BOOK REVIEW

SHAPING THE STORY: A GUIDE TO FACILITATING NARRATIVE COUNSELLING

Shaping the Story is a broadly authored, comprehensive and up-to-date text that addresses the theory, practice and realities of a postmodern approach to career counselling and practice. The steady shift in acceptance of constructivist–narrative approaches facilitates a long-espoused belief that the client needs to take ownership of the process; the need for co-facilitation of career projects; and it also highlights the ongoing, lifelong and evolving nature of career development.

As editor, Maree has produced a text that exposes readers to the current thinking of some well-known leaders in the career development field, gives an overview of the development in theory and practice of narrative strategies, as well as some practical examples of ‘life stories’. This would be a useful text for training and professional development sessions for new or experienced practitioners wishing to review and expand their repertoire of practice.

Concepts of constructivism, constructionism and hermeneutics as well as narrative strategies have become much more mainstream in career development practices. It may be that we are in the early stages of a potential paradigm shift to postmodern approaches, however, narrative has been demonstrated as sitting comfortably alongside some of the long-employed and well-accepted career approaches.

In introducing the book to the reader, Savickas reminds us that:

In the postmodern world, employees can no longer depend on an organisation to provide them with a familiar and predictable commitment to hold their lives together. Instead, individuals must rely on themselves to construct a story—a self and a career—to hold themselves and their lives together when they encounter discontinuity.

For the many career practitioners who have made a shift in their professional practice, and for others who are exploring the potential of adopting narrative strategies, this text can be most helpful. It includes the insights of many internationally recognised postmodern researchers and proponents, including Mark Savickas, Larry Cochran, Norman Amundson, Mark Watson, Reuven Bar-On, Paul Hartung, Robert Chope, as well as Australian leaders Wendy Patton and Mary McMahon.

The text is organised into three main sections: theory, practice and personal stories. For busy professionals it is probably helpful to ‘cherry pick’ chapters of specific and immediate interest, however there are some chapters that should not be missed by career practitioners wishing to improve their narrative counselling strategies.

For those new to postmodernist approaches, the first section proves most interesting and helpful. Savickas skilfully describes the connections and links between postmodernism and the well-established more structured testing and assessment approaches. Benefits
and reasons for the shift are also discussed as a broad introduction and context for the chapters outlining aspects and insights on narrative strategies.

A number of chapters begin to address the theory–practice nexus, an issue of ongoing concern for practitioners over the years. The connections between the theory and application or practice of the theory are explicitly addressed in the first section of Maree’s text. Cochran’s Chapter 1, ‘The promise of narrative career counselling’, should not be missed. Cochran presents and discusses three main areas of promise of the narrative approach, writing:

the focus of narrative career counselling is twofold… to engage the narrator to spin the larger story of one’s life and career in a way that bodes well for the future… [and] to strengthen the actor to become a more powerful agent of our main character in this story. (p. 8)

Chen’s ‘Narrative counselling: An emerging theory for facilitating life career success’ (Chapter 2) provides a context over time, which gives the reader an appreciation of the evolution of constructivism and narrative strategies in career development theory and practice.

‘Theoretical underpinnings and practical application of a hermeneutic–narrative approach to career counselling’ (Chapter 3) by Thrift and Amundson provides insights into hermeneutics and how this can be melded with narrative in practice.

For those who have struggled with the distinction between new concepts of constructivism and social constructionism, Patton has produced a clear and simple explanation in ‘Theoretical underpinnings and practical applications of constructivist approaches to career counselling’ (Chapter 9).

There are also the seeds of some new and potentially new directions of exploration that have been flagged in this text. Shaping the Story should be commended for addressing the relative paucity of career development approaches for different cultural groups and for the power of language and initial considerations regarding the contributions of emotional intelligence and social emotional intelligence in career development approaches. Although there is still much work to be done, there is hope that the narrative and story approach to career counselling will be better suited to meet the needs of culturally different and minority groups in the future. New aspects of narrative relating to the power of language are explored in ‘Weaving a learning community by the telling, deconstructing and re-telling life stories’. In this chapter, Sliep considers the power of language and how it can be used in a positive way with certain groups, to facilitate client ownership and control over their career development.

Finally, it is heartening to see the first overt attempt to consider the relevance, or contributions of emotional intelligence and social emotional learning competencies in the discourse on career development theory and practice.

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