

THE CAREERS-WORK CRUNCH

the abuse of narrative and slow-burn creativity

Bill Law

The credit crunch is presenting careers work with the biggest challenge ever to its creativity. We need, more than ever, to appreciate the depth of twenty-first century uncertainty. And our clients and students need to find every inch of their capacity for flexibility.

- > uncertainty - because some of the foundations of the labour-market just got badly damaged;
- > flexibility - because people need to be up for anything.

It's true that we already work with uncertainty - and for flexibility. But we have it in us to do much more - to work with the depth of the impact and to enable the breadth of the response.

Habits-of-mind will be disturbed. Habitual thinking works with what has seemed to work for most people, most of the time, in most circumstances. Such regularities make the patterns of our understanding - they form our career-development expertise.

But uncertainty is a negation of regularity. The credit crunch is said to be the first economic crisis of the global economy. That economy is not well-regulated. And this will not be its last crisis. The regularities that once worked for most people will not do so now.

The career metaphor has changed - not so much a race, more a journey. Encouraging people to position themselves in a well-regulated race will suit only the most fiercely competitive - normal people will need more time on figuring out the possibilities. Engaging them as travelers on a journey will help them work out unforeseen possibilities, venture into unexplored paths, find routes that nobody ever thought might be there.

It is a deeper kind of flexibility- calling for a shift of focus...

'find new paths' / 'be curious' / 'put old learning to new use' /
'take nothing for granted' / 'be intuitive' /
'know when you're being lucky' / 'not just for you but for yours' /
'be interested in the likes of whom you've never met before' /
'watch for the unexpected' / 'notice turning points'
'see things differently' / 'change your mind' /
'get a grip' / 'bounce back' / 'find another way' /
'see how one thing leads to another'

A race is an event, a journey is a story. And the uses of narrative will frame much of how we re-pattern our future expertise. But stories can mislead - it is easy glibly to abuse narrative. We need to be creative - but the need is for a special kind of creativity. It is what will expand our expertise.

The global economy has been frighteningly creative in inventing the financial derivatives that caused this crunch. It needs to be reigned in. But the converse is also true: education is emerging from a period of severe over-regulation. It's our turn to be creative.

There is a lot of uncertainty, but economists agree that the current crisis is going to badly damage the demand-side of the labour-market. The last few weeks have delivered a cruel blow to students looking for the reward for their hard work - and for their way out of debt. It is because the labour-market is in over-supply. There is talk of some employers binning all but applications from Russell Group universities. Even so, there's also talk of more people seeking further and higher education - riding out the storm.

demand-side action - supply-side response. In the longer term we are facing lower rates of growth - perhaps for generations. Some things will stay much the same. UK tourism might do even better - at least while sterling is weak. And there might well be longer-term expansion in bio-technologies, creative industries, environmental technology, high-end manufacturing and legal and similar services.

But cautious lending will do catastrophic damage to some small-and-medium firms. Risk-taking enterprise may get stripped of some of its gloss. The financial sector is not going to look such a rosy prospect.

And changes in one sector bounce into another. Public-service sectors might feel more secure than private.

Fiercely competitive careerists will look for surer bets. The less pushy may find themselves elbowed out of what they had planned. Some will be out-of-work for quite a while. That will then damage their long-term chances. The crunch will hurt most the people least equipped to deal with it - but it will hurt everybody.

Few predicted this. Even the commercial elite, recently gathered at Davos, are reported to be dazed and confused. For this is no ordinary recession. Its causes lie inside massive trans-nationals, using digital technologies to expand markets. It attracted ruthless motivation. The resulting recession is flagged as the first economic crisis of the global economy. It is new. But we need not assume it will be the last.

In labour-economic terms this is a demand-side problem. Careers work - a supply-side provider - has little leverage on labour-market glut. Some will argue that we should ramp up what we do to enable people in competitive positioning. There are, no doubt, career-coaching websites offering to do that right now. But all that an artfully constructed cv can do is change the pecking order for available opportunities. You don't get a quart into a pint pot by re-branding the beer.

We can do better than that. But not by just repeating in the future what we have got used to doing in the past.

pattern seeking. We are a pattern-seeking species. Irregularity bothers us. Some people enjoy messy edginess (think of your children's bedrooms) but most of us would rather not be in a muddle - especially when they really need to know what to do. So we signpost experience with regularities.

Many of them are work-related: 'seed-time and harvest', 'sleep and wake', 'ebb and flow', 'voyage and return', 'growth and recovery'. Such symmetries deeply underlay the way we see things. They give us cyclic metaphors for what we do. And they lodge, deep in our minds, expectations that we can get back to where we were. We never can.

Nonetheless, finding patterns in experience helps us to feel that we know what to expect. And, so, irregularity becomes a sign that something is wrong - an alert. But the underlying expectation persists - pushing aside what doesn't immediately fit. We are more comfortable when we can consign the unexpected to the edges of mainstream concerns. We make irregularities the exceptions that prove our rule. We all do it, even careers workers.

Careers education and guidance evolved in a century where work was still governed by more-or-less reliable regularities. Over that century we developed ways of showing that the rewards and requirements of work could be set out in patterned relationships. That kind of symmetry frames the pegs-and-holes metaphor in our 'matching' model. The first draft of the pattern has been continuously updated - but much of what we do is still mapped in this way.

Our training and qualifications are based on patterns like this. Command of them is our expertise. They also appear in the matrices we use for appraisal, and the lines we draw for managing selection procedures. Indeed, there is a grand symmetry in the way the whole supply-side apparatus elegantly front-loads into demand-side selection. There is much agreement between careers and recruitment people about what patterns best fit people for work.

All of this is attractive because it suggests that what worked once will work again, that what works in one circumstance will work somewhere else, and that what worked for one person will work for another. Regularities become rectitude - 'rules' for career success.

Over three decades, our work has been tightly scripted by such regularising requirements. They are our performance indicators. These include 'learning outcomes', 'targets', and 'quality standards'. They all say 'do it like this and you'll be getting it right'. That claim is not always checked out with much rigour.

Nonetheless, the scripts shape our research agenda, the partnerships we make, the resources we use, and the methods we engage. Were we ever to become dependent upon those rule-bound expectations, our capacity for professional creativity would be seriously damaged.

Students and clients are quick to pick up such 'how-to-do-well' messages. (I recall, from long ago, an eager face peering round my career-adviser's door and asking 'what subjects do I need to be a football-club manager?'.) You see...

'if there are 'rules', and I stick to them, I will get a result - won't I!'

I can't remember what happened to young Sven (or whatever his name was). But there have always been students and clients who don't get the result they play for. That is an irregularity - a red-light saying something has gone wrong. But pattern dependence tells us that those people don't know the 'rules'..., or won't accept them..., or can't stick to them... So we can see them as exceptions that prove our rule - people who need to be brought into line. They were, for a time, called 'the excluded' - though we didn't always think to ask ourselves who was excluding whom.

Some of those patterns are wearing thin. Here are the facts: we are all now working with people who have learned the 'rules', stuck to them and implemented them, but are - nonetheless - in career-management trouble. And there will be more. A lot more. But they don't fit our patterns. And they won't permit us to treat them as exceptions that prove our rule. They see themselves as able, articulate and deserving. And a good many of them have a point. Such people do not sit still for being seen as outsiders. They'll see us, not themselves, as failing.

Our 'rules' are getting crunched. We need new patterns. And we are well-placed to design them.

the use and abuse of narrative. Careers workers are educators - we help people to learn. Education is emerging from the grip of three-decades of regularising control - much of it called for by demand-side interests. But there is now wide-spread understanding that we need more creative ways of enabling learning-for-life. That search is embarked not only by teachers and their advisers, but also by politicians and theirs.

And, yet again, our metaphors need reworking. It's easy to think of career as positioning - as if in 'a race'. But it is becoming more useful to think of career as traveling - as if on 'a journey'. The term 'coaching' derives from the race metaphor. But it's getting harder to see how fitting people to be winners in a well-regulated race stays as useful as it once might have been. A person needs first to find out what events are still being run, to ask what else is possible, and to figure out which is worth the effort. The term 'exploring' derives from the journey metaphor. It is easier, now, to see the usefulness of enabling people to embark a not-entirely-predictable journey. They need to be up for unforeseen possibilities, to venture into unexplored paths, and to find routes that - until now - nobody ever thought might be there.

A race is an event, a journey is a story. As a species we pay a lot of attention to narratives. One of the most effective ways for making sense of a muddle is to recount it as a story. This is a pattern-making activity. And media, politics and education are accumulating evidence that people most readily learn from narratives. So much so that we actively seek out stories - every soap, every lyric, and every bit of gossip is devoured on a daily basis. All are narrative forms.

But there is more to the uses of narrative than may, at first sight, be obvious. People are interested in stories because they give us each a clue to our own. So we want to interrogate them. We enjoy finding out how one thing leads to another...

'what did he do?'
'how did she react?'
'now what?'

It's the plot. It's also an anecdote. But wait a minute - can an anecdote be a reliable guide to action? Do anecdotes offer generalisable patterns? It would mean that one person's past can become another's future.

That possibility can be inspiring. Barack Obama's inauguration was moving - more than anything for the joyous tears, on black faces, turned towards dawning hope...

'if this can happen for one of us, it can happen for any of us'.

Don't dismiss it - with that kind of hope anything is possible. But does that mean that the way it worked out for him will be the way it will work out for you. The hard-headed say 'no!', because...

'you can't generalise from an anecdote!'

But suppose the hard-headed have missed something. To find it we need to go back a couple of steps. We are on unfamiliar terrain, where exploratory journeying is more useful than positioning for a win. And - while raising questions in the middle of a race is not a

good idea - not exercising curiosity on a journeying is missing the point. The key concept here is finding flexibility for dealing with an uncertain world. And that means probing the irregularities - for they are the pervasive reality of this terrain. We move on less by tightly-concentrated competition more by widely-searching exploration...

*'find new paths' / 'be curious' / 'put old learning to new use' /
'take nothing for granted' / 'be intuitive' /
'know when you're being lucky' / 'not just for you but for yours' /
'be interested in the likes of whom you've never met before' /
'watch for the unexpected' / 'notice turning points'
'see things differently' / 'change your mind' /
'get a grip' / 'bounce back' / 'find another way' /
'see how one thing leads to another'*

It's narrative talk, but not in a way that tries to cut-and-paste somebody else's story into your own. It's probing the journey at a deeper level. And - here is the pattern - it is that scrutiny which gives our work its new 'rules'. The rules are not now about asking what happened - they are about asking...

*'why did she do that?'
'would I deal with it that way?'
'how would me-and-mine feel about it'
'and how would that work out for us?'*

It's motivation, not plot, that drives this story. To set out to inspire people into believing that they can import other people's stories into their own - that is an abuse of narrative. To figure out what that other life can mean for me - this is to learn from narrative. The patterns of how to learn from narrative in this way have been worked out - so that what is most useful in one person's story can be used in another's.

Such learning is for flexibility at a deeper level than putting people at the labour market's beck-and-call, deeper even than fitting work around family needs. This is flexibility which takes account not just of domestic but of civil, ethical and environmental frames for working life. It re-examines deeply-rooted habits-of-mind. It awakens inner life, confronts inconvenient truths and re-negotiates structural realities. It gets-to-grips at a level of application as demanding as any that we have ever faced. And, this time, none of us is exempt.

The implications for what we do to help are radical. This kind of programme design calls for creative thinking on the partnerships we make, the materials we use and methods we engage. It calls for a more-probing research-and-development programme. And carries us way beyond edge-of-timetable careers education and hit-and-run guidance.

slow-burn creativity. Innovative clients and students need creative helpers. If ever there were a time for well-founded careers-work innovation - practice-led, locally-based, reality driven - that time is now. Careers work has a long history - much of it highly inventive. But we are now faced with the biggest challenge to our creative powers that we have ever faced.

One of the gains to be made from deregulation is the liberation of creativity. And it worked like that in financial services. Their designers are said to have come up with derivatives totaling a face-value many times the worth of the world economy. How's that for inventiveness? The instruments turned out to be toxic assets - because nobody knew what, in reality, they were actually worth. But they were works-of-art - and probably gave their inventors much creative pleasure. They may still do so.

So regulation is a key issue - for them and for us. The converse danger of too much policy scripting of performance is the suppression of professional creativity. In education that over-regulation has run the risk of eroding our capacity for inventiveness. We could easily have become too dependent on the rule-bound, the ready-made and the comfortably-familiar.

So, while quick-fizz merchants may need a whole-lot more regulation. we certainly need a whole-lot less. But let it be slow-burn not quick-fizz. We know how to work with the complexity and dynamics of on-going realities of peoples' lives. It deserves better than whim and wizardry.

On that basis it's our turn to be creative.