Online Career Counselling:
Developing a pedagogy for e-career learning

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1. Introduction

As the career guidance field is challenged with the task of reaching citizens in the delivery of career services across life-span, a natural and important question is how the distributed power of the internet can extend services across time and space. There is much debate about effective ways in which the careers field may leverage the power of digital media and Web 2.0, yet little research to guide our way. This paper is based on both the research I am conducting for my Doctoral dissertation and my practical experience designing and delivering facilitated online career services to a broad citizen base in British Columbia Canada.

When discussing the notion of using ICT in the support of career guidance, it is critical that this discussion explicitly describes the types of career service or interventions we are referencing, what the purpose is and for whom the service is targeted. We have a myriad of options available to us in the provision of face-to-face services and presumably we will develop multiple ways of enabling ICT to support our practice; however the current body of literature discussing this topic reveals a lack of detailed application description and common lexicon when naming and defining services related to ICT.

Remarkably absent in our current research and literature is discussion regarding the use of ICT as a career learning intervention that involves purposeful design and strategic interactions between career practitioners and individuals. The intent of this paper is to provide an expanded service definition for person-to-person facilitated online career interventions and to provide a model of pedagogical consideration for developing such services. A brief historical backdrop for the use of technology in career services and current discourse related to ICT and career services will be provided in an attempt to locate this discussion within the broader literature of our field.

2. Technology, ICT and Career Services

The use of technology in the careers field has a rich and long history, beginning in the 1960's with the development of the first computer assisted career guidance systems. These systems were designed to computerize aspects of the career assessment process to either replicate what counselors were already doing or to provide a process to improve or enhance the counselling exchange (Harris-Bowlsbey & Sampson, 2001). Use of internet-based career guidance systems are still widely used in many career centres to support the process of assessment or occupational research in face-to-face service delivery. The career development field has technological roots that are based on well researched and carefully designed solutions. Today, career guidance materials are being designed and packaged for direct consumer access off of internet-based Web sites. In some instances there is evidence that care is being taken in the design of websites representing many of the guidelines that Sampson et al. (2003) have offered; however, an explosion of non-standard career assessments and packaged career advice is continually populating the internet which has led to "a smorgasbord of disjointed information…available to the public free of charge and without consumer protection" (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003, p.21). This blending of purposefully designed self-help websites with randomly published material creates significant challenges for the user of the internet to discern the value and purpose of specific information and equally clouds our understanding of the role ICT can play in the delivery of e-career guidance.

Vuorinen and Sampson (2009) suggest that e-guidance can function to provide both resources and services. Enabling individuals to be self-reliant in their quest for resources related to career information and utilize resources effectively is an important step in supporting life-long career development and career management skills. A simple google search, however, demonstrates the vast amount of career-related information that users can access and it emphasizes the active role we need to play as career practitioners in assisting clients to appropriately access and use information. Vuorinen and Sampson (2009) suggest a 4 step model to achieve this that includes practitioners *understanding* an individual's resource needs; providing resource *recommendations*; *orientating* individuals to the materials; and f*ollowing up* to verify the value of the resources in assisting the individual in goal setting and developing an action plan. This approach to using available resources would substantially increase the purposeful use of Internet published resources.

The use of ICT as a service is less explored than the use of ICT as a resource. One of the challenges is the compendium of terms that are emerging within the literature related to online career development services. A quick scan evokes the following terms: e-guidance (Vuorinen and Sampson, 2009); virtual career centres (Amundson et al.,2005); cyber-counselling (Harris-Bowlsbey, 2003); distance counselling (Malone, 2007); e-career counselling (Goddard, 2008); and the use of social media for career development (Hooley, et al. 2010; Strehlke, 2010). Our field lacks a common language related to how we define and interpret what is meant when we use such terms (Brimrose, et al., 2010) and what intent we are seeking when choosing to design and use such services. Although this paper is not addressing this situation with an analysis or recommendation, acknowledging this backdrop when discussing services is important and calling to our field to find ways to establish a common lexicon and framework will be critical for the long term development, understanding and research in this area of theoretical and practical development.

When discussing ethical guidelines for e-guidance delivery, Vuorinen and Sampson (2009) define a variety of service levels including supported self-help, brief assistance, or intensive assistance. The service intervention strategies they define include:
1) Responding to questions arising from clients' use of self-help resources on a Web site
2) Helping clients locate and use self-help resources on a Web site
3) Providing scheduled career guidance appointments

When describing the use of distance services, there is a focus on the ability for clients to access web-sites or to reach practitioners from a distance. There is recognition that distance delivery has the potential to be effective, but little description about how these distance guidance relationships can be effective. The suggested service strategies are, in many regards, relying on concepts of transferring face-to-face guidance roles into the online space without re-imagining how the social affordances of interactive communication technology could be differently applied to reach and provide services to clients. The question becomes whether ICT is only a new space to do our work or whether, if re-imagined, we can harness the potential of ICT to service clients in new ways, adopting new pedagogical approaches of designing and delivering career learning interventions. What if career learning interventions leverage the social medium of online spaces while being purposefully designed to achieve targeted growth and development needs for individuals through a combination of independent online access with ongoing online engagement with practitioners? This could radically change the way we are defining e-guidance.

3. A Career Learning Perspective

Considering the use of web-spaces as a location for the social actions of "giving" (providing information and context) and "getting" (creating meaning and understanding) with the goal of improving an individual's ability to act, is adopting a career learning orientation to online practice. It is approaching the guidance or counselling relationship from a learning dominated discourse and adopting a orientation that purposeful design can enhance the way interactive web-spaces are used for enhancing career development learning. Experts discussing career learning characterize it in the following ways:

> career development learning in its broadest form relates to learning about the content and process of career development or life/career management. The content of career development learning in essence represents learning about self and learning about the world of work. Process learning represents the development of the skills necessary to navigate a successful and satisfying life/career. (McMahon, Patton & Tatham, 2003, p.6)

> career-learning thinking is an account of how people learn to manage working life. It speaks of what they find, what they think-and-feel about that, the sense they make of it and the bases they find for acting on it. (Law, 2010 p. 2)

> the learning of skills, interests, beliefs, values, work habits, and personal qualities that enable each client to create a satisfying life within a constantly changing work environment. (Krumboltz & Worthington, 1999, p.313)

The above definitions all include aspects of "getting" knowledge and "giving" meaning to that knowledge to *enable* the ability to *navigate* and *act* on achieving the desired outcomes of one's situation. Engaging individuals in an active process of personal and contextual meaning-making to enable them to make personally-appropriate decisions and to act upon these decisions in a social context is evoking the notion of constructivist learning. It is about approaching career learning from a proactive stance with individuals actively engaged in the creation, understanding and interpretation of their own reality along with the co-participative role of the career guidance practitioner.

McMahon and Patten (2006) provide a definition for considering career constructivist practice:

> Fundamental to the constructivist approach is the proactive, self-conceiving and evolving nature of human knowing. In career counselling individuals work to construct and reconstruct reality through the use of language and dialogue with the counsellor. Language is fundamental to the creation of the meaning and knowledge. Knowledge is shaped through dialogue between the career counsellor and the client, a process which incorporates the construction and co-construction of an individual's reality (p.7).

Inherent in a constructivist paradigm is a desire for meaning-making. In the case of career counselling, it's usually making sense of one's personal drivers and agency and how past experiences and a current context can inform decisions related to one's career. These developmental decisions may be of a more objective nature such as a search for an occupation or career trajectory to match their vocational identity against extrinsic typologies or of a more subjective nature that support the client to focus on their own perspectives of what their career may look like in relation to their own life context and identity (Christensen & Johnston, 2003). Viewing career guidance through a constructivist lens describes a counselling activity that is active, reflective, contextualized and understood through language. Viewing

online spaces as a new container for text-based interactions, offers a new experience for articulating, capturing, and reflecting on the language exchange to create meaning.

4. Developing an Online Career Learning Pedagogy

Pedagogy can be simply defined as the science and art of teaching and learning. The context of the learning will influence the pedagogical design by impacting how the process is delivered and what content is selected based on the type of knowledge or skill is being sought. For any pedagogical and instructional design to be effective in achieving the desired learning outcome, it must be rooted in an epistemological framework that bridges theory to practice (Bednar et al.1991). Web-based technologies have redefined pedagogies of distance learning by stretching its scope and deepening its interconnectedness (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). To consider a pedagogical model for designing and delivering online career interventions requires an acceptance of interventions as a purposeful engagement of learning to support individuals in enhancing their ability to understand themselves and act in the social context.

Career interventions can be generally defined as any purposefully focused effort to enhance an individual's career development skills to enable an individual to make better career related decisions (Spokane & Oliver, 1983). Guichard (2003) enhances this definition, recognizing that these decisions expand beyond career choice to include the decisions one makes in work-life transition across a life span and in the social meaning-making of understanding oneself and one's own existence. To locate the idea of delivering career interventions using web-based spaces requires a re-conceptualization of the dominant discussion of ICT in careers. Rather than seeing ICT as only an extension of geography or as a distance delivery tool, it encourages us to look at web-spaces as an environment of participation and engagement (Firdyiwek, 1999). If we imagine a web-space as an opportunity to build constructivist career interventions where individuals and practitioners come together, we can expand our conception of the role a career practitioner can play in the relationship with their clients in an online space. No longer would we be only seeking to replicate face to face delivery by having a virtual meeting or responding to an email as we might a phone call, instead we would begin to imagine a new use of the socially constructed web-spaces for career learning.

 When considering facilitated constructivist career learning interventions based on the definitions of career learning earlier discussed in this paper, one proposed method for pedagogically designing career learning interventions involves the purposeful use of the information, personal learning activities and interaction as instructional and developmental elements. These concepts can be defined as follows:
1. **Information** – the delivery of targeted career related content addressing the learning and development goal of the individual.
2. **Personal Learning Activities** – learning strategies for engaging with the information and applying it to one's personal context and developmental processes.
3. **Interaction** – the process and strategies for individuals and career practitioners to engage in text-based communication and co-construct meaning.

In addition to providing a constructivist structure to the learning design, this model integrates cognitive processing with narrative meaning-making. As career interventions integrate constructivist models, significant attention is focusing on the role of narratives within career counselling and guidance (Cochran, 1997; McMahon, 2006; Peavy, 1998). To consider the role of narratives, within career counselling is to consider how clients use language to tell the story about their careers and uncover and make meaning of the sometimes hidden stories in their own plots. With a constructivist approach and effective counselling strategies, the client and the counsellor can experience the story together and create a space for clients

to write the next chapter of their story ultimately creating their preferred future. McMahon (2006) expands on the multiplicity of our life stories and the counselling exchange in this way:

> The notion that our lives are multi-storied warrants further consideration in relation to our work as career counselors. For example, clients choose the stories they tell us, most usually their dominant story. However, there are also stories they don't tell us, stories that they don't know or realize, stories that they have forgotten and stories that have been silenced. The counsellor and client dialogue facilitates clients connecting with new stories, new meaning, alternative stories or new endings to stories and with a future that prior to their involvement in career counselling they may not have envisioned as possible p.18).

Locating the story-telling in text, online, offers a space for the client's narrative to live, in his/her language, intermixed by the prompts, reflections and dialogue exchanged with the practitioner. This transparent and recursive process allows both the client and the practitioner to look and listen for the quiet stories that may help to bring forth new self-understanding and meaning. Turner (1986) defines this meaning-making process as bringing what "culture and language have crystallized from the past together with what we feel, wish and think about our present point in life" (p.33). Although not a new idea for the field of career development, it is relevant to consider how bringing together the aspects of information, personal application and interaction in online spaces can support this crystallizing process.

Through the weaving together of relevant information, personal application activities and interaction with a practitioner, individuals gain the benefit of accessing their online career development space at times that meet their needs without sacrificing the ongoing access to guidance and learning support from their practitioner. Using a purposefully designed online career intervention allows individuals (clients and practitioners alike) to draw upon a reflective orientation to the dialogue and career learning being developed from the clients' engagement with new information and personal application of that information. Wright (2002) in her study of text-based counselling using the internet identified the power of reflective focused writing as a process that "draws on imagination and creativity to enable people to become much more knowledgeable about themselves and to increase their sense of agency" (p.295). Gage (1996) explored the power of writing as a learning and development strategy, he defines it this way:

> Writing is thinking made tangible, thinking that can be examined because it is on the page and not in the head, invisible floating around. Writing is thinking that can be stopped and tinkered with. It is a way of holding thought still long enough to examine its structures, its possibilities, its flaws. The road to clearer understanding of one's thoughts is traveled on paper. (p. 24)

Although his study pre-dates common use of Internet communication, the relevance of this thinking is clearly applicable in the online space.

Communication in online spaces offers at once a permanent and permeable experience. The permanence can be characterized by the ability to return to one' articulated thoughts through writing, in the logical and timely sequence of record. A client's personal thoughts and dialogic exchange with the practitioner is recorded and can be reviewed throughout an active career intervention or ultimately, made available to the client for review, at another career juncture. This is different from the verbal exchange that occurs in an office based dialogue where the recall of the experience and the meanings made can be harder to recall over time. Coupled with permanence, is the permeable reality of online spaces. Words, phrases, paragraphs of writing can be copied, pasted, and modified just as an author might do in the writing of a manuscript. By tinkering, and intersecting with one's own narrative, a concrete opportunity to articulate meaning and vision a personal career future emerges. By bringing together the career need of collaging stories from fragmented episodes of work life (Collin 1998) with and the narrative ways of knowing that support a self-reflexive understanding (Giddens, 1991) and the ability to organize events

into meaningful stories (Polkinghorne 1988), a strong argument emerges for using online web-learning spaces as an interactive career learning intervention.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this paper was to locate the potential use of ICT as an option for designing and delivering career learning interventions. The goal of leveraging the affordances of online spaces is to create service options that enable reflective learning and meaning-making between the individual accessing service and the practitioner. Building pedagogical models that enable the development and delivery of facilitated and interactive online career counselling services will allow us to stretch beyond seeing ICT as a resource delivery mechanism or a substitute face-to-face delivery modality through email or web-meetings alone.

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