



Photo: Colourbox

Weaving together disciplinary strands into career development practice

It is a common experience when working in career development to see everywhere and connected with everything. It is there whenever people are talking about their work and their choices: what to study, who to hire, where to live.

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From one perspective you could see this ubiquity as a weakness – career is nebulous, hard to define, and anyone can help other people with their career. Its not hard to take steps from there that undermine our whole profession. But working in the training and development of career practitioners, I also know there is an extraordinary richness and complexity in the knowledge, skills and behaviours we cover in our training programmes. The contemporary career development professional also has to do a wide range of activities: working at depth with individuals one at a time but also working in groups, alongside colleagues, employers and other stakeholders and designing and managing services too. This broad view of career development work is behind the new '[Career Development Handbook](#)' I have authored with Tristram Hooley and Rosie Alexander.

In helping my thinking about this over the last year or so I have been focusing on career as a subject, or discipline. We could claim that careers work is so important that it deserves to be a subject on its own – but I want to make the contrary argument: that career is inherently

interdisciplinary, and to reconceptualise that as a strength that will serve us all in our practice.

I'm going to outline why I think career is interdisciplinary and then consider some of the ways different disciplines think about career and contribute to career development work. I've come up with a matrix approach to career development as interdisciplinary across two axes – a textile with a warp and a weft. I'll then introduce the articles in this series, through which I hope to expand the range of disciplines we might draw on still further. I hope this series complements the special issue of the NICEC journal published in April 2024 where [my article](#) delves further into the 'signature pedagogies' or distinct ways that we teach the knowledges, skills and behaviours that career development practitioners need to work effectively.

Career development as weaving

Before we can determine if career development is interdisciplinary, or think about which disciplines we are bringing together, we need to think about what a discipline actually is. We might think about them in particular as subjects we study at school and beyond which have both cognitive and social commonalities: so, we might consider how biologists or economists know, as well as how they behave together according to the social practices they have in common. In this way, psychology differs from sociology and they both differ from management studies, although they all have a lot to offer career development work.

In the introduction to his book 'Understanding careers', the New Zealand academic Kerr Inkson observes that there is lots written by both vocational psychologists and by management scholars about career, but they rarely reference each other. I guess if you are standing in one spot, you can only see what is closest to you. So maybe the vocational psychologists focus primarily on what is going on within the individual, the sociologists look at societal factors. And the management scholars consider largely what is relevant for people working in corporate environments, not those in informal and peripheral labour markets. These are clearly part of the story, but bringing all of them together will give us a richer picture.

Disciplinary affiliations

What disciplinary affiliations do you have? What subjects have you studied at an advanced level, and how has this affected what you are bringing to career development work? Some of us might identify with education and others with strands of psychology such as vocational, counselling or organisational psychology. My own story is that I have studied English literature at university before moving into careers work, as practitioner, manager and then scholar/educator. As an adult I have studied theology, so I see myself shaped by both literary and religious studies as well as education, and they are all important parts of my identity.

Imagine that these subjects are the warp of the career textile, the pillars that stay firm vertically in the weaving process. The other axis is the weft: the thread that we bring back and forth across the warp to make the fabric. In this analogy, the weft is a twisted thread

which through reflective practice brings together theory and research, policy and practice as equal parts of career development. The integration of theory, policy and practice is another way in which we are interdisciplinary and which to my mind connects with a broad view of career development work as a range of activities from counselling the individual to managing services and influencing other stakeholders.

Career as a salad, not a smoothie

So, let's think about how we do the weaving. It's also been said that bringing disciplines together it's a bit like [making a salad](#). We don't buy all the ingredients, laying them beside one another and eating all the tomatoes then all the lettuce. Neither do we put it all in a nutribullet and make a salad smoothie. Instead, we do the work of washing, combining and dressing the salad, where each ingredient is still identifiable. Like the weaving example, through this we create something greater than the sum of their parts. We can still see, and respect, the identity of each component as we bring them together

In this series, I have brought together articles where career development practitioners have brought other disciplines into their work. These are all disciplines where they have current or previous affiliation, so they have become part of their identities which they bring to our profession.

[Catherine Reynolds](#), a former English literature teacher, explains how ideas about the study of narrative can be used by practitioners to help people's career development learning.

[Valerie Rowles](#), who has recently completed a masters in linguistics, offers fascinating insights into concepts from this field and their relevance for our language-based practice of career counselling.

[Robin Stevens](#), former philosophy and religion teacher, shows how his background in philosophical inquiry shapes his understanding of careers work and gives us ideas for how it can be of use to others.

Thinking in interdisciplinary ways will help with all the activities we take part in and will help to create a firmer weft of scholarship, policy and practice. Particularly relevant to this is [Ester Bonomi's article](#) showing how policy studies can support advocacy and how it can help us across all our duties to reflect on our role as 'street level bureaucrats'. How does this greater understanding of terrain affect how you see yourself when you are working with clients, or with colleagues?

So, this series lifts and names a series of different disciplines enabling us to see their potential and actual impact and relevance. Whilst it might not seem that philosophy, linguistics, political science or literary studies have a direct connection with career development, I believe these articles prove that they do. I would love to know what other disciplines you can think of that can be woven into our careers work textile. I have spoken on the [Veiledforum podcast about theology and religious studies](#), for example.

There are lots of benefits to this interdisciplinary way of thinking. In England, the Gatsby benchmarks for careers education in schools asks that career is woven into the school

curriculum. This might be straightforward in some subjects such as science and technology where direct links to jobs can be made. In other subjects it can be more complex, and this thinking can resource that.

From interdisciplinary to inter-professional

Each of these disciplines has its own cognitive and social norms and ways of knowing, and so by embracing more than one discipline we are enriching the textile we make. However, we might also experience some discomfort as these norms butt up against each other. Learning to work with that discomfort strengthens us. And that brings us to the further benefit of interdisciplinarity: its links to interprofessional working.

In the UK at the moment, we are engaged in some discussion of the links between careers work and other forms of helping. As we recognise that people's ability to access work and develop their career is linked to physical and mental health, housing and safety, we are exploring ways of working the criminal justice system, and health and social support providers. This brings us into potential collaboration with many other helping professions, who might see things slightly differently to us and draw on different concepts from their professional training. So how do we do this well? We don't want to make smoothie of all the professions (ouch!), we want to be able to see and respect the specifics that each bring. The warp and the weft of our textiles as we create a patchwork of effective practice.

I think that we, as career development practitioners, are skilled at this weaving, and can show others how we do it. Through our own interdisciplinary work we are creating new textiles: with beauty, strength and texture to be of practical use in the world.

Guest editor [Dr. Gill Frigerio, University of Warwick](#), has processed and edited several articles on the topic of career guidance and other fields of study.