

## THE MATRIX RE-WORDED



***'So! what's he up to now?' 'He's worried about alien control.' 'He's what?...' 'You heard me; he's saying we're being taken over, and we've got to do something about it.'***

***'He's winding you up, right?' 'No, he says we must all get more control of the words.' '...of the words! You're kidding!' 'Nope! - he says we must be able to tell it how it is or we'll just be taken over.' 'And he's serious?' 'Oh yes! - he means it alright.'***

***'So what are we supposed to do?' 'Well, we could spend less time listening to the aliens, and more time learning from our own people.' 'Like who?' 'Like the people we're trying to help.'***

***'What planet is he on? - we do that already.' 'He says we need more ways of talking about their experience.' 'And how we going to do that?' 'Read more biography.' 'He's really lost it you know - why biography?' 'He says good biography gives us more ways of talking about experience - especially autobiography.'***

***'But biography is not about what we do - it's not theory, not policy not practice.' 'He says it's all three.'***

***'He's quite mad you know, he'll be talking to himself soon. But you're not taking this seriously?' 'Dunno yet - I'm thinking about it'.***

*The Matrix* is the ultimate web scam. Seriously bad aliens are digitally manipulating our experience, keeping us quiet for their own nasty purposes. Only hacker Keanu Reeves can save us. Great film! Puts you in touch with your inner paranoid.

One quibble about the power of digital manipulation. It is true that pixels can create a convincing virtual reality; but change the words and you really change things. If there is anybody out there who wants to get control of what we do, they'll start with the language. It's not *The Matrix Reloaded* that we should most fear, it's *The Matrix Reworded*.

It would be bad news for careers work, because we depend on words. We listen, question, reflect, and try to grasp their significance. And our learners use them to let us into their

lives. Then they need more words to give themselves their best shot in selection. And, that done, they need more still to negotiate how best to work in a team.

**communication.** We call it all 'communication skills'. And you'd think it'd be enough about words. But it isn't. And the reason why it isn't makes any matrix-re-worded a serious threat.

To understand why, we need to get back to how our heads work. Our species has evolved to learn from experience. And we use language, our distinctive ability, to sort that chaos into useful order. It keeps us all in a more-or-less constant process of talk. It worked for us on the pampas, and it works for us on the street:

*'what's up?...',  
'you'll never guess...!'  
'he did what?...'  
'for crying out loud, why?...',  
'what did she say...?'  
'she won't let it pass, you know...!'  
'won't that mean he'll...?'  
'this is not going to get any better, is it?...',  
'not, anyway, unless we...!'  
'so, do we do it... or don't we?'*

Much of it is gossip; and you can learn from gossip. It is valuable because it keeps us in touch with the way things are, it gives us a clue on what we can do about them, and it suggests who might be prepared to help. That's why gossip is satisfying: it is a search for meaning; we feel good when we find it.

And those street-level questions are not so far off the kind of questions that come up in careers-work interviews. We should consider re-naming IAG 'information advice and gossip'. Might bring more punters in.

**inner conversation.** But talk is more than dialogue: before we ask any of those questions of anybody else, we ask them of ourselves. And that is not communication, it's soliloquy. Utterly absorbing stories have been written entirely as soliloquy. And it poses the most famous quotation in any story:

*'to be or not to be?'*

Which is a career-management question.

Soliloquy sorts out the slings and arrows of outrageous experience. And it's headwork with words: words set out the situation, identify the possibilities and therefore drive the action. What we tell ourselves flows into what we do about it.

Okay, I know about graphics, music and dance; and I agree that careers work doesn't make enough of them. But - being the species we are - if we can say what we want, and why we want it, we're going to make getting it more likely. And the more we can say then the more options we have. Expanded language expands the scope for action. It's how we're built. The first rule of communication is first to work out what you need to say. That puts soliloquy

ahead of communication. Monologue works out what we need to say to ourselves, before we get into dialogue with anybody else.

It is of course thinking; but it is not best understood as a list of thinking skills but as part of our struggle to make sense of our experience. Which makes it, also, part of what we mean by emotional intelligence. Making sense of our experience - with emotional intelligence - would, in a sane world, be more likely to be learned in literature than in careers education. It's hard to think of a better reason for studying narrative.

**the language of help.** What soliloquy can do for your learners, it can do you. Which means that you probably talk to yourself. You're not going mad, your brain is just doing what turned out to be most useful to your ancestors.

Which is where alien control comes in. If anybody wanted to get control of what you do, they would first try to control that process - all the way from '*what's going on?*' to '*do I do it, or not?*'.

So, if there were any controlling aliens out there, you would notice a shift in our language. It would label the troublesome ('complication bad!'), marginalise the inconvenient ('theory worse'), insist on easily manageable accountability ('targets good'), and assemble everything into tidy lists ('frameworks better'). You'd notice that you're left working with tick-box simplicity: a limited and standardised language of help. The matrix wants to replace a culture of exploratory thought with the habits of compliant simple-mindedness.

'Well!' you might say, 'as things change our words must change'. Right. It's why Career-learning Café talk has abandoned 'careers education and guidance' and complicated your life with the wider-ranging term 'careers work'. And it's also why café talk insists on the usefulness of 'role', has coined the term 'labour-market experience' and - right here - is suggesting the usefulness of 'soliloquy'. It is because our work is organic and evolving. And a still-vigorous project is best served by a still-living language.

Resistance to the matrix is not fear of the new, it is rejection of the restricted. Expanding possibilities require expanding language. The implications for our work are radical. There is little room for manoeuvre in 'careers education' and not all that much in 'guidance'. But, when it comes to learning from stories, just imagine where narrative-based thinking could take progress-file work, mentoring and experiences-of-work.

Experience, role and soliloquy are narrative terms. Gossip (and its media manifestation, soap opera) are also story forms. Being the species that we are, storytelling is the most basic of our learning methods. That is why narrative is a good way of expanding our vocabulary. It's also why using biography will find more possibilities for practice, and pose more questions for research.

So, never stop talking to yourself - jogging, watching *East Enders*, reading the paper, walking to the classroom, tuning in on your learners' gossip. Making the links that soliloquy finds is work: your brain uses a lot of energy, it's why you get so tired. But don't stop thinking, take more 'power naps'.

Tiring but exciting: of all the things we indulged ourselves in on the pampas, giving ourselves a serious talking-to is the one that still invariably serves us well.

**paranoia and vigilance.** The most frightening thing about the *Matrix* control of all of this is that it becomes more comfortable not to notice. It's less troublesome to accept the Matrix account as 'the way things are'. '*What's up?*', Nothing's up, and so there's nothing that needs to be done about it. After a while we would lose our language to alien control. We would stop asking awkward questions. We would stop knowing what to say when our learners run beyond the limits set by targets and frameworks. We would be embarrassed by their awkward questions.

And once awkward questions get silenced - theirs and ours - everything changes.

Paranoia is not compulsory. The government's green paper *Youth Matters* was a clear acknowledgement that there is a limit to what central control can do about our work. The web is loosening; leaving room for our thinking - and requiring our own language.

Paranoia may not be compulsory but vigilance is. While we're seen as having economic, political and commercial usefulness there will be no end to the drive for control.

So, however this plays out, we're going to need all the word-hacking Keanu's we can get. Including you.