

Another Story to Tell: Outcomes of a Single Session Narrative Approach, Blended with Technology

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Abstract

The present outcome study of an initial session of career counselling using a narrative framework and method of practice builds on findings of an earlier outcome study that examined multiple sessions of the same narrative framework. Career development professionals frequently struggle to engage clients in an initial session and may lose opportunities to help clients more by continuing on to further sessions. The purpose of this study is to illustrate the effectiveness of a narrative framework blended with technology, within a single career session with a client. This study found statistically significant increases in all study variables including optimism, clarity, confidence, organized thinking, and internal and external search instrumentality from the beginning to the end of a single session. These results, coupled with monthly client return rates of up to 85%, suggest that career professionals seeking to engage clients in an initial session and have them return for future sessions – to tell another story – should consider utilizing some of the strategies and interventions included in this study’s narrative framework. Recommendations for career professionals seeking to increase client engagement in and after an initial session are provided, such as: elicit client stories, embrace evidence-based approaches, and utilize tools to help clients organize their thinking.

Keywords: career planning, career counselling, narrative career counselling, narrative career development, career management, outcome study, single session, blended delivery, counselling technology

Purpose of Study and Literature Review

Narrative frameworks for career counselling and coaching such as life design (Savickas, 2012), the storied approach (Brott, 2001), and OneLifeTools/CareerCycles (OLTCC) narrative method of practice (Franklin, 2014), among others, continue to gain popularity in the career development field. Moreover, numerous benefits of narrative methodologies exist as described by scholars who explore narrative approaches and qualitative assessments from diverse perspectives (Abkhezr, McMahon, Glasheen, & Campbell, 2018; Busacca & Rehfluss, 2017; McMahon, Watson, & Lee, 2018; Stebleton, 2010).

In parallel, there is a growing need to evaluate the effectiveness of these frameworks through outcome evaluations leading to evidence-based approaches among the career development community (Stebleton, Franklin, Lee, & Kaler, 2019; Taylor & Savickas, 2016). Following from these two themes, the primary purpose of this study is to build on the previously published results of a retrospective outcome study of a narrative method of practice across multiple sessions by focusing on outcomes of a single career counselling session using the

same narrative method (Franklin, Yanar, & Feller, 2015). The purpose of this inquiry is to answer: “What works in an initial, single session? Do clients experience significant increases in confidence and optimism, clarity and organized thinking, internal & external search instrumentality?” This inquiry evaluates the outcomes of a single narrative career counselling session different from the 2015 study which evaluated programs of, on average, five sessions.

A secondary purpose of this study is to respond to a common and frustrating phenomenon among career professionals that clients frequently end their engagement after a single session. This is particularly prevalent in post-secondary settings. For example, Whiston, Li, Mitts, and Wright (2017) found that the number of sessions and hours in career counselling were significant predictors on career decision-making self-efficacy measures as well as support for counsellors to engage in psychoeducational approaches; a narrative strategy is one such example.

Practice Setting and Overview of Initial Session

This outcome study was carried out at CareerCycles, a fee-for-service career management practice based in Toronto, Canada, with associates based across Canada. All associates utilize the same narrative method of practice animated by the two linked processes of “career and life clarification” and “intentional

exploration” described and illustrated in a case study in Franklin and Feller (2017). Associates have counselling or coaching training, and are assigned to clients based primarily on fit, and secondarily on availability. When working with clients, career professionals operationalize the narrative method of practice using a web-application called Online Storyteller, thus offering clients blended-delivery, including human intervention and technology. To clarify, CareerCycles is a practice known for using narrative tools and methods. OneLifeTools is a separate entity providing tools to helping professionals including Online Storyteller and Who You Are Matters!, a gamified intervention built around the same narrative framework, and offered monthly in CareerCycles’ practice. The suite of narrative tools and methods have been referred to as OneLifeTools/CareerCycles or OLTCC in several publications.

In an initial session, the career professional uses a flexible structure to guide the hour to accomplish seven tasks: elicit the client’s presenting question and initial career possibilities, explore career and life wants and dislikes, introduce the OneLifeTools/CareerCycles clarification-and-exploration framework, begin to use the Online Storyteller to populate the client’s Clarification Sketch with initial items, reflect together with the client on one or more client experiences or stories while adding more content to Clarification Sketch, generate new and context-sensitive possibilities, and finally, recommend next steps. These steps and the way the practitioners use the narrative framework to help clients find their way – a term called wayfinding – are described in more detail by Franklin, Botelho, and Graham (2017). In this setting, the rate at which clients return after an

initial session for a paid program of five to eight sessions has reached 85% in some months, with the majority of months reaching above 50% (Franklin & Mackey, 2018).

Four aspects of these initial sessions are noteworthy, providing context for the present study and outcomes. First, sharing with the client a graphic “roadmap” of the process gives the career professional a sense of direction for the session, which, in turn, the client notices and feels confident that there is a structured and understandable method. Second, the practitioner aims to shift negativity and complaints to positive language. For example, a client complaint about “boring tasks” is transformed into a future desire for “intellectual stimulation.”

Third, every initial session moves toward the client sharing at least one story or narrative with the career professional. A client story may be any experience such as a job, role, volunteer opportunity, travel and so on. In initial sessions, the career professional elicits a story that the client feels good about, with the intention of increasing positive client affect thus invoking Fredrickson’s (2001, pp. 219-220) “broaden and build” phenomenon. To gather and organize elements from client stories into a Clarification Sketch, open-ended questions are used such as: “What did you like about this story? What skills and knowledge did you use? How would people have described you? What interests were revealed? What possibilities come to mind as you reflect on this story?”

Finally, new and context sensitive possibilities are generated collaboratively in response to the client’s issue or question, stories, and needs. Although unique from some career assessments with which a client may be familiar, these future possibilities

align with the client’s situation, and are approved by the client for addition into their Clarification Sketch. In this way, clients do not encounter occupational suggestions which often accompany test-and-tell results that clients may describe as “silly” and are therefore dismissed, such as “funeral director,” “vending machine replenisher,” or “potato farmer,” all real occupational recommendations identified by CareerCycles clients.

Methods

Participants

Sixty clients (we use the term clients for study participants) who had completed the initial consultation responded to the online survey. Fifty-six percent of clients identified as women and 63% of clients were aged 25-44. Almost all had at least a bachelor’s degree, with 36% having a graduate degree. There were no significant differences in the study variables as described below among different demographic groups.

Design and Procedure

CareerCycles clients who completed a single, initial consultation of one hour were sent an online survey for the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness and impact of the consultation. The survey provided information on confidentiality and consent and included questions focused on three items: exploratory consultation quality, exploratory consultation effectiveness, and internal and external search instrumentality (Stumpf, Colarelli & Hartman, 1983). The survey also included three open-ended questions to elicit qualitative responses about what clients found helpful and how the session compared with their expectations. Specific measures

and reasons for choosing them follow.

At the time of the survey, all clients had completed the first consultation. Using a number of measures, clients were asked to reflect on how they think and feel in relation to their career at the time of the survey as well as how they thought and felt about their career before the exploratory consultation session. This post-pre or retrospective assessment approach has been recommended for career intervention evaluation and has strengths and weaknesses (Hiebert & Magnusson, 2014), including the practical strength of being a single point in time survey thus increasing likelihood of completion.

Exploratory consultation quality was measured by two statements. Clients were asked to rate their overall exploratory consultation experience and their working relationship with their CareerCycles associate on a 5-point scale of 1=unacceptable to 5=exceptional.

Exploratory consultation effectiveness was assessed by four items using the 5-point scale (1=unacceptable to 5=exceptional) recommended by Hiebert and Magnusson (2014): “Optimism I feel about my career,” “Closeness to achieving clarity about my career question or challenge,” “Confidence I feel in my ability to manage my career,” and “Organization of my thoughts about my career situation.” Optimism and confidence were selected to align with two of the four subscales of psychological capital (Luthans, Youssef, & Rawski, 2007), which was measured in the 2015 outcome study (Franklin, Yanar & Feller, 2015). Clarity and organization of thoughts were chosen as key variables clients seek in response to their presenting questions related to lack of clarity and confused thinking, respectively.

Internal and external search instrumentality were measured by sub-scales of the Career Exploration Survey (Stumpf, Colarelli & Hartman, 1983). Internal search instrumentality measures beliefs about the usefulness of self-exploration activities in obtaining career goals using four items: “Assessing myself for the purpose of finding a job that meets my needs,” “Learning more about myself,” “Understanding a new relevance of past behaviour for my future career,” and “Focusing my thoughts on me as a person.” External search instrumentality measures the usefulness of occupational exploration in obtaining career goals using three items: “Obtaining information on the labour market and general job opportunities in my career area,” “Initiating conversations with friends and relatives about careers,” and “Initiating conversations with other professionals about careers.” Clients were asked to rate the probability that internal and external activities will result in obtaining their career goals after the session and before the session using a 5-point scale: 1=not probable to 5=very probable.

Three open-ended questions further explored clients’ experiences with the initial session. Clients were asked to briefly describe what they found most helpful about the initial consultation, how it was helpful, how their experience with the initial consultation compared with their expectations, and how and in what ways the initial session was different than other career counselling/coaching programs. Clients’ responses to open-ended questions shed light on their experiences with the consultation.

Results

Overall, clients reported high satisfaction with the exploratory consultation service ($M=4.50$) and their relationship with the CareerCycles associate ($M=4.52$). An open-ended question explored clients’ experience with the exploratory consultation session. Table 1 below shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations of all study variables.

Overall, clients found the holistic, client-centred focus of the session helpful. Examples of responses, shown below and throughout this section have been selected to illustrate findings: “Information about me was discovered through conversation rather than questionnaires” and “This is more about me as a person and finding a job that fits me not about making a resume to fit a job” offer a sampling of client experiences.

Most clients reported that the initial session exceeded their expectations, and many mentioned how different it was from expectations because it was narrative and structured. Many clients mentioned the good listening skills of the CareerCycles associate and found the session productive. One client responded: “My experience exceeded my expectations because I was able to formalize a career search idea with the online profile and I left with a small amount of hope for change, which I haven’t felt in years.”

Also, several clients shared that they found the Online Storyteller helpful in mapping out the discussion: “Online Storyteller tool helpful in providing snapshot of breadth of achievements and skill sets.”

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted to assess the differences in clients’ attitudes about their career before the initial session and after they completed it. Compared to earlier

assessments, clients reported feeling more optimistic about their career, feeling closer to achieving clarity about their career question/challenge, feeling more confident in their ability to manage their career, and having better organization of thoughts about their career situation after the first consultation session (See Table 2).

The changes were all statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). These results were reflected in the patterns emerging from clients' responses to the open-ended questions. For example, a client shared feelings of career hope and optimism: "Showing me that there's hope that I will figure out what sort of job I want and then get it" and "Great, at the end I was feeling that there is hope in taking next steps."

Some clients shared that the conversation they had with their associate helped them gain more clarity about their career. One client reported that the initial session "allowed me to identify and define some of the things I'm looking for in a career,"

Another client noted:

I liked that by the end of the session I recognized that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. I can see the possibility of having clarity with my career path and that made me feel confident moving forward.

Some clients reported that after the session they felt more confident about their strengths and abilities:

It was able to help me be more confident that I could get a career I wanted just by looking at myself as well as helping me change some things about my lifestyle that would help me grow as a person.

Clients also shared how the initial session helped them organize their thoughts about their career. Some clients shared that the conversations they had with the CareerCycles associate helped them voice concerns about their career situation and focus on their needs. In particular, one client noted "having someone external to myself gave some insight and instructed new ideas and confirmed some things that I had already thought about." Another client shared how the initial session helped "the way the coach could draw questions from my stories. It was helpful for me to see a different perspective."

Overall, there was a significant increase in internal and external search instrumentality after experiencing the initial consultation as referenced in Table 2. Regarding internal search instrumentality, there was a significant difference in clients' beliefs in the usefulness of internal search activities, such as understanding one's self and focusing on self, needs, and how one's past behavior is related to future career. Open-ended questions also reflected that clients gained a clearer

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations of All Study Variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Overall satisfaction	4.50	.61	1										
2. Careercycles associate	4.52	.58	.66**	1									
3. Optimism	3.90	.79	.26*	.21	1								
4. Clarity	3.62	.96	.30*	.31**	.50**	1							
5. Confidence	3.51	1.0	.20	.26*	.52**	.62**	1						
6. Organized thinking	3.63	1.04	.27*	.25*	.46**	.61**	.67**	1					
7. Internal search	4.26	.76	.17	.15	.27*	.31*	.31*	.44**	1				
8. External search	3.89	.87	.11	.10	.33*	.37**	.40**	.41**	.59**	1			
9. Age	2.87	1.10	.08	.23	.06	.03	.13	.04	-.16	-.13	1		
10. Gender	1.56	.50	.01	.03	.01	.05	.12	-.09	.27*	.12	-.04	1	
11. Education	4.27	.71	.30*	.07	.10	.03	.09	.03	-.01	.22	.08	-.11	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 2

Paired Sample T-Tests

Study Variables	Before Exploratory Consultation		After Exploratory Consultation		n	95% CI for Mean Difference	r	t	df
	M	SD	M	SD					
Optimism	2.48	1.15	3.86	.83	60	1.12, 1.64	.52	10.6	59
Clarity	2.18	1.14	3.55	.96	60	1.08, 1.65	.46	9.6	59
Confidence	2.46	1.19	3.41	.99	60	.65, 1.24	.48	6.5	59
Organized thinking	2.25	1.16	3.57	1.08	59	1.00, 1.64	.41	8.3	58
Internal search	3.12	1.06	4.26	.76	54	.84, 1.40	.41	8.0	53
External search	3.15	1.15	3.89	.87	53	1.41, .99	.49	4.9	52

view of their personal strengths, more insights about themselves, and the ability to see how their interests and skills can transfer into a job possibility. One client shared that the session helped “draw from past experiences to build a story that will help [me] achieve employment.”

Several clients noted that their CareerCycles associate asked questions about their past experiences which helped them see how these experiences shaped their skills, desires, and interests. Furthermore, several inquiries were useful in “determining what experiences I can draw from for my future career” as described by one participant.

That same client described the overall experience with the initial session as “the reflection on past stories to help identify and contain some characteristics that compose my character. I believe this can help illustrate some of my career avenues I’d like.”

Finally, there was an increase in clients’ perceptions of the effectiveness of search strategies such as obtaining information on the labor market, initiating conversations with friends and relatives about careers, and initiating conversation with other

professionals (external instrumentality). For example, one client noted that the consultation session, “helped me realize that what I knew would work best is the right way to focus my job search, namely, calling upon former colleagues and contacts and asking for referrals.”

Recommendations for Career Practitioners

Career professionals seeking to improve engagement in initial and follow-up sessions may find it helpful to draw on the following three methods and strategies related to this outcome study.

First, career educators and career development practitioners should elicit client stories. Asking clients to tell a story from their experiences tends to engage them (Savickas, 2011). Drawing out the story with open-ended questions gets the client talking, and through their storytelling, they reveal strengths, values, personal qualities, interests, and influences that may otherwise be missed by asking for them directly or using traditional assessments. Storytelling is often easy for clients as it draws on epi-

sodic memory and builds vital verbal communication skills. As clients learn from their own stories, they build confidence in the richness of their lived experience, and develop their reflected best self (Roberts, Dutton, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005). When positive stories are shared, clients harness the “broaden and build” phenomenon (Fredrickson, 2001), which includes broadening their possibilities, and building internal resources such as optimism, clarity, confidence, and organized thinking, as shown in this outcome study.

The positive emotions that accompany positive storytelling are not just indicators but also generators of change according to Fitzpatrick and Stalikas (2008) who further suggest positive emotions as an alternative gateway to therapeutic change. By focusing on positive emotions, clients gain therapeutic insights and increase motivation and inspiration; Wagner and Ingersoll (2008) link this to an increase in interest and curiosity within motivational interviewing, which in turn supports exploration of how life could be better in the future. Findings from this outcome study build on insights from the two articles

cited above in the following helpful way: previously rejected or overlooked possibilities, and new possibilities, emerge in client interactions within an upward spiral of positive emotions fueled by storytelling and story listening.

Second, career professionals should find and use evidence-based approaches for career development and emphasize this fact to clients. Career clients across the spectrum, from high school students to college or university students, to later-career clients, are getting more sophisticated in understanding the importance of an evidence basis for interventions. Career professionals who can confidently utilize and communicate an evidence-based narrative framework gain credibility in the eyes of clients and others who often support them in accessing or funding career services.

Third, career professionals are encouraged to use tools that support clients to organize their thinking. For example, the Clarification Sketch tool utilized in the OLTCC narrative framework makes in-session narratives come alive with clients' own text entries for all elements that emerge from their stories and experiences: strengths, desires, personal qualities, interests, assets, influences of others, thoughts and feelings, and possibilities. Having these items organized and visible to clients supports all aspects of their career session experience, including career idea generation and co-creation of future narratives aligned with life design principles (Savickas, 2012), as well as a positive feeling associated with a shift from chaos to order.

Conclusion

The purposes of the present study were to build on the results of a multi-session retrospective outcome

study using a narrative method of practice (Franklin, Yanar & Feller, 2015) by focusing on outcomes from a single, initial career counselling session using the same narrative method, and to identify which outcomes encourage clients to continue with career services beyond that initial session. The study found statistically significant increases in optimism, clarity, confidence, organized thinking, internal search instrumentality and external search instrumentality. Such results, coupled with a return rate reaching 85%, suggest that career professionals seeking to engage clients in an initial session and have them continue past that initial session to tell another story, should consider utilizing some of the OLTCC narrative framework strategies: elicit client stories, embrace evidence-based methods, and find and use tools that support clients to organize their thinking.

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