The role of imagination in emerging career agency

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Introduction

Western societies are quickly becoming less coherent (Giddens, 1991). As a result it is increasingly unclear how individuals should act in a range of situations or how they may understand themselves. To a certain extent this development towards more diverse perspectives and a broader range of ways to act is a positive one, as cultures can only develop as they are confronted with different perspectives. A uniform culture would simply reach a standstill. That said, current society now demands of its citizens that they become increasingly self-reliant and by extension develop a capacity to be self-governing. On the labour market self-reliance and self-determination have been considered par for the course even longer. It is no surprise then that terms like self-direction, self-governing teams, employability and resilience are considered part of the standard repertoire of politicians and employers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2017).

Within the social sciences, an ability to be self-governing and self-reliant are terms that are associated with the concept "agency". However, the latter is a fairly vague, multidimensional concept (Arthur, 2014) that refers to the 'scope of action' an individual has in a fluid society (Bauman, 2000). In this article we would like to explore the concept of 'agency' further whereby we focus on the role of imagination in enacting it.

Agency

In an unpredictable society individuals are challenged to 'position' themselves on an ongoing basis (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) in order to act in ways that are meaningful in a space that is limited by existing power differences. They must ask questions such as ("What am I able to say?"), diverse media ("With what medium

can I say what I want to say?"), one's own social network ('To whom can I say what I want to say?") and one's history and perception of self ("What is it I actually have to say?") within natural and cultural circles of interdependent relationships. And this does not only apply to the rather (abstract) level of "society", but in every actual societal practice in which an individual participates. To be able to successfully engage in this challenge is referred to as 'agency'. In other words, agency is about creating space to act (i.e. expanding one's scope of action), both in the material and the symbolic sense.

In the academic debate about career development, agency is viewed from two opposing perspectives. On the one hand there is a perspective that emphasizes the possibility of making or creating one's own career. A number of scientists led by Savickas do not hesitate to speak of "life designing" as the challenge of the 21st century (Savickas et al., 2010). The concept of self-direction that is used in this context owes its assumptions to some of the ideals characteristic of enlightenment thinking. These ideals, however, are often taken too literally in career guidance in schools and assume subjective autonomy and the powers of the conscious and rational will (Kant, 1976/2002; Taylor, 2006). In this line of thinking, people are actors who are or can be at the wheel (i.e. in control) of life designing and career planning. Freedom to act, often referred to as autonomy, is an ideal that dominates Western thinking about the individual. This is often interpreted as: the freedom to achieve one's own goals, whatever they may be. The assumption is that goals have their source in one's deepest being and in achieving them one can actualize one's self. If that turns out not to be possible the fault lies with 'others' or even worse, with oneself. It is this viewpoint that is at the foundation of neoliberalism, in the sense that the goals are conceived of as one-dimensional in terms of economic egoism (Schirrmacher, 2013).

There are at least two objections to this view as Crawford (2015) explains: firstly, needs and goals cannot be merely seen as being essential to an individual. They are instead continually being manipulated by others, for instance by the media. Goals don't have a kind of unchanging 'core', but they take shape in the span of one's life, influenced fundamentally by others and the surrounding culture. Secondly,

people are not free to act in a way that is fully autonomous. Action too is dependent upon the opportunities and limitations that are offered within a cultural context and these are in part internalized by every individual and have become a part of them. In a context of complete freedom, if we can even imagine such a thing, we would not in fact be able to start a thing (Smet, 2017; Yuthas, Dillard & Rogers, 2004).

There is currently increasing criticism regarding this individualist (or voluntaristic) viewpoint and approach and the limited space or scope that many actually have in determining their own fate is now being emphasized in the literature (Sultana, 2014; Reid, 2016; Leach, 2017). The discourse that is developing in opposition to this individualist approach is the deterministic viewpoint that people are either merely pawns, or at the very least completely dependent on the psychosocial and cultural-economic powers that be in societal and organizational contexts. In this field of tension between the assumption of being wholly 'in control' and/or seeing one's self as a victim of outside forces, we suggest that people might be seen as *players* in a playing field.

Both the voluntaristic and the deterministic view make it difficult to conceptualize the reality that most people have a limited scope of action while at the same time they need to become self-reliant. Society has in fact become a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) in which only those with enough social, cultural and economic capital can survive of their own volition. And those who notice that they are not getting the opportunities to thrive, have the tendency to explain this as pressure or caused from outside, by the 'elite' or because of 'immigrants' or other minorities who are blamed for taking up the space and opportunities that one is entitled to. On the other hand the fear of freedom to act (Fromm, 1960) and the fear of the complexity of life in today's society have resulted in people limiting their own scope to act in order to avoid the perceived pressures (Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Arndt, 2012). For instance, by prescribing rules and protocols in the context of societal practices, one attempts to reduce the chances of 'error'. Or in the individual context, one reduces one's perspective to a so-called manageable whole as envisioned in dominant scripts (e.g. the perfect citizen, the good student) or even going as far as cultivating perspectives that lead to radicalization. Such a negation of the

complexity does not only apply to the world outside one's self, but also to the complexity and motives for action and ideas within one's self. In a sense this is a form of agency that invalidates itself (Landau et al., 2004).

Invalidated agency: an example

It is exactly this that we are seeing in careers education in the Netherlands where agency has been narrowed down to four career competencies (motive reflection, reflection on qualities, career direction and networking), which are seen as unrelated learnings (and as a regular part of the curriculum) and are thus presented as separate lessons. In addition, politicians argue that 'career education', in line with the rest of the curriculum, should be defined and differentiated through distinct measurable learning outcomes. If politicians get their way, students will have to show that they can reflect at various levels (beginner, intermediate, expert) about their motives, qualities and career plans. Precisely defined and differentiated outcomes are even seen as the official mark of quality. This development goes hand in hand with the instrumentalisation of career guidance in the form of personal development plans, portfolios and reflection formats (Winters, 20012; Winters et al., 2012).

Boud and Walker (1998, p. 195) show what this means for reflection in the classroom.
1. Reflection follows a recipe where learning activities take students through a sequence of steps of reflection and require them to reflect on demand.
2. Reflection without learning is always possible. Reflective activities are not guaranteed to lead to learning and learning activities are not guaranteed to lead to reflection. Reflective activities may be inappropriate or badly used.
3. The belief that reflection can be easily contained by the teacher and kept within his/her comfort zone is identified as another problem. Reflection may lead to the serious challenging of both the experience of the student, the concepts the teachers uses and the context.

4. The mismatch between reflection and assessment. This is acutely problematic in a curriculum where students are required to demonstrate evidence of capacity for reflection. Typically in education the expectation of assessment is that students are assessed for what they know rather than what they do not know and expecting students to publicly reflect on their uncertainties in a situation where they will be assessed requires them to make a major cultural shift.

4. Intellectualizing reflection: because emotions and feelings in the educational context are often ignored, it is normal for reflection to be viewed as a purely intellectual exercise – simply an act of rigourous thinking. However, emotions are central to all learning.

5. Inappropriate disclosure is identified as another problem which can occur between staff and student . Students may disclose material which the staff does not know how to deal with.

6. Non-critically accepting of experiences: felt experiences often give important but not unambiguous information. What we feel is always influenced by our assumptions and formal or informal theories in practice. Experiences can thus be interpreted in different ways. Experiences cannot be seen in isolation from knowledge and must be interpreted as an experience in context that is certainly not yet complete.

7. Insufficient expertise by teachers in both experience and behavior: when students begin to speak about traumatic experiences, teachers sometimes have the tendency – as they don't wish to abandon their students – to carry on where they could better refer a student to seek specialized help (e.g. psychological counseling). Students are not helped by well-intentioned non-professional help in order to deal with traumatic experiences. Reflection can too easily turn to rumination (see also Lengelle, Luken, & Meijers, 2016).

8. Excessive use of power by the teacher: the use of reflection can lead to teachers having influence over students. "Worryingly, for a minority of staff this may be part of their attraction. (…) A degree of mature awareness beyond that possessed by many teachers may be needed if reflective processes are to be used ethically" (Boud & Walker (1998, p. 195).

Agency and Imagination

Human life and action, even seen as part of an objective, 'natural' reality, takes place in inter-subjectively, culturally and historically constructed and developed 'virtual worlds', 'figured worlds' (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Obviously human worlds are influenced by the natural world and vice versa. That is exactly what differentiates people from animals (Harari, 2015). Everything we know has already had meaning attributed to it. That is the primary reasons why people have so much to learn from birth onwards. And what they learn often becomes 'second nature': virtual worlds are experienced as real as natural worlds; no difference is felt between them within a person's experience (Baudrillard, 1992). That said, people are not only bound by existing 'figurations'. They also interpret the world in their own way and those interpretations when confronted with other people's perspectives can be revised. Moreover, the characteristics of those cultural worlds are not stable. They change continually because different worlds are interacting, and they can be deliberately altered, though perhaps painstakingly because others and one's own experience of identity resist, causing unknown side effects. In other words, there is some room to play regarding our perceptions of reality. It is not surprising then that Wittgenstein (1977) spoke of 'language games', though it should be said that the constitution of 'figured worlds' is not only a matter of language (Holland c.s., 1998).

Agency as the possibility of creating room to act or expanding one's scope of action has to do with two dimensions: on the one hand with limitations others (i.e. people and institutions) set, or the space they allow, and on the other hand the room that a person allows him/herself to see or has the courage to use. Agency is a paradox: "We have it and we do not have it. Some of us have it more than others, but no one has it absolutely or lacks it absolutely" (Joseph, 2006, p.238). But even this formulation by Joseph can be rather misleading. Agency is not something that you can 'have', it is not a person's inherent ability, but it emerges time and time again in the exchange between a person and in given situations: it is an emergent

phenomenon.

Emergence itself is a term borrowed from dynamic systems theory (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Homan, 2008). It points to the fact that empirical observations such as colour, form and states of aggregation, such as fluid or solid, aren't inherent characteristics of a substance but rather they are (changing) states. They are qualities that show up, that come to be, and they do so in the context of other forces acting upon particular substances. By speaking of 'emergence' as central to agency, we are creating a perspective where phenomena relating to 'agency' are in a *space between,* playing field where different forces ("adaptive and accommodating") work on each other.

A consequence of understanding agency as an emergent phenomenon is that it is not possible to permanently acquire 'agency', nor can one speak of someone consistently 'having' more or less agency. However, it is possible to explore under which circumstances and in which situations a person is more likely to have agency emerge. In this article, we will only analyze one of those aspects: the possibility and skill that a person has to imagine a space for meaningful action that is not present in the current situation, or that seems to not be present. We speak of this skill as "imaginative power".

Which scope or space for action one sees for themselves, is not in the first place determined by objective characteristics of the situation, but it pertains to the perception of the situation – that is, the way in which a person imagines the space for meaningful action within the situation (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). This implies that in many cases the ability to move towards meaningful action can be enlarged by (potentially with the help of others) imagining the situation differently, and then asking whether that which has been imagined differently can also be realized. What is needed for this to come about is creativity and knowledge of the situation (Law, 2017). The ability to apply this 'informed creativity' is what we deem to be imagination. It refers to installing a space between (i.e. an interspace), imagining the realm or reality of the 'what if'' (Winnicott, 2005). An interspace we see as a playing field (De Ronde, 2015), a space where new stories can take shape about existing experiences and where new experiences can take shape through new stories. It is in

that space that people can play with 'reality' and try on different possibilities and alternate scripts and learn how to give direction to life on a playing field of diverse and interdependent cultural and natural forces and relationships.

In the same spirit, Zittoun & Gillespie describe imagination as follows:

"Imagination, we propose, is the process of creating experiences that escape the immediate setting, which allow exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities. Imagination feeds on a wide range of experiences people have of, or through the cultural world, through diverse senses, now combined, organized and integrated in new forms. […] Imagination, we maintain, is a social and cultural process, because, although it is always individuals who imagine, the process of imagination is made possible by social and cultural artefacts, it can be socially allowed or constrained, and because the consequences of imagination can be significant changes in the social world." (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, as cited in Zittoun, 2017, p. 144).

Philosophical background: human as player

The starting point for the idea of the human who plays (i.e. player) or 'homo ludens' has been explored and explained as a cultural reality by linguist and historian Johan Huizinga (1938/2008). He saw imagination as a form of play, that takes place both in the arising of a religious cult (as 'holy game') and also in the form of myths and theatre (the tragedy and the comedy): "From the act of a mythical theme gradually evolves a presentation, in dialogue and in mimetic action, of a series of happenings – the presentation of a story" (Huizinga, 2008, p. 175, our translation). Human as player is also at the foundation of the existential call to 'shape one's life in the form of artwork', as an individual, but also supported by helpers. And with that, the imagination and the mythical become a guiding principle and a fundamental way in which to view reality (Campbell, Cousineau & Brown, 1990; Lévi-Strauss, 1985).

This philosophical perspective on the art of living seems to do justice to the fact that from the cradle to the grave we are subject to a variety of forces in a context where we must play diverse roles. Existential philosophy and psychology point out the importance of freedom as a form of moral courage to fulfill our role within diverse groups and contexts in an authentic way – this should be understood as a call to be the author of one's own life. We can fulfill our roles as a puppet or rather as a player or adventurer (Campbell, Cousineau & Brown, 1990). The philosophy on the art of living calls people to mastery (classical art of living) and authenticity (contemporary art of living) by acknowledging the fear of freedom (Fromm, 1960) and of the existential emptiness (Landau et al., 2004).

But terms such as 'play' (or game) have the same type of double charge as the dilemma between authenticity and determinism. In order to reduce the complexity of life and the anxiety that this causes, people can decide to let their roles be determined by a dominant discourse. In this way, many learn to behave as exemplary actors – within a script as citizen, official or family member – and thereby miss the opportunity to co-create a (more) fitting script based on the emotionally processed "boundary experiences" they experience (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Many organizations tend to force professionals, through the use of ICT- and management systems, into a mode characterized by obedience to rules and protocols. Here too we see an interspace, between the unbearable freedom of recurrently finding one's own role and on the other hand giving up one's power and becoming a pawn. Foucault's (2005) incomplete project of the art of living in late modernity can be understood as the challenge of becoming a self between abrasive and existing frames of reference and prevailing scripts (Brohm & Muijen, 2010 a,b,c), with a chance of new scripts.

Agency as a game (or play)

How might we understand the current question about self-reliance and self-direction from a philosophical perspective on becoming the self? Becoming the self as a development towards maturity and citizenship demands and contributes to a form of a self-organizing capacity in the sense of an *emergent* process, a

characteristic that shows up in the exchange with forces in a context. This perspective has been translated to varying contexts, for instance applied to organizational change (Homan, 2008) in which changes are seen as coming from (emerging) fields of tension between spontaneous and planned change, between top-down and single-voice (mono-vocal) stories and bottom up, multi-voiced (poly-vocal) initiated movements.

We therefore want to understand the question about self-direction within a constructive tension, as a learning process and not a product, by imagining it as a type of art of living: the interaction between self-direction and contextual forces. This is about a dialogical learning process: we explore and expand the symbolic, affective and societal space as an interaction between internal and external dialogues where imagination plays a tangible role.

Our starting point is a hypothesis that we want to explore further: instead of self-direction as guiding one's 'autonomous' self or of being 'determined' by outside forces, we assume that imagination – as the power to reimagine the 'status quo' – is crucial for the emergence of a dialogical and participative learning process. In the context of this emergent process, this ability to navigate comes about through the creation of (play)space within a dominant discourse and the social forces that exist (e.g. organizational, economic and cultural). This play-room (i.e. wiggle room) refers to the creation of a play space/playing field by engaging in play in diverse contexts: as a creative act, as adventure, by seeing one's self as a central node in networks in an open system and by being able to constantly reposition one's self in relation to others, to the larger whole and to one's self. By choosing interdependent relationships within the interaction of poles, instead of one of the aspects (either the pole 'autonomous agency' or its opposite 'determining structures') as our starting point, we bring a cluster of concepts into position: becoming a self as a process of emergence, as a social play in cultural and natural playing fields, by means of experiential learning and imagination, dialogue and multi-voicedness. These things, precisely in their interplay, point to a constructive tension between the poles. Just as an actor acts according to a script and a pawn follows the steps in the protocol, a player exists by the mere fact of the act of playing the 'game' and embarking on the

journey as an adventurer; in reverse the game only exists by proxy of the fact the players are there. In other words: not the conscious will of the subjects, nor the objective structures (formalized rules for instance) are primary, but the interaction in a field of play (i.e. possibility) is at the crux. Primary is a playing field in which processes of individualization, participation, community building happen alongside each other and contribute in an organic way to the broadening and deepening space for interaction, both literally and symbolically. By understanding agency as characteristic of playing rather than something we 'possess' as individuals we give primacy to the space between players who interact in a 'play room' (i.e. wiggle room). Play as an ongoing participatory process of (re) interpretation of what is at stake while playing. Therefore rather than fixed playing rules we focus on constant change and reconfiguring of positions that re-shape the play and the players, the goal of playing and rules emerging, in resonance with forces in the context. On the playing field there is no 'is' but 'becoming'; no winning or losing in an absolute sense but as part and parcel of the play that unites both teammates and adversaries.

The shift that we suggest from the dichotomy between voluntarism and determinism towards a "deconstructive" approach places and conceptualizes agency as an ongoing, contextually-based process of becoming the self. There 'is' no predetermined 'self' but there are multiple identities emerging in a space between un-decide-able aspects and polarities, contingencies and coincidences. Therefore we reframe agency outside the assumed dichotomy between voluntarism and determinism as the art of handling paradoxes in life – it is about how to play with tension *between* poles (instead of the contradictions). This shift has an interesting implication. It means that the question of goal and rules, meaning and purpose of the game of 'self-direction' cannot be defined outside of the participatory emergent language game in a (scientific, ideological or religious) meta-language game (Muijen, 2001). After all, then we would take literally the metaphoric (Derrida, 1972) on which the scientific language game, the ideologic or religious script are based. That would suggest we have answers to unanswerable metaphysical questions such as "Is a human being by nature egoistic or altruistic?"; "Is the script of the game determined more by 'nature' or more by 'nurture'?"; "With which goal and by whom

is the script written? And what for?"; "Who is the director?" etc. Instead of a move towards a meta-language game by cutting through or settling philosophical dilemmas about these questions, we assume an endless process of meaning-making about these questions. In this way we see imagination as the positive breeding ground for meaning-making. In this sense it is primary and opposed to conceptual frameworks that bring closure. Often one places imagination at the start of a knowledge-acquisition process in the context of discovery, assuming that fruits of the imagination like metaphors will eventually be redundant in the context of arriving at a destination. However, from the proposed perspective, imagination is not (only) the start but especially the principle of knowledge construction. Nietzsche (1984) and Derrida (1972) put the rhetorical power of metaphors above the logical truths of concepts in the sense that, "the tone of the music" (Nietzsche, 1084, p. 386) seduces people to believe in the truth of words.

Metaphors as bridge

Imagination seen as the ability to envision possibilities about how things could be different than they are also offers a playing field to create living metaphors (Ricoeur, 1978). We suspect that metaphors play a crucial role in the development of agency because they form the bridge between intuitions, emotions and new insights. They can fulfill this role because they (1) resonate with the emotional brain (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), (2) are specific and clear enough to be articulated (Maasen & Weingart, 1995), and are at the same time (3) vague enough to leave room for the creation of new meanings and interpretation (Jaszczolt, 2002). Metaphors make communication and interaction between I-positions possible (and with that put words to lived experience in an internal dialogue), but they also make possible the external dialogue, by creating a 'collective understanding of the way in which images, concepts and emotions are being communicated-and facilitate new ways to give meaning to experience (Barner, 2011). They make the transfer of coherent bits of sensory, cognitive, emotional and experienced information possible using a known 'vehicle' to describe what is as yet unknown (Hofstadter, 2001). According to Ortoni (1975) metaphors "express in a succinct manner that which is implicit but

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is unable to be expressed in discrete, literal language." (p. 50). The metaphor offers for what is vague – the often half-conscious images, thoughts and feelings that together form I-positions – a clear label and in this way functions as a 'messenger of meaning' (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

Imagination and play

In order to grasp the central role of the imaginary, playful interspace, we assume imagination to be an emergent, emancipatory power, that questions established frameworks by breaking open dominant discourses (both as it pertains to what is happening externally but also with regards to what has been internalized) and imagining things differently. In this sense the deconstructive, participative approach that we stand for is also a critical emancipatory one, which makes the human-as-player conscious of his/her role as co-creator in the interaction with others and in response to contextual factors. The continuous dynamic between the disruption and reestablishment of a temporary equilibrium in the interplay of forces leads to the emergence of a particular play: the nature and the rules and shape of the game vary between more structured or more open, more rule-governed or more playful, more competitive or more cooperative (Sutton-Smith, 2009). This depends on certain game goals (e.g. making profit; societal creation of added value) in which values are at stake; such as efficiency and sustainability (Nussbaum, 2010). People can, in a creative way ("informed creativity"), shape their role and sphere of influence, to the degree to which one is more conscious and gets proactive as one of the players in a particular form of play in diverse social contexts.

Below we provide an example in order to concretize the philosophical perspective on the central role of the imagination in shaping career counseling as an art of creating a 'playing field'. In this way agency is fostered as people are enticed to become players and to create room to play (i.e. wiggle room). Congruent with the proposed approach, imagination is envisioned as an in-between power and interspace instead of something people 'have' or 'have-not'. We see imagination both as a 'subjective' (rhetorical) power of people finding striking images as well as

an 'objective' power that assumes (articulated) forms of imagination, like metaphors and metonyms, analogies and models, myths and symbols. Imagination as an in-between force can give a shattering, innovating twist to the 'turn of events'. Political utopias (Achterhuis, 2006) for instance are able to do this – take the example of the utopia in *The New Atlantis* where Francis Bacon envisions a society ordered by technical renewal, which in part contributed to the establishment of the Royal Society in 1662 and which, in a sense, we see realized around us in myriad ways (Bacon, 1626/1989). We maintain that in order for this to happen, the imagination must be dialogically stimulated to create interspace in which we might experience relationships in an existential way as interdependency between each other and ourselves, as well as in relation to a time-space continuum. In the sense of Heraclitus' quote "We both step and do not step into the same river twice. We are and are not", the existential void sets the stage for immersing oneself in the field of experience and then stepping out again. Within the broader scope of the art of living we envision the art of sense-making: of giving meaning to experience by way of rhetoric and reflection, dialogue and forms of play and by gleaning power to take actions from this (Troop, 2017).

Imaginative learning

One method that is being employed to facilitate the emergence of agency – aimed at enlarging both symbolic and actual space to act is through engagement with imagination - is "career writing" (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014). In this form of creative, reflective and expressive writing, students write personal stories, poetry, dialogues, and fiction and explore life themes and struggles. They are also stimulated to write in order to examine assumptions they have and to try on or imagine new ones. They are stimulated to play and not focus on answers but on an evolving narrative of self. Career writing is done in a group setting and although students each write and may keep what they have written private, this is also a collaborative process as fresh texts are read aloud to each other, some partner work is done, and participants are invited to respond to another's work. Tears regularly flow in the process of sharing

and there is often laughter in the learning space as well – in other words, where emotions are often ignored in educational settings, here they are welcomed and made useful.

As well, the course does not begin with the theory or concepts of why writing creatively and expressively is aimed at playfully changing entrenched identity narratives that have often trapped us in dualities of "autonomy" or "determinism" as discussed above. Though students are often eager to learn what conceptual frameworks are behind the learning they are doing once they have an experiential base from which to view their writing work. A structured journal-writing method using instrumental baroque music called proprioceptive writing (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002) is the first exercise used, as it focuses both on listening to what wants to be written and noticing what one write's while asking the proprioceptive question, which is, "What do I mean by that…" (e.g. What do I mean by frustrated? I mean exhausted actually. What do I mean by exhausted? I mean that I don't want to do it anymore.) This exercise is the first encounter with one's internal dialogue and while it gives freedom to express random thoughts, concerns, and whatever emerges, it also has a reflective component in the instruction to notice what is written and to inquire about what the writer actually means. This exercise sets the stage – or rather to use a fitting metaphor, it sets the initial parameters for the game or play. It does this in a way that is both structured (just as a field where we might play has painted lines and particular game rules) but also allows room to 'run' and try things out. This metaphorical playing field also allows room for emotions to be made fruitful because the proprioceptive question stimulates the unpacking of interpretive comments and results in more direct or concrete language.

Metaphors of the self

Subsequent exercises become more structured, while always leaving room for imaginative expression. For instance in one exercise, students explore negative labels that they have heard said about them or they fear are may be true. Instead of discussing directly a trait like, "pushy" or "drama queen" or "anti-social" they are

asked to make this trait into a character with clothes, a particular way of looking, idiosyncratic habits, perhaps even a job.

Reading these aloud is fun and in that sharing, some of the 'stress' of the label already disappears. It is indeed much less scary when this 'being' is brought fully on to the stage, than when we fear it is behind a kind of black curtain within our psyches, ready to jump out at some inopportune moment. One of the greatest benefits of this imaginative exercise is for those writing to see that this 'negative trait' is usually serving in some way, is most often innocent in its intent, but misguided by unexamined beliefs. As well, this character is but ONE aspect of the self. By witnessing such an "inner character" (or "I-position"; see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) the clenching around the label lifts – the creative space to play (e.g. to literally play a kind of psychological 'dress up' game) is liberating but also provides meaningful insights. This creative work has practical repercussions for agency – indeed to imagine fully such a "character" can mean it can become part of the action in an act of repositioning (e.g. pushy becomes assertive and self-directed) or can, for instance, be kept at bay (e.g. I understand I can be pushy, so listening first can be a useful strategy).

The (optional) reading aloud of other work is a part of the dynamic of social play (Troop, 2017). Like children, a course participant is saying, "Look, I'm going to put on this play dress now and act out a part of me and I want you to see me so I can better see myself too – and because this is just make belief, I will not be judged or condemned to the role permanently." After a variety of exercises where childhood themes are explored and students have worked playfully around issues that are often a source of pain or struggle, the course provides the theory of identity development through narrative (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). This is the level at which the dialogue becomes a kind of meta-logue and the players take to the stands and become part of the audience: they get to witness what they are enacting. The delight and revelation this witnessing often entails is moving to watch and frequently expresses itself in phrases like, "I did not know I was so scared" or "The story I have been telling myself all my life is that *you shouldn't speak up* – this is a huge deterrent in my work and how I want to develop at work."

The playing field as a 'safe holding space'

It is important to note that the work of career writing isn't primarily about yielding and expressing insights, but it is about the imaginative space to "try things on for size" and to witness and be a witness to the other vulnerable players too. The others in the field become a point of reference as well as support. Participants frequently report "feeling very supported and heard" and noting that they are not alone in their struggles as others are dealing with their own life themes and fears. The safe space to play (i.e. Winnicott referred to this as a 'holding environment') is an essential element to the success of the course (Lengelle & Ashby, 2017) as is the facilitated process that stimulates the internal and external dialogue.

In line with the argument in this article: that it is not about having or not having 'agency' but rather creating the space and the play space so that agency is more likely to emerge. Perhaps fittingly then, career writing has no specific goal, though it often results in the enlarged imagination through play that results in a sense of great actual and symbolic space to act and choose. Although a 'second story' can be a product of some kind (e.g. a Haiku, a script) the outcome is most likely to be a sense of experiencing one's self and one's life differently – as more spacious, more full of possibility, with at the same time a more clear idea about one's individual direction and what others might contribute. These 'outcomes' can be described as things like: the old story not having the same pull or salience or an acceptance of circumstance as feeling peaceful but not without possibility for new developments. Indeed, there is freedom to take a step previously not imagined or dared – there is more room to play and learning is seen as a process and not as merely a desired destination.

Conclusion

Living and working in liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) is not easy. The most common reactions to this context can be described as a loss of the ludic elements in culture. Stricter regulations, a fear of the possible influence of 'strange' cultures, and

the dominance of the neoliberal model of humans as economic egoists, all contribute to this loss, which results in there being fewer opportunities for creative action. This is also true of formal education, which is especially important as much of the preparation for life and work, including career counselling, takes place in school. Admittedly, formal education has never been very strong at fostering creativity and the development of imagination, as its dominant rationalist paradigm separated these from the 'real' learning of knowledge and skills. The emphasis present-day authorities place on test results and narrowly defined '21th century skills', however, threatens even those initiatives that try to foster imagination in students and to integrate these with more classic 'content' orientation.

In an analysis of a number of industry disasters, Langemeyer (2015) has concluded that the consequences would have been less destructive if the operators involved had relied less on predefined protocols, had had more insight into the processes they were monitoring, and had been able to use this insight imaginatively and cooperatively. Knowledge and imagination are not separate things; they need to be integrated. And this has to be learned – preferably within an educational context. This implies that the present emphasis on knowledge and skills in education is precisely the wrong response to a world in which processes and work are increasingly complex. What we need is not less imagination, but more, coupled with knowledge that does not just reside in memory but becomes part of one's outlook on the world in which one lives. This integration of the ludic element is a big challenge not just for education, but for our society as a whole.

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