

# “Listen to My Story” Identifying Patterns and Purpose in Career Counseling

Marie Sacino (Cooperative Education)

As community college educators, we are constantly striving to improve the learning experiences of our students and to model, in a powerful way, the value of learning. In our daily classroom practice, we are challenged to design and develop teaching and learning activities that have meaning, that matter, and that will move our students to look more deeply at the world around them.

In our practice of career education and counseling, we see students in our classrooms that are at the growth and development stages in their careers. Students engage in exploratory activities that may assist them in making occupational decisions based on self-knowledge and available career information. These students are grappling with identifying their occupational personalities – their career-related abilities, interests, values and needs, as well as issues of self-concept and personal identity. How can we help students see patterns, find purpose, and consider the possibilities of certain careers? How can we motivate and inspire students to stay the course, remain focused, and know that there are many choices available to them? How can we let them know that they are not alone, that others have struggled with similar issues at various career stages in their own lives?

A powerful way to introduce career development theory and practice – oftentimes complex and multi-faceted – is to provide an opportunity for students to read articles about individuals who reflect upon their own personal, academic, and career growth. These life stories of people who have devised creative and resourceful solutions to their life and career dilemmas can be used to complement career theories and concepts.

*The New York Times* is an excellent resource and provides contemporary articles that students can make connections with and enjoy. Through a variety of features and columns,

including “The Boss” and “Public Lives,” students can read life stories and see images of people who have struggled with self-identity, occupational preference, and career construction. The stories and images provide models to help students begin the assessment phase in the counseling process. Educators and counselors can use the results of assessment to help students understand life themes and goals. If we can help students see themselves and their options more clearly, they can make better decisions as they become more in control of their lives as workers.

Mark Savickas’ career construction approach begins with a career-style interview. In describing this interview, Savickas suggests that the counselor ask questions about important lifestyle issues. Questions concerning role models, favorite books and magazines, leisure activities, school subjects, mottos, ambitions, and decision-making can help provide the counselor with clues about the student’s life goals.

Before beginning career-style interviews, we read several life stories to guide our thinking and provide models. In “I’m a Coffee Doctor” which appeared in “The Boss” column, Andrea Illy, chief executive of a coffee company based in Trieste, Italy states, “As a child, I dreamed of being a sports driver or a neurosurgeon. It might seem a strange combination of desires, but both share immediacy, something I thrive on” (C10). To begin our own work on self-assessment, we asked, “What professions did you dream about when you were a child? What makes these professions attractive and appealing to you? Can you find a photograph of yourself engaged in the activity you loved the most? Can you write a reflection or a recollection around the photo?” In career construction theory, we look for patterns and life themes; this exercise can help uncover and identify both. A student-writing sample follows:

*When I was child, I dreamed of being an artist. I can recall an art class, I may have been seven or eight years old, where our teacher gave us postcards of famous works from museums.*

*Our task was to glue the postcards into our marble notebooks and write the title of the work and the artist under each card. I wrote the titles and artists as beautifully and as carefully as I could – holding my breath so as not to make a mistake or to let my pen slip. This little marble notebook was my prized possession. It felt as if I had some secret knowledge and a special world all to my own in my little marble notebook.*

*The dream of being an artist and of being surrounded by works of art is still with me. As I enter a museum or library, the excitement begins – I hold my breath again.*

A life story begins to appear – an image, a purpose, and a place come to the surface as we look more deeply and find meaning by reflecting on the past and looking toward the future. In “The Theory and Practice of Career Construction,” Savickas notes, “Language and stories are construction tools for making meaning” (62). This is such a rich content area and a wonderful opportunity to engage students in reading and writing assignments that make a difference, have an impact, and cause students to be thoughtful and reflective. Students make close connections with one another when they say, “Listen to My Story.” Mr. Illy also writes, “One of my more influential role models was an elderly widow I lived with when I was in school in Switzerland. She had little money, yet meals were taken formally. Service was always perfect. She looked perfect. She taught me that dignity had nothing to do with money” (C10). Mark Savickas states, “If I can only know one thing about a person, I want to know whom he or she admires” (“Spirit in Career” 14). Using Mr. Illy’s piece as a model, students wrote about their role models. One student wrote,

*Growing up in Brooklyn, I admired one of my neighbors, named Mrs. M., most of all. Mrs. M. worked at an elementary school nearby. Mrs. M. always dressed so nicely, always smiled, seemed so happy, seemed peaceful, too. One day during the holidays, Mrs. M. invited me to a big party in the auditorium of her school. I was thrilled, and I felt very special and grown up. There were musical performances from the children and then two special guest appearances. One was Sammy Davis, Jr., and the other was Robert Kennedy, Jr. I could say I saw them both and heard them each speak. Mrs. M. taught me to open my eyes to the world around me. She taught me that I could fit in, that I could belong, and that I could be a part of bigger things.*

In “Championing Children for Whom Reading and Learning Are Difficult,” by Brent Staples, we learned about Peter W. D. Wright, an education lawyer who has a reading disability. As a child, teachers, peers and school staff ridiculed Wright. With much support and encouragement from his parents and reading specialists, Wright went on to become a successful attorney advocating for the rights of learning-disabled students. His most famous victory was a landmark Supreme Court case that extended the rights of learning disabled children to receive the education they need in private schools at public expense.

After reading the article, we began a lesson on the link between private preoccupations and public occupations. We considered how career choices might result from some unfinished business from childhood. Could we identify personal preoccupations or recall early memories that might be connected to our exploration of possible career paths? In response to this question, a student wrote,

*I was a young boy growing up in the Bronx in a close family. I knew something was wrong. It was a dark and*

*rainy night and my oldest brother was out driving with his friends, and there had been an accident. We didn't have much information. My parents were devastated. We learned that my brother's car had gone off the parkway near the Bronx River. An off-duty New York City police officer was driving home to his family when he saw the accident. He stopped to help. He got my brother to the hospital in time. He saved my brother's life.*

The student who wrote this recollection is a NYC Police Cadet; he looks forward to attending the Police Academy in the year ahead. The student who treasured her homemade art book

is considering careers in education, art therapy, and museums. The student who admired a teacher will graduate with a bachelor's degree in education and the goal of teaching second-grade.

Supported by career development theories that see patterns and purpose in life stories and recollections, students can identify themes that help define career possibilities. Through this approach and working together, my students uncovered fresh opportunities for considering their life's purpose and their life's work. An excitement and energy existed among us as we began to make occupational choices that would be meaningful to us and that would matter to others.

## WORKS CITED

- Illy, Andrea. "I'm a Coffee Doctor." *New York Times*, 28 March 2001, sect. 8: C10
- "Life Portraits from Donald Super's Career Pattern Study," Paper Presented at the International Association for Education and Vocational Guidance. Berne, Switzerland, September 2003.
- Savickas, Mark L. "The Theory and Practice of Career Construction." *Career Development and Counseling: Putting Theory and Research to Work*. Ed. Steven D. Brown, and Robert W. Lent. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2005. 42–70.
- Sharf, Richard. *Applying Career Development Theory to Counseling*. California: Brooks/Cole, 1992.
- "The Spirit in Career Counseling." Bloch, Deborah, and Lee J. Richmond, eds. *Connections Between Spirit and Work in Career Development*. California: Davies-Black, 1997. 3–25
- Staples, Brent. "Championing Children for Whom Reading and Learning Are Difficult." *New York Times*, 26 June 2003, sect 1: 76, A32.