

LIFE - A USER'S MANUAL

New times and new challenges demand new ideas. Careers work and citizenship are not short of ideas; although we should beware of unthinkingly clinging to the familiar - we need new theory. But who knows where that might lead us?

We are thinking species - building theories of how things work is our fingerhold on survival. It is an academic word, but theorising is a very practical activity - working out what is going on, how it works and what you can do about it. There is nothing so practical as a good theory - much too important to be left to academics.

Theories have three elements:

- > they describe matters;
- > they explain how things got this way;
- > they hunch what can be done about them.

The hunch is the hypotheses. Careers-work helpers need useful hypotheses about what can be done. And we need them checked out - that's what research is for.

Why do we need all this? Without some supportable hunch concerning 'what happens if...', getting out of the bed in the morning would be a serious gamble - let alone running a citizenship or Connexions programme.

learning for living

It is a pretty basic thought, but it's worth repeating that the big purpose for education is not to push people back into their culture, or through our examinations, or up to a government target - it is to enable them to know what to do in their lives.

One of the most influential bits of theoretical thinking for citizenship and career is the DOTS analysis.

- S - self awareness**, asking 'who am I?'
- O - opportunity awareness**, 'where am I?'
- D - decision learning**, 'what I will do?'
- T - transition learning**, 'how will I cope?'

DOTS often appears in four columns, so that you can tick things off. They diagnose the range of coverage in a programme..

Lists like these are better at describing what happens than why they happen. But DOTS was never intended to be a complete theory, it was meant only to help helpers plan what their programmes should cover.

And it has been good at that. Good enough that there are DOTS derivatives. The best known is this one, from the DfES:

S - self-development, asking 'who am I?'

E - career exploration, 'where am I?'

M - career management, 'how will I now move on?'

The last line combines the 'T' and 'S' in DOTS. But, for a lot of people, 'hanging in' until they can 'move on' may feel more real than 'making decisions' and 'managing transitions'.

All of these ideas can also be used to plan for education-for-citizenship. There are motivations and skills in worthwhile citizenship (put them in the 'S' column); and settings and roles for engaging them ('O'); there are political dilemmas to be faced ('D'); and their consequences to be managed ('T').

So DOTS ain't out-of-date yet. If you take a look at the original version (available on this site, see below) you'll see that it can give a pretty complete account of the ground to be covered for by careers work and - potentially - for education for citizenship.

But coverage isn't everything.

how to learn - in the right order

DOTS talks mainly about what people need to learn for career and citizenship: it does not say how they learn it. And the 'how-to-learn?' question is every bit as important as the 'what-to-learn?' one. And getting more important all the time.

Asking how-to-learn pushes two issues up the theoretical agenda: they are issues for (1) process and for (2) progression.

The process issues are: ‘how do people gather enough information and impressions?’, ‘how do they sort it all into useful order?’, ‘nobody can go into detail about everything, so how does anybody know what particularly to probe?’, and - then - ‘how do they know what to do about it?’

The progression issues are; ‘how do we get the foundations for learning in place?’, ‘how soon should we be doing that?’, ‘how does this basic learning lead to a basis for sustainable action?’, and - so - ‘how do we know when the process is well-enough completed?’.

Process issues ask, not about what people learn, but about how they learn it. Progression issues ask, not for lists, but for a story - about how people get started, how they develop that early learning, and how they know when they’ve done enough.

The theory which puts all of this into the careers-work and citizenship picture is the SeSiFU analysis.

Se - sensing, asking ‘have you got enough to go on?’

Si - sifting, ‘have you got this sorted into usable order?’

F - focussing, ‘do you know where to go into things in more detail?’

U - understanding, ‘can you see the probable effects of what you now mean to do?’

In order to take this thinking seriously, you’d need to agree that - when things go badly - it is not always because of ‘bad’ information, it is often because of the way people gather and make sense of information. The most telling example of how things can go badly is in the formation of stereotypes. Stereotyping self and others - on gender, race and class lines - is learned from early childhood; and yet it is one of the most damaging influences on both career and citizenship. And unlearning stereotypes won’t come from dispensing ‘neutral’ or ‘corrective’ information. The SeSiFU diagnosis calls for a deeper and more demanding re-learning process.

Now we have two dimensions: (1) a DOTS-range of coverage and (2) a SeSiFU-reach towards understanding - a basis for action.

Two dimensions offer more ways of describing, explaining and anticipating things. They therefore also give us a more complete diagnoses of what might go wrong, and more ways to put them right. Such complexity is troublesome; but - if it is well founded - it is also power.

If you take a look at the account of NewDOTS (available on this site, see below) you'll see that it raises big issues for realistically enabling learning-to-learn.

contacting an inner life

Once you start thinking, there is no knowing how far you can go. We started with lists of information, but we are moving into a world of impressions, intuitions, early learning, family and neighbourhood pressures, cultural beliefs, points of view, feelings... and conflicts. Can you imagine career or citizenship without them?

All are part of an inner conversation - making sense of experience. This conversation must stay in touch with world 'out there'; but much of it will also build up a mental map and where I am in it - that I build 'in here'. And so - like every character in every story - we are all forever moving between 'objective' and 'subjective' versions of 'what's going on?'.

O - 'objectively' - talking in terms which have much-the-same meaning for everybody. If we could not do that, then no shared citizenship - or work with others - would be possible.

Su - 'subjectively' - getting to what is important to you, thinking and feeling in terms which are your own. This makes a difference to what you do and say to other people.

It is another dimension. We've found that learning-for-life needs a range, a reach; now we find that learning-for-life needs a depth. It is the sheer range, reach and depth of learning needed for contemporary living that gives Connexions and education-for-citizenship their significance. They cut across traditional programmes, and they demand networks of help capable of working in these more dynamic terms.

If you take a look at new thinking for careers work and citizenship (available on this site, see below) you'll see how and why that is so.

lists and stories

In a way we have government policy to thank for this: Connexions, and education-for-citizenship demand new thinking. But there are deeper explanations in changes in how economy and technology now alter the way people manage work and their citizenship.

However, policy and change do not come with batteries included - we have to power-up ourselves. And there are two important new sources for what we have to do. One is rooted in improved observations of how we, as a species, think-and-feel our way to action. The other offers a deeper understanding of the relationship between identity and culture. We are being offered new insights into both our nature and our nurture - which we should not ignore.

Speaking of nature, it proves to be 'natural' to understand what is going on through stories. Gossip is, it seems, deep in the species. And narrative theory provides us with a whole new set of questions about learning for life.

Pe - people, asking 'who is involved here?', 'who else?', 'how do they influence each other?' and 'what feelings does this uncover?'

L - location, 'what beliefs and values do these people have?', 'what roles do they play?', 'who is in a position to get things moving?', 'who are "insiders", and who "outsiders"?''

Ta - talk, 'what are they thinking?', 'what do they say to each other each other?', 'is anybody paying any attention?', '...or is everybody stuck?'

E - events, 'what's happening?', 'why?', 'who's version of the story is getting most acknowledgement?', 'is that version all that there is to say?', 'is luck playing a part here?'

Pu - purpose, 'can anybody see any point to this story?', 'are there other points-of-view?', 'who wants to get what out of this?'

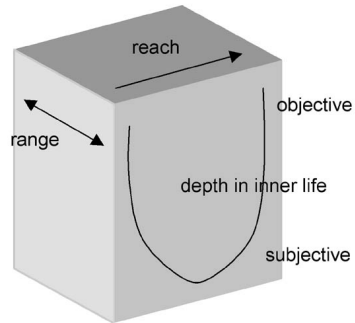
You can safely disregard any theory which can't point you to useful practice; but narrative theory does seem to be talking about what people actually do - in both career and citizenship. And its implications for practice are radical. They also give a lot of credibility to the work of mentors, social workers, youth workers, and teachers of 'narrative' subjects, in developing what we must do to help.

DOTS has been kind to people who like worksheets and schedules. It has fostered a culture of lists. But the new century is drawing us towards a culture of stories. There are implications here for practitioners, managers, researchers and theorists. If you take a look at narrative theory (available on this site, see below) you'll find some suggestions about possible directions for those developments.

We've come a long way and if you are not confused you are simply not paying attention. But there is a bright side: we can have more ways of understanding what happens, and what to do about it, than we had before. Complexity is power. So think on.

Or, we could, of course, make a grab at simplicity, by getting rid of some of the dimensions, or - at least - some of the factors. If you think it can be done, use the

(tongue-in-cheek) diagram. Your task (if you decide to accept it), it to erase what you think can safely be disregarded.



Well?