

# Reinventing careers: creating space for students to get a life

Gill Frigerio

**This** paper has been influenced by two emergent themes within recent discussion of higher education teaching and learning. Firstly, it has been argued that rather than treating students as passive beneficiaries of careers advice and guidance, they can be engaged with the process of career development through the academic study of theories of career (career studies), which in turn enhances their own career development learning (McCash, 2006). Secondly, it has been proposed that rather than seeing undergraduate students as passive consumers of the knowledge created by academic research, they can be engaged with the research process and recast as ‘producers’ of knowledge, which in turn enhances their learning experience (Boyer Commission, 1998).

Both of these arguments chime with questions at the heart of higher education today: what is the meaning and purpose of undergraduate study? Who will I become through being a student? They view the student as an ‘embodied learner’ (Stanbury, 2010) whose learner identity develops with influences from their own discipline as well as its relationship with others. They also flag up the importance of a research-linked curriculum in higher education, and contrast with what has become an action-oriented norm for careers education in UK higher education institutions, which focuses on tactics for managing the transition out of University.

This article reports on a project influenced by these current ideas in career studies and student research. The project set out to help student-researchers explore their own and others developing stories and subjective careers. I provide a brief overview of the project and its findings, and go on to discuss

some of the points of interest which emerged as traditional boundaries between student, researcher, guidance practitioner and manager were crossed.

In charting the varying disciplinary origins of career studies, Arthur (2010) acknowledges the important contribution of sociologist Hughes, who identified critical distinctions between the subjective career (how we see it) and the objective career (how the world sees it), and between identity and role, and the interplay between the two. Savickas (2010: 15) acknowledges the influence of Erikson’s work in describing how college students “confront the crisis of identity-formation versus role confusion...[by] creating a clear and compelling story with which to get a life and construct a career.” I would argue that this creation of a clear and compelling story is one of the possible outcomes of effective career guidance, which operates precisely at this interplay of role and identity. The place of one to one guidance within the career studies movement has not received much consideration hitherto. However, through this project some questions have emerged for guidance practitioners about the unspoken and tacit career development theories that clients may assume underpin their practice. I end with some observations on the potential contribution that one-to-one guidance can make.

## Overview of the project

With the support of an academic fellowship from the Reinvention Centre (a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) at the

Universities of Warwick and Oxford Brookes aiming to support undergraduate research), I recruited a team of 5 undergraduates to work on a research project of their choosing focused on students' career development. The students were drawn from a variety of backgrounds and were not typical users of the University's Careers services, having been recruited via academics involved with the CETL at Warwick. The students were each paid a bursary for their involvement.

The project began with a series of teaching sessions introducing the students to critical perspectives on careers and employability. To shape the teaching experience, I made use of the metaphors outlined in Kerr Inkson's (2007) textbook *Understanding Careers*; Tomlinson's (2007) work on the narratives of employability constructed by students and my own research on students' experiences of guidance (Frigerio, 2010). The members of the student team were then asked to design a research project. The research project took shape out of discussions concerning career studies, employability and the wider work of the Reinvention Centre and Student Careers and Skills (the University careers service). The student-researchers planned and carried out a small scale study of student attitudes towards their degree subjects, their participation in extra-curricular activities and future career; using qualitative interviews with 30 fellow students to explore any inter-relationships between these dimensions. I supported the team in the analysis and writing up of their findings in a joint report which is published on the Reinvention Centre website ([www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/reinvention)).

Prior to the first teaching session, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each student-researcher, exploring their own perspectives on career and employability. I used concept mapping (Novak and Gowin, 1984) to allow each student to identify the concepts they saw as relevant to career development, and the interrelationships of these concepts. My aim was to explore their own theory-in-practice about career development and, by repeating the process at the end of the project, to see what (if any) shifts had emerged.

## Student findings

The findings in the student joint report of most relevance to this article concern the primacy of familial relationships in students' prior decisions, and the open-ended approach most were taking to their future career development.

When listening to their interviewees' descriptions of the processes of choosing their degree subject, the student-researchers were particularly struck by the direct influence of parents and other influential figures such as teachers. For example, one student described her father as 'choosing' science for her, before immediately correcting herself to say that he had 'suggested' it. Another described his choice of course as a deliberate rebellion against a parental opinion. Students sometimes spoke of denying or regretting this influence, but still spoke a great deal about family reference points in their decision-making processes. The student-researchers' analysis of the data included the impact of role models from a student's community, and the way 'worldview observation generalisations' (Mitchell and Krumboltz 1996) are constructed from the observation of the careers of parents and siblings.

A further theme emerging from the interviews focused on concerns for maintaining a broad range of options at every stage and, for many students, postponing any specific career actions. Many of the students spoke about their choice of degree subject, even specific areas of study such as biochemistry and mechanical engineering, being based on the breadth of options it would give after graduation in comparison with other degree courses considered. Having a range of options was seen as a priority, and only a minority had either actively narrowed these down or taken any concrete actions to find work. Students were often animated in discussion of their prior choices and general aspirations, but could not be more specific about immediate intentions.

For example, one student (T) who described himself as very motivated and concerned for career as part of his future, reflected:

T: Every now and then I think about it and I wonder by [hesitates] then I push it aside

and think about what I want to do, first, at University.

Student-Researcher (SR): So, do you think there is anything that has stopped you from coming to concrete ideas?

T: The worry I will miss out on a potential... on a different career I may be better suited for... I always worry that choosing one career over another, it may be the wrong decision.

Another student reflected ambivalence about the future.

J: I just cannot visualize what is going to happen... I cannot imagine myself working in an office, in a suit.

Others were taking action but with a very open mind: one student had current applications for investment banking internships but was also actively pursuing medicine and teaching, including gaining voluntary experience. Some students appeared open-minded, viewing their futures as something that would begin to take shape at a point beyond graduation but had little connection with their student lives. For example, a final year student commented:

M: Right now it [career] isn't particularly important because I am concentrating, on my degree and making sure I get the right grade... however when I leave after I do a few years of travelling and calming down after university and sorting everything out after graduation... it will be really important cos I can concentrate on work experience and erm building up my CV to get a job... although I have been trying to get a job and unfortunately haven't been successful so far.

The preference for many students to postpone actions until after graduation will be familiar to many who working UK HE careers services, but what this quotation shows is that acting/not acting are not necessarily either/or positions. This student had been making applications, whilst retaining a very open-minded view of their future.

## My learning from the project

I found that the issues I spotted in the data and my reactions to it differed from those of student-researchers. I could imagine a careers adviser's response to these statements if they were made in a guidance consultation. For example, if a guidance client presented with a broad range of ideas, they would be encouraged to break that down into specific priorities and actions; if a client told of a high number of applications for a broad range of jobs with no success, they would be gently challenged to review that approach. On many occasions, as I crossed the boundary from practitioner/manager to researcher, I had to silence my inner careers adviser. The student-researchers' accepted their interviewees' statements at face value and did not drill down further with their questioning. In contrast, I found myself wanting to ask follow questions, correct interviewees' inaccurate labour market information, challenge inconsistencies or lead them through a process of prioritising and planning a specific course of action. Passive comments such as "I didn't get the chance to do an internship." (M) seemed to me to reflect some ambivalence or unease with the application process that I would have sought to understand.

## Student-researcher's learning from the project

I think that in career development terms, the impact on the student-researchers link directly to the findings about family influences and open mindedness. Hearing fellow students describe their family influences caused student-researchers to think critically about what had influenced them, and what they had generalised from their observations of working lives. Two student-researchers described how the project had enabled them to explain to their parents why they were choosing to step away from previously 'endorsed' career trajectories.

M: This was just something I realised recently, that after conducting all the interviews, most of the students were actually talking about how their families influenced them or did not. But I wasn't actually aware that it was so important

for me. I said that I am now pursuing the same thing that both of my parents are doing, but I wasn't aware that they actually influenced me in any way. I was thinking that it was purely my own decision because they didn't ever say 'you should try studying Computer Science' and thereby influenced me.

GF: But do you think that they did influence you?

M: Of course. Now I know that they were one of the biggest influences for this. I saw them working in Computer Science every day. What else would influence me more than that?

GF: So it's like you know about Computer Science because you've seen them do it.

M: Yes.

GF: Right, ok. How do you now feel about your decision to study Computer Science?

M: I don't know. Actually, now I'm a little confused about whether to continue studying it because I don't find it that interesting anymore.

Following the semi-structured interviews with all 5 student-researchers at the beginning and end of the project, I could see subtle shifts in the way they conceptualised career. First, they began to view career as lifelong. In initial discussions, they had described career in terms of initial (post-graduation) occupational choice, and indeed found it quite hard to engage with the curriculum content which reviewed research from across the lifespan. In looking beyond the initial transition, two student-researchers described themselves as less sure of their choice of career area than at the project outset, but able to cope with that:

G: ...I think that in comparison to some of my interviewees, I was quite sure about what I wanted to do. Actually, though, I don't know. A few weeks ago, it struck me that I'm not so sure after all. I thought that I was sure, but then I realized that it might not turn out the way I thought it would and stuff like that. It was quite scary. Then I realised what that the people had

been talking about... it has reassured me that it is ok to be not sure and to wander around. It's ok to try to look for different things. I don't have to just concentrate on one way to go.

Through the life of the project, the students moved from an objective to a subjective view of career by giving more personalised accounts of their own theoretical constructs of career. For example, at the outset, with only their own backgrounds and the messages they had tacitly absorbed to draw upon, they spoke about career in an objective and generic sense, but by the end they had a much greater sense of their own story. This is illustrated by the exchange below, made as the student researcher compared the two concept maps:

I: ...And I think at this stage [first map], I was very much like 'what would a generic human being going into the workplace do?', whereas here [second map] it is 'what would I do'?

GF: Ok.

I: I didn't even realise that.

GF: Yes, it's interesting.

I: I didn't realise that at all.

This seems to illustrate that, by the end of the project, having each spoken to 6 other students and analysed the data of 30 others, they were better placed to apply the theorising to themselves.

Finally, student-researchers began to understand the complexities of 'career' that go beyond the instrumental 'how to' of many action oriented programmes and publications.

R: Well... When I drew that, [first concept map] I didn't really think... It comes from more of an ignorant standpoint, because this [second map] has got strategy, planning and a more long-term view... and also a more short-term view as well. The time scale for the 'when' factor sort of completely stretches out how you think about the individual things... There's also a small part about how you can do things... but there's not much.

GF: So, why do you think that map has become

more complex and detailed for you?

R: I think it's because I've obviously learned more about 'career'. It's not just learning more information; it's sort of a more 'meta' way of looking at it. [Looking at the 2 concept maps] That's sort of just one way of looking at something, whereas as this is an elevated view over the field. I've gone all metaphorical!

It is too soon to track students further into their careers and comment on their further career development. In the months since the project concluded, all five have continued with plans for gaining work experience which were already in development when we first met. The coming months will reveal more about whether their enlarged understanding affects how they move forward. My hope is, and the insights highlighted above suggest, that an engagement with career studies like this provides an enhanced sense of their own identity that will serve as a foundation for future career-making.

## Observations for career services

In response to my growing awareness of my own different reactions to the data, I began to compare the stories told to the student-researchers to those I was used to hearing from clients and colleagues who worked with them. The researchers commented that they felt the students spoke with different voices to them as peers than they would to careers advisers, and attributed this to their being respondents to a request for an interview, as opposed to active participants in a guidance process.

The project has left me reflecting on the interplay between the range of provision offered by HE careers services: employer events, careers education, careers information and one to one guidance. The availability of one to one support, client demand and patterns in client usage have led most careers services to move away from the sort of longer career guidance appointments that facilitate a non-directive exploration of a client's subjective career, towards an action-oriented series of short appointments.

However justifiable and necessary this action-oriented shift may be, my suggestion is that, we are in danger of creating an expectation that our provision is in the domain of 'objective' career, and has no room for a non-judgemental exploration of themselves. Despite the potential for one to one career guidance (even in the shortest interventions) and careers education activities such as the project I describe, to be a non-directive safe 'space' for students to construct the 'clear and compelling story' that Savickas highlights, this is difficult to convey to clients and it is a perennial problem for guidance practitioners. Often, students seem to expect our approach to be didactic and instrumental, based on a one dimensional, linear career planning process which emphasises a decisive and planful approach. My fear is that, as a result, students believe that careers advisers will judge them negatively if they have made little progress prior to an appointment. As one student-researcher (M) commented when I raised this issue, "I think a lot of students feel that, although not done intentionally, a careers advisor will judge them for their lack of action, or their thoughts on career." When mixed in with careers service marketing materials full of exhortations to act and career self-help publications full of top tips for success, students may not perceive career education and guidance as a safe place to explore career identity from whatever starting point.

In contrast, the project inspired the sorts of conversations around work and career advocated by O'Regan (2010: 23). Whilst it is not possible to comment on the impact on the research participants, for the student-researcher these conversations helped them to construct their own narratives: a transformative process of identity formation and "self-making" (Savickas, 2010: 15). This was a one-off project, and the generous funding is unlikely to be repeated; however, I believe the value of the student as researcher concept in career education and guidance has been demonstrated and that the project has illuminated the power of a career studies-informed approach. It suggests ways in which innovative career education and guidance can facilitate this transformative process of self-making.

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## For correspondence

Gill Frigerio  
[G.Frigerio@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:G.Frigerio@warwick.ac.uk)

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