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Storytelling as a Tool for Student Career Counselling

Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar and Krina Huisman

Abstract

Students at Dutch universities of applied sciences are constantly expected to monitor their own personal and professional progress, using models from the field of management. These abstract models offer a top-down analysis of the learning process, mapping it with pre-constructed categories. In this chapter, we will present storytelling as an alternative bottom-up model for reflection. Narrative communication takes personal experience as its starting point, and thus allows students to tell their own stories rather than confine them to a one-size-fits-all model of personal growth and development. We will present a typology for categorising life writing, based on a genre classification developed by Russian semiologist Mikhail Bakhtin. The typology discerns four genres of life writing, according to how the protagonist can be placed vis-à-vis his or her surroundings, and whether the protagonist is presented as constant or changing over time. We call these four types of protagonists 'heroes', 'growers', 'fighters', and 'picaroons'. We suggest that this model can function as a starting point for dialogue between student career counsellors and students, and can be used to analyse the stories students tell about their study progress. We will use the study narratives of 24 students from a large Dutch university of applied sciences who participated in our pilot study as examples.

Key Words: Life writing, storytelling, stories of becoming, student career counselling, Mikhail M. Bakhtin, A.J. Greimas, genres, narrative learning environment, narrative counselling.

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1. Introduction

Student career counselling, as practised at Dutch universities of applied sciences, is meant to teach students to reflect on their personal ambitions and motives in order to allow them to make more conscious decisions regarding their studies and careers.[1] The aim is to monitor students' progress and prepare them for professional practice by enabling them to develop career competencies and professional identities.[2] The counselling usually consists of group sessions and private conversations between students and counsellors, as well as graded personal assignments and group work.

Arguably, student career counselling in its current form has a top-down design, in which analysis of study experience using the models precedes reflection, and the individual study experience itself runs the risk of remaining outside the scope of the counselling. We propose storytelling as a bottom-up approach in which

reflection precedes analysis: with a minimum of instructions, but a clear explanation of what storytelling encompasses, individual students are invited to narrate their study experiences, after which student and counsellor dialogically analyse the resulting study narrative.

After discussing current practices of student career counselling in Section 2, we will present an outline for study narratives in Section 3. In Section 4, we will introduce a typology of possible genres with which study narratives can be mapped. This can serve as a starting point for an analysis of study progress and preparation for professional practice. We will illustrate our arguments with the outcomes of a pilot study conducted at a Dutch university of applied sciences. A group of twenty-four third- and fourth-year students doing a minor in Storytelling were asked to hand in a study narrative in which they reflected on their study experiences during the minor. Additionally, we held semi-structured in-depth interviews with five of these students.

2. Current Practices of Student Career Counselling

Recent research has pinpointed several problems with student career counselling as it is currently practiced. First, lecturers are often appointed as counsellors alongside their core activities, so they regularly lack time and knowledge to counsel students adequately. Just like students, lecturers often find it difficult to reflect independently.[3] Furthermore, students often see the central aim of student career counselling – reflection – as a useless exercise: they participate to receive the necessary credits, not because they feel it empowers them.[4]

Student career counselling mostly uses models from management studies to stimulate reflection. Students must plan their personal development in the form of an action plan with which their study progress and their preparation for professional practice are monitored. Models used for mapping this progress include SMART criteria for study goals (i.e. presenting a Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound action plan),[5] the STARR format for describing study progress (i.e. a specific Situation, the Task performed, the Action taken, the Results of this action, and the Reflection on the process),[6] and SWOT analyses (mapping Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).[7] Anything that does not fit these models remains unspoken, regardless of its importance to the student. It is precisely the use of these models that results in analysis preceding reflection, and thus in counselling, that may be disconnected from the actual study experience.

A more fundamental problem of student career counselling in its current form was illustrated during our pilot study. A student, Tamara,[8] submitted an outline for her study narrative at the beginning of the study period. She included a foreword in which she wrote:

> Writing this portfolio has made me more aware of my own competences and pitfalls. Awareness is important for personal development. I can now start strengthening my weaknesses and building on my strengths.

In other words, before writing the actual study narrative, Tamara already 'knows' that the result will be growing awareness of, and reflection on, her personal development. Whether this will truly happen seems irrelevant. The remark itself is a necessary element of what the student assumes is expected of her.

Thus, such assignments risk representing the behaviour that students assume is expected of them, rather than their actual study experience, presumably because they are graded and mandatory. This expected behaviour is presupposed by the mentioned models, which arguably present 'personal development' and improvement as the necessary outcomes of reflection. This presupposition can be linked to the general striving for constant growth and improvement in capitalist societies. Just as an economy is supposedly in crisis when there is no growth, and even companies that function well perform customer satisfaction surveys in order to innovate, student career counselling convinces students of the necessity to use reflection reports first and foremost to illustrate personal improvement.

According to Michel Foucault, a personal dossier – which is what students are expected to write for their student career counselling – serves three purposes: *observation* (overseeing individuals); *normalising assessment* (checking how individuals relate to a norm, enabling correction if necessary); and *examination* (deciding whether individuals should be punished or rewarded). Dossiers function like a panopticon: a dome-shaped prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in which a large number of prison cells can be kept under surveillance from one central point. Because the prisoners do not know whether the guard at the central point is watching them, they will always behave as if this were the case. Thus, the prisoners internalise the guard's observing, normalising and examining gaze.[9]

Similarly, methods like SMART criteria and STARR and SWOT analyses may cause students to internalise an observing, normalising, and examining gaze that checks whether there has been personal growth and improvement during their study experience. Even if a student concludes that there has been no growth, these models beg the additional comment that there is awareness of this shortcoming and that improvement will take place in the future.

3. Storytelling and Life Writing

Storytelling is 'the telling of a story by someone to someone on some occasion for some purpose'.[10] As Paul Ricoeur has argued, storytelling represents experience by creating a plot: because the events in our lives occur consecutively, it is possible to – or rather impossible not to – narrate them (i.e. to relate them as happening *because of* each other).[11] Unlike the methods described in Section 2,

storytelling relates events as they were experienced; events are perceived through the storyteller's lens rather than through an imposed analytical model.

Although storytelling happens naturally when people narrate experience, we suggest that students be given some devices with which they can structure their narratives. One such device is a four-phase scheme by A.J. Greimas in which stories are made up according to (1) *desire*: the goal the protagonist strives to realise and why; (2) *ability*: the ways in which the protagonist gathers the means to achieve this goal; (3) *action*: the ways in which the goal is realised (or not); and (4) *evaluation*: the consequences of the other phases.[12]

Students assigned to turn a learning experience into a story will produce *life writing*, an 'umbrella term […] to cover the protean forms of contemporary persona narrative'.[13] In short, life writing is the narrative presentation of personal experience, focusing on what Mikhail Bakhtin has described as 'becoming': a never-ending process through which individuals learn to relate to themselves and their surroundings.[14]

4. A Typology of Stories of Becoming

We designed the typology below to map the ways in which students experience study progress and how they relate to the learning environment. The horizontal axis indicates the extent to which the protagonist evolves in the study narrative. Only in the genres on the right side will the protagonist undergo significant change as the story develops; the protagonists on the left side can be seen as 'ready-made heroes'.[15] The vertical axis indicates the extent to which the protagonist and the story's time and place influence each other. Monologic protagonists are self-sufficient, while dialogic protagonists interact with their surroundings in such a way that both the protagonist and surroundings are affected.

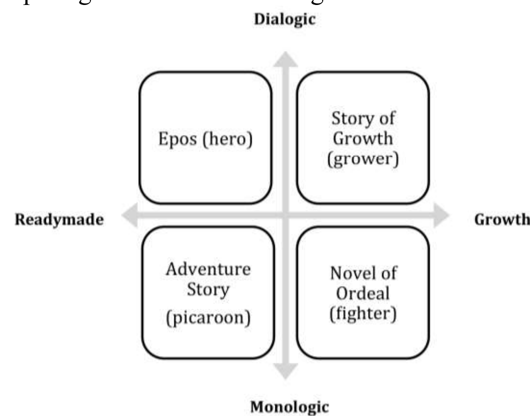

Figure 1: A typology of stories of becoming © 2015, Krina Huisman and Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar. Courtesy of the authors.

The basis for this typology is Bakhtin's description of four genres of biographical writing, which we have turned into a structural model of four narratives. We propose that all life writing generally corresponds to one of these genres. It is important to stress that (1) these quadrants should be seen as ideal-typical clusters and (2) this typology should not be used as a personality test, but should be the starting point for a dialogue between student and counsellor *after* the student has formulated a study narrative.

Each genre has its own protagonist, which we have called the *picaroon*, the *hero*, the *grower*, and the *fighter*. These types are what MacAdams calls 'imagoes': idealised concepts of the self that unite different social roles and aspects of identity in one single narrative category. These narrative categories imply specific goals, characteristics, values, positions, and conflicts that come with their own plots.[16] 'Imagoes' in life writing cannot be equated with actual persons, but function as attempts at self-fashioning: the conscious styling of the way in which an identity is experienced and expressed.[17] Our model is designed to clarify the specific plot, values, characteristics, and goals that come with the 'imago' that the students have constructed, and to indicate how these shape the study narrative.

The *picaroon* of the *adventure story* prefers to be left to his or her own devices, like the pirates, rogues, and antiheroes of literature's fantastic voyages and picaresques. Study narratives in this genre have an episodic plot and depict studying as an exciting adventure and/or a conflict with incompetent surroundings. Little attention is paid to what we defined as the phases of *desire* and *ability*. Picaroons will not dwell long on motivations and are quick to get to the *action* phase. When problems arise, picaroons enjoy tackling them with cunning and stratagems, cleverly using their strengths or the occasional *deus ex machina* (e.g. the unexpected delay of a deadline or a lenient teacher). *Evaluation* is, again, not very important. There might be some gains, but not in the form of growth; the student might have once again proven the learning environment flaws, but have no wish to change them.

We encountered the picaroon in Michael's study narrative, where he shows his cunningness by using the reflection jargon required by the university to show its deficit: 'I haven't reached a single learning objective' because the goal of becoming a good writer 'cannot be measured […] it concerns living values' Michael pointed out that the reflection models fail to include personal preferences, tastes, and values, and therefore cannot help him achieve an unmeasurable goal. Since students who present themselves as picaroons tend to value their independence, student career counsellors may encourage them to find methods of reflection that best suit their own purposes.

The *hero* of the *epos* is as constant as the picaroon, but has a more involved interaction with the learning environment, often in the form of leadership or confrontation. Different circumstances may tease out different characteristics of the hero, but will not change his or her character. *Desire* is an important phase in this

plot and often describes the manifestation of talents or character traits in childhood. For example, in the *ability* phase, a student may be inclined to narrate how study groups are formed, a bond with the lecturer is created, and which role the student played. The *action* phase clarifies how the task was or was not realised, and *evaluation* tends to explicate how the student was indeed ‘the right man/woman at the right time’.

Although Agnes’ protagonist used to believe she was a born writer, the Storytelling minor caused her to doubt her talent. She failed to distinguish her stories from those of her classmates, and therefore lamented, ‘but if I can’t write, then what can I do?’ Agnes’ conflict was caused by a discrepancy in the *desire* and *ability* phases. Whereas *desire* is typically stressed in an epic narrative – the main character elaborately discussing personal wishes and desires – *ability* is the most important phase of the story of growth, where there is often a long process of an uncertain protagonist’s internal struggle. As we see in Mary’s story, however, the typical epic hero tends to be confident that he or she possesses the competences needed to achieve a particular destiny: ‘I consider myself a real talent in my field of study. But I want more.’ When a narrative shows stagnation, the student career counsellor can encourage the student to rewrite the narrative from a different perspective. Agnes, for instance, seems to admire the picaroon, who is indifferent to the opinions of others. She could be asked to write a story about how a picaroon would deal with personal doubts regarding his or her ability to write a good story.

The *story of growth* follows the Bildungsroman’s plot: the main character must find his or her identity and place in the world. Elements of this genre were found in all study narratives in our pilot study, albeit in combination with other genres. This is not surprising, as this genre best fits student career counselling in its current form, with its stress on personal growth and development. In this genre, the *desire* phase serves to clarify that the *grower* is not content with him- or herself and his or her study progress so far. The aim to change this is formulated.

A period of self-reflection follows in the *ability* phase, which receives the greatest stress in the *story of growth*. The student seeks counsel, analyses the learning environment and tries to formulate personal and social shortcomings. In the *action* phase, study experience yields increasing awareness, allowing the student to grow. The *evaluation* phase shows how the student has evolved in significant ways – or has failed to do so, but gained insight into how to improve this in the future.

Most students’ study narratives adhere to a narrow understanding of growth that is implied by the reflection models (i.e. the appropriation of competences necessary to achieve learning objectives). However, growing or developing in a Bakhtinian sense means becoming *aware* of the ways in which time and context affect and bring about fundamental changes in a person. Students who are interested in writing a *story of growth* could, therefore, be encouraged to explore personal attitudes toward their study progress, or to write about significant events

in their lives and how these affected their choice of degree programme. Another possibility is to encourage students to write about the generation they belong to (e.g. generation X, Y, or Z) and how this affects their learning behaviour or their expectations for the future.

The *story of ordeal* centres on an internal or external ordeal: the main character either has to overcome something within him or herself, or overcome something in his or her surroundings. The main difference between the *fighter* and the *grower* is that the latter searches for dialogue with, and confirmation from, the learning environment, while the former is content with the results of the ordeal (e.g. a good grade, new skills, knowledge). In the *desire* phase, the fighter is confronted with a challenge: an inner weakness or an external test. In the *ability* phase, inner strength is gathered, or, in the case of an external ordeal, skills and tools that are needed to pass the test. In the *action* phase, the test is passed or failed; in the latter case, a first step towards passing is often made. The *evaluation* phase clarifies what the student has gained from this ordeal.

We encountered various internal and external ordeals in students' study narratives. Tamara, for instance, experienced her fear of failure as an internal obstacle to be overcome, whereas Zoe felt threatened by her family's and friends' comments and questions about her choice to obtain a second degree. Although both girls presented their main characters as fighters, they faced two very different challenges. It is therefore important for student career counsellors to make a clear distinction between the type of ordeal that is experienced (internal or external) and the reasons for fighting the obstacles (overcoming them or learning to manage them). One may also take a close look at the costs of the struggle. What would be the consequences, for instance, of Zoe cutting off her family and friends to avoid their comments?

5. Concluding Remarks

When executed well, storytelling results in reflection that is less an exhibition of desired behaviour, is less likely to incite students to internalise the capitalist ideal of continuing growth and innovation as a norm for self-monitoring, and enables the expression of students' own attitudes towards study and career. Most importantly, the narrative form teases out an emotional investment that will increase students' intrinsic motivation to participate in student career counselling.

However, much depends on the student career counsellor's attitude. Many are quick to encourage students to integrate a need for growth and increasing awareness in their study attitude, as well as the need for dialogue with the learning environment. We would, however, argue that there is equally much to say for the autonomy of the picaroon and the fighter, or the constancy of the hero. It may certainly be helpful to direct, for example, students presenting themselves as picaroons or heroes towards other possible narratives of becoming, when a constant conflict with the learning environment creates problems. However, it may

just as often be helpful to invite students who are stuck in a story of growth, or struggling with unattainable goals or unfruitful interaction with the learning environment, to reformulate their study narratives as an adventure story or story of ordeal. The effects of such interventions, not part of our pilot study, need to be studied to get a clearer picture of the value of our typology.

Notes

[1] Cf. Kariene Mittendorff, Wim Jochems, Frans Meijers and Perry den Brok, 'Differences and Similarities in the Use of the Portfolio and Personal Development Plan for Career Guidance in Various Vocational Schools,' *The Netherlands' Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 60:1 (2008): 77.
[2] Cf. Marinka Kuijpers, *Loopbaanontwikkeling* (Enschede: Twente University Press, 2003); Gerard Wijers and Frans Meijers, 'Career Guidance in the Knowledge Society,' *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 24 (1996).
[3] Marinka Kuijpers, Frans Meijers and Chad Gundy, 'The Relationship between Learning Environment and Career Competencies of Students in Vocational Education,' *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 78 (2011); Kariene Mittendorff, Simone van der Donk and Mark Gellevij, 'Op zoek naar de kwaliteit van reflectieprocessen van studenten,' *Wiens Verhaal Telt? Naar een narratieve en dialogische loopbaanbegeleiding*, ed. Frans Meijers (Antwerps: Garant, 2012).
[4] Mittendorff, Jochems, Meijers and Den Brok, 'Differences and similarities,' 77.
[5] Although the letters in SMART have been used to signify different terms throughout the years, the original SMART criteria were formulated by George T. Doran in a 1981 article. Cf. George T. Doran, 'There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives,' *Management Review* 70 (1981): 35–36.
[6] This method was originally designed as a behavioural-based method for job interviews as the STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) technique.
[7] The SWOT analysis was designed by Albert S. Humphry and his team at the Stanford Research Institute during the 1960s. Cf. Albert S. Humphry, 'SWOT Analysis for Management Consulting', *SRI Alumni Association Newsletter*, December 2005, 7.
[8] All student names are fictitious, to ensure the privacy of the participants.
[9] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
[10] James Phelan's definition of narrative. James Phelan, 'Narrative as Rhetoric. Reading the Spells of Porter's Magic,' *The Critical Tradition*, ed. David H. Richter (Boston: Bedford Books, 1998): 800.
[11] Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative. Volume 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984): 56−70.
[12] Leo H. Hoek, 'Literatuursemiotiek,' *Vormen van Literatuurwetenschap: moderne richtingen en hun mogelijkheden voor tekstinterpretatie*, ed. R.T. Segers

(Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1985); Algirdan J. Greimas, *De betekenis als verhaal. Semiotische opstellen* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1991).
[13]John Paul Eakins, ‘Introduction’, *The Ethics of Life Writing*, ed. John Paul Eakins (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004): 1.
[14] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 55.
[15] Ibid., 20.
[16] MacAdams, Dan P. *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: Morrow, 1993).
[17] Cf. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago/Londen: The University of Chicago Press, 1980): 1.

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