

Perspectives in HRD: Narrative Self-rescue: A Poetic Response to a Precarious Labour Crisis

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Abstract

This article provides a narrative response to a precariousness labour situation. The question it attempts to answer is: how does one cope with the precariousness and injustices of contemporary employment without becoming pessimistic or hopeless? The piece, based on the author's personal experience, argues that we can tell and write our career narrative and with that influence our response.

Keywords

Precarious, employment, narrative, career, creative writing

In the last several years, I was in the process of enhancing my employability in academia by completing a dissertation. Although I was initially invited to graduate teaching 12 years ago based on my work experience and qualifications as a professional writer, a PhD became a natural progression of that work and research interests and was encouraged by my university.

That said, the hope of such a qualification was not what kept me employed when I was told in December several years ago that after almost a decade of part-time (max. one-year) contracts, my work with the university would simply come to an end when the next contract-period was finished. In August, I, a mother of two who is financially responsible for our household, would be out of work. Fat had to be trimmed and it turned out that I was part of the rind. Despite sufficient enrolment in our program and in my courses, the university aimed to cut a portion of their contingent and some of their permanent staff to save money. This is neither an unfamiliar tale in higher education currently nor did this applying to me come as a complete surprise.

At a colleague's Christmas party, someone informed me and others that the university was looking to let everyone in the graduate program go who did not have a PhD. A colleague tried to downplay this unofficial report, but I took it as a warning. My father had told me that the French writer Guy de Maupassant had, in one of his short stories, said that a criminal always warns you once before he steals from you so that his conscience is clear in advance. I knew the value of life lessons learned from fiction and the colleague who had told me lounged in a chair afterwards looking visibly relieved. I had a dream shortly afterwards that two men were stealing my purse out of the car and that when I approached to find out what they were doing, they handed it

back to me, conveying with feigned innocence that they were merely holding it for me until I returned.

On the day I went to meet with my superior, I sensed our appointment was not going to be an ordinary conversation about workload and performance. 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.

At that point in my career, I had not started my dissertation, though I had several peer-reviewed articles to my name and had been considering the step. After my boss had told me the news, I asked him whether pursuing a doctorate would change the decision. He simply told me ‘no.’ To add insult to injury, the news came on the eve of me qualifying for a full year of research and study leave. I was reassured that the decision to not renew my contract had nothing to do with my work, which was of “superior quality.” I was simply ‘collateral damage’ and over 100 of my colleagues would be laid off the following year. The news presented to me would become proof of what I now know from reading so much about contemporary employment: one’s skills and record of good contributions are not enough to keep a job in the 21st century, even if it be a beloved vocation.

My boss and I sat side-by-side in the small conference room, overlooking the city and I took in the news, feeling that somehow this ending of my work didn’t fit; I wasn’t fully buying into the story of my fate as told to me by my employer. Not only did the math not add up (i.e., I was cheaper contingent labour in a program that needed instructors) but I also felt deeply about the value of my contribution. Some instinct kept me sitting there until my supervisor told me about a coincidental meeting he’d just had with one of the university’s executives. They happened to have stepped into the same elevator on the way up to this termination meeting and in that short ride to the twelfth floor, my boss was told that a case could be made for visual artists, musicians and writers working as professors in graduate programs without doctorates; there was precedent.

Indeed, this had been the argument for my employment when I began.

Truth be told, I was distraught, but not enough to stop listening. The idea that perhaps the door hadn’t completely closed went with me as I left the building. I walked to my car and noted that I was not despairing (though a hug might have been nice). I thought of the model of writing for healing that I use with my students; that crises trigger in us a tendency to feel victimized and create an unproductive ‘first story’ about situations and events in our lives. The challenge for us insecure and vulnerable humans, I had told them many times over the years, is to not let a story of woe, fear, and hopelessness set the tone for one’s life. I too could not let this be the final word.

Over the Christmas break, I sat down to write a book chapter about career counselling in the 21st century and a case for my employment. It was all strangely fitting. I had help in conversations from someone who had seen several cycles of recession and growth in the economy and at universities. He advised me to build an argument; “Why should the university keep you?” he asked me to get our dialogue going. I had already done the research on artists turned professors without PhDs, but that was but one reason. I explained that my work of encouraging students to explore their life stories wasn’t only about academic skills. It required emotional -

social intelligence, patience, and, quite frankly, love. He humorously replied that this was a good argument – after all, there were plenty in academia who lacked such qualities and it was obvious that courses in writing

for personal development required them. A third argument – one I wouldn't have dared make without my friend's prompting – was that despite not having a PhD, I was working at a PhD level and had the publications to prove it.

In early January, I forwarded this well-argued third-person narrative to my supervisor and our union representative. They passed it along. I also phoned a former boss who saw merit in my work early on and told him of my situation and asked him for advice. It turned out I was far from friendless at the university and word spread. By March, I was told not only that my contract would be extended, but that I would be able to take my sabbatical. I started on my PhD immediately.

The moral of this story is that it's true what they say: an MA and a pocket full of change is often just enough to get you a cup of coffee. But in our day and age, a PhD and a pocket full of change might only be enough to get you coffee, food stamps (Patton, 2012), and the official right to fill in the title "Dr" on government forms. This is not to say that we should stop encouraging the next generation to value education and credentials – on the contrary, our labour force needs to be more and more highly skilled. But what it does mean is that there are other qualities that need to be cultivated in order to survive and thrive in today's labour market.

Indeed, this career story beautifully confirms to what some of the most inspiring career experts have been telling us in the last decades about career learning: that safety and steadiness are not ensured by our employers (Arthur, Khapova & Wilderom, 2005; Hall, 2004); that our work and lives are subject to the chaotic laws of chance (Pryor & Bright, 2011) and that we need to cultivate a host of new career competencies (Kuijpers, Meijers & Gundy, 2011). We can also not assume we will be able to survive the ups and downs of life and work without help and we must learn to ask for it (Sher, 1994). A dialogue and learning environment is needed that lets us cultivate our awareness and agency (Kuijpers, Meijers & Gundy, 2011). In other words, our focus must shift from maintaining our employment to maintaining our employability (Savickas et al.,

2010). Even the collective actions we take to bring about reforms in our working conditions must be dialogues and narratives born from courageous conversations with ourselves and others.

A confession I have to make at the end of this tale is that parts of my story may not be true. I don't really know if my colleague was relieved to have told me that those without a PhD were on the chopping block or that I was being warned. I also may have fictionalized the order of particular events to comply with an inner desire for aesthetics or a yearning for congruence. And I simply don't know everything that went on behind the

scenes. Nor do I have to. My story doesn't actually have to be the truth to be and feel workable and help me set a course forward. Perhaps still being employed today is a result of happenstance, luck and goodwill. Maybe having had a few peer-reviewed publications tipped the scales. What I now know, is that years of work experience and being reliable and steady are not rewarded as they once were, even when we have kept up to date in our field and receive praise from those we serve. I have also learned that predictions can't be easily made about how things will turn out – some of those who set the policies that would have led to my job

loss are no longer with the university; a tenure-track professor was recently let go; I, the contingent worker, am still on the payroll. The truth can be like that – strange and like fiction. Based on my studies of others' narrative career guidance work, my own research, and the experiences I am relaying here, I now believe that successful careers are co-created as we turn our lived experiences into new narratives by way of courageous internal and external conversations (Whyte, 2001). Work now requires that we are able to face setbacks, curb our natural tendencies to cry victim, feel entitled, hope for rescue, or blame someone else or the economy for our employment 'fate' (Baker & Staught, 2003). We must learn individually and collectively how to tell a different tale about our working lives.

In my dissertation, I argue for an approach that fosters meaningful career conversations with ourselves and others in the form of creative, expressive, and reflective writing (Lengelle, 2014). I make a case for cocreating a liveable and workable alternative story or narrative through writing – for “actively mastering what we have passively suffered” (Savickas, 2011). I propose and show that creative, expressive, and reflective writing – what I call ‘career writing’ – can train us to become the inspired seeker, but also the fool, sage, and artist who see alternatives where others don't, and the mourner who helps us grieve and let go of our expectations.

Indeed the many voices of our dynamic landscape of selves (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), our internal witness, as well as helpful others, both living and long gone, are invited onto the stage of a life which we can (co-) author.

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