WHY CAREERS WORKERS NEED THREE BRAINS
and why brain #3 urges 'use more stories!'

Bill Law

Bill argues that our field is best organised around three brain-buzzing tasks:

1.   *for career development*: finding out what is going on - among the facts, factors and trends in how careers work;
2.   *for career management*: drawing out what people make of those events and pressures - in their minds and in their actions;
3.   *for careers work*: working out what we can best to do to help - in our programmes.

No interview and no curriculum can be engaged without getting a grip of all three appreciations. That's why you need three brains. It's also why you get so tired.

But it helps if we keep our heads in order; and that means being clear about where these three sets of questions relate to each other - and why we need all three.

Bill tracks some of the paths they open up. No room here to chase them all as far as they will go; but Bill points to one in particular – the one that leads to making more use of narrative in how we help.

The analysis has serious implications for what kind of professionalism is worth defending and what sort of knowledge best supports it.
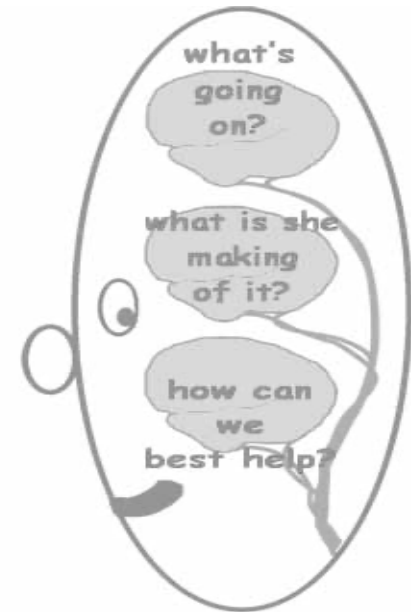
We have never ceased expanding our professionalism. As things change we think again. And, I argue here, we need to direct our thinking into three areas of understanding – asking...

1. 'what's going on?' – which gives us an account of **career development,** 2. 'what do our clients and students make of it all?' – ...of **career management**; 3. 'what can we best do to help?'– ...of **careers work**.	
## what's going on? Nobody can accuse us of lacking research and thinking about what is going on. And there is pretty-much a consensus about how that knowledge is best organised. Similar three-fold analyses of learning outcomes crop up, both in recent QCA proposals for economic-well being (see below) and in 'blue-prints' for career learning (below). There is some muddling of categories, but - when it comes to mapping out expertise in career development - the terms 'opportunity', 'self' and 'role' pretty-well cover the ground.	*'the terms "opportunity", "self" and "role" pretty-well cover the ground'*
the opportunities. Accounts of opportunity set out what sorts of working-and-learning openings are on offer. There is a lot to know – not least about entrance requirements, access routes and trends in availability. (Some people like to characterise this as 'impartial information' – but we'll leave that claim to another article.)	*'there is what some call "impartial information"'*
the selves. And we need to know about what significantly features in the lives of our clients and students. From the seven-point plan to the DOTS account of 'self-awareness' (below), we are pointed to the importance of qualifications, interests and skills.	*'we are pointed to the importance of qualifications, interests and skills'*
the roles. And, of course, we need to know where in their lives our clients and students will use this knowledge - the roles to which it is relevant. We are naturally interested in the roles of job-seeker and applicant, as well as worker. And we are alert to out students' and clients' need to look good and move on in these roles. In all these three-fold analyses there is a middle category linking 'self' to 'opportunity'. And the term 'role' is a useful bridging term - it opens up the dynamics of the analysis. A more deeply-conceived self can engage in more broadly-set opportunities when we engage a more varied range of roles. 'Parent',	*'we are interested in worker roles... but we can go deeper and wider'*

'friend' and 'consumer' are as significant to what people do about working life as the obviously vocational roles. And as the QCA suggests, 'well-being' is a more inclusive principle for our work than 'employability'.

All of this is knowledge of **career-development.** When we are working with clients and students we need to be aware of how these facts, factors and trends impact our clients. This is the terrain that they will navigate as they moving on in their working lives.

Much of it has been learned from labour economics, occupational psychology and the sociology of work - our professionalism is largely based on these areas of expertise.

It is an expertise we share with other professionals. Human-resource people, recruitment officers and entrance tutors also need to know about the economics, psychology and sociology of career development. But there is a difference: their work is to bring about selection for the institution they represent; our work is to bring about learning for whatever may come up in students' and clients' lives. These are not the same thing - and we lose touch with ourselves if we fudge the distinctions.

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what do people make of career development?

There is nothing morally superior or inferior about either selection or enabling learning - both are necessary. But they are distinct. (The distinction is reinforced by those who accuse some careers workers of using their *enabling* roles for *selection* purposes. But whether and why that is so must also be for another article.)

The distinctive importance of enabling learning comes into sharp focus when we start to enquire into the second question – 'what do people make of their career development?'. That phrase, 'what people make of this', has two aspects: they make something of it in their *heads*, so that they can make something of it in their *actions*. And, in both aspects, what people make of our expertise has its own dynamics– in experience, in disclosure and in their ability to deal with it.

'what people make of our expertise has its own dynamics'

recognising experiences. Career management is experience (below). It is up-close and personal engagement with what people find in family-, in neighbourhood- and in working-life. But the relationship between what we say and what students and clients make of it is never exact - it is often disturbingly different. It is not that people automatically ignore, reject or rebel against what we say. It is more that they can't see how it fits with the mental furniture they previously arranged. That arrangement comes from what their experience has already taught them.

For example, labour-market information may not be recognisable to some clients and students. They know of work-life disappointments, frustrations and stresses that don't get much of mention on our data bases. And our diagnoses of self may not correspond with what they have always felt is so. Because this is not how they are with their friends. And when we go over what they will need to say at a job interview they may have no useable impression of what that experience will be like. Or they may have more pressing concern for what they are going to say about it to their mates. And these mismatches - between what we offer and what their experience teaches - are not vanishingly rare.

And so, understanding career management means, first, seeking accounts of experience.

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welcoming disclosures. There is a consequence. Recounting experience calls upon a different kind of communication than setting out facts, factors and trends. It is a disclosure. And that applies whether people are talking about their own experience or other people's. In both cases they are working with an account of 'this is what happens, this is what I feel and say about it, and this is what I do'.

And disclosing experience put us in a different relationship with people. That different kind of relationship becomes important in comparing selection and learning encounters. Both sorts of encounter call upon the recounting of experience – but in selection a person needs to be more circumspect about what she or he allows to be known.

Different setting means a different task. In selection the task is to look good in order to position self with a competitive edge. In learning we cannot help people unless they disclose their experience. Looking good means being positive. But in learning settings we often need to talk most about what has not gone

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well - and what students and clients feel bad about. The fact is that you can often learn more from what goes badly than from what goes well.

But disclosure can be counter-cultural – a lot of people will go to some lengths to avoid looking like 'losers'. It therefore take a great deal of careful managing – by your students and clients, and by you.

finding abilities. And, so, working with disclosure raises one of the biggest challenges for our work. Recounting experience can set up a dynamic for self-entrapment.

All alert helpers notice what goes on: an account of what has happened develops its own self-reinforcing momentum, so that what has happened becomes a predictor of what will happen - '...it's what I do, and I'm not changing it now!'. Experience can point you up a blind alley– the more vehemently the story is told, the fewer alternatives come into view.

We learn about this from working with people's own stories. But we also have an expert source: Paul Willis's trail-blazing work is with a handful of disclosing young men (below). A simple career-development expertise would diagnose them as psychologically different – each capable of moving in a different direction from the others. But Paul shows how they are bound together by a shared experience. They reinforce each others' doubts about work, they mock each other with a well-developed irony, and they are drawn into a what feels like an unbreakable allegiance to each other. It leads them onto a path where 'working-class kids getting working class jobs'. The quality of Paul's work shows that they are each capable of a more expansive management of their own career, but - despite that - 'they collude in their own downfall!'.

We don't have enough work as good as Paul Willis's. But his accounts live, and we can still learn from them. Those lads need to learn more. But it is doubtful that an intensified use of fact-and-factor expertise will much help them. What is learned from experience is more likely to be relearned by expanding experience.

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The dynamics of experience, disclosure and ability is essential to any understanding of career management. Linking their experience to our expertise confronts us with some of the most demanding needs in contemporary careers work: they need us to connect labour-market information to labour-market

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experience; to bring their experience into a credible appreciation of self; and to work with family and neighbourhood roles as well as obvious career-relevant roles.	

how can we best help?

Knowing how best we can help means thinking about what we do in network-, in team- and in scheme-development.

> **network-development**: how we link to the resources of organisations and community. Our networks need to expand to allow more learning from experience - and more about well-being. Bilateral partnerships must become multilateral.
> **scheme-development**: how we assemble resources into programmes. Our schemes need repositioning so that students and clients have the space and time to recognise learning as useful and to bring it to where they can rehearse their future stories.
> **team-development**: helpers – advisers, teachers and mentors - and the support they need. Our clients and students need teams who can enable them to learn-to-learn – and, in particular, to scrutinise the pressures they encounter.

The implications are as much for the reform of curriculum (below) as for the reform of face-to-face work.

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networks for informal learning. Working with experience means more than acknowledging experience, it means linking experience to expertise. That is what Paul Willis's lads - sharing what they find in their own network – never manage. Because formal learning is more liable to distrust; and informal learning is more likely to feel like what we can know for sure.

These are deep dynamics: learning from shared experience is how we, as a species, survive. Brain areas that embed feeling-laden episodes, confirmed by the group, carry the knowledge that most influences what we actually do.

None of this should surprise us. We find life's episodes more compelling, more likely to be recalled, and more likely to be used as reference points for action. Learning from experience is seeing-for-yourself

'expertise is attending to what strangers say - experience is seeing-for-yourself - we need most to expand that experience base - for possible selves in possible futures'

what is so. It comes from direct-and-personal contact with recognisable events, in familiar situations – and is taken into a feeling-laden inner life, shared with others. Whereas learning from expertise is listening to what strangers say is so. And it comes from attention paid to what they say, by trying to remember it - and wondering how to make it useful in your life.

Expertise then seems to come from too high up and too far away. This is particularly so for people less used to dealing with formal propositions, set out in carefully-defined categories, using abstract terms. And so it is not surprising to find evidence (below) suggesting that people who most need our help are least likely to engage with us. Paul Willis signals as much: he speaks of people who feel better relying on what their experience, and the experience of people like them, tells them.

Careers-work helpers encourage students and clients to recall and work with their networks of experience. And this is working with the grain; especially where contemporary communication technology means that our students and clients can exchange word-and-image-accounts of what people say, feel, say and do about work - on a world-wide basis. And where that learning is embedded in what they share when hanging with their friends.

But, like Paul Willis's lads, they stick to their own kind. The challenge to careers work is massive. We can't ignore networks of informal learning – whether internet- or neighbourhood-based. But our work is to expand those bases for learning. We do that by finding and tapping into new networks - which open doors to other possible selves in other possible futures. It is - in a variety of technological and social senses - a network-development task. And it is one that reaches beyond our habitual range of working partnerships.

schemes using narrative. Experience is a narrative. And narratives, like those in autobiography, speak of working life. But they always do so as part of an interwoven account of encounters, attachments and allegiances. The inner life disclosed in a decent autobiography is always set in relationship with other people. There is never a free-standing 'self', there is always a background.

Working only from facts, factors and trends can miss too much of this. Labour-market opportunities and employable skills don't cover it. Unless - that is - the bridging concept of role is allowed to include

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family-, neighbourhood- and social-roles. The more of a person's roles are introduced into an account of career management, then the more necessary it is relate it as a story. 'Role' is a narrative term.

Narrative sets what people do against a background - of what people take to be the way things are, what they think is worth doing, and what life can be expected to deliver. These beliefs, values and expectations form a culture (below). And that culture is reflected in family life, in neighbourhood conditions, and in how people seek others out on the net. And it all sets up the habits-of-mind which influence what people do – including what they do about work.

The need to take account of these background influences is becoming more pressing. Selectors increasingly understand that, in order to find talent, they need to grasp how potential is lost when they fail to understand how background buries talent. And if selectors need to understand that for their purposes, then we certainly need to understand it for ours.

And so, though nobody is arguing that narrative is all that we must do to help, it is certain that careers work must make more use of narrative (below). And not least for working on our equal-opportunity agenda. Stories set out experience in a sequence of encounters, episodes and turning points. They therefore suggest where habits-of-mind can become change-of-mind.

There are doubters; they argue that biography merely imposes a bogus structure on lives. They have a point: mere celebiogs assemble celebrate the hero's worth in by moving in a straight line - often from rags to riches. (Candidates for selection also use straight-line stories – 'what I have overcome, and why you need me'.)

But life is not a straight line. Any half-decent biography will track blind alleys, luck, and conflicts - both in inner life and with other people. Narrative gives career management social and cultural backdrop. And it shows how that background influences what people do.

And is also shows how people manage the pressures - and how they do that in different ways in different roles. That means that it points to how things got to be this way. It also means that it can develop scenarios where people can anticipate what might be made to happen now. And how.

In all of this narrative joins together what career-development expertise has too-much pulled apart.

teams enabling learning-to-learn. But rounded stories are less orderly than expert analysis; they can be fragmentary, gossipy, disjointed and tentative. So we must use stories for what stories can do, and not expect them to do everything.

There is a particular feature of rounded stories which makes for their biggest challenge to our work. Stories set out facts, but the meaning that we assign to those facts is always attributed from a point-of-view.

But learning from experience is so compelling that a point-of-view - although culturally rooted - can be made to seem like god's own truth. The challenge is to enable people to find the difference between a fiction, a fact, and a point-of-view. Stories may reveal few once-and-for all truths; and they may contain some fiction, but they certainly contain accounts of what people take to be the truth. And in rounded stories points-of-view change over time. So good stories call to a curiosity to be aroused, a point-of view to be checked out, and a meaning to be assigned.

The challenge to careers work is radical: if people are to accept responsibility for their own take on working life, then they need to learn how to learn. That ability is critical for contemporary society: there was never a time when we so needed people to know how to find out what is going on - and to work out what they can do about it.

And so we need a way of working with narrative which gives people a chance to see that a thing is not so just because somebody says it is so. We are already alert to the need to enable clients and students to enquire and to think clearly - in personal-learning skills. But we need to do more.

Contemporary living calls for more robust learning-to-learn methods - probing the reliability of accounts of experience, scrutinising possibilities for their sustainability, interrogating sources for their credibility, and turning what you find into a basis for setting out what you will do about it. It calls upon a wide range of enabling skills, and an able team of helpers - advisers, teachers and mentors.

'in a pressurised world living calls for more robust learning-to-learn methods - probing, scrutinising, interrogating - a wide range of enabling skills, and an able team of helpers'

All of this is about what we can do to help - in **careers work**. It is different from both career development and career management. Career management is not the same as career development – its facts, factors and trends do their work whether or not clients and students pay attention to them. And career management is not the same as careers work - people manage their careers, sometimes quite well, without our help.

There is no argument here for the rejection of expertise; on the contrary, the argument is for its enhancement. But there is an argument that, in current conditions, expertise must take more account of experience. And the argument runs that the more we bounce these ideas off each other the more fruitful will be our search for ideas-for-action in careers work.

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So we need to know how to keep all three sets of ideas bouncing. It is how we get the most fruitful suggestions for future work. There may be some people who don't need our help so much, but there must never be some who just don't bother to find out how can help. And that group may well be becoming a majority.

The three sets of ideas tumble over each other – in consulting room, classroom and planning meeting. It calls for hard thinking. Advisers, teachers and their managers are aware of the need for three brains – and of the fact that serious brain-work is the most exhausting of all human activity.

Careers work is at its best when it meets challenges with new ideas. The reform process of will not cease. Because what is happening now is presenting careers work with its biggest challenge in a generation

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