

BECOMING A DIFFERENT PERSON: THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT IN CAREER GUIDANCE

LLEGAR A SER UNA PERSONA DIFERENTE: LA ZONA DE DESARROLLO PRÓXIMO EN ORIENTACIÓN PARA LA CARRERA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines an emerging social constructivist approach to career guidance, with a particular focus on the concept of the zone of proximal development. This is done by examining a metaphor used by one of the students who took part in a small scale in-depth qualitative study, all of whom were in the process of making their university choices. Some background to the study is given in order to set the scene and the theoretical lens for the study is then described, emphasising the active and social nature of learning. The metaphor used by the student (“me and my future” and “joining the dots”) is then described and interpreted in order to put forward understandings of the zone of proximal development in the context of career guidance. In particular the role of agency and participation are highlighted as ways in which people can develop beyond the expectations of society.

Key Words: career guidance, social constructivist approach, zone of proximal development, “joining the dots” and “me and my future” metaphor, agency and participation.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora un enfoque socio-constructivista emergente en la orientación para la carrera, centrándose en el concepto de ‘zona de desarrollo próximo’. Esto se realiza a través del análisis de una metáfora usada por uno de los estudiantes que participó en un estudio cualitativo en profundidad, a pequeña escala, sobre el proceso de toma de decisiones acerca de las opciones universitarias. Primero se contextualiza este estudio de caso dentro del estudio más amplio así como su fundamentación teórica, en la que se hace énfasis en la naturaleza activa y social del aprendizaje. La metáfora usada por el estudiante (“yo y mi futuro”, y “unir los puntos”) se describe a continuación para acercarnos al

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uso del concepto de la zona de desarrollo próximo en el contexto de la orientación de la carrera. Se hace énfasis en particular, en el rol del sujeto como agente y su participación activa como formas en que las personas pueden desarrollarse más allá de las expectativas de la sociedad.

Palabras Clave: orientación para la carrera, enfoque socio-constructivista, zona de desarrollo próximo, metáfora de “unir los puntos” y “yo y mi futuro”, agencia y participación.

Introduction

This article examines an emerging social constructivist approach to career guidance through the exploration of a metaphor used by one of six students who took part in a small scale qualitative research study in a sixth form college in inner London. The overall aim of the study was to explore the possible application of Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development to the context of career guidance, in order to discover new understandings that this could offer. A metaphor used by one of the students (“*joining the dots*” in order to draw a picture of “*me and my future*”) became central to the study and to the researcher's emerging understanding of the zone of proximal development in the context of career guidance. The metaphor is interpreted here in order to shed light on the ways in which individuals, who cannot be separated from their social context, construct career through interactions with others. The relationship between self and society is seen as a dynamic one, where individuals grapple with the contradictions that become evident as they try to make decisions about their possible future. But far from offering a deterministic view of individuals conforming to society's norms, the article offers insights to the ways in which through participation individuals can develop beyond that which society might normally expect. This offers some genuine scope for career guidance practitioners who are committed to the promotion of equality of opportunity and social justice.

Background

The in-depth qualitative research study was carried out with six students in a sixth form college in inner London over a period of nine months and its aim was to explore the ways in which the students were making their university choices with the help of a Careers Adviser. The particular interest was in social constructivist approaches to learning, and in exploring new insights and understandings about the career guidance process that such approaches might have to offer in relation to the dynamic between self and society. Students were interviewed by the researcher before (the pre-interview) and after (the post-interview) their career guidance interviews and their interviews with the Careers Adviser were observed and recorded.

All of the students concerned were in the process of making their university choices. The process of choosing universities in the UK is a complex one, where students choose to apply to up to six different institutions, but where ultimately universities choose them, depending on their academic achievements in their final school examinations. Currently universities offer students a provisional place, based on their predicted achievements. The place is then confirmed or otherwise when their final results become known.

Theoretical lens for the study

Many of the traditional theoretical underpinnings of career guidance practice have been drawn from psychology (which tends to emphasise the role of individual agency) and sociology (which tends to emphasise the role of society in shaping the decisions people make). There have also been many attempts to bring the two positions together to form integrated approaches. The context of the rapidly changing postmodern world has led people to question positivist notions of a career for life, and constructivist approaches of career learning throughout the life course have come to the fore, particularly in the form of career narratives.

The particular focus of the study was an examination of Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (hereafter ZPD) and its possible application to career guidance. Vygotsky's work falls within the paradigm of social constructivism, which argues that knowledge is not acquired, but is constructed through participation in activities and in interactions with others. Learning is, therefore, an active and interactive experience and the career guidance interview can be seen as one kind of interaction among many in which a client might participate during the process of constructing their career.

The word 'social', when linked with constructivism, is important in two different ways. Firstly, it highlights the interpersonal nature of learning as discussed above, and secondly, it emphasises the social and cultural context of learners. From this perspective, people are seen to develop *in* society and are immersed in, and inseparable from, their context via processes of communication. However, it is also important to understand that from this viewpoint social context is not seen as static, but as dynamic, with the potential to change as cultural practices are constantly challenged (Bruner, 1996). Society, therefore, does not remain the same, but changes over time through contradictions that become evident in 'the conflictual nature of social practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:49). In relation to the promotion of equality of opportunity, this is positive news for career guidance practitioners, as they seek to encourage clients, such as those who are the first in their family to enter university. The notion of people developing their understanding of career within their changing social context provides a contrast to those theories that tend to emphasise the role of the individual in constructing their future, (Cochran, 1997) or the role of society in shaping it (Roberts, 1993; Hodkinson et al, 1996).

The ZPD has a clear focus on development (as the term itself implies) and emphasises learning through interactions with others. Wood (1998:26) describes the ZPD as 'the 'gap' that exists for an individual (child or adult) between what he (sic) is able to do alone and what he can achieve with help from one more knowledgeable or skilled than himself', and is an indication of learning potential. Put simply, people can learn more in interactions with others than they can alone. The study was carried out in order to seek to define the ZPD with a career guidance context.

From the perspective of social constructivism, people learn through participation in communities of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991:15) argue that 'Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind'. This kind of learning by participation involves the whole person, and, as a result of participation, people change. Here, 'Learning ... implies becoming a different person' (Lave and Wenger, 1991:53). As people participate in communities, so the community itself is also transformed over time, as cultural practices adapt and change and new meanings and knowledge are generated. Com-

munities of practice therefore are not static, but change in the light of the experiences of those participating within them. Such communities of practice are part of what (Engeström, 2001) describes as activity systems; these often take the form of institutions (e.g. schools, universities) that interact with one another through the participation of individuals.

‘Me and my future’ and the inseparable nature of self and society

During the study, one of the six students (Tommy) used a metaphor that became absolutely central to the researcher’s understanding of the ZPD in the context of career guidance. This metaphor is highlighted here for this reason and is described and interpreted. Some background detail regarding the student is also given, in order to help the reader understand his context.

At the time of the study Tommy was 17 years old and was studying at the sixth form college. The students in the college are all aged between 16 and 19 and come from a wide geographical area across London. Tommy is studying for a National Diploma in Sports Studies; he took this course because of his love for sport. He has loved sport for as long as he can remember, in particular football. He did very well in his General Certificate of Secondary Education in Physical Education at 16, and this prompted him to decide to take his Sports Studies course. At the start of the pre-interview Tommy was asked what he was hoping to gain from his career guidance interview. He said that he saw it as a chance to talk some things through and used a metaphor “*to join the dots*” to describe the process in which he felt he was taking part. Here Tommy was describing the kinds of puzzles that children often enjoy completing, where a picture is drawn by joining dots in numerical sequence. Some pictures are straightforward and can be seen in outline before the dots are joined, others are much more complex, and the picture only emerges as the dots are joined. This ‘join the dots’ picture represents Tommy and his future.

From talking with Tommy it appears he could visualise a picture of himself and his future, and he used the metaphor of joining dots to describe what he saw. The outline of the picture is drawn in dots, showing what he might become in the future, and, as yet, the dots are not joined in any significant way. At this point the dots symbolise various aspects of Tommy’s life. Some of these are internal, (e.g. his interest in sport, his love of football and his desire to be a personal trainer) whilst others are external (e.g. his family circumstances that affect his financial position, the requirements of the universities concerned and his thoughts on his chances of success). The picture is complex, incomplete and changing as Tommy grapples with contradictions that become evident (e.g. does someone like me go to university?). This emerging picture is all about Tommy “becoming a different person” (Lave and Wenger, 1991:53) and his discovery of himself within his social context.

Tommy’s metaphor of joining dots to make a picture of “me and my future” provides an excellent description of the ZPD in a career guidance context. Before his interview, Tommy’s picture was unclear. Various dots were already in place, and more emerged during his interview, and hence his picture changed. The ZPD can be seen as the difference between Tommy’s picture before his career guidance interview and afterwards, as Tommy’s holistic self develops in society. Tommy’s picture is a picture of his emerging identity, which no doubt continued to develop in the ensuing months in college and indeed, would emerge and change throughout his life as he constructs his career.

The role of agency

Tommy demonstrates a high level of agency in relation to his university choice, as he clearly describes all the different things he has done in preparation for the task of completing his application. Along with many other students from the college, Tommy attended a higher education fair, where he was able to talk to representatives from a numbers of universities. He said he

“got loads of prospectuses, went away and looked at them, and then decided I wanted to do Sports Development. After that read things about and phoned up the courses”.

Tommy clearly articulates the action he has taken by saying

“I’ve found all the universities that do Sports Development, and their entry requirements, and their codes and code names, and I researched them. And my first choice is Liverpool at the moment, John Moores.”

His interest in sport and his desire to pursue a career in some aspect of it appear to be strong motivating factors in his choice. Although he went to the fair with an open mind, this seemed to be an open mind in relation to sport.

“I went to the fair with an open mind, but knew I wanted to work in the sports industry, but not quite sure what”.

As far as sport is concerned, this is something to which he already knows he wants to commit himself. Since attending the fair he has become interested in Sports Development, and now feels that he wants to check out whether or not this kind of course would help him work towards his aim of becoming a personal trainer. Tommy’s career interests therefore, seem to be an overriding factor in his university choice.

During the post-interview it was important to try and ascertain how Tommy felt his picture had changed, and whether or not he now felt that any of the dots had been joined. Following his interview he felt that there were now several more dots in his picture, which had emerged during the discussion. The dots represented such things as other courses he could consider, different assessment methods used on courses and what will suit him best, competition for places, and as such these can be seen to represent a mixture of both individual and societal factors. In terms of joining the dots, Tommy was emphatic in saying *“I can see now that this is for me to do and no-one else”* which is further strong evidence of his agency, and his overriding desire to be active in the process.

The role of participation

During the interview Tommy continues to draw his picture with the help of the Careers Adviser. The Careers Adviser also points to other opportunities for doing this by asking him if he has made any visits to universities, and encouraging him to do so. Tommy sees real value in this, particularly as it will give him the opportunity to see the sports facilities, which will help him to assess the quality of what is on offer, and will aid his decision-making processes. The Careers Adviser also encourages him to make direct contact with uni-

versities (e.g. telephoning) regarding any queries he might have. By giving him the opportunity to see facilities, talk to staff and possibly students as well, such individual actions move Tommy closer to the activity system of universities and gives him the chance to participate in it, albeit in a very peripheral way (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Through such participation, Tommy begins to think about himself differently. Over time, as more students like Tommy study at university, it can be expected that universities will also adapt to change.

The changing nature of Tommy's picture

Tommy's picture represents his holistic development towards his future. Bearing in mind the nature, scope and pace of change Tommy can be seen to be drawing his picture using a pencil, as a picture drawn in pencil can be changed much more easily than one drawn in ink. His picture is flexible and dynamic. Tommy is holding the pencil and is drawing the picture himself. It is intricate and complicated, as a whole variety of factors, both internal and external to Tommy, are involved within it. These include both Tommy's own experiences and how he feels about himself (e.g. his assessment of his chances of gaining a place on a degree course, and his feelings about whether or not he will cope with the level and type of study) and the messages of society (e.g. people who have studied on National Diploma courses tend to do better on Higher National Diploma courses rather than degree courses). Tommy's picture is one of his self developing within his social context. This intricate and complex picture is indeed a work of art, and one that needs to be treated with care.

But in this imagined scenario, the degree to which Tommy is in control over how his picture develops is still contestable. As the artist, Tommy would appear to have the overall say in how it turns out, but is this really the case? How do self and society interact and how does this affect Tommy's picture? Pictures drawn in pencil can be changed easily by using erasers and, in taking this metaphor a step further, it is interesting to consider both who is holding the pencil and who uses the eraser or erasers. The data of the post-interview shows that Tommy sees himself as the artist holding the pencil and drawing the picture. He sees himself as an agent, in that he feels he is the only person who can make his decisions and that he actively wants to do so. However, as time progresses various encounters (such as university visits) prompt Tommy to think about himself differently and he uses an eraser to adjust his picture accordingly. As he discovers more about himself and his possible options, Tommy assesses himself in relation to his discoveries and adjusts his drawing in response. It is also clear that at times society's eraser also has an impact on Tommy's picture, for example when universities reject his application. In the future this will continue to be the case as Tommy is affected by life events outside his control (e.g. redundancy).

Implications for career guidance

It is clear from exploring Tommy's metaphor that guidance needs to be an active process, which fosters a culture of participation and growth towards independence.

By focusing on what clients know already and helping them to reflect on their experiences of participation, guidance remains proximal to them. Encouraging clients to see the next steps in their development maximises learning within the ZPD. Clients need to be able to

draw their own pictures, but will be able to do more with help and support than they can alone. There is a role for Careers Advisers in enabling clients to find their dots and join them. There is also a role for them in educating clients about society's erasers (e.g. discrimination on the grounds of race, gender disability, age) and in supporting clients when such erasers have an adverse effect on their pictures.

Proximity as a concept works both ways. For example the client thinks about their next steps and takes action to move themselves closer to their desired future. But there is also a strategic role for guidance in seeking out opportunities for clients to participate in new contexts, thereby bringing activity systems closer together, in order to open up new experiences to clients. Such participation is vital as it is the means by which new and different experiences become proximal to the lives of clients. Whilst these new experiences (for example, being the first person in a family to go to university) remain at a distance little will change. With support, people can do more to address such contradictions in society that they encounter than they can alone. People may then be able to develop beyond the boundaries of society's expectations and equity and social justice will be promoted actively.

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Fecha de recepción: 16-09-07

Fecha de revisión: 26-09-07

Fecha de aceptación: 07-11-07