

What a career coach can learn from a playwright: expressive dialogues for identity development

Reinekke Lengelle

*Society is inside of man and man is inside society, and you cannot even create a truthfully
drawn psychological entity on the stage until you understand his social relations and
their power to make him what he is and to prevent him from being what he is not. The fish
is in the water and the water is in the fish.*

ARTHUR MILLER

Writing expressive dialogues can be used to assist individuals in developing their career identities – that is: stories that are needed to help people position themselves in relation to the current labour market. Writing expressive dialogues entails having written conversations with various parts of us – much like a playwright does with his characters – and making developmental gains in the process. In Dialogical Self Theory (DST) terms, it means talking to and with various I-positions on the page, perhaps forming coalitions, discovering counter positions, and innovating and integrating the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 228-234). And as the playwright Miller suggests in the above quote, the creation of identity is an interactive process between self and others.

Expressive dialogues as a writing exercise, which primarily cultivates the dialogue within the self (i.e. the internal dialogue), is part of the “career-writing” method,

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a narrative and dialogical approach to career counselling (Lengelle, 2014). The method is based in narrative psychology and Dialogical Self Theory (DST) both in the way the nature of the self is perceived – as a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind – and in the way that progress of a narrative can be promoted and identified (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). In DST terms, a beneficial narrative (i.e. identity) develops when individuals begin to express what is important to them (articulate I-positions), expand those I-positions and subsequently develop and express meta- and promoter positions (Winters, Meijers, Lengelle, & Baert, 2012). What these positions entail and how writing expressive dialogues might help in stimulating their development will be described below in greater detail.

In this chapter, I will explain the reasons narrative approaches are needed to assist people in surviving and thriving in the current employment climate. More specifically, the central goal of the chapter is to show how writing expressive dialogues can promote career identity development. It will become clear that doing so can augment or be used as a form of career guidance. Writing expressive dialogues will be placed in the context of DST where the development of particular I-positions promises particular developmental gains in the process of creating a beneficial career narrative. Metaphors from playwriting will be used to describe the I-positions (i.e. developmental stages) and two case studies will be featured that show how expressive dialogues might be written and how they can foster career development. One of the case studies is from a student and the other is a recent career story of my own. A discussion about who would benefit from using the exercises and what qualities a practitioner should have in order to work with groups or individuals will follow to conclude the chapter.

A need for narrative guidance

The career-guidance methods we generally associate with career development and which focus on matching skills to jobs, no longer work (Jarvis, 2014; Pryor & Bright, 2011; Savickas 2011). The so-called “trait and factor approach” which had career professionals making inventories of people’s skills and aptitudes and trying to match those to available jobs (Holland, 1973) is out-dated. It served people well in the industrial age when manufacturing was central to economic growth and the world of work was not as complex, insecure, and individualized as it is now. Employers are no longer the main source of security and belonging for workers, nor is counting on one’s traits and focusing on a possible match; the proliferation of types and forms of work is ubiquitous and we no longer have the grand narrative to inform us about occupational identity (Meijers, 2013).

A sense of continuity and congruence must be put together and found in co-created personal narratives – stories that also grow and change as circumstances shift and include details about how we can and wish to relate to others. Indeed, various researchers and practitioners have recognized the importance of this shift in career guidance in recent decades and this is, in part, the reason why narrative methods are increasingly considered central to career counselling in the 21st century (Cochran, 1997; Savickas, 2005; McMahon & Watson, 2012; Reid & West, 2011).

The adjectives that describe employment nowadays are: insecure, contingent, part-time, individualized, complex, and requiring increased emotional competence

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(Cherniss, 2000). The ground under our *employment* feet was once the work-floor of the companies and institutions we worked for, the clear do's and don'ts of internalized societal norms, and our skill base. Now the 'ground' under our *employability* is a kind of flying carpet, woven from the many strands of our personal histories, combined with a fragmented melange of multi-cultural values, and put together in a way that makes sense to us as individuals. In guidance terms, we call this flying carpet a career narrative or career identity: a story about ourselves that gives us a sense of meaning and direction, and tells us how the multi-voiced "self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow" (Savickas, 2005, p. 58). It is "not factual truth but narrative truth; meaningful to the individual in terms of experience, understanding of the world and of future possibilities" (Reid & West, 2011).

However, before I continue to describe how such an individual narrative takes shape through expressive writing, it is important to note that the claims made here do not condone neoliberalism and the agenda it sets that has stripped away security, benefits, and continuity in society. What is described here merely sets the stage – a stage on which young and old, who would succeed in the current economy, will have to tap into more inner characters to survive and thrive than before. They will have to be able to tell a story about *themselves* (i.e. construct a career identity) that allows them to gain insight into what has meaning for them and how they would like to be useful to others (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). In DST terms, they will have to develop particular I-positions in order to develop a narrative that they can use in the world of work.

Dialogical steps to (career) narratives

As described more fully in the introduction of this book, Dialogical Self Theory describes the self as a dynamic multiplicity of positions or voices in the landscape of the mind with a possibility of dialogical relationships between the positions (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). This multiplicity of positions can be in conflict with itself, criticise itself, agree and consult with itself (p.127) just as we might do so with other individuals. Metaphorically speaking and in the words of a playwright, the “self” described here can be likened to the various characters on the stage of one’s life. If that stage were the labour market, a successful career story could be worked towards if one character began by articulating what is important to him/herself (express an I-position) and if other characters then came forward to deepen and broaden those expressions (expanded I-positions). Subsequently, it would be important that a person would also be able to observe those positions as they enacted the conversation (i.e. develop a meta-position). A meta position, much like a play’s narrator, observes from the side and articulates what (s)he sees. A meta position (1) “permits some distance from the other positions”, (2) “provides an overarching view so that several positions can be seen simultaneously and their mutual relationships visible”, (3) “makes it possible to see the linkages between positions as part of one’s personal history or the collective history of the group or culture to which one belongs” and (4) “facilitates the creation of a dialogical space (in contact with others or oneself) in which positions and counter-positions engage in dialogical relationships” (p.147). In career terms this might be the combined position that says, “I became aware of both the part of me that wants to serve, but also the part that wants to

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invest more in learning before I do so” or “I realized that because of my upbringing that I actually see my own gender (woman) as less able to stand up to authority. The me that is a small-town girl from the fifties and the me that is a feminist are still not really talking to each other.”

The (final) developmental step in identity formation in a career-narrative learning process – in addition to expressing an initial I-position, expanding that I-position, and meta-position – is the formation of a promoter position. This position most closely resembles the role of the play’s director who guides, oversees, connects, and can act as an innovator to the characters on stage and can be seen as “the one who is able to take action”. A promoter position implies openness towards the future and the ability to integrate the positions that appear and which were identified by the meta-position. The promoter position, like the play’s director, can ‘reorganize the self towards a higher level of development’ and provides room for both continuity and discontinuity in the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p.228). In a career context, the promoter position may, for instance, be the voice of unconditional acceptance that allows the stalemate between “self as ashamed of being unemployed and therefore paralyzed” and “the hero self who is waiting to take a new action, but doesn’t know how” to be resolved.

By extension and in the context of the expressive-dialogue writing exercise that I will be describing, the individual facing a career dilemma is encouraged to take on the role of the playwright. The playwright is the one who can – with the help of a writing mentor and inner characters waiting to speak and be born – co-author a new story about work or work struggles. In the sections below, I will refer to a ‘first story’ as a narrative that doesn’t work and is characterized by flight, fight, or freeze responses and a ‘second

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story' as a narrative where meta and promoter positions have been developed and are at the heart of a story that is life giving and allows an individual to move forward (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

The method

Years ago, I discovered that writing about my life brought me insights and allowed me to solve problems. Researcher James Pennebaker discovered the same thing and began to study this phenomenon on a wide scale with a variety of populations (for an overview see Pennebaker, 2011). In one of his research projects, he and colleagues found that engineers who had been laid off found work more easily if they wrote about their deepest pain associated with the layoff (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994). This as well as experiences with students and their personal-development-through-writing led me to develop and subsequently research the career-writing process (Lengelle, 2014).

Expressive-dialogue writing is one exercise or approach that can be used to foster career-identity development and involves writing from different 'voices' or positions in the self. This is done with prompts from a writing mentor who understands that to get from a 'first' to 'second' story requires the expression and feeling of emotions and a movement towards a more cognitive, structured narrative. In this exercise, that movement is stimulated by beginning with the expression of 'I positions', where one may for instance be asked to "write from the voice that is loudest and wants to be heard".

The reader can imagine: a person struggling with a particular career dilemma (e.g. being laid off) may write a conversation between the position "I as suffering" and a wise-self-position. In such an exchange, a discovery might be made that "I as suffering" is not

suffering from the fact of unemployment, but from the societal shame perceived as a result. The future wise-self position – acting in this case as a meta-position – who is able to see things from a bit of a distance, might unearth this assumption and point out that what is holding a person back is not the fact of their unemployment but their perception of the stigma. When this insight is gained, another position, for instance of an accepting self, can be brought into the dialogue as well – this promoter position can subsequently soothe the ‘shamed self’ and allow a process of grieving to begin. The old identity (I-as employee or I-as capable and acceptable) and “I as ashamed” is then acknowledged and new space appears for positions such as “I as hopeful” and “I as an eager new beginner” for instance. Where this process in DST would ordinarily be done with a counsellor, it can also be done on paper and this will be illustrated with the following case studies.

Elaboration of the method:

Case Study 1

One of the exercises I have used in my writing practice with students is the following:

“Take a piece of paper and tear it so that you have six separate strips. On each strip write one of the following words: Unemployed, Employed, Observer/ Witness, Victim, Wisdom, and the Labour Market (in which case, the ‘labour market’ is not a thing, but a position that is also a voice in the dialogue) . Fold the pieces of paper so you cannot see what is written on them. Choose two of the pieces of paper randomly and start a written conversation between the two ‘roles’, much like you would if you were writing the first lines of a play.”

The idea here is that both an I-position can be expressed (e.g. role on first piece of paper), but also expanded I-positions that emerge in the dynamic of the dialogue where the ‘voices’ begin to explain themselves to each other. An I-position might for instance be when the voice of employed says, “I want to be included” (i.e. this is important to me) while a conversation with “unemployed” starts to show expanded positions, who says, “...but I don’t want to be employed at all costs. I want to be included in a way that shows my skills and talents. And travelling as far as before takes me away from my family too much” (i.e. who I am personally also matters, and that includes my skills, talents, and family. Frequently initial meta-positions also begin to show up, for instance, “I realize now that I have made parts of me disappear in order to do the job I did; being unemployed now is showing me how much I have compromised myself”. Promoter positions make use of those insights and demonstrate an ability to act on them in the service of stimulating other positions, “when I go to the employment office, I will add what I have discovered to my file. The conflict that plagued me feels lifted now that I know what I will say.”

Using the strips of paper and choosing the ‘roles’ randomly gives the writer a chance to surprise him or herself and get curious about what this new ‘character’ is about to say, instead of automatically defaulting to common scripts a person has about one’s life or struggles.

In response to this exercise, Carla, a middle-aged woman and graduate student with a well-paying but uninspiring job wrote the following dialogue (her written dialogue is in italics):

Employed: *I'm busy.*

Victim: *You're always busy.*

Employed: *I am being useful and used. My skills are needed by someone. That is what is honourable and acceptable.*

Victim: *I really do not want to be like you. You're selling out for money.*

Employed: *I need to make a lot of money so I can do the things I really want to do.*

Victim: *Yeah, when you're dead because you do not have time to do what you want to do, and here I sit looking at all the tools to play the music, and I have to wait for you because you're busy. When you're not busy you're tired. When you're not tired you're doing something for someone else. When are you ever going to smell the roses and spend time with me?*

Employed: *I'm busy making good money. I am helping people. I'm helping you and the rest of the family.*

Victim: *That's just an excuse. You're as bitter about this stuff as I am. If you were really doing what you wanted to do, you would be happy. You're just copping out and being like everyone else. You left me behind and you're not getting any younger.*

What is interesting in this initial exchange is that although 'victim' and 'employed' seem at the outset to be two rather polarized I-positions, but their dialogue already creates space for initial insights like "You're as a bitter about this stuff as I am." If "victim" or even the voice of "wisdom" were to write alone – which frequently

happens in the case of people merely journaling about their problems – there is less chance of variations and new viewpoints emerging. A monologue tends to strengthen or solidify positions, just as our own viewpoints tend to become more static if we not in conversation or challenged by others. Certainly in writing in non-dialogical ways, an I-position will be expressed, (e.g. “I as bitter”), but it is the introduction of a second voice (a potential of an expanded I-position) that the conversations starts to lead to the dialogical development of narrative identity (e.g. “I as wanting to do work that fits better” or “To work with people that make me feel valued”).

The instruction after letting the first two voices speak is to add a third or fourth. It is important that one does so in an unhurried way so that each voice gets to offer its gripes, issues, responses and insights. In the course, Carla was asked to invite the ‘witness/observer’ and ‘wisdom’ to the table as she reported that she was currently employed. It became an expanded dialogue where meta-positions slowly emerged and eventually even a promoter position developed. Here are several pieces to illustrate:

Witness (speaking to ‘victim’ and ‘employed’): *You know you both are on the same page from different perspectives. Why do you not learn from each other? Try out each other’s suggestions. (...) It sounds that you both have excuses to fail: one appearing like a legitimate, positive reason, and the other in a negative, self-defeating way.*

It is noteworthy that Carla, by quite literally introducing a ‘meta position’ in the form of “witness” started to ask completely different questions, much more focused on the coming together of viewpoints: I-positions working together with respect for the differing points of view. The next position that was introduced (wisdom), served as a

meta, but also as the beginning of a promoter position, where solutions grew in seed form and referred not only to what was observed by what could be done.

Wisdom: *Is it beneficial? Or are you just allowing yourself to be like victim only on the other extreme. Victim doesn't want to make choices that she will have to pay for, but you seem to want to control everything. Neither is fruitful. Both lead to pain and regret.*

At the end of the dialogue, Carla let each voice speak again. Although the pieces have been shortened for this chapter, it is apparent that the atmosphere of the exchanges had completely changed. The polarised I-positions shifted and a crystallising metaphor of a tree appeared – a tree that could stretch out and grow and also ‘touch other trees’. Notice also how all the I-positions began to interact constructively. Each began to speak with its own purpose and contribute insight.

Employed (I positions and first expanded I position): *I believe in being helpful to others. If I have power, influence, network, and money, it gives me the capabilities to influence the direction of my life.*

Here, Carla expressed several I-positions, like serving others and having power, influence, a network and financial resources so that, she could (expanded I-position) “have influence over her life”.

Victim (another expanded I-position): *I do not believe in that imbalance.*

Here Carla specifies that “balance” is also important in addition to the work of being helpful to others and gaining power etc. She may even be saying that a balance is one way in which she has influence over her own life.

Witness (meta-position, noticing and expressing insights): *You two are really not that different. You're just at different places of knowledge and self-revelation. I see you as balancing each other out. The tender and the strong, like a tree.*

Carla's meta-position brings together the positions I-as-employed and I-as-victim and notes they are not really polarized at all. Here, like a play's narrator, she observes that each character has something to say and offer: I-as-employed brings the knowledge and revelation of wanting to be helpful and gain power to influence one's life and I-as-victim brings the knowledge of a need for balance (from the earlier part of the dialogue, 'balance' likely refers to getting enough rest and also investing in activities that were more personally meaningful to Carla). She brings these positions together in the tree metaphor, which she perceives as both "tender and strong". Wisdom (beginning of a promoter position in metaphorical form – an integration of insights and hint about action that involves investing in one's other interests "new heights" and "connecting with others meaningfully" – not just serving or earning money): *Tenderness is necessary in order to allow flexibility for the energy to run through the tree uninhibited, resulting in the birthing of leaves and fruit... It is focused energy reaching for heights and spreading itself out to meet other trees.*

Several days after the writing, Carla wrote more directly about her career interests in an online message. It was noteworthy that after doing the written dialogue the urgency to take action of some kind erupted (i.e. in her case asking new questions and networking).

Writing expressive dialogues in this case looks like the learning process from I-positions, to expanded I-position, to meta and promoter positions happened too as a result

of happenstance, as the strips of paper Carla began with “I-as-employed” and “I-as-victim” were more likely positions for a ‘first story’ and witness and wisdom suited for the emergence of meta- and promoter positions. However, in my experience, a student can start with witness or wisdom and these will serve as initial I-positions. If ‘victim’ emerges at a later stage for instance, it will bring insight (meta) or suggest creative solutions or more dynamic views of how a particular issue can be addressed (promoter). What I mean is that there is no order in which a student should or must work with the positions in order to move towards a beneficial (second) story. That said, the guidance of a writing facilitator is key in the process if for instance a particular I-position gets caught up in a circular internal dialogue (e.g. victim repeating poor-me narratives). A writing teacher may then prompt the writer, to bring in an additional I-position, one for instance that comes from the imagination of the student. A question like, “who or what, in your imagination can see new things or knows how to solve serious problems”. Students may respond with archetypal positions like “the sage” or “Buddha” or “compassionate witness” or with other more life-giving positions than come from their personal lives (e.g. My aunt June who always knows what to say) and which work to stimulate the development of meta- and promoter positions.

In a workshop, for instance, participants were prompted to write down a “career question that has been following you around.” One of the participants, a widower, wrote down for himself a more urgent, personal, question, which was: “is it time to begin to date women again?” He had been raised strictly Christian, but had become disillusioned by the faith and left it in his adult life. He had spoken about this during the workshop

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briefly, so when he randomly chose the card “God” from a set of 78 archetype cards (Myss, 2003), he was surprised and later shared this in with the group in a fashion that caused quite a bit of laughter in the room. He wrote a dialogue with I-position “God”, who advised that he also write his deceased wife directly. He later confided in me, that this conversation had ‘set him free’ and had been deeply meaningful. In the following year, he happily reported that he had a new partner.

Case study 2

The second case study, which I will present now, is a story from my own career history and begins with a reflection on an entry from my journal.

“... I left home early and stopped in a café to write a short letter to my future self – I told her not to worry if this afternoon’s news turned out to be bad. An hour later, I would need those words of reassurance” (Lengelle, 2014, p. 13).

A few years ago, there were financial cuts at my university, layoffs followed and my position too was on the chopping block. All those teaching in the graduate program who did not (yet) have their PhDs, would be let go a colleague had warned me. Shortly after this, I was invited by my program director for an appointment and on the way there, as described in the quote above, I wrote myself a short letter to comfort and give my future self hope in advance.

That afternoon, I was indeed told that my series of one-year contracts would come to an end after a decade of employment at my university. This bad news could have

easily locked me into a first story – a narrative characterized by victimhood that often sounds something like: “I will no longer be employed, this is not fair, the university does not see my value, I am a victim of the economy, and there is nothing I can do. Poor me.” This I-as-victim is powerful and archetypal and it is our human tendency to use this narrative (i.e. first story) as a way of explaining our circumstances and remaining in the safety of our ‘innocence’. As I walked back to my car, my mind predictably offered up a series of scared, disillusioned, and victim-like voices, but I remembered too what I tell my students: a ‘first story’ is absolutely natural and understandable, but it is a stop along the way, not a good destination.

A first story is only one act in the play of our life unfolding. We tend to panic, but we need not anticipate that the script of our lives is destined for a tragic ending. Hence, I invite students – and myself in times of trouble – to invite other voices, characters (i.e. I-positions) on to the stage to speak. Again, I-positions should be expanded, deepening and widening our viewpoints in emotionally salient ways. In my situation, the voices I began to express sounded like this:

I-as-notetaker: *my boss said my work was of superior quality. He did say that.*

I-as-hopeful: *he also said that there might be a case to be made for my employment; he even said he might be able to write something up*

I-as-realist: *not that he is going to put that case forward on your behalf! He’s too darn busy. He’s just trying to ease your pain.*

I-as-hopeful: *I might be able to do something myself.*

Emerging meta: *I notice, I kind of feel like he has left me a trail of breadcrumbs to get home and I better do that before the crumbs are (i.e. all hope is) gone.*

In this stage of expanding I-positions, often the voices of others outside ourselves (i.e. the external dialogue) help expand our insights and move us towards meta-positions. Indeed, a new narrative is a co-creation that takes shape as a result of an internal and an external dialogue. An internal dialogue alone is often a vicious circle with limited I-positions emerging, while an external dialogue alone may sound helpful, but the insights and suggestions from others if not felt (i.e. affectively internalized) and integrated cannot be acted upon with conviction.

The first person I engaged in an ‘external dialogue’ with was my partner and colleague Frans, who asked me shortly after the meeting with my boss:

F: *Do you want to keep this job? Is the work meaningful to you?*

This evoked in me the I-position that I will call “devoted”.

I-as-devoted: *Yes, I am deeply committed to my work. I am doing the work that is for me. I also notice a lot of gratitude for that.*

Meta-position (or play’s narrator): *As we see: devoted shows us her commitment and connection to her work. That this is the right work for her and that she doesn’t want to lose it. She is deeply devoted. And in I-as-devoted there is energy to build a case for her employment. She does not yet know how to do that, but she sees that she is committed to trying.*

The promoter position (i.e. play’s director) grew in part from the realization articulated by the meta-position. I wanted to keep my job and I was willing to do

something about it. The promoter position (i.e. “I as able to act”) followed when I wrote the response to Frans’s question: *why should the university keep you?* This question prompted me to shift positions and to step for a moment into the shoes of university administrators who were being pressured to make cuts.

I thought about the fact that my boss had told me a case could be made for my employment, so I wrote down two main reasons why the university should keep me: they had hired me as professional writer (and professional writers, artists, and musicians without PhDs could teach in graduate programs – there was precedent). Second, the courses I design and teach on writing and personal development require special skills: creativity, empathy, and knowledge of this specialized field. The final prompt that activated and allowed me to internalize the promoter position, “I as able to act” and direct the play of my life came when I examined the positions “I-lacking-with no PhD” and “I not-lacking without a PhD”. During the holiday break in December, within two weeks of hearing the news, I wrote the case for my employment, using the two afore mentioned arguments as well as the argument that I was working at a PhD level and had the publications to prove it. Early January I emailed the written case to my boss and the union representative and with it in hand they were able to influence the administrator’s decision. In March I heard my contract would be extended.

Summarizing the process in dialogical terms: I expressed the I-position of victim that let me know I had a problem and was in my first story, then expanded that I-position finding positions like, I-as-devoted, I as hopeful, I as realistic. A meta- and promoter position grew as I began to write down what I noticed, starting with “I-as devoted” and

subsequently responded to prompts in the external conversations I had with my partner. Noticing (meta position) my devotion and other qualities, I moved towards being able to take action (promoter position) where I argued for my employment and shared the case I had built.

The first story of, “this is terrible” transformed step by step into the empowering narrative, “I am devoted, committed, worthy” and finally, “I will communicate this message with important others and see what happens.” The outcome, of course, could have been different. I could have simply lost my job anyway, but the exercise of moving out of the victim role and becoming empowered through the development of meta- and promoter positions would still have stood me in good stead had that happened. This is because other action-able (promoter positions) emerged from this exercise as well, positions such as, “I as capable of finding work elsewhere if need be” and “I as going to do a PhD” which I subsequently did.

The self-pity that might have grown if I had remained in the initial I-position, may well have paralyzed my efforts to move forward. Another discovery in this process has been that the culture of my family says “if you fail it is your fault”. This I-as-self-blame could also have found a friend in I-as-victim and together formed a dangerous coalition, which may have sabotaged my efforts. Instead “I as devotion” and “I as case writer” worked together to put forward an argument for my continued employment; regardless of the result, I had invested in proactivity and a sense of worthiness.

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Table 3.1 below shows the 4 dialogical phases and the I-positions that I identified and named in each, the kind of writing one can do in each phase and what stimulated me in each stage and allowed me to the move to the next.

Table 3.1: Overview of the dialogical writing process (using this case study as point of reference)

Dialogical stage or type of position	I-position named	Kind of writing per stage	Internal dialogue and influences	External dialogue (e.g. writing mentor, counsellor, or conversation partner)
I “Character”	I as victim	Venting on the page, letting the I-as-victim get feelings out Expression of emotions	Human tendencies to avoid pain and be innocent. Raw emotions. (Fear)	Encourages the person suffering to express painful feelings and put those on paper
Expanded I “Other characters”	I as hopeful I as realist I as note-taker	Writing down the other possible perspectives that seem to have something to say – recording the “other” voices	One’s ability to let other voices be heard, even in the middle of difficult times. (Opening)	Encourages the expression of potential ‘other voices’ to also express perspectives and feelings on the page by asking questions or giving additional writing prompts
Meta “Narrator”	Realizing and noticing I-as-devoted and I-as-meaningfully	Letting the narrator make a summary of what it observes about	One’s ability to observe one’s self and imagine other possibilities.	Acts as external witness by encouraging the sharing of written work –

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	employed and having the willingness to act on that	the selves	(Noticing)	either in written or verbal form.
Promoter “Stage director”	I as able to act: articulate the three reasons the university should keep me and communicating that with influential others	Writing down a plan based on meta positions	Ability to take what is observed and noticed in the meta phase into some form of action and reassessment (Courage)	Explore and suggest potential steps that might be taken based on insights gained in earlier stages.

To stimulate this type of writing in others or with groups, it is important to note that in expressing I and expanded I-positions, room must be made for all types of ‘voices’ or shadow positions, including the ‘messy’ ones (e.g. rage, disappointment, fear). Then a facilitator should slowly help the writer to bring in voices that may shed insight and lead to more life-giving actions. It is frequently the mistake of those struggling with a life issue, to stay too much in the first story with corresponding disempowering I-positions, but likewise, it is frequently the mistake of teachers or guides to move people too quickly to ‘wiser’ I-positions that are therefore not felt or lived through. Stories are inherently about conflict, pain, and struggle and at the same time, the author or characters long to resolve the tensions; the same goes for personal narratives. There must be room for both the first story and the emergence of the second and below there are six recommendations to help support this dialogical learning process.

Practical recommendations for using the method

In the following section, I make suggestions for facilitating this narrative and dialogical process; a description is given of what constitutes a strong workable and enjoyable stage for practice.

1. 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. This can 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 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, noticing things together in what is written, and being clear and gentle with students.
2. 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 I-artist or I-playwright. 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, to start a fictitious script of one’s own. This allows

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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. I 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 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.

3. Don’t look for answers; go on a journey. In getting people to write expressive dialogues, 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’s sounds like you are troubled about being unemployed, so you should write with the voice of I-as-ashamed”. 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 the scared one. You can write that down. You don’t have to share it with anyone. See what might happens.”
4. Slow down to the speed of the body. When leading a group or individual, it’s important to be in touch with our own bodies. This is

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important in determining the natural speed at which we might work with someone or a group. Our own sense of timing (felt through the body in subtle and not so subtle ways) will tell us if we are pushing someone too quickly or if it's time to tell a joke or introduce a more light-hearted exercise or to go deeper. Time for the learning process is important, in particular because emotions are involved and need time to become integrated.

5. Give feedback 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. Feedback using these sentence stems works well, "I like the sound of..." and "I want to hear more about..." (Scarfe, 1993) and stimulates the development of expanded I-positions and meta-positions.
6. Have a structure to the process that moves writers from a first to second story by allowing more 'free' expression at the beginning, and incrementally bringing in more structure towards the end. For instance, at the start or course or writing process, one might encourage writers to make a list of a whole range of voices and let them all speak (i.e.

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cacophony), but by the end of the process, the messages of a meta or promoter position 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 that clearly summarizes the insights (meta) and actions (promoter) they might take, but that at the start allowed for all kinds of raw material to arise. (For more details on the order and types of exercises, see Lengelle & Meijers, 2014).

7. Focus on art making and the writing craft, not only on life making. This last point may seem to contradict some of the previous recommendations, but it is essential and goes beyond the importance of play and enjoyment. Those writing are not only engaged in beneficial (or even therapeutic practice) but they are working as real writers. They are making art. They are trying in earnest to reach the reader with the 'truth' of their experience using vivid and visceral detail and are thereby working seriously at the craft of writing. As a facilitator, it is useful to bring in the advice of actual writers (and not writing teachers!). Let those with their pens ready hear that Ralph Ellison said about Hemingway, "When he describes the process of art in terms of baseball or boxing; he's been there" (McRorie, 1988, p. 29). Let them hear from Maya Angelou about why humans write and what she believes fiction writers are doing, "I look at some of the great novelists and I think the

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reason they are great is that they're telling the truth...the truth about the human being—what we are capable of, what makes us lose, laugh, weep, fall down and gnash our teeth and wring our hands and kill each other and love each other.” (Angelou, 2015). If students and clients work like writers, with the inspiration of writers, they will learn the hard work and pleasure involved and rekindle what has often killed by “The English teacher who wrote fiercely on the margin of your theme in blue pencil: “Trite, rewrite,” (Ueland, 2010, p.7). And to inspire courage, remind them as Brenda Ueland did in her original 1939 advice to writers “Mentally (at least three or four times a day) thumb your nose at all know-it-alls, jeerers, critics, doubters. (Ueland, 2010, p. 8).

Discussion

It should be clear from the above that writing expressive dialogues is a process intended to help people create life-giving stories so that they can move forward in life and that setting the stage for such work is important and requires specific acts and intentions. Below are some reflections on its implementation in career-development contexts and a final word on facilitator capabilities.

Part of a career professional's toolkit

Expressive-dialogue writing can become a part of a career counsellor's toolkit: an approach to helping clients gain insights and co-create ways of taking action. Teachers and guidance professionals in schools and universities can also use this approach when helping young people orient themselves in life, education, and work. Currently it is used

in several graduate courses as a way in which people can promote their personal development and work on strengthening a conscious conversation with themselves.

There are several advantages of this approach over conventional one-on-one counselling services. First it is more time and cost effective as it can be done with a group of people at a time, either face-to-face or online. Second, participants can each work on their own written dialogues, (are then invited to share them out loud with the group or post their written pieces online if they wish), and receive feedback from both instructor and peers. Third, other voices in the room stimulate the much-needed external dialogue, while the expressive writing continually serves to ‘reconnect’ to the inside voices and feelings. Fourth, people can continue to write expressive dialogues once they leave the course and no longer have direct access to a facilitator. This is because participants learn how to allow I-positions to be voiced and worked with in constructive ways: in ways that help people move beyond first stories. Fifth, writing is dialogical in nature: the moment words are committed to paper, the ‘I’ who is writing, connects to the ‘me’ who is expressed there. The act of observing and noticing what is written is the beginning of the formation of meta-positions and the conflicts and issues that are written black on white ask for resolutions and new actions. Writing stimulates and strengthens the internal dialogue in particular and that is perhaps why what is confessed to a friend over coffee can evaporate again, but the discoveries we commit to the page are much harder to retreat from or unsay. Finally, and as argued earlier, this narrative and dialogical approach can capture the human responses to the complexity, insecurity, and individuality of the current labour market in a way that traditional career guidance approaches cannot.

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The compassionate facilitator

Those helping others to write out their stories, their fears, their problems and their first attempts at new insights and actions, must be compassionate. Those writing frequently feel afraid of what they might reveal to others, but also to themselves. Shame and a sense of failure or coming up short are common feelings when we begin to write about our lives. That is why facilitators of the process must be gentle: they must know when to be silent and listen, when to encourage a next dialogical step or to suggest a new voice enter into the conversation, and when to bring in humour.

Those who would use writing also do well to have a solid basic understanding of human psychology but without stepping into a therapist's role (unless they are qualified to do so). Those encouraging others to write should also have written about their own trials and issues, so they know in an embodied way what happens and is felt during such a process. Lastly, facilitators of this method must 'have a thing' with writing: that is, they must love something about writing, whether that is editing poetry, scribbling notes in a journal about scenery that has moved them, or lovingly underlining passages in a book. In order to use or create variations on dialogical exercises, a facilitator must be playing with writing, like a playwright, evoking in themselves a host of dialogical possibilities.

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