

Writing as soul work: training teachers in a group-based career-narrative approach

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Abstract

Writing as soul work refers to the active engagement of students in transformative writing activities in a group setting with the aim to enable students to develop new, more empowering narratives. This article explains how soul work through writing can be used to foster career adaptability, expressed in the form of increased awareness and self-direction. We summarize the labour market realities that underlie a need for more narrative approaches and introduce writing as soul work as a potential method to respond to these contemporary career challenges. We define what is meant by soul work and writing, illustrate its use with several stories from practice, and make recommendations for teachers and implementation in institutions.

Introduction

“The extent to which people can narrate the meaning of their lives indicates how much of what they do will matter to others. This process is referred to as narrativity, and it is about people’s ability to say who they are (narrate their story).” (Maree, 2013, p.52)

Cultivating career adaptability is important in the current labour climate and narrative career-counselling approaches are particularly suited to facilitate the kind of transformative learning required to develop it (Savickas, 2002; Cochran, 1997; Lengelle, 2014). Adaptability is defined here as “the readiness to cope with the predictable tasks of preparing for and participating in the work role and with the unpredictable adjustments prompted by changes in work and working conditions” (Savickas, 1997, p. 254). We operationalize adaptability here as the *increased self-awareness and self-direction* of students in their career development in the face of an insecure, complex, individualized labour climate where emotional competence is increasingly necessary for both personal and professional reasons. Transformative learning in our context refers to experiencing fundamental shifts in the way in which we understand ourselves, and our relationship to others and the world (Sullivan, 2003). The way in which transformative learning can be achieved through writing as soul work is by way of meaning making – a concept closely related to transformative learning (Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006).

Mezirow aptly describes the necessity for such an act of construction, when he says, “in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgements, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings

is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking.” (1997, p. 5).

Various narrative approaches with strong theoretical underpinnings have been introduced to promote career adaptability in recent decades and various studies have described and shown their potential (McMahon & Watson, 2012; McMahon, Watson, Chetty & Hoelson, 2012; Reid & West, 2011; Savickas et al, 2009; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

However, most narrative approaches still rely heavily on a professional counsellor and one-on-one counselling sessions. Schools, colleges, and university-based career professionals are not able to adequately provide such services: counsellors in these settings are frequently consumed by administrative tasks and pastoral care (Hooley et al, 2015; Malatest & Associates, 2009) and the number of students that can be reached with this kind of service is limited. To complicate the matter, narrative career-counselling approaches are not yet widely incorporated into career-guidance programs or curriculum. If student numbers are to be served, not only counsellors but also teachers should play a more active role in career learning (Hooley et al., 2015). In many countries this is already the case; and not only is school curriculum potentially fertile ground for career learning, but it is increasingly becoming the responsibility of schools, colleges, and universities to provide guidance (Hooley et al., 2015).

We therefore propose that teachers be trained in group-based narrative methods and in this way be helped to develop the skills and qualities needed so that they can provide career-learning opportunities for their students. An additional challenge will be to convince institutional leaders of the need for this type of guidance, which is cost- and time-effective and evidence based.

In this article, we propose that “writing as soul work” – the foundation underlying the work of career writing (Lengelle, 2014) – is a way in which students can be helped to develop more awareness and self-direction (i.e. career adaptability). The approach entails having students engaged in transformative writing exercises in a classroom setting; both online and face-to-face programs are possible.

The unique challenges of the 21st century labour market

There are four key challenges that are the heart of the need for career adaptability in the contemporary world of work: insecurity, complexity, individualization, and the need for emotional competence at work and in career development. We will describe the central issue of each of the first three only briefly as more elaborate explanations have been published elsewhere and can be reviewed in the existing literature (Lengelle, 2014; McMahon & Watson, 2015; Savickas et al., 2009). The fourth – emotional competence – will be explained in more detail below and its relationship to writing as soul work will become clear as the cases and approaches are described.

Insecurity

The insecurity of the current labour market is most noticeable in the increase in part-time work and the widespread trend towards temporary contracts. This development in society has created a precarious labour force with corresponding uncertainty and economic vulnerability (Standing, 2011). In the last several decades the numbers of people who have become part of the so-called contingent labour force is on the rise and it is not uncommon for people to make a living working two or three part-time jobs at a time. They are the people without steady or permanent employment who are often hired on a task or project basis and go from one temporary contract to the next, frequently not

knowing if they will be employed in the near future. In some sectors in the U.S. (e.g. retail, financial services, retail services, professional services, public service) the number of contingent workers is over 80% (Ettling, 2014). In academia there is also a marked increase in contingent labour contracts and job insecurity, in particular in the past four decades (Goldstene, 2013). The idea behind this form of labour is that it creates flexibility for employers and is supposed to increase employment opportunities as well, but “Most contingent workers have lower wages compared to permanent workers, they experience income insecurity, worse working conditions and get fewer training opportunities. Above all, contingent workers tend to have more difficulties in influencing their working conditions and it is difficult for them to get support from trade unions” (Bergström & Storrie, 2003, p.1). This is one of the realities students now preparing for work will be faced with and cannot be remedied by the familiar ‘career-matching’ model still used by most career-counselling services. Workers of the future will need to know how to respond to insecurity: remaining adaptable, cultivating an entrepreneurial mind-set, and at times negotiating terms in the face of workplace injustice.

Complexity

Complexity refers to the changing landscape of work and explains why one cannot simply, ‘choose a career’ and then pursue it. To illustrate the reality of complexity, “...one has only to consider that in 1976, in The Netherlands there were 5500 recognized professions and 2000 job titles that could be described as “nonspecific” (e.g. policy assistant; regional advisor; data worker). By 2010 the number of professions had dropped to 1073 and the “nonspecific positions” had grown to over 23,000 (CBS, 1993; CBS, 2012)” (Lengelle & Meijers, 2015, p. 20). This change is seen in employment around the

world and again makes career-matching models – which were developed for and worked well in the industrial age – fall short. That students now enrolled in an educational program may later be doing a job no one has yet envisioned, or that the student has created him/herself based on a combination of making use of random opportunities (Pryor & Bright, 2011) that match that person's life themes and aptitudes, requires a new way of thinking about career learning.

Individualization of society

While it is obvious to most that life fifty years ago followed a more standard biographical pattern (e.g. school, work, marriage, children) than it does nowadays, this doesn't mean individuals are equipped to respond to an individualized society where non-standard biographies have become the norm. "People are more individualistic in the way they view their commitments to organizations" (Boyatzis, 2001, p. 3) and the way in which they live in a more general sense. Indeed, people are no longer relying on the 'grand narratives' of the past but must take their own steps forward, both in their education and careers (Meijers, 2013). They must navigate the "risk society" (Beck, 1992) and are expected to take personal responsibility for their well being when in the past answers could be found through parents, communities, and religion. This is not to say or imply however that individuals are therefore simply responsible for their successes or failures, as the neoliberal discourse might have us believe. The, which has also been identified by others, of promoting career methods that focus on the individual's psychological development is that people can then be blamed for failing to achieve without consideration for real economic hardship and other factors beyond their control (Sultana, 2011; Reid, 2015). Struggling economies, precarious labour, marketization of career

services, socio-economic influences, and other challenges not determined by individuals must be taken into account and no career-learning method should be touted as a panacea for all career woes. The individualization of society does mean, however, that students need support in setting their own course forward.

The need for emotional competence at work and career learning

Emotional competence can be understood as the ability to “perceive one’s own feelings and others’ emotions, to regulate them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Kim, Cable, Kim, & Wang, 2009, p. 983) and includes the contribution emotions make to our understandings, our judgements, in particular our moral judgements (Nussbaum, 2003). Although emotions have been generally undervalued in adult education and are often seen as a hindrance to learning, adult education theorists and career counsellors do underscore their value (Chandler, 2007; Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 2006; Dirkx, 2008; Plumb, 2014; Savickas, 2002; Uhl, 2005). Indeed, there are several key reasons why emotional competence at work and in career learning are increasingly important (Cherniss, 2000) and why those guiding students should have methods by which to cultivate this competence in themselves and in those with whom they work. First, research shows that employees with more emotional competence perform better, are valued more by their employers, are more likely to seek feedback in order to improve and develop rapport with their supervisors “which in turn translates into more positive effectiveness and social integration” (Kim, Cable, Kim, & Wang, 2009, p. 997). Also, the workplace has shifted to service provision in the last half century (Buera & Kaboski, 2012): those working must be able to engage with clients and promote products and services in a personal way. Third, successful career choice-making

processes require an awareness of emotions – it is through emotions that we identify salient themes, preferences, as well as personal struggles and limitations. This form of applying the awareness of emotions to career decision-making can be referred to in metaphorical terms as developing a warm inner compass. In conclusion: affect affects choice making in fundamental ways (Kidd, 2004; Meijers & Wardekker, 2002) and life themes are inextricably tied to emotionally-laden experiences, those which can be both remembered and transformed in the process of (career) learning (Savickas, 2009; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Both wondrous and painful moments (the experiences themselves and the associated feelings) can contribute to our learning, though experiences that we deem positive often affirm us in what we already know, while painful experiences are more likely to fuel transformations. This is in part because the latter create cognitive dissonance and therefore require integration (Pennebaker, 2011). As philosopher Nussbaum has pointed out, emotions inform our learning – they are an “essential contributor to the way we think and learn about life’s deepest mysteries, especially our personal vulnerability, our dependence on others, and about the way we can support the flourishing of ourselves and other people” (Plumb, 2014, p. 146). Finally, emotional resilience is also needed in the face of setbacks and unpredictable changes in our working lives (Krumboltz, Foley, & Cotter, 2013) – indeed the complexity, insecurity, and individualization already mentioned at the beginning of this section cause existential uncertainty that cannot be resolved by engaging with rationality alone.

With the above realities in mind, we will argue for writing as soul work as a way of fostering career adaptability: the ability to develop self awareness and self direction within a world that is increasingly insecure, complex, individualized, and (therefore)

requires increased emotional competence.

Writing as soul work

“Discovering your Self in language is always an epiphany, even if finding words to describe your inner reality can be an agonizing process” (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 234).

That two writing teachers – one teaching undergraduate English composition (Ashby) and the other teaching writing for personal development to interested adult learners and at the graduate level (Lengelle) – should be motivated to write about what happens in their classrooms and how what they do might contribute to career learning is not coincidental. Rather, it *coincides* with the mutual knowledge and experience that when students write about their lives, they not only improve their writing skills, but they also learn to ascribe meaning to their lived experience and gain new insights. Writing one’s story can be aimed at constructing both meaning and identity (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) and is done by facing “cognitive dissonance and potential truth through the reinterpretation of prior experience” (Ashby, 2013, p. 41). That this process can contribute to career learning has been described and researched in some detail by Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post (2013, 2014) and has resulted in the development of *Career Writing* a narrative career-learning approach (Lengelle, 2014). As well, in order to develop truly meaningful curriculum for students learning to write in college, Ashby (2013) examined college writing instructors’ approaches to helping bring to conscious awareness myths, images, and metaphors through imaginative writing and thinking processes. Adult learners have experienced profound movements and responses through their own authoring selves.

As teachers, our aim is not only to teach writing as a composition skill, but writing as a life skill and with that, revision as a life skill (Warnock, 2000), where revision refers to the ability to alter our story and make it more life giving (Lengelle, 2014). We do this with the awareness that the self is made of many ‘selves’ and can be described as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Indeed, those writing carry multiple voices with multiple stories (Ashley, 2001), and through writing and revising, storying selves can be bound together through creativity’s power (Ryan, 2009). With particular attention paid to emotional content in holistic learning (Hunt & West, 2009), revision leads to the engagement of selves in adult learners. If we can change our ‘story’, we can also change the way the story of our lives unfold. After all, we become the autobiographies we tell and the more we examine how to tell the stories differently, the more we come to understand (Bruner, 2004).

Definitions

Writing as soul work is the active engagement of students in transformative writing activities in a group setting with the aim to enable students to develop new, more integrated, more empowering narratives. In the context of this article, soul work will focus in particular on setting the stage for courses that would foster career adaptability. Soul work as a concept refers to the conscious engagement with images, emotions, and myths surfacing spontaneously from the unconscious, often leading to the integration of separate selves (Dirkx, 2001) and the impetus for engaging in soul work is often a life crisis or life question (i.e. boundary experience) where old ways of being and coping no longer work (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). The soul work practices in adult learning

courses can be expressed through a call, movement, and response process (Ashby, 2013), whereby the call of the unconscious selves to consciousness necessitates movement towards a collective or unification of parts (Lawrence & Cranton, 2009), which is often prefaced by an initial sense of fragmentation or sense of decentering (Lengelle, 2014). Movement, which refers to the actions of dialoguing, questioning, hearing, awakening, and struggling in this context, often leads adult learners to experience acute change, self connection, self, wholeness, awareness and voice (Ashby, 2013). Here, voice is the product of newly integrated selves or meta-positions (Lengelle, 2014), a communicated outcome when a person senses his or her own freedom to become something new (Ashby, 2013) or take action (promoter position) (Lengelle, 2014). Berman (2001) argued that these transformative stories allow for the construction of a new interpretation of meaning as the writer revises him or herself; in the words of Meijers and Lengelle (2012) this refers to moving from a first (i.e. painful-default narrative) to a second story. Telling or retelling one's story is the route back to matters of the soul, argues Hillman (1975), something he defined as the layer or translating force between people and events. He says that events in a person's life should be discussed through the process of personifying. Personifying, according to Hillman, is "a way of being in the world and experiencing the world as a psychological field, where persons are given with events, so that events are experiences that touch us, move us, appeal to us" (1975, p. 13). A person who is able to act within the layer of soul work through retelling operates in the personifying landscape. Engaging in matters of soul work, then, can be considered a means of personifying through the process of writing, breathing life into things during which one finds new relationship: "Images and metaphors present themselves always as living psychic subjects

with which I am obliged to be in relation” (Hillman, 1975, p. 32). It appears that matters of the soul during personifying allow meaning to surface through inner dialogue, as if in the retelling, images and symbols reveal new relationships between writer selves and the world.

Writing as soul work – also known as writing for personal development or transformation via writing (Bolton, 2010; Lengelle & Meijers, 2009) – is at the foundation of ‘career writing’ (Lengelle, 2014) and can be applied with various aims in mind (i.e. making healthcare more humane, fostering personal development, reducing recidivism in the prison population). It is not necessarily aimed at career learning outcomes, but we focus on and describe writing as soul work instead of career writing in this paper because it is the prerequisite to good career-writing work and its principles would inform any training program using writing as a transformative learning tool. It is also from this foundation that teachers (and career counsellors) can develop their own tailor-made programs and understand the qualities and the type of learning environment that is needed to write more empowering narratives, including career narratives. Sensitivity to particular cultural contexts is also important as some cultures are less inclined to encourage disclosure (Wellenkamp, 1995) and may need to have particular safeguards built in when sharing work.

Four short case studies of writing as soul work

In order to concretely understand what writing as soul work might entail and lead to, we sketch four short case studies where students benefitted from the writing they did in the classroom setting. We have countless examples of personal transformation by students

and both of us are regularly approached by past and current students with words of gratitude. Students also return to do advanced courses or special projects with us to deepen and broaden their learning and report feeling more self aware, more able to face life's challenges, and more open to experience. These benefits of transformative writing are also seen in research done on their written work, not merely in self reports (Ashby, 2013; Lengelle, 2014; Pennebaker, 2011). The first case study is part of research done at a Dutch University where students chose to participate in a career-writing workshop before and after their 5-month work-placements and agreed to have their written work analysed as part of the study. The second case study is from a colleague who took an online career-writing course and gave us permission to use her story for the purpose of this article; since completing her own story, she has also begun to use writing as soul work activities with her bachelor students. The third and fourth case study come from doctoral research as part of a qualitative study on value of soulwork by one of the authors (Ashby).

Case 1: Awareness around career choice and empowering metaphors

A 23-year old student involved in a face-to-face career-writing course told the group at the start she knew she wanted to join the military (her story is also briefly described in Lengelle & Meijers, 2015, p. 24). She at first assumed she wanted to do this because the military life seemed glamorous and adventurous. She also joked that she liked the look of men in uniforms and had wondered if that was somehow involved in her choice making. As she wrote reflectively for the course, she came to the conclusion that she wanted to join the military because it was like a family and her family had fallen apart. Upon telling the group about this insight, she visibly choked up. At the end of the course

she wrote a Haiku as part of the writing exercise to bring together her discoveries and portrayed herself with the metaphor of a mother panther leading her young ‘charges’ (i.e. troops) through the jungle. She saw herself as empowered leader in the form of ‘head of the family’.

Case 2: From outrage at workplace injustice to more space to do desired work

Jo, a forty-year old language teacher took part in an online writing course called “Work-life Narrative” with one of the authors (Lengelle) and began by writing about a workplace injustice that bothered her greatly. In the course she did a form of reflective and expressive journal writing called the proprioceptive writing method (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002) in which those writing are asked to listen to what they hear, to notice what they have written, and periodically ask, in writing, the proprioceptive question, which is: “what do I mean by?” The method helps to access often-unexpressed thoughts and feelings and unpack these. Jo first wrote about family members who inspired or limited her and also about how she had broken away from traditional models of how to be, literally moving to a country that was more conducive to women’s independence and career development. She also explored the reasons why Erin Brokovich was her favourite movie prompted by a written response to Savickas’s five Life Design questions (Savickas, 2014), and subsequently wrote a news report-style piece about the injustice at work. In the process she discovered that her life theme was: *not tolerating injustice that could lead to the limitation of one’s room to develop (i.e. autonomy)*. Her almost paralyzing anger at her superiors made way for an acceptance of what could not be changed. Although Jo thought at first she had outgrown her place of work, she later grew her work to suit herself within the same department. The new project she embarked on in

addition to her regular work was to go overseas and help others empower themselves through learning.

Case 3: A female university student came in contact with an image of a physical symbol in a composition class reading and felt disturbed by it but could not name why. The symbol is an abstract sculpture called *Erma's Desire*, located off highway I-80 near the town of Grand Island, Nebraska. In his book, *Back to Keith County*, John Janovy (1984) wrote this of the emotional impact from *Erma's Desire*:

Different emotions are evoked at different angles or from the same angle on different days, depending on cloud patterns, wind blowing through spaces, or the color of sunrise. The best ones are thus free of restrictions, free to interpret as they wish, free to feel as they wish, free to think their own thoughts about this pile of steel and free to change those thoughts. (p. 3)

One idea presented here from this excerpt is the narratibility of Maree (2013), the opening necessary for this student to engage in transformative learning whereby she was later able to retell and change her ideas and her selves in light of a growing understanding of who she might have been then and could be anew. Shortly after our classroom reading and discussion, she travelled with her family to the actual location of the symbol at a roadside rest stop, something she had sensed carried some power. The metaphor of the symbol called to her in some way, she reported later. As she struggled with that symbol and upon arrival to the actual location, she uncovered its connection to a painful past memory of physical abuse near that location, a *re-membering* (Tisdell, 2000), something she then felt free to explore and even revise with her current selves. The following week in class, she had a sense of relief and calm as she shared about this journey and her

writing about the experience and in the papers that followed improved in clarity as well (Ashby, 2013). The transformative learning experience had obvious positive effects on this student's emotional state, a process by which she could face future decisions and uncertainty with at the very least a mind open to exploration of inner selves and their relationship to startling symbols, metaphors, and meaning making. Indeed, although this case study is not directly related to a career decision, such processes can help clear the way for both personal and professional progress.

Case 4: Another university student wrote a paper about herself, including some detail about her personality as it connected to a future career choice. Her concern in the paper was matching her felt natural talents and abilities with a certain career. In one section of the paper, she wrote about her desire to work with people who suffered from issues like PTSD, something with which she felt that she had first-hand knowledge and experience. The story or myth she believed was that a person is best placed in an occupation based on the event in his or her life that carries the most emotional impact, positive or negative. Her thinking was that if she could assist others who had gone through what she had, she would then feel good about her work and, perhaps by extension, her past selves. This idea corresponds with Savickas's notion that what we have passively suffered in childhood we try to actively master in adulthood and in this way often make of our preoccupations our occupations (2011) though the connection between the past and future is not always that literal. The surface of the writing had fragmented sentences and this portion of her work lacked a coherent flow of words. As her teacher, I had noticed another section in her paper where she described the joy she had when she baked for friends, family, and neighbours. In those sentences, she conveyed a clear, matter-of-fact writing style, a

lightness of style and message. I wondered about the difference in choices, so I invited her to discuss that further if she wanted. After class, she asked me about her paper and we shared honest observations, as is the way with constructivists giving each other open space to explore and create new knowledge (Fiume, 2005). She shared her thinking about the counselling job and I shared how I experienced her writing in the section about baking. She met my interest in her baking as potential career choice with silence at first, perhaps facing the cognitive dissonance common with soul work or transformative learning. Then, we spoke and she questioned these possibilities, a part of the process of “being called awake” described by Dirkx and Kovan (2003), where she wondered about the differences in work tied to powerful negative past events and work tied to less powerful yet positive, emotionally salient, past events. She experienced at the very least the “self” and “awareness” of soul work as she pondered whether it will matter if her career comes from the results of others’ negative actions in her life or of her own positive creations through baking.

As we can see from the above short case studies, in each situation there was an ‘awakening’ of a kind, a growing awareness about what is salient and either a new vision about one’s self, often accompanied by a reduction in tension and stress and sometimes even a call to action. Here we also note that emotional competence comes both from noticing feelings which identify important points of focus (e.g. family realities; a passion for justice; past trauma) and from insights that come as a surprise (e.g. insights into themes of belonging, staying with a job after struggles, imagining from which feelings and beliefs we make choices).

Teachers using writing as Soul Work

In research done by one of the authors, Ashby (2013, p. 11) approached 150 full-time and part-time teachers at a Mid-west American community college and asked them if they had had a ‘soul work’ experience with their students (as defined by Dirx). Seven teachers responded and eventually six took part in the study. In some cases, composition teachers believe that a writing class is only about the symbols on the page and, as a result, focus their attention on the surface of the paper and the writer. Although this type of instruction frequently leads to students having a rather instrumental relationship with learning, with little improvement made even in their writing (Allen, 2000), such approaches remain common. Perhaps like the ancient Greek understanding of what makes something physical: the approach to writing we’re proposing here can be best considered holistic, where affective, spiritual, as well the physical nature of humans is taken into account (Webster, 2013). Indeed, holistic education calls forth movement and response (Ashby, 2013) from students and teachers, a renewed openness for learning and for understanding others (“The Heart,” 2003, McRorie, 1974). That several teachers were queried yet few answered could be seen as a sign that not many teachers know to use writing as soul work. Indeed it seems few know of writing’s potential to facilitate transformative learning processes. We were surprised to find that even established writers – like the student Edith Robb (for full case, see Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) – did not know to use writing to help her deal with sudden unemployment, even after having been a journalist for 38 years. We will therefore not assume that most teachers – even those teaching writing – have identified writing as a source of transformative learning beyond

activities like keeping a reflective journal. Not having discovered this in the process of teaching could be caused by the rather instrumental relationship many teachers and students have with writing and with curriculum in general (Holt, 1995). Or it may be that writing in education is viewed as a means to an end and not as an exploratory learning process in and of itself. Even writing reflective journals is often seen by students as one more thing they do for teachers.

And although there is now substantial research supporting writing's beneficial effects (Pennebaker, 2011; Lengelle, 2014) as well as numerous papers, books, and programs on writing as a transformational process even in composition classes (Allen, 2000; Anderson & McCurdy, 2000; Ashby, 2013; Berman, 2001; Bolton, 1999, 2010; Cranton, 2006; Elbow, 1988; Hunt & Sampson, 2006), this work is still underrepresented in schools and universities. Therefore there is a case to be made for bringing writing as soul work to teachers, for a variety of purposes, including career learning. The questions that remain then are: what qualities do teachers need to have or cultivate in order to do this work well? What recommendations for practice can we provide based on our experiences? And finally, how can we convince school, college, and university administrations to feature this work for the purpose of career learning?

Doing writing as soul work in the classroom

After teaching in this area for 19 years (Lengelle) and 14 years (Ashby) we came up with a list of characteristics teachers, who would do writing as soul work, should possess or cultivate. They are as follows: an interest in writing (e.g. fiction, poetry, literature, composition), an openness towards the theory and practice of writing as a transformative process, a willingness to experiment, the courage to examine one's own life and share

with others one's personal narratives, and compassion for one's own and students' imperfect learning process. Questions teachers must ask themselves are: "Who is the self that teaches?" (Palmer, 1998): who is the 'authentic', self-aware teacher who reaches student selves through open-ended questions, dialogue, and storytelling (Groen, 2004)? Here authentic refers to "being somehow associated with a sense of empowerment, self-actualization, and individuation, and as such, linked to larger questions of human existence and agency in the world" (Kreber et al., 2007, p. 25). The self or selves inwardly integrated (in the teacher) leads to coherence and strength of teaching (Palmer, 1998) as does an awareness of the multi-voiced self that at first makes de-centering movements that can lead to new connections of those selves (Lengelle, 2014). This means that the diversity of voices in a person, in this case the teacher, are integrated through a constructed personal narrative (i.e. identity) that shows both self-insight and the ability to take action (Lengelle, 2014). One can also connect the response of soul work's "wholeness" to mean integrity or more cohesive selves, first in the lives of teachers, then in the lives of their students (Ashby, 2013). "Deep speaks to deep, and when we have not sounded our own depths, we cannot sound the depths of our students' lives" (Palmer, 1998, p. 31). The critically reflective teacher is aware of his or her orientation to power as well (Brookfield, 1995), and that awareness leads to the responsibility of building environments and curriculum free from oppressive forces (Freire, 2000), more specifically, a safe and enriching environment is foundational (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009). We give the following recommendations for practice and note that these aspects should be attended to when training teachers to do writing through soul work.

Recommendations for practice

A) *Create a safe space for writing.* The space – whether it is a real or online classroom – should be like a place where it feels okay to share personal stories. Trust, according to Brookfield (1995, p. 26), “is the thread that ties” together purpose, technique, and impact. This may be facilitated if an instructor gives a personal introduction and invites participants to do so in a playful way. For instance, students can be invited to complete the following sentence stems: (1) The meaning or origin of my name is...or I got my name because...(2) A question that has been following me around is... (3) If I told you one true or untrue thing about me, it would be... Keeping the space safe also means not criticizing work, advising in directive ways, or projecting that there is a ‘right’ way to write. The safe space stays safe by focusing on the text (i.e. noticing and noting things in what has been written, not about the student directly) and being clear and gentle with work read aloud or shared otherwise. A writing student who writes in a safe classroom abandons automatic or ready-made common expressions and finds freedom in self-expression (Berman, 2001), the very thing necessary to allow for a break in the cycle that produces bad language and even political loss (Orwell, 1946). The classroom that allows for this is the empathetic one, where students experience a “feeling into another person’s point of view” (Berman, 2001, p. 31), even if the other’s point of view comes from their inner selves. With empathy between student and teacher, the dialogue they share is less likely to destroy and more likely to reveal new direction as more coherent selves act as whole beings (Palmer, 1998).

- B) *Have teachers write themselves.* A teacher who practices what he or she teaches empowers his or her teaching. What is good for the role model is good for the learner. However, teachers must also write *them-selves*. In other words, the teacher must practice the kind of writing described here as soul work, which includes the sharing of this work with peers. This requires a willingness to play, to be vulnerable, and to receive responses in a non-defensive way. It is in this way that teachers truly come to understand both the courage that is required and the intrinsic motivation that is stirred when we are asked in an educational setting to consider not the knowledge ‘out there’ but the experience as felt ‘in here’. If teachers can examine their own life themes, fears, and do so with peers in a safe and well-facilitated group setting, they will know better how to work with their students. They will understand in an embodied way what it is like to be both vulnerable and enthusiastic about sharing personal work.
- C) *Play with language and keep the drama on the page.* It is vital that those writing find enjoyment in the process and get in touch with themselves as artist or playwright or narrator or storyteller. Groen (2004) described storytelling as tapping into the imaginative and intuitive ways of knowing. As a facilitator one might for instance start by getting students to write a short scene of a play. A piece of an existing play may be read aloud first (or shared online) and a line might be borrowed from it in order to start a fictitious script of one’s own. This allows those writing to create something new and gain experience with ‘feeling’ the difference in voices. Likewise, if someone brings up or goes on about ‘a problem’ they are facing, invite them to put it on paper. We often tell students that

in suffering and an urge to complain, there is energy and they do well to keep that energy on the page to infuse their writing; this is what is meant by “keep the drama on the page” (Cameron, 1998, p. 40). This emphasis on making something refocuses energy away from rumination and entrenched perspectives. Frequently when asked to share work in class, youth and adults alike will read enthusiastically and proudly from their work; an innocence and excitement is often palpable in class – that applies to online settings as well. An exercise where humour is involved is also a good way in which to engage students and make the work playful.

D) *Don't look for answers; go on a journey.* That travel and transformation can be experienced together for substantial lasting gain is no secret (Kottler, 1998; Ross, 2010). The travelling mindset is necessary for the movement required in writing and revision, so a mind and heart prepared to move away from the norm is one readied for new perspectives. The inner space of storytelling is the space of soul (Moore, 1992), and the journey there requires movement through imaginative means. In getting people to write for the purpose of soul work, it is best to see the work as an exploration from which insights can emerge. It is a process. And the way to enable writers to open up is often through ‘the backdoor’. The ‘front door’ is saying something like, “it sounds like you are embarrassed about being unemployed, so you could write about shame”. The backdoor approach would be to say, “who is the character on your stage of life who is saying ‘it’s bad that I have lost my job’ – give this character a name and see what he/she has to say alongside another voice that might be the voice of fear. You can write that down.

You don't have to share it with anyone. See what might happen." Or even, "What is that over there?" "Do you hear that knocking?" and "Can you feel that?"

(Ashby, 2011; Ashby 2013). "There is a spiritual side to our learning despite the domination of rationality in the classroom" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 200), so learners must be addressed as holistic beings, free to err and learn, to intuit and know. The journey can be considered one of "re-membering" through revision and reevaluation of past symbols (Tisdell, 2000) and even then the 'second story' (Lengelle, 2014), which is constructed and is more life-giving, need not be a kind of ultimate 'truth'. As Pennebaker has discovered through doing quantitative studies in writing and healing: a beneficial narrative needs to be "under construction" (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 11) and not written in stone.

E) *Slow down to the speed of the body.* When leading a group in the writing process, it is important to be in touch with our own bodies. This is important in determining the natural speed at which we might work with those participating. Our own sense of timing (felt through the body in subtle and not so subtle ways) will tell us if we are pushing the group to work too quickly or if it's time to tell a joke or introduce a more light-hearted exercise or to go deeper. Also, taking time for the learning process is important, in particular because emotions are involved and experiences need to be felt, articulated and given meaning. The writing space can become the reflective space as groups reflect on stimulating dialogue, avoid overly simplistic summaries, encourage nonverbal communication, and allow for quiet (Cranton, 2006). The body's role in helping an instructor be aware of what is required in the classroom can also be cultivated in the student, by asking

students to scan their bodies for tensions and encouraging them to note what they are feeling (e.g. “in one word, just note how you’re feeling right now and say that word aloud”) without in any way needing to alter what they find or feel (Hawkins, 2012, p. 25). This awareness and surrender to actual experience is also intended to help students know whether they want to delve into particular themes or would rather ease off. Although in recent literature more credence is given to the importance of embodied learning, it is still common that “practices in education silence, conceal, or limit bodies” (Springgay & Freedman, 2007, xix). This while the body is an important source of memory and even in online classrooms plays a role in learning (Freedman, Striedieck, & Shurin, 2007). The development of emotional competence can also not be separated from the awareness of what is going on in the body; in other words the body plays a role in teaching as well as learning through soul work.

F) *Give feedback like an oral storytelling that is kind, notices, supports, and inspires.*

In pieces shared aloud in a face-to-face class or online, it is important that the facilitator and peers follow some guidelines for giving feedback. The human tendency is to ‘move out of the process’ by either (1) offering interpretations, analyses, or solutions to problems instead of letting people spend time with the questions first (2) telling one’s own story without it serving the other or (3) criticizing or minimizing another’s story in some careless or suggestive way. Instead, feedback using these sentence stems works well: “I like the sound of...” and “I want to hear more about...(Scarfe, 1993). When we dialogue attentively in speech, we listen closely and at some point if we join the conversation, we create

in a sense another active participant to the current relationship the speaker has with the subject. As long as the communication is clear, one can join with the writer and respond without pressure to own or change the writer's message, but simply as one interested in the story. A teacher can accept the story in order to move along with the writer for a time in the unveiling of the unknown to come. One might treat the sharing on paper as a dialogue, like one might have in response to an oral storyteller. A listener would likely respond with interjections and with emotion: "Wow, amazing" and "Did you really?" and "What were you thinking or feeling when it happened?" and "Where did you think it might be leading?" The use of prescriptive "I" messages to a writer means perceived managerial control over the other's experience, something that can be felt as an authoritative stifling to creativity (Ashby, 2013).

- G) *Have a structure to the process that moves writers from a disempowering to a more life-giving story* (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012, Warnock, 2000) by allowing more 'free' expression at the beginning, and incrementally bringing in more structure towards the end. For instance, at the start or course of writing process, one might encourage writers to make a list of a whole range of voices and let them all speak (i.e. cacophony), but by the end of the process, the messages of a wiser voice or an action-able voice, that have emerged as a result of more structured exercises, may be summed up in a metaphor or translated into a haiku. Students or clients, like in other narrative career counselling methods (Cochran, 1997; Savickas, 2005) should leave with a 'life portrait' or second story (Lengelle, 2014) that summarizes the insights and actions they might take, but

that at the start allowed for all kinds of raw material to be expressed. (For more details on the order and types of exercises, see Lengelle & Meijers, 2014).

H) *Empower students to see humans as natural researchers and storytellers.*

Through an interview process, learners can research about those with whom they share the learning environment and develop the written products of autobiography or biography. Writers can learn to view research and even writing as more natural when they consider the human being as a storytelling creature. Danielewicz (2008) identified the mental approach in the collaborative adult learning environment as “the process of getting to know one another, not by establishing any common ground but by beginning as strangers or, even better, as foreigners” (p. 430). Thus, the need exists to establish some sort of public voice, an awareness or sign spoken or written to express one’s presence. Some teachers start their classes with an opportunity to build the public voice by having students introduce themselves to the class. Others encourage students to interview a classmate with the intention usually of breaking the ice. What if this interviewing activity did not end after the first day? Bintz (1995) saw this exercise as “culturally relevant and personally meaningful” (p. 41). The autobiographical and biographical writing process, with interviewing as an integral method, encourages empowerment through qualitative revision. This revision of thought through drafting forces a self-transformation because with each new piece, the whole of a person and story change through dialogue. The challenge with the writing process as it pertains to student biographies is the temptation to force assimilation of our worldview on the other. Thus, if one considers the other as completely foreign and as a result

approaches the other through respectful expectation, construction of new meaning occurs. When faced with the foreign element, one writes with discovery in mind, one innovates in order to connect the new ideas to long-term memory. Once drafted, the written product is reviewed for social, economic, educational, and intellectual precision through respectful dialogic peer review. Peer review becomes much more powerful when the product of review is one's self, one's culture, and one's impact.

Conclusion

The arguments for using writing as soul work in classrooms and in the face of economic and societal challenges, as well as the guidelines and philosophy behind its use, have been presented. Now the question is: what are (further) arguments that would motivate schools and universities to make such an approach a part of their programs? We posit that there are several main reasons why writing as soul work will appeal to administrators, schools, universities, and teachers as a foundational approach to foster career learning. First, on a very practical level: writing as soul work is done in a group or classroom format, which makes it both time and cost effective. Second, writing with personal or professional development goals in mind is evidence based (Pennebaker, 2011) and its use in careers work is already promising (Lengelle, 2014). Third, the approach can also be readily incorporated into the existing structures of education (i.e. classroom based or online with a teacher trained to guide those enrolled). Fourth, and as mentioned before, schools and universities are becoming increasingly responsible for useful guidance in schools and the existing methods fall short and other narrative approaches are frequently

too labour intensive. Fifth, teachers who receive proper training can learn how to facilitate soul work with their students – they need not become counsellors in order to work on career learning with their students.

Writing as soul work is also attractive in two additional ways – ways that will appeal both to administrators and teachers who care about student learning, but also those concerned with the bottom line. Writing through soul work motivates students intrinsically and cultivates in them an ability that does not continue to depend on a teacher, expert, or sage but can be accessed from within on an ongoing basis. Also, such classes are frequently popular with students and increase student enrolment numbers. Students who enter the classes report that they come to such courses because their other courses focus on *learning from the outside* and that they want to be able to spend time on what moves them internally as well. That students frequently become better writers and thus better students (Allen, 2000) is, in this context, an added benefit.

Teachers need training if writing as soul work is to be introduced on a broader scale, and transformational leadership and a willingness of administrators to seek renewal in existing career guidance methods will be essential. Just as the writer is encouraged by doing soul work to develop a new narrative about one's individual life, so will those in charge of curriculum and programming want to re-examine the story of what meaningful career learning entails. New methods, such as this one, are needed in the current climate of insecurity, complexity, individualization, and the increased need for emotional competence.

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