

## Active Engagement and the Influence of Constructivism

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In recent years I have made a concerted effort to stand back and look at the career counselling process through fresh eyes. I have come to some new understandings with respect to client problems and the way in clients and counsellors relate to one another. I have used the term “active engagement” to capture some elements of this new perspective (Amundson, 2003a). With this approach there is a critical evaluation of traditional counselling conventions and an emphasis on creativity, story telling, questioning techniques, action strategies and relationship building. There also is the recognition of the need to integrate personal and career counselling. In building this more active counselling approach I have relied heavily on constructivist notions of career counselling. I have placed at the centre the notion of meaning-making from both client and counsellor perspectives.

## Supporting Creativity and Innovation

An important concept with active engagement is the recognition that many clients come forward with a “crisis of imagination”. This is reflected through confusion, lack of self confidence, and a sense of hopelessness about new possibilities. Given this scenario counsellors need to use their own energy and creativity to help clients create a new story for themselves where there is clarity, confidence and optimism. In achieving this objective the client’s personal creativity needs to be fully engaged. In more traditional career counselling the term “career management” is used to describe this process. In active engagement, however, there is more emphasis on the creative and the term “career craft” seems to be a better fit (Poehnell & Amundson, 2002). The notion of craft combines the elements of functionality, skill and creativity. When one is involved in crafting a career there is ample opportunity for personal investment, energy and empowerment.

When one closely examines the counselling process it becomes apparent that there are many traditional elements or conventions that form the foundation for the career counselling process. A critical analysis of these conventions is necessary in order to support a counselling framework such as active engagement that values creativity and innovation. Counselling can be much more than two people sitting together in a room engaged in dialogue for a set period of time (repeated on a weekly basis). While verbal exchange is important it is also helpful to encourage visual imagery and physical activity. The simple addition of a flip chart in the room can encourage people to start to explore issues using drawings and written commentary. Counsellors can also take clients on walks, sit on park benches and use hallways to ‘walk their problems’. The dialogue also does not need to be continuous. There are advantages to having reflective breaks and times for clients and counsellors to sit back and assess what is being accomplished. The length of sessions is another variable that can shift. Many counsellors no longer have the luxury of hourly meetings on a regular basis. Counselling strategies often need to fit into shorter segments and perhaps occur in open spaces where there might be ten or fifteen

minute discussions. In a multi cultural social context there are also many situations where family members need to be included in career discussions. Space needs to be adjusted to allow for group meetings. There are many ways in which career counselling can be conducted, counsellors need to be actively choosing the structures and strategies that best fit with the needs of the situation.

### Establishing the Counselling Relationship

An important element in active engagement counselling is the personal stance of the counsellor as they enter into the counselling relationship. One way to look at the counselling relationship is through use of the term “mattering” to describe how clients interpret their connection with counselling. Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989) define mattering as the beliefs people have that they are important or significant to others. Mattering is more than just words, it is the way in which people reach out to others to make them feel welcome. The counsellor plays a role in this, but it is important to recognize that the beliefs about mattering start from the first contacts that are made with the counselling office staff. Counsellors take this further in the discussion that follows as they attempt to listen and validate their clients’ perspectives. At its highest level, clients come away with the feeling that they are more than just another “case” for the counsellor – they indeed, do matter.

The connection between client and counsellor is further enhanced when counsellors extend the opening discussion beyond the traditional boundaries of the expressed career counselling problem. Taking this extra time is usually a wise investment. One way of achieving this objective is through use of the “Twenty Things I Like Doing” exercise prior to engaging in problem focused discussion (Amundson, 2003a). With this exercise clients are asked to begin by taking a piece of paper and writing up to 20 things that they enjoy doing. These activities can come from any part of their life. After the list has been composed there is some reflection about the activities with respect to the following considerations:

1. How long has it been since they did each activity?
2. What costs were involved?
3. Are the activities done alone or with someone else?
4. Are the activities spontaneous or planned?
5. How do the activities help them find overall fulfillment (mental, physical, emotional, spiritual)?

As the client and counsellor discuss the activities there is opportunity for some self disclosure by the counsellor (i.e. finding common ground); there also is an opportunity for the counsellor to expand their view of the client in a more holistic manner.

#### Negotiating the Counselling Process

There are a number of different beliefs about career counselling that often confuse the process. A common belief is that counsellors have a special test that will provide all the answers (Amundson, Harris-Bowlsbey, & Niles, 2005). Another belief focuses on the topic areas that will be addressed in career counselling, the assumption being that there are clear boundaries between career and personal issues. The expectation is that counsellors will only raise questions related to academic and work life experiences. If these beliefs are not clarified at the beginning there can be difficulties further along.

One way of clarifying some elements of the career counselling process is to use a centric wheel to describe the various components of career counselling (Amundson, 1989; Amundson & Poehnell, 2003):

- place wheel here –

The process of defining career goals is complex and the career wheel can be used to explain how career goals depend on a wide variety of variables. Some of these segments have a more

personal focus (skills, interests, values, personal style) while others address social and environmental concerns (significant others, learning experiences, work/life experiences, career opportunities).

### Defining the Client's Career Concerns

People enter counselling with concerns and often some confusion about what to do next. Patsula (1992) suggests that an important first step is to help clients tell their stories and formulate their problems as constraint statements. For example, if someone is unsure about their educational options they might be encouraged to describe their problem as follows: "I can't find a job because I haven't explored all the options." With a constraint statement there is a description of the problem and then a clause at the end describing the reason (from the perspective of the client) for the problem. At this point the counsellor is not trying to pre-judge the situation it is just a matter of helping a client state clearly the problem and to also indicate what they perceive to be the reason for the problem.

For some people there might be a number of issues that emerge. The task then is to make choices about the order in which problems will be addressed. It is important here to ensure that there is a specific focus for the counselling. In other situations, the problems that emerge might be beyond the expertise or mandate of the counsellor. Career counsellors need to be prepared to discuss the appropriateness of the problems and also to make referrals when warranted.

Problems can also be conceptualised using a metaphoric framework. Some clients use visual images as part of telling their stories to describe their problems. These images can serve as a useful platform for further discussion and exploration. Metaphors are often based on familiar situations and help people to "pull things together" and to be more creative and proactive in their problem solving (Combs & Freedman, 1990; Inkson & Amundson, 2002). Taking the same

example as above, the client might describe their situation as follows: “I feel like I’ve walked down a hallway to a nice room and now I am wondering what is in the other rooms that I passed along the way”. In this situation the career exploration that would follow would be based on elaborating the various facets of the metaphor.

### Exploring the Problem

One of the metaphors that I use to describe the counselling process is the “backswing” (Amundson, 2003b). A backswing is something that is needed to generate power and to move an object forward. Whether a person is using a broom, a hammer or a golf club, there is a need to move backwards before going forwards. Applying this to counselling, many people come for help because they are discouraged and also confused about what steps they should take. They need to explore and clarify issues and also to remember some of their past accomplishments in order to rebuild their confidence and develop goals for the future.

There are many different ways of exploring the different facets of career problems. Within active engagement there is room for a range of systematic and more dynamic counselling methods. Systematic methods include various questioning strategies, self assessment programs, card sorts, information searches - often using the internet, standardized assessment, and so on. From the more dynamic perspective there are strategies such as mind mapping, storytelling, games, drawings, dramatic enactment, metaphors, and two or three chair techniques. The challenge for the counsellor is to use strategies that fit best with the situation.

A defining characteristic of active engagement is the willingness of the counsellor to use a wide variety of counselling methods. According to Gladwell (2000) one of the key factors in change is the experience of memorable and transformative experiences. As counsellors design intervention measures they need to focus on both the relevance issue and the need to involve clients in activities that will be memorable. For example, asking someone to walk their problem is something that is helpful and also a bit unusual, therefore likely to “stick’ in their mind. With this

exercise clients start with their problems at one end of the hallway and are asked to visualize the solution to their problem at the other end of the hallway. They are then told that a 'miracle' has occurred (based on the miracle question – De Shazer, 1985; O'Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989) and that their problem is solved. Without worrying about all the details they are asked to walk to the other end of the hallway, the place of solutions. From this new perspective they then look back at where they came from and consider what steps need to be taken to get to where they have arrived. Most people are used to solving problems in only one direction, from the problem to the solution. By starting at the solution there is the possibility of gaining new perspective on the situation. Walking the problem introduces physical activity along with cognitive reflection.

Another important element within active engagement is the focus on in-depth exploration of events. Many of the exploration activities are based on a close examination of a few critical experiences. The Pattern Identification Exercise for example starts with a full exploration of an interest. Clients are asked to describe a specific time when they really were pleased with their involvement and another time when they were not so satisfied. After carefully describing each event the client is encouraged to look for patterns in the stories that have been generated. The counsellor provides some support and guidance but the emphasis is on a client's own analysis of their experiences. In traditional assessment, if someone indicates an interest in tennis the assumption might be made that they like athletics. A fuller examination of the story, however, might reveal that the interest in tennis is fuelled by a desire for social relationships or a desire for physical fitness. It is only through a careful analysis of the situation that patterns are revealed.

The centrality of flexibility during all aspects of the counselling process ensures that there is a synchronization between the goals of the client and the goals of the counsellor. There are times when there is a shift in the client's goals during the exploration phase. In active engagement the counsellor closely monitors any shift in direction and is always prepared to step back to problem clarification approach to ensure the proper alignment of client and counsellor goals. In the example that was used earlier the client indicated that they couldn't choose an educational program because they didn't have enough information. Through exploration it

became obvious that gathering information wasn't a problem. The client enjoyed doing research and was doing using this activity to avoid contacting employers. The revised constraint statement became: "I can't get a job because I am afraid of contacting employers." With the emergence of this new goal there was a need to explore other issues.

### Consolidation, Decision Making and Action Planning

While the exploration phase is very important in terms of building confidence and clarifying issues, there also comes a time when clients need to consolidate information, make decisions and move forward. Returning to the image of the "backswing", there is a need to push forward with renewed energy and focus. It is important here to remember that a good backswing is something that is efficient and has focus. Some counsellors and clients get lost in the backswing and never take the next step of moving things forward. Others, of course, try to push ahead too quickly and don't give enough time to the backswing. Obviously, there is some middle ground here that helps to define good counselling.

As with the exploration phase there are a number of different activities that can be used to facilitate decision making. For some it is a more intuitive and holistic process, perhaps using the centric wheel that was mentioned earlier. Others prefer to make lists of advantages or disadvantages or use grids to compare various career options. The activities are designed to engage clients at different levels – verbal, visual and the physical. For some clients it is enough to just discuss options and make decisions. Others prefer diagrams and visual representations. And then there are those who gain additional insight by physically walking their problems.

Many clients delay action planning because they want to have everything worked out before taking a first step. While it is important to have some long term goals it is equally important to recognize that a first step needs to be taken in order to generate some momentum. Given the complexity of the current labour market it is often necessary for people to take a step

and then work out other details as they move along. Each step that is taken results in a new perspective on the situation. Sometimes small movements can generate new insights.

As people develop plans for action there is a need to be concrete, to have back up plans, and to have a written contract specifying what is going to be accomplished (witnessed by another person). Sometimes action plans fail because insufficient attention is paid to working out the details. As people take steps it is important that they experience success and a real sense of moving forward. There also is a need for follow through to ensure that action plans are being integrated into the overall change process. Going back to the metaphor of the backswing, much of the effectiveness of the movement forward depends on the follow through that is put into place.

#### Practical Application

Active engagement serves as an 'umbrella' under which many different counselling techniques can be applied. As a counsellor educator I initially teach trainees the dynamics of these various techniques by involving them in experiential exercises where they do some self reflection or facilitate the exploration of others in the training group. Following this experience, they then have the opportunity to use the various techniques as part of supervised counselling practice.

One technique that works well in the classroom and also in counselling practice is that of achievement profiling. In preparing for this activity it is helpful to have access to a flip chart or to some writing paper. The activity takes about half an hour and the time frame can be extended depending on the needs of the client. As a starting point, the person is asked to describe an achievement from any area of their life – leisure, education, volunteer, or employment activities. It is important to encourage the telling of the story and to use supplementary questions to ensure that a full description of the situation is included. If, for example, a person pointed to an event where their team won a sporting prize, it would be important to 'unpack' the details so that it would clear how the person prepared themselves for participation in the event and also how they

contributed to the overall team success. Listed below are some questions that might be helpful in fully describing the story:

1. What did you actually do? What made it successful?
2. What led up to it? What happened after it?
3. How does this relate to other aspects of your life?
4. What did you like or dislike while doing it?
5. Why did you do it? What was important to you?
6. What personal characteristics did you use?
7. Were others involved? In what way?
8. What prepared you for this accomplishment? (Amundson & Poehnell, 1998, p. 3)

Once a full story has been generated the client and counsellor work together to identify some of the characteristics that are reflected in the story. In a classroom setting the other class members would also be encouraged to contribute to the analysis. Continuing with the example of the sporting event, there might be examples of hard work, athletic ability, willingness to follow a strict training plan over an extended period of time, an ability to follow strategy but also to be creative within that plan, teamwork, competitiveness, and the ability to overcome obstacles. One way of describing this sequence is to take a blank piece of paper and put at the centre a small circle indicating that this is the sporting accomplishment. Around the outside of the circle it is then possible to make several "spokes" of a wheel. Each spoke reflects a certain characteristic. So, in this case, there would be the hard working spoke, the athletic ability spoke, and so on. By representing the story in this way it becomes clear to the person that each story illustrates a variety of different characteristics. These characteristics reflect skills, interests, values and personality style and represent one way of filling in the career wheel that was described earlier. Of course, one story is never enough to capture the full range of personal skills and qualities, thus the need to repeat the profiling exercise using different types of achievement experiences.

## Summary

An active engagement approach to career counselling includes many ideas that are consistent with constructivist theory and practice. Certainly there is a valuing of the way in which each person makes sense of life experiences. It is these constructs that heavily influence both actions and emotions.

Many clients come to counselling in a state of confusion and despair. As they appraise their situation they feel hopeless and lack the ability to image new possibilities. It is this “crisis of imagination” that is at the heart of active engagement. The process of helping people to see new perspectives is one that requires active involvement of both client and counsellor. There are many ways of re-energizing the situation, often involving a mix of verbal, visual and physical activities. The image of the backswing has been used to reflect this process. Through a measured backswing there is a rebuilding of self confidence and a focus on new ways thinking and of taking action. Once this is achieved there is movement forward and attention given to follow through.

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