounds that you both have excuses to fail: one appearing like a legitimate, positive reason, and the other for a negative, self-defeated way.

It is noteworthy that Carla's observing self started to ask completely different questions, much more focused on the coming together of viewpoints, working together and respect for the differing points of view.

**Wisdom:** Is it beneficial? Or are you just allowing yourself to be like victim only on the other extreme. Victim doesn't want to make choices that she will have to pay for, but you seem to want to control everything. Neither is fruitful. Both lead to pain and regret.

At the end of the dialogue, Carla let each voice speak again. Although the pieces have been shortened for this article, it is apparent that the atmosphere of the exchanges had completely changed. The polarised I-positions shifted and a crystal-lising metaphor appeared. Notice also how all the selves began to interact constructively. Each began to speak with its own purpose and contribute insight.

**Employment:** I believe in being helpful to others. If I have power, influence, network, and money, it gives me the capabilities to influence the direction of my life.

**Victim:** I do not believe in that imbalance.

**Witness:** You two are really not that different. You're just at different places of knowledge and self-revelation. I see you as balancing each other out. The tender and the strong, like a tree.

**Wisdom:** Tenderness is necessary in order to allow flexibility for the energy to run through the tree uninhibited, resulting in the birthing of leaves and fruit . . . It is focused energy reaching for heights and spreading itself out to meet other trees.

Several days after the writing, Carla wrote more directly about her career interests in an online message. It was noteworthy that after doing the written dialogue the urgency to take action of some kind erupted (i.e. in this case asking new questions and networking).

Of all the exercises, writing dialogues looks more like a dialogical learning process because I-positions can be easily discerned and employed. Dialogues between I-positions are also a direct reflection of the 'multi-dimensional self' even when these dialogues do not always result in the development of a meta- or promoter position.

### **The 'Work' of Byron Katie**

The 'Work' of Byron Katie (2002) can also contribute to the development of a promoter position and the engagement in a dialogical learning process, but has particular added value because the student can explore the legitimacy of particular I-positions. It allows, in the words of McMahon et al. (2012, p. 131), 'the deconstruction of previous non-preferred stories'. The 'I's' that often play the lead role in our career drama can also be paralysing. Successful career learning is not only about the stories our minds constantly serve up, but also identifying stories we keep telling ourselves that no longer serve. The Work is used in both graduate courses after the creative approaches described above and while those were primarily constructive, the Work is an inquiry process that strips and makes room for new constructions. The Work begins as an expressive form of writing, but is essentially a

reflexive approach. The first task for a student is to write down a page of stressful thoughts (e.g., 'My boss does not appreciate me; she should understand my time constraints', etc.) and then examines each thought or assumption, starting with the question, 'Is it true?' This first question is often already a radical step in developing a meta-position. The second question, 'Can you absolutely know it's true?', asks the person to have another look at what is being believed. At this stage I-positions that once seemed firm and well supported are seriously questioned. The two last questions ('How do you react when you believe the thought?'; 'Who would you be without the thought?') cultivate one's ability to notice (from a meta-position) what a particular position is costing us and creates the space for the final step where students are asked to write down evidence for what Katie calls a 'turnaround' (e.g., 'My boss *does* appreciate me; *I* should understand my time constraints', etc.). Viewing various opposites of the initial stressful thought would seem like an arbitrary exercise in positive thinking or rationalisation, were it not for the four questions at the centre of the process which allows for repositioning and 'implies transformations of identities' (Zittoun, 2008, p. 166).

Margot had completed her course work and was ready to do her final project. She had two supervisors to guide her, but occasionally she e-mailed for moral support as she had taken both graduate writing courses described in this article. At one point she e-mailed to say she felt she was 'not an academic'. She presented the apparent evidence: 'I am an artist; I am a teacher; I am a mother and a grandmother, but not an academic!'. Byron Katie's method asks Margot to first write down the thought that is causing her stress and then to ask the four questions about the thought she has written down.

M: I am not an academic.

Katie: Is that true, you're not an academic?

M: Yes. That's true.

Katie: Can you absolutely know that it's true, you're not an academic?

M: Well, I did all the course work. I have read so many academic texts now. I know how to dialogue, but it's not my language or voice.

Katie: A one syllable answer, can you absolutely know it's true, you're not an academic?

M: No.

Katie: So how do you react when you believe the thought, 'I'm not an academic' and you are faced now with your final project? You have to write a final academic-style piece and you are believing, 'I am not an academic'.

M: I feel incredibly anxious. I'm terrified and alone. I cannot stop crying.

Katie: Sounds stressful. Can you think of one stress-free reason to keep that thought? *(Note that this is an additional sub-question that can be asked in this process)*

M: No.

Katie: So, who would you be without the thought, 'I'm not an academic?' You are looking over your approved project proposal and that thought does not enter your mind.

M: I'm so excited. I know I do not want to be doing anything else right now. This is how I will make my vocation known. Without the thought, I'm free. I have so much to learn, but I'm free.

Katie: So, turn it around. Turn it to its opposite, for instance.

M: I am an academic.

Katie: Tell me three reasons how this is just as true or truer than your original premise?

M: Like I said, I have been reading all this stuff! I am understanding it. I have dialogues with other students about it and my professors too. Our dialogue is on 'equal terms' – not the hierarchy that I was expecting. They believe I can do this! In moments I believe I can do it too. I am an academic because this program drew me in; it is a strange home



for me, but it is my home! I recognize other academics as ‘my kind’ – not all of them, but some of them. I have a number of skills that academics have.

We had a brief conversation about her trying on the ‘the academic garb’ for an afternoon – in other words to live the turnaround; to live it out symbolically as Warnock suggests. Shortly thereafter, Margot sent me several practical questions which could be seen as her making room for a new identification, also signalling that she was ready to take a practical step (promoter position). Margot completed her project within six months of this writing and later wrote in an e-mail, ‘feeling like the only academic in the room; NOT that I minded, but all of a sudden I had a “shift” in terms of seeing where my work might be going’.

### **The order of things**

The aim of the process in its entirety is the creation of a ‘second story’ (see Lengelle & Meijers, 2009) as mentioned earlier. A second story is a felt theory, or workable self-narrative. At the end of the course students are therefore invited to write a self-portrait making use of the various forms of writing they have engaged in. We have developed a theoretical model that describes this process (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

Central to the model is the assumption that the creation of a second story is a ‘whole brain activity’: it is an emotional and cognitive learning process, which is ‘fuelled’ by a dialogue with oneself and others. The learning begins with a ‘boundary experience’ which is a ‘rupture’ in one’s life that calls for the ‘construction of new schemes’ (Zittoun, 2008, p. 165). A narrative develops in the interplay between the conscious, the unconscious and experiences (Krieshok, Black, & McKay, 2009), whereby experiences first result in ‘tacit knowledge’ (Jiang & Chun, 2001; Reber, Gitelman, Parrish, & Mesulam, 2003) that has to be made explicit by cognitive learning in order to stimulate self-directedness (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Law (1996, 2010) distinguishes four stages in this process: sensing, sifting, focusing and understanding. Sensing is the stage in which information is gathered (from various sources, in particular those that are emotionally compelling), but no explanation or perspective is yet developed. Sifting is a sorting process which moves a person ‘towards the issue of causality’ (Law, 1996, p. 55). One compares one’s circumstances with those of others and starts to develop analogies and from those analogies, constructs and concepts start to emerge. In the focusing stage actual viewpoints are formulated. These viewpoints are still fragmented, but they are an attempt to string together feelings and ideas that arose during the sensing and sifting stages. The focusing stage ideally segues into the understanding stage and the insights and fragments start to become a second story. This process is referred to as episodic learning, which means the learner puts the events into sequence and clarifies the who, what, where, when, how and why of what has happened. This process is usually a combination of ordering the material, articulating the ‘big picture’ and drawing conclusions.

All the writing that is done to come to a second story will inevitably contain creative, expressive and reflective elements, but certain writing approaches are often better suited in varying phases than others. Although it is not possible to match Law’s learning phases with particular writing activities, the order of the exercises does correspond with the aims of the stages. For instance, the introductory sentence stem exercise and proprioceptive writing are useful sensing exercises; they allow free

expression without imposing a great deal of structure on the work. Poetry and fiction writing are more suited to sifting and focusing and frequently work when the initial emotions have been expressed and no longer dominate. Dialogues are often best suited for focusing and understanding; they not only require advanced skills in writing and in having practised ‘embodying’ different I-positions, but a dialogue tends to bring to the fore key insights and threads of continuity.

The Work could be useful in any phase of the process, but frequently it is used to most effect when enough ‘story’ has been explored to also consider the central tenet of the process – that is, to discover who one would be without one’s story. It is a useful exercise prior to writing the final narrative or self-portrait as it allows students to ‘edit out’ assumptions and beliefs that may linger from a first story. In conclusion, a second story is strongest when expressive (engaging with the emotions), creative (exploring all kinds of stories about the self, including metaphors and poetry) and reflexive writing (which often means dialogues and inquiry) are all engaged in through the phases.

### **Implications for training and course development**

Career learning using writing is rife with possibilities, but more career professionals would have to become familiar with the theories and approaches for it to become a recognised and effective approach in narrative guidance. More specifically, career professionals do well to spend some time writing for and about themselves. The process, the courage required and the possible benefits need to be experienced before they can be properly understood. As Bolton (2010, p. xiv) says, ‘reflective practice is only effectively undertaken and understood by becoming immersed in doing it rather than reading about or following instructions’. There is a danger that simply assigning work to young adults without this embodied experience increases the chances that the writing exercise will be done as another assignment to simply ‘get over with’ (as most students in secondary education are not intrinsically motivated for their studies and therefore have a purely instrumental relationship with their assignments and teachers; see Holt, 1995; Prawat, 1998). Additionally, Simpson (2011) in her autoethnographic exploration suggests that it is important that the practitioners themselves gain a better understanding of their own career stories in order to gain a fuller perspective of their clients’ lives.

Those using writing approaches should also familiarise themselves with the many creative exercises that are already available and have been created by those who work in the field of writing for personal development. Enthusiasm, engagement and a conversation with what is already ‘out there’ will contribute to professionals’ ability to eventually tailor-make exercises for particular students or clients.

Training programmes created for career professionals should also include space for ethical conversations about confidentiality and the psychological and emotional implications of asking students/clients to write about their lives. The pitfalls of writing about personal topics have been described by Pennebaker (1997) and include things such as writing as a replacement for action, over-intellectualising and – if guidelines are not in place – even rumination. These pitfalls can be avoided when professionals are aware of them and know how to redirect students towards writing activities that foster a dialogical learning process. Although we have argued that writing is a more self-directed activity, it still requires a conversation that ensures a safe space for exploration. Career professionals have to be trained to know when to create space

(e.g. by encouraging students to be more expressive) or when to structure space (e.g. by showing students how they might view their stories in a more analytical way). The MAIS courses do include a disclaimer and ask students explicitly to work within their comfort zone and if emotional issues should arise that fall outside the scope of the course, they are asked to seek advice or psychological counselling.

## Conclusion

The narrative career methods that have proliferated in past decades offer a wide range of counselling-based approaches to career learning. In addition to the storytelling approach of McMahon and Watson (2012), the storyboarding method of Law (<http://www.hihohiho.com/storyboarding/sbstockroom.html>), the life design perspective of Savickas et al. (2010) and the contributions of Cochran (1997), Peavy (1998) and Amundson (2010) to narrative counselling, writing might be included as a developing method with an evolving practical and theoretical foundation. Compared to the above approaches, writing has the advantage that it can be done online at a distance, it can allow students/clients to be more self-directed (although a dialogue remains essential), it allows career professionals to work with groups and it is often suited to people who actually have difficulties with disclosure (as writing can be kept private). Research as to the efficacy of writing and the process of using writing for career learning is currently being done by the authors.

## Acknowledgements

We thank all those students who have allowed us to share examples of their work to illustrate how writing may contribute to career learning.

## Notes on contributors

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