

REINEKKE LENGELLE AND FRANS MEIJERS

19. PLAYWRIGHT MEETS CAREER COACH

Writing Dialogues to Promote Awareness and Self-Direction

Art does not reproduce what we see. It makes us see.

—Paul Klee

... I left home early and stopped in a café to write a short letter to my future self – I told her not to worry if this afternoon's news turned out to be bad. An hour later, I would need those words of reassurance.

—(Lengelle, 2014, p. 13)

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we propose that writing dialogues in creative, expressive, and reflective ways can foster more awareness and self-direction among those who aim to start, build, or rescue their careers. In the first section of the chapter we sketch the societal issues for which narrative counselling is a response; we subsequently argue that more independent methods, like career writing (Lengelle, 2014) are needed as they are more time and cost effective as compared with one-on-one narrative counselling approaches. We explain what dialogue writing entails, explain the learning theory that underlies its use in career learning, and provide case studies and personal stories to show its potential. We close with several practical exercises and suggestions for those who would add it to their practice.

21ST CENTURY WORK-RELATED CHALLENGES WHICH NECESSITATE A CHANGED APPROACH TO CAREER GUIDANCE

As will be clear from various contributions in this book, a pervasive yet out-dated notion about career counselling is that those seeking to develop their careers can match their skills and talents to existing work. In much of career guidance practice, it is still assumed that receiving 'the right information' about opportunities and aligning these with skills and qualifications will allow people to succeed on the labour market. The logic in these assumptions can be explained by looking at the history of guidance in the industrial age, where professions could easily be identified and grand narratives served to provide people with a road map through life (Guichard & Lenz, 2005).

In the twenty-first century this is no longer the case: work has not only become increasingly insecure with part-time and contract-based work becoming ubiquitous (Goldstene, 2013; Savickas 2011a), but society at large has also individualized to the point where there are no longer ‘grand narratives’ to count on or live by. Individuals are expected to find or create their own sense of purpose and meaning and although this new state of affairs creates a sense of greater career mobility and perceived opportunity, it is also a source of profound insecurity (Pryor & Bright, 2011).

The variety and proliferation of different types of work add to this insecurity and make it impossible to make sense of information provided about job opportunities as such. It is noteworthy to consider, for instance, that in 1976 in The Netherlands there were 5 500 professions that could be identified with and 2 000 job titles that could be considered “non-specific” (e.g. policy assistant; regional advisor; data worker). By 2010 the number of recognizable professions had dropped to 1073 and the “nonspecific positions” had grown to over 23 000 (CBS, 2012). An additional and compounding factor is the need for emotional competence in the workplace (Cherniss, 2000) while formal education continues to emphasize “rational-cognitive conceptions of knowledge and cumulative linear models of learning” (Briton, 2012, p. 48).

The realities described above call for a different approach to career guidance as it is clear traditional approaches are no longer sufficient (Jarvis, 2014). Those seeking work, embarking on career journeys and developing ‘career paths’ need to develop a story of who they are in order to navigate a now complex and multifaceted world (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). They are compelled to do so with the awareness that the self is dialogical, which means it is an ever-evolving “dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous I-positions in the landscape of the mind” (Hermans & Konopka, 2010, p. 173–174). Indeed the self is no static ‘thing’, no single ‘core’, but both tension-filled and multi-voiced and when expressed in narrative form is perceived as a more coherent and stable whole (Hermans, 2014; Lengelle, 2014). This is an important observation because the ‘constant’ in career development is no longer the employer or labour market, but the individual, who makes his/her way in the world guided by an evolving story of self. Identity is constructed by engaging in both internal and external dialogues in response to meeting challenges (e.g. choice-making dilemmas, difficulty finding work, losing work).

Various practical narrative-based dialogical counselling practices to stimulate the formation of narrative identities have been developed in recent decades (Cochran, 1997; Savickas, 2005; McMahon & Watson, 2012; Reid & West, 2011). However these methods depend primarily upon time-consuming one-on-one guidance practices, are therefore costly to individuals seeking such services, and in most cases require a professionally trained career counsellor. It is for this reason that approaches that can be done more independently or in group formats – and become part of a person’s on-going self-directed learning process – are valuable.

Instead of giving a person a story after a series of counselling conversations, the future aim of career guidance should be aimed at teaching people to uncover and

(co) construct (i.e. write) such stories for themselves. This is what “career writing” – creative, expressive, and reflective writing for career learning was developed to do (Lengelle, 2014). More precisely and in dialogical self-theory terms, writing for one’s career development intends to foster the expression of I-positions (what is important to someone), makes possible the expansion of those positions (to find out in what other ways and contexts these things are important), and ideally leads to the development of meta- (insight-) and promoter- (capacity to act-) positions (Winters, Meijers, Lengelle & Baert, 2012; Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2014). In short, people can learn to write in a way that facilitates awareness and self-direction. This chapter focuses in particular on how dialogue writing can be used to achieve this aim.

In the following sections, dialogue writing, as a part of ‘career writing’, is explained and the learning theory that underlies its use visited briefly. (For a full theoretical perspective, see Meijers & Lengelle, 2012.) A case study where a student used dialogue writing to gain awareness and foster self-direction is shared. One of the authors also revisits three separate occasions when she herself used dialogue writing to navigate a life transition. We conclude the chapter with suggestions for career professionals who would use this creative approach as part of their services.

DIALOGUE WRITING

Career Writing

Career writing refers to a method of narrative guidance¹ that was developed by the authors to help individuals construct a career identity using creative, expressive, and reflective types of writing and combines the field of writing for personal development with that of career counselling (for a full overview see Lengelle, 2014). Career writing includes a host of different writing exercises, including dialogue writing, and research shows (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2013) that it is a promising method for helping university students who did work placements make sense of themselves and work experiences and contributes to the formation of “beneficial narratives” (i.e. career identities). As well, research shows that students become more luck ready by writing for this purpose and are evaluated more positively by their employers as compared with those who did their work placements but did not take part in career-writing activities (Lengelle, Meijers, Poell & Post, 2014; Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, Geijsel, & Post, in press).

Dialogue writing involves having written conversations with various ‘sub-selves’ (I-positions) within oneself or with imagined others. It can be done in creative (i.e. fictional), expressive (i.e. expressing painful feelings and events), and/ or reflective (i.e. recording and assessing one’s life) ways and intends to make sense of experiences in a deliberate way. This might for instance mean that a person writes a dialogue between “a victim self” and “a wiser self” or writes an unsent letter to an employer that includes disappointed, angry, but also perhaps understanding voices.

The learning process that may be facilitated by writing dialogues to oneself or imagined others is intended to create sense and meaning and to help shift attitudes that no longer serve. Ideally the art and act of writing dialogues is a way to get to know one's 'selves', expand (deepen and broaden) these, gain awareness and foster a sense of self-direction.

The learning process implied here – which is also described above in dialogical self theory terms – is triggered by a crisis or 'boundary experience'. A boundary experience is a challenge that cannot be resolved using familiar coping mechanisms and in this way constitutes a stressful life event (Meijers & Wardekker, 2002). This may include losing one's job, having to make a new career choice while feeling incapable of doing so, or feeling inadequate at making a living or life as compared with other people. Because a boundary experience is by definition an experience that an individual cannot (yet) effectively cope with, it brings up negative emotions, which are ordinarily translated into a narrative of woe or what is referred to as a "first story" (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Indeed, humans' first response to 'challenges' is often victimhood, entitlement, rescue, and/or blame (Baker & Staath, 2003, p. 158-177) before potential opportunities of crises are explored; help is frequently required in order to make the most of boundary experiences. Therefore contemporary career guidance should be aimed at helping individuals turn 'first' into 'second' or more life- and hope-giving stories.

Meaning and the Importance of Dialogue

There is consensus among career professionals, educators, and employers that gaining work experience through vicarious learning is a natural part of becoming an effective worker. The notion that practical training and obtaining (theoretical) knowledge in a particular field are also essential is also generally agreed upon. However, the idea that sense should be made of learning experiences by cultivating a meaningful conversation about them is not assumed. Those who study learning and assess clients' skills and talents may overlook this aspect, even though experience alone does not necessarily teach us anything (Dewey, 1933). In order to make an experience valuable, enrichment is important, which implies "a process of increasing awareness via experiential activities that increase the decision-maker's fund of information about his or her self in the world" (Krieshok, Black & McKay, 2009, p. 284). In light of this and what has been said earlier, the aim of using dialogue writing in career guidance is to have a means by which meaning and sense can be made of challenges and work experiences via a dialogue with oneself (and with others) (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014).

A CASE STUDY

Carla (who gave us written permission to use her story) took part in a course called "Narrative Possibilities" (Lengelle, 2008) and wanted to explore her frustration with

her work situation. The exercise she was given was to take six pieces of paper and write one 'role' involving employment on each. The roles or labels were provided by the instructor and included: unemployed, employed, observer/witness, wisdom, labour market, and victim. The instructions were as follows: "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 between those 'roles', much like you would write the first lines of a dialogue between two characters in a play".

Carla wrote as quoted in Lengelle (2014, p. 60–62):

- 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 no getting any younger.

The act of writing as if roles were characters having a conversation on paper and having these first two begin an exchange, is a way of stimulating the expression of I-positions. As mentioned before, I-positions express what is important to an individual and in this first portion of the dialogue, we see not only the 'employed' Carla (as I-position) who finds it important to earn money for herself and her family, but also the value she puts on her skills being needed and serving others. The dialogue that the "victim" contributed was also not merely an I-position expressing discontent, but this part of the dialogue brought forward the musician in her and the importance of taking the time to "smell the roses" (and not only be dictated to by survival themes). The 'victim' also brought forward the preciousness of time and an awareness of energy levels.

When voices seem to repeat earlier messages and there is no further expansion of I-positions apparent, the next step in this particular exercise can be taken. Another piece of paper can be picked at random and a third voice can enter the conversation.

In this case, Carla happened to choose the role of ‘witness’. This position is quite literally a ‘meta-position’ (which facilitates attainment of an overarching insight) and also served her in this capacity. However, had she chosen “unemployed”, a meta-position may still have appeared; each new voice tends to bring together polarized views or sheds new insight and nudges the parties towards greater understanding and (self-)insight.

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 like you both have excuses to fail: one appearing like a legitimate, positive reason, and the other for a negative, self-defeated way.

Next Carla chose (again, randomly) the piece of paper with the role “wisdom” on it. Such a voice will also tend to bring unifying and helpful insights or even facilitate action steps. In Carla’s case, the appearance of ‘wisdom’ brought about a deepening (asking new questions) of I-positions and the insight (meta-position) that both the voice of ‘employed’ and the ‘victim’ were polarized positions and if continuing the dialogue as before would cause a deadlock.

Wisdom: Is it beneficial? Or are you just allowing yourself to be like victim 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.

Articulating this insight constituted a meta-position and this dialogue seemed to loosen the tension and polarization between the voices. It also showed expanded I-positions (i.e. broadening and deepening of initial I-positions).

Employed: 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.

Naming the problem again here in a matter of fact manner seemed to bring out a response from the witness and ‘wisdom’. A crystallizing metaphor eventually emerged and the polarization of voices seemed to become milder.

Witness: You two are really not that different (*referring to employed and victim*). You’re just at different places of knowledge. 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 ...

Several days after the writing Carla did here, she wrote more directly about her career interests in an online message. It was noteworthy that after the written dialogues, which

revealed I-positions, expanded I-positions and meta-positions, she was compelled to write about what steps she wanted to take next (i.e. formulating a promoter position). She said that she had ideas about networking – getting in touch with those who might offer her other employment options or spend time on her music.

Not all dialogues will lead to meta- and promoter positions, but they are apt to go in that direction as humans have a natural tendency to create new narratives of potential understanding from their stresses, in particular when they have given themselves a chance to feel (i.e. identify salient issues) and describe their stresses in increasingly structured ways (Pennebaker, 2011). Those new narratives or viewpoints, often expressed in the form of metaphors and analogies (Mignot, 2004), also often inspire action. In Carla's case, the realization that her employment situation may be seen as a tree that can bear new fruit may help give her the energy and focus to explore new avenues. Avenues she may have felt were inaccessible if she had remained trapped in the polarized views of 'employed' and 'victim' (which was the case at the start of this creative learning process).

A QUESTION OF SELF NARRATIVE: THREE PERSONAL DIALOGUES

Writing in order to alleviate suffering or to gain insight is not a new phenomenon (Riordan, 1996; Pennebaker, 2011) nor is it entirely new as a way of responding to employment challenges (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994). Additionally, it is being seen as a viable method in career counselling (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014). However, all this does not necessarily make it the option of choice in one's hour of need; one must experience or be convinced of its benefits to be motivated to employ it. With this in mind, I (Reinekke) will now share several of my own successful experiences with dialogue writing to navigate life challenges, starting with a relationship dilemma I resolved, followed by a loss I came to terms with, and concluding with an example of how I used dialogue writing more recently in the face of threatened job loss. Each dialogue will also be viewed through the lens of the four dialogical-self steps described above.

Writing Relationship

In my early twenties, I was strongly attracted to a man whom I knew was not healthy for me. Or rather, I should say, that 'one part of me' knew that while other selves remained attracted to him. Some I-positions even planned a future with him as my partner. There were various routes I could have taken to resolve the inner conflict (for instance counselling) but I decided to write a play about it (Gerding, 1995). I literally let my problem take centre stage, where I had an actor play how I experienced 'him'—a character who was cynical and emotionally difficult. I also created a character that represented a 'healthy' man to explore his imagined opposite. The main, female character was put in the mix and had a chance to wrestle with her longings, her insights, and the tensions between them.

As the writer of the piece, but with no idea how the story would end, I was able to see myself enacted several times. The first time, through the writing, the second time by workshopping and rehearsing the play with the director and actors (and listening carefully to the cast and crew as they reflected on the characters) and a third time on stage amidst the earnest attention and laughter of an audience. You might say that both an internal and external dialogue became possible through a process that allowed me to express my initial I-positions (my attraction and my initial insight), expand those I-positions (having the main character evolve her vision of the life she wanted) and eventually formulate a meta-position (the insight that the man who presented the fatal attraction was not evil, nor so very irresistible, but constituted a risk in the longer term). In the midst of the process of writing the play, I had an actual meeting with the man in question and found I was already able to remain present to myself instead of becoming entranced by the idealized version I had had of him. The attraction of many years faded and I was able to enact a peaceful and satisfying good-bye.

The Voices of Miscarriage

At age 31, while married and wanting a second child, I had a miscarriage. I credit writing about the experience, as it was happening, for helping me accept this loss and not being traumatized by it. The experience is described in detail in a full-length article (Lengelle, 2011). Looking back, I can see I gained the most value from writing from various parts of myself, noting that there were many ways to view the loss and not all of them were dramatic or painful. As well, many perspectives could co-exist and didn't need to be resolved or judged as truthful or definitive. Here is a sample of the myriad of I-positions that were given voice on the page.

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Nature: | Hi, it's me, nature. This is all very natural, you know. It's selection. You are unattached... |
| Humor: | Yeah, literally and figuratively ... |
| Nature: | You are healthy and well. |
| Know it all: | I knew this would happen! I asked (my husband) and he wasn't worried! But I knew it. Even when people would say "Hope your pregnancy goes well" I would be very touchy! Of course it's going to go well, why would they even say that?! |
| Mother-in-myself: | You are in need of some self-care. Curl up, pamper yourself. |
| Control: | Boy, do I feel stupid having told everyone at work that I was expecting and now I have to debrief everyone. |
| Comforting one: | What's so bad about that? They are nice people. All women and they care about you. So big deal. They'll understand. |

- Perfectionist: So, you are not perfect. Mistakes happen to you. Your body can literally “lose it”. You now belong to the statistical ranks of those “unhealthy” women who lose pregnancies.
- Neo-Nazi in me: Yes, you have failed. You’re not an Arian after all. You pride yourself on your health. Look at you now.
- Nature: This is not a failure. This is a success. Successfully letting go of that which would not be healthy!

The degree of openness to listen to the variety of voices – no matter how unexpected, judgmental, melancholic, or accepting, I felt – made me more receptive to the loving kindness of others, in particular of other women who came forward to tell me they had also had miscarriages. The ‘second story’ of the loss was a lived experience of ‘felt acceptance’ and meaning re-discovered. Again the writing clearly allowed me to express many more I-positions than I initially ‘heard’ and the meta-position that took shape as I observed my own perspectives (seeing not all of them were sad) allowed for conscious action (promoter position). I was motivated to go out for a walk, open myself to conversation with others to learn more, and eventually make a social contribution by writing an article that might benefit others (actively mastering what I had passively suffered) (Savickas, 2011b)).

A Dialogue with Myself on the Brink of Job Loss

After these powerful experiences with writing dialogues, it was quite natural for me to write in the face of threatened job loss and plan next steps on paper as well. The quote at the start of this article is a piece from the foreword of my dissertation where I write about the afternoon several years ago when I was told suddenly that after almost a decade with the university, my already-contingent contract, would simply not be extended. I had an inkling this might happen and in preparation for the meeting with my boss, I wrote myself a short letter of unconditional comfort and support. I told myself that if the door on my employment closed, this would mean that another door would soon open. This metaphor helped sustain me in the months that followed. During that time, I did not despair, but asked for help, discussed and calmly wrote a case for my employment, and ultimately managed to get a contract extension and the sabbatical I had earned.

In this same period about 100 of my colleagues were laid off, many who had permanent (i.e. so-called “secure”) contracts. The insight (meta-position) that fear might dominate and make my situation more hopeless presented itself in those initial words of comfort. This led to an immediate shift in mindset that let me take proactive steps (promoter position). One might say that putting the words on paper allowed me to create the safe space (Savickas, 2011b) that I needed to become aware of my

circumstances, consider options, and be self-directed in contributing to solutions. As well, there was no need to blame or act out any negative feelings associated with the event, but instead it was possible to continue to cultivate what Rousseau (1996) calls a (positive) ‘psychological contract’ with my employer and work mutually towards solutions. The following year I also took the initiative to represent our small group of visiting (read: contingent) graduate professors and where possible strengthen our position within the university. As mentioned elsewhere in this book, career empowerment nowadays includes the promotion of social justice and note that my ability to act with confidence came forth not from the experience of almost being laid off (that merely reminded me of the reality of temporary, insecure employment) but from the internal and external dialogue (that began with writing).

SUGGESTIONS FOR CAREER PROFESSIONALS

For career professionals (e.g. mentors, counsellors, and coaches) who would consider adding dialogue writing to their career services, we recommend that they first experiment with the process themselves. This might include taking a career-writing course or exploring the self-confrontation method (Hermans, 1999), a practical approach that has come out of dialogical self theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). It might also mean studying techniques like Voice Dialogue (Stone & Stone, 1989) or quite literally taking a course in play/scriptwriting. Below are several exercises I use with groups that could be used to begin with.

1. Write a dialogue with your ‘child self’ and ask him/her what childhood dreams he or she had and which life experiences were considered ‘passionate’ or memorable.
2. Write a dialogue with your ‘inner career coach’ and see what he/she advises. Make sure to stay in touch with your body, so that the ‘responses’ are felt and not merely rationalizations.
3. Write down a career question. Then look around the room until your eyes rest on an object (e.g. pin in the wall; white board; window sill). Let the object write back to you in response to your career question.

CONCLUSION

Not everyone will be able to keep from becoming unemployed through the act of writing; it is not a magic trick, nor a panacea or a cure-all, but dialogue writing does have the potential to foster awareness and self-direction. Creative approaches have the added bonus that they are often fun to do – insights are often gained “through the back door” – they reveal themselves in ways that surprise us. As novelist E.M. Forster, aptly says, “How can I tell what I think till I see what I say? Group work using these techniques and in a setting where fresh writing is read aloud can be highly inspiring. Our ability to gain insight is enhanced by having peers witness and support us; especially if a safe holding space is created first.

NOTE

‘Counselling’ is usually administered on a ‘one-on-one’ basis by a trained counsellor. ‘Guidance’ may include ‘counselling’ but also includes other ways to guide people. That is why career writing in our view is a guidance-related approach and not a ‘counselling’-related approach, though it can be used as an adjunct in counselling practice. As writers and writing teachers (not trained as counsellors) who administer ‘guidance’ and have done so for many years, we also draw a distinction between the “therapeutic effects of writing” and “writing as therapy” (we do not feel ourselves qualified to administer the latter). Of course, we agree that professionals guiding students need to be open and sensitive to the issues that exist and will emerge, as they would during counselling. Furthermore, those guiding must have an awareness of some psychological dynamics but need not be certified counsellors. In principle, writing teachers, visual artists, musicians (and not only the ‘therapists’ in those fields) might be able to enhance and deepen the work of career counselling through their own forms of facilitation (i.e. guidance).

In the Netherlands, for instance, regular school teachers with little career training are actually responsible for the career orientation of their students. They could benefit greatly if they could elicit authentic career dialogues or foster those through career writing. Research shows that the dialogues school teachers elicit often reveal avoidance of emotions. Moreover, school teachers mostly talk to and not *with* students and focus mainly on school performance instead of careers (Winters, Meijers, Harlaar, Strik, Kuijpers & Baert, 2013). What we are working on in Canada and the Netherlands is to ensure that these professionals become facilitators of ‘narrative guidance’ through the elicitation and promotion of deepened dialogues or career writing, without needing to become “counsellors”.

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