

# What's Your Story?

**Helping the next generation imagine their career identities through narrative career coaching**

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## Introduction

Figuring out who we are in terms of our career identity is something that everyone engages in at some point in their work life. Most of the time this begins as a challenge – feeling stuck in the “old me” (the present career identity). What we must do is get unstuck – imagine the “new me” (the career identity we’re growing into). At the heart of this practice of narrative career coaching is the need to confront our limiting story and taken for granted beliefs – our “problem story.” The narrative career coach serves as a helper – helping one let go of the old story and get unstuck; and, ultimately transform the problem story. Finding a new story and living into that story is the full-circle of narrative career coaching.

The following case offers an example of how the narrative frameworks of *rescription* and *re-membering* were used in a community college career coaching context – affording students the opportunity to practice with story-based approaches to career transition and change. In the broader perspective, the case offers a view into the human resource development practice of narrative career coaching – helping the next generation workforce imagine their career identities. This practice of narrative career coaching is grounded in the theory that seeks to explain the narrative development of career identity (e.g., Bujold, 2004; LaPointe, 2010). Others (e.g., Cochran, 1997) have clearly asserted this connection between narrative and identity in the context of career. For example, McAdams (1995) states, “identity is the storied self” (p. 385), and Bujold (2004) similarly suggests, “narrating one’s life is a way ... of constructing one’s identity” (p. 476). And, Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) have asserted that beyond the academic classroom, an unarticulated function of business schools is to serve as an “identity workspace” – a space that enables students to explore their career identity as managers. More specifically, it affords students an opportunity to craft their ‘who I am’ story – the story of who they’re becoming and what kind of managers they’re growing into. This case explores the development of such an identity workspace, one enabled through narrative career coaching (e.g., Kets de Vries and Korotov, 2007).

## Case Context

Cincinnati State Technical Community College is one of the State of Ohio’s largest community colleges, with over 10,000 students and the country’s largest and most renowned cooperative education programs (over 500 co-op employers and 1,500 student co-op placements, with \$3.1M in student earnings/year). The author serves as Dean of the College’s Business Division, and is a former human resource development executive – who’s committed to developing the next generation workforce. As Chief Academic Officer for the Business Division he is ultimately focused on leveraging education as a means of community and economic development for the Tri-State Region (Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana). Practically speaking, this role is focused on workforce development – helping students develop a career identity that allows them to be productive citizens and members

of the workforce. The narrative lens allows us to see this transformation of career identity as *changing what we think about who we are at work*.

Cooperative Education at Cincinnati State offers students learning that integrates the classroom experience with related work experience. An integral aspect of this pedagogy is referred to as *learning modules*, which are discrete skill-based learning opportunities designed to bridge classroom and work experience. The author facilitates a cooperative education learning module (a hands-on workshop), titled, “So, What’s Your Story?” It’s designed to: 1) help students *find their story* (and, begin to give voice to their *who I am* story), and 2) more importantly, to help students appreciate that they have choices about *which* story they will embrace. Specifically, students have the opportunity to surface a *problem/limiting narrative* and explore an *alternative story* – in the context of their career development.

This learning module is taught in the students’ last semester of college, prior to graduation, at a time of significant transition. It is purposefully designed to support students through this time of transition – where an *ending* of college-life is occurring and a *new beginning* of work-life is emerging. Often, this means that students are faced with a problem/limiting narrative, maybe even feeling stuck. Typically, they desire an alternative story, but may not have the skills/ability to enact such a future. The author engages the students in a narrative career coaching model that affords the students/learners an opportunity to engage in finding their *who I am* story, and more importantly, the students are coached through the narrative processes of *rescription* and *re-membering*. This allows students to assert *authorship* of their story and begin to critically explore their problem/limiting narrative as well as their alternative story.

This approach assumes an *agentive* aspect of career identity construction. LaPointe (2010) describes how, “individual agency is accomplished through the capacity of individuals to actively craft narratives by adapting, resisting and selectively appropriating cultural storylines ... and by negotiating and modifying the positions available in them” (p. 3). Similarly, Barner (2011) describes the importance of such constructivist approaches, where individuals are encouraged, “to give voice to their career hopes, concerns, and future goals by taking an active role in the exploration and construction of their life stories” (p. 89). Also, this case and the method described approaches career identity as a *practice* (e.g., LaPointe, 2010, p. 4) – the practice of articulating, performing, and negotiating career identity. Then, the students can begin to tell, through a sort of rehearsal process, their new story that’s emerging through the process of transitioning from college to work. This pedagogy seeks to create what Meijers (1998) refers to as “higher order learning” (p. 202), which he asserts is needed to develop career identity. It’s a pedagogy focused more on creative learning versus reproductive learning, where students are literally engaged in a crafting process – the crafting of

identity. This is a critical distinction – between the traditional practice of career counseling (counselor-led) and the contemporary practice of narrative career coaching (agent-led).

The narrative approach to career development (e.g., Cochran, 1997; Cohen & Mallon, 2001; Bujold, 2004; LaPointe, 2010) is clearly different from the traditional conceptualization of career development which focused on matching an individual's traits with job requirements. In addition, the narrative approach (e.g., Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Esbroeck, and van Vianen, 2009) embraces new conceptions of work life, and recognizes, "career belongs to the person not the organization" (p. 240). LaPointe (2010) defines career as, "the evolving sequence of a person's work experience over time" (p. 2). Similarly, Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Esbroeck, and van Vianen (2009) have asserted that we can no longer speak confidently of "career development". Rather, they suggest, we should envision "trajectories" in which individuals, "progressively design and build their own lives, including their work careers" (p, 241). And, as Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2010) have asserted, business schools may serve as such a place, hosting participants' identity work – which they refer to as "identity workspace." This case describes the practical development of such an identity workspace and affords a view into the human resource development practice of narrative career coaching. Next, the specific narrative frameworks and practices of *rescription* and *re-membering* are described; and, their use in narrative career coaching is explained.

## **What is Rescription?**

The idea (and the term) of *rescription* arose from Nick Nissley's applied narrative research at The Banff Centre and Stedman Graham's leadership coaching experience with executives around the world. *Rescription* is a narrative coaching strategy, a process employed by coaches to assist leaders in creating new stories when their old stories no longer serve them in achieving their desired results. First, one must consider "plot" – the organizing theme of a story. It's around this theme that life events are gathered into the unity of a story. Bujold (2004), notes that the "plot must constantly be revised in order to configure the new events happening in a person's life" (p. 472), and suggests that this act of narrative construction of identity, "offers a means of understanding the past in order to go beyond it" (p. 476). This "constant revising" and "going beyond" is what Nissley and Graham (2009) refer to as "rescription".

For example, first-generation community college students might become stuck in a dysfunctional story line/plot about perceived limitations given their limited financial resources (e.g., poverty) or their first-generation college student status, and thus find themselves repeating scripts that don't yield their desired results (of college success). This phenomenon is not unique to Cincinnati State students. Generally speaking, individuals in their personal lives often unconsciously enact scripts that produce unintended results, and in their work lives they often find themselves enacting scripts

describing what they unconsciously believe about organizational life – about career, leadership, decision making, and conflict, for instance. When an organization and its leaders are stuck, they need a new script that allows the organization to move its story forward. Similarly, these college students may find they're stuck in a script that self-labels them as a *struggling college student* – when they must transition and embrace a new identity, as a *successful college graduate* as they move into their full-time work lives. A *rescription* is analogous to a prescription received from a physician – the drug-based remedy that restores good health. Except in the case of a *rescription*, the remedy is story based and can be self-administered (or, enabled with the help of a narrative career coach), once the individual accepts his/her authority/authorship of his/her own story.

### ***Rescription and the Narrative Career Coaching Process***

The author uses CCL's Visual Explorer tool to aid the *rescription* exercise (e.g., Palus and Drath, 2001; Barner, 2011). Visual Explorer enables imagination (and story finding) and encourages dialogue through the use of visual imagery. The tool comprises more than a hundred diverse images that help people visualize their challenges (e.g., what's stuck) and imagine new possibilities. Barner's (2011) pioneering work shows how visual metaphors (and, the Visual Explorer tool) can be used as an important part of a constructivist approach to career coaching, and sense making around career transitions. Similarly, Bessell, Deese, and Medina (2007) describe the "photolanguage" tool, as a means for eliciting imagination and giving voice.

In this learning module, after context setting – e.g., introducing the narrative lens – students are first asked to consider a challenge they are facing, where they feel they're stuck. Some narrative coaching questions (Swart, 2013) that they're asked to reflect on and dialogue around, include:

- 1) What's the *limiting story* that you're currently telling about your identity as a college student/graduate?
- 2) If you choose three incidents in this narrative that are significant, what would you choose?
- 3) Is there a name you would give this story?
- 4) How is the story influencing how you think about yourself, especially as you prepare to transition from student to graduate?
- 5) What are the *taken for granted beliefs* that are keeping the story alive?
- 6) Who do you *authorize* to speak about the story?

Students are asked to find an image from Visual Explorer that “speaks to them”, helping them visually describe the problem/limiting narrative they are dealing with, or central ideas that emerge from the above mentioned questions. Barner (2011) concludes, “... visual metaphors appear to constitute an important part of a client’s narratives and may provide a useful method for helping individuals integrate the emotional and symbolic aspects of their life experiences and career aspirations” (pp. 91-92). Then they find a partner, to begin a dialogue with about the challenge, using the Visual Explorer image to help explain the challenge. In this phase, the partners are engaging in the first step of the *rescription* process – titling the present script.

Second, the partners are asked to find another Visual Explorer image that suggests a way out – a possibility for getting unstuck – the seeds of an alternative story. This technique helps the participants access their imaginations and begin to visualize a future script. Again, the partners engage in a dialogue mediated by their Visual Explorer images.

Similar to the first step, mentioned above, a number of narrative coaching questions (Swart, 2013) are offered, to help scaffold the construction of an alternative story. For example:

- 1) Have there been times when you’ve thought – even for a moment – that you might step out of the *problem story*?
- 2) What is an incident that suggests you could become *unstuck* from the old story?
- 3) What would you like to *let go* from the old story?
- 4) What do I want to have happen? (Is there a *rescription* you’d write, to suggest an alternative story?)
- 5) Is there a name you would give this new story?

What they typically find is that the Visual Explorer images and dialogue framed by the narrative coaching questions, offer insights and a more expansive vocabulary in order to surface a future script and enable them to become unstuck. How does it work? The process of *rescription* is a sort of narrative re-authoring (Swart, 2013) that creates distance from the current problem/limiting narrative and allows the student to give this problem/limiting narrative a name/title, and explain how he/she influences and is influenced by the narrative. Then, we look for moments in their history where the narrative wasn’t true. These become the seeds of a new/alternative narrative. Executive leadership coach and cognitive psychologist, Michael O’Brien (2010) asserts: “Simply asking yourself the question what do I want to have happen ... shifts you from being an actor in the world’s drama to

being the playwright of your own experience within that drama” (p. 126). This is the second step in the *rescription* process – founding the future script/an alternative story.

Finally, the students engage in the process of thickening the new story – beginning an enactment process or *actualizing the new script*. In this phase the author plays a more active coaching role, asking the participants what is needed for them to enact the third and final stage of the *rescription* process – letting go of the old script and embracing the new one. Often this means the students must confront their social support network (or, the absence of a healthy network). Here’s where the narrative process of *re-membering* is engaged.

### What is *Re-membering*?

According to renowned narrative therapist, Michael White (2007), in our life stories we grant membership to significant characters whose voices are influential (the people who are in our lives that form our associational identity). *Re-membering* conversations provide us an opportunity to revise these memberships: to upgrade some memberships and downgrade others; to honor some memberships and to revoke others; to grant authority to some voices and to disqualify other voices. Why? Many community college students, especially first-generation college students, are not positively supported when they go away to college. In fact, they might actually be discouraged and only receive negative reinforcement – e.g., “you’re not cut out for college”; “you’re not one of them”; “those people aren’t any better than we are”. *Re-membering* conversations provide an opportunity for the students to engage in a revision of their associational identity memberships (to consider who they might want to *upgrade* and/or *downgrade* as part of their associational identity). This affords an opening for the reconstruction of identity (or, simply, to change what we think about *who we are*).

### Summary

This case offers insight to a methodology employed in narrative career coaching – an example of how the narrative frameworks of *rescription* and *re-membering* were used in a community college career coaching context – affording students the opportunity to practice with story-based approaches to career transition and change. A person might enter career coaching with a dysfunctional narrative definition of a situation that is currently impeding progress. In this case, the narrative coach serves as a helper (Schein, 2011), aiding in the transformation of a problem/limiting narrative. In the end, the narrative career coach offers help to the student/client by affording him/her insight to the questions: 1) *What story do I find myself a part of?* and 2) *What am I to do?* It was the philosopher, Alisdair MacIntyre (1984, p.216), who helped us understand, a person cannot author his/her own story without drawing on the narrative resources of his/her ecological context: “I can only answer the question, *What am I to do?* – if I can answer the prior question – *Of what story do I find myself a part of?*” The narrative frameworks of *rescription* and *re-membering* afford us means for accessing answers to those questions,

and might prove helpful for the next generation workforce, as they seek to imagine their career identities; or, simply, to change what we think about who we are at work.

## About the Author



Dr. Nick Nissley previously served as Executive Director of Leadership Development at The Banff Centre. Presently he serves as Dean of Business Technologies at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College (USA). Nick is a human resource development professional with more than 25 years of experience in the mining, healthcare, and education sectors. Nick describes his life work as, helping leaders learn to lead.



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