

Mapping the Self in the World: An Arts Based Narrative Curriculum for Career Resiliency

Carly Stasko

Abstract: *In this essay I describe a holistic and arts-based curriculum that I developed for a career path-finding program called the Dream Job Academy at the University of Toronto's Hart House in collaboration with the campus career center. The metaphor of navigating and mapping is pervasive in the discourse of career development as students are commonly given a "road map" informed by employment statistics as they are assisted in finding their chosen path through a series of formalized assessment tools. In contrast, our program was designed to help students self-assess and to develop life-long skills of self-reflection and meaning making in a form of self-cartography. With the experiential learning model (Kolb) as a framework, the goal of this course was to help students map out their own experiences and interests so as to develop connections and deepen insights about how to navigate their future career and life paths. Through a series of hands-on creative experiments this course provided participants opportunities to explore and play with the semio-narratological constellations of social signs that story their place in the world (McLaren, Danesi). Rather than providing students with a map, this course was designed to invite them into the messy and rewarding business of creating their own.*

Imagined Nations

If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come. This is the essence of magic, which does not create, but summons. (Kafka)

I call myself an Imagitator—one who agitates imagination. It was a dream job title I created for myself after much self-reflection. I had struggled to represent

Carly Stasko is a self-titled *Imagitator*—one who agitates imagination. She is also an artist, activist, educator, writer, producer, creative healer, culture jammer and mother. In 2014, Carly developed and facilitated the pilot project of the Dream Job Academy at the University of Toronto where she works as Program Coordinator at Hart House, a centre for experiential learning. As founder of the Youth Media Literacy Project she has led various workshops across North America on Media literacy, Globalization, and Creative Resistance. She is a former television producer with CBC Newsworld's live debate show "counterSpin." Her work as a culture jammer and Imagitator is featured in several documentaries.

my varied but connected personal and professional experiences in an authentic and original way. When existing narrative frameworks failed, I created new ones. As I began using this new name to describe my work and my passions I was soon hired as an Imagitator for a pilot project called the Midnight Media League—an arts based program for street involved youth to learn video making skills—and most importantly to learn how to tell their own authentic stories. In the decade that followed I continued to be employed as an Imagitator working with a broad range of populations including elementary school children, community activists, adult cancer patients, UNESCO Ambassadors, and in recent years, undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Toronto. I present my personal experiences in order to show how they have influenced my approach to creating a curriculum for career resiliency.

In dreaming up the name “Imagitator,” I created more than a name, I created a new path in my life—one that continues to be enriching and inspiring (59). Conventional job titles weren’t the best means to communicate the range of experiences and interests that contributed to my personal and professional identity. By mapping out my own experiences, passions and skills onto the position of the “Imagitator” I was able to connect with people, organizations and opportunities in meaningful and exciting ways. I had come up with an answer to the question “Who/What are you?” that didn’t (like so many Answers) end the conversation, but instead would invite more generative questions. The kinds of questions that could help me authentically share the stories that constructed my personal and professional self. Stories of travel, volunteering, innovation, struggle, achievement, self-publishing, culture jamming, community engagement, scholarship, activism, creativity, courage, healing and hope. My dream job title was a map that helped others better know who I was, but more importantly, gave them conversational pathways to explore if they wanted to find out more. Learning how to communicate about yourself in this way takes practice and experimentation. It can be daunting to know where to begin or how to communicate one’s unique complexities in ways that others can connect with. An interest in helping other’s learn how to do this kind of self-storying led me to the formation of the Dream Job Academy.

In 2014, in partnership with the University of Toronto Career Centre, I developed an arts and narrative based curriculum that was designed to help students map out their own experiences and interests with the goal of preparing them for meaningful, self-directed and adaptive careers following graduation. With a group of 20 undergraduate and graduate students from a broad range of academic backgrounds, we ran a series of bi-weekly workshops for 3 months. Each session featured a guest speaker and was shaped by a theme such as vision, passion, courage, play, resiliency and reflection.

In the early sessions of the DJA, students were guided through a series of activities to help them develop their own dream job titles. Through gratitude

journals, self-reflective storytelling and gathering feedback from their peers, each participant brainstormed different possible dream job titles for themselves. Each student shared a story with the group about a meaningful experience of contribution or service in the world, and their peers would mirror back to them what they heard with adjectives, insights, questions and encouragement. With this raw material, we started to craft different job titles and parse out their potential meanings. Then we used a hand-crank button machine to make custom buttons with the invented job titles emblazoned on them. The homework assignment for the next two weeks was to wear the buttons everywhere and to answer anyone's questions about them and to journal and reflect on the experience, refining one's answers as they went. By the end of the two weeks they'd all had a chance to polish and test out various personal narratives. These buttons worked like small maps. The activity gave people a way to engage with and begin to explore the personal terrain of the button wearer that otherwise may be unreachable through traditional social interactions. It took a lot of courage to wear their dreams on their chests like this and that too was an important practice.



Among our group of 19 participants we had a broad range of dream jobs generated with titles like Psycho-ecologist, Citizenship Wrangler, Social Mas-sagist, Mind-feeder, and Pathwayologist. Our “Makerbrarian” was a library studies student who was interested in empowering people creatively by connecting them with materials and tools of production. When she wore her button in

the weeks that followed it prompted countless conversations in which she was able to practice distilling her personal and professional narrative. She'd get to share stories about her work volunteering at a local seed library, gather insights regarding challenges she faced in her research projects, and connect with potential collaborators or allies regarding future projects she wanted to initiate. Often, students would discover connections between significant life experiences and interests that they hadn't been aware of, but through these conversations they were able to collaborate on a personal cartographical draft that evolved through dialogue and narrative playfulness.

Storying the Self

Humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives. Thus, the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world. (Connelly and Clandinin, 16)

The study of interacting narratives considers the storied nature of individual lives and the effect of such individual storied lives on each other when they interact (Beattie, *Constructing*; Beattie, Dobson, Thornton, and Hegge; Dobson). When a maker of meaning creates a narrative to represent the world of their experience they transform the experience in the telling. When we map out the world, we alter the terrain in the mapping. We are all born with a map of ourselves, our world and our future, that is given to us but we are not the storyteller or the cartographers of this inherited life. With chance, privilege and creative vitality we can reclaim the role of storyteller, map-maker, meaning-shaper and ultimately be the stewards of our own lived experiences and co-creators of our personal narratives. This is a powerful act, since "the strongest form of power may well be the ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world" (Gal, 78), and so it is important for teachers, students and for everyone to be actively and consciously engaged in the creation and recreation of such visions. I've come to believe that reclaiming the power and tools to tell our own stories (often defiantly piecing them together from fragments of popular culture, the arts and daily life), has the potential to be an act of social justice and cultural resistance. Recent work by narrative scholars expands the notion of interacting narratives to include the inter- and intrapersonal interaction of both lived and chosen narratives in an innovative manner that provides new models for the study of knowledge creation and re-creation. As Mary Beattie explains, it is "within interacting narratives where lives come together, influence each other, and become increasingly more responsive to each other [that] professional development and change can take place, and individuals can re-form themselves and their communities" ("The Making," 133).

Career Cartographies and Developing Career Resiliency

What is the task of the teacher, when the primary desired learning outcome is career resiliency? It is not to transmit knowledge or to deliver a pre-existing career map to the student, but rather to awaken within the student the skill of self-cartography. But what is the terrain? Is it the student or the workplace? I argue it is both—that area on a Venn diagram that would illustrate an overlap between the individual’s experiences, abilities and motivations and the needs of the world and communities they inhabit. For each person at each changing moment, that map is in flux and no one can hand it to us. But if we can teach students how to use their own personal narratives to experiment with and test different ways of charting that terrain—we have begun to support their own self-actualization and deepened self-knowledge. They are then more able to identify opportunities and to communicate what they have done and can offer in the world. There is not necessarily a final product to this process of self-reflection, but the process of trying to map it out will in turn reshape the terrain. By giving a name to the service we are suited to enact in the world, we may potentially summon its initiation. The mapping is a necessary interaction and a call to action.

Flow Thyself

In one of the DJA sessions, students mapped out their own life experiences and interests on a large piece of paper in order to create a vision board or mind-map. Students were given collage materials (magazines, scissors, glue, markers) and were coached to start out by intuitively gathering images and words that resonated with them. In the session prior to this activity the students were introduced to the concept of “flow”, a psychological state in which people experience deep enjoyment, creativity and total involvement with life (Csikszentmihalyi, *Discovery* and *Optimal*). This “optimal state of inner experience is one in which there is *order in consciousness*” and “attention is invested in realistic goals” such that “skills match the opportunities for action” (*Optimal*, 6). I asked our participants to think back to times in their lives when they had experienced states of flow. What were they doing and why? Where were they? What was their source of motivation? By journaling about these experiences they had built up a broader narrative of their own personal source of inspiration and motivation. In our efforts to help them find meaningful work and lives, we wanted participants to be more self-aware of what conditions lead them to their most inspired and productive work/play experiences.

Continuing with the metaphor of flow and the semiotic practice of mapping, I created a template that depicted an abstract representation of a series of tributaries feeding into a larger river. Each small tributary represented different experiences, interests, and skills that had shaped the individual and that ultimately

could feed into the service that they were best suited for in the world. By gluing and writing or drawing images and words onto the tributaries, participants could map out and begin to answer the question “What ways can I draw on my experiences and interests to provide meaningful and necessary service in the world?” It can be quite daunting to answer such a broad and significant question. But the goal of this exercise was to start small with the tributaries and flow with their momentum into the larger more difficult questions that could be explored, thereby clarifying a broader vision of the self in the world. Jeff Warren, a writer, meditator and founder of The Consciousness Explorers Club in Toronto was our guest speaker that week and he was able to circulate through the room while students worked and he engaged in impromptu conversations with them about their collages and the ideas they were generating. The use of collage is important because it creates a liminal semiological space where a fluid play of meanings and connections are allowed to occur. The decisions to choose particular images and words are more liberated from the internal editing and censorship that can inhibit self-expression. Students were assured that they didn’t need to be professional artists to make these collages, they just needed to trust their instincts in choosing and arranging various signs and symbols to use in their maps. Unlike conventional maps, these maps were experimental, incomplete, and shifting in their subjectivity. They illuminated the most through the process of their creation rather than in the form of their final product.



engage creatively with flux while maintaining a sense of wonder and the capacity to tap into their own states of flow.

Self-Cartography, A Pedagogy of Play

Self-cartography is a playful process that provokes insight and learning but in a fluid and liminal way. It takes courage to surrender to a creative process with unpredictable outcomes. For the DJA to succeed we needed to create an atmosphere conducive to such courageous vulnerability. The emphasis of self-cartography is on the pedagogy of the process rather than the final products. Conventional cartography relies on accuracy and permanency in order to provide mastery over the terrain they represent. Self-cartography is experimental and librating and emphasizes relationships rather than firm realities. Participants in the Dream Job Academy are young students with unknown futures before them. The notion of a map of their future could be appealing at times - especially in the face of economic and employment precarity. However, given the uncertainty ahead, it is more important to have the ability to continually chart a course in a changing world than to possess a stagnant and soon-to-be obsolescent map. Elizabeth Ellsworth calls for a 'pedagogy of the unknowable' and a story of self and world that is always partial - "partial in the sense that the meaning of an individual's or group's experience is never [completely] self-evident or complete" (318). Similarly, Doll argues that

in order for the students and teachers to transform and be transformed, a curriculum needs to have the 'right amount' of indeterminacy, anomaly, inefficiency, chaos, disequilibrium, dissipation, lived experience... Just what is the 'right amount' for the curriculum to be provocatively generative without losing form or shape cannot be laid out in advance. This issue is one to be continually negotiated among students, teachers, and texts..." 176.

The desire for tangible outcomes and measurable goals often freezes, interrupts, and/or devalues the very processes that stand at the core of learning. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget argued that play provides an excellent vehicle for learning because children learn more effectively through activity rather than instruction. While the practical function of a map is to avoid being lost, the process of creating almost requires it. In his book *On Creativity*, physicist David Bohm devotes considerable attention to the importance of confusion in the creative process, suggesting that "we need to give patient, sustained attention to the activity of confusion, rather than attempting to promote creativity directly" (x). As such, while the outcomes of arts and narrative based practices cannot be predicted with precision, it is precisely the ways in which they allow us to relate to the unknown, to learn from being lost or confused and to experiment with making meaning, that their pedagogical power resides. This is reflected in the feedback from students provided during outgoing assessment of the program:

“It gave me a general vision of following my intrinsic interests, but not really any more specific path”

“I’m more comfortable with the idea of not knowing what I am going to do.”

“It’s okay not to know where you are going, life is not a linear process.” (DJA participants, assessment data)

Self-cartography requires vision. Teaching for vision requires room for experiences of uncertainty, play, wonder and reflection. The cartographer needs to see what others could not see, to be present to novelty in a way that refrains from certainty and categorization, and to experience life with an emerging epistemology rooted in discovery and the creative imagination.

Conclusion

“When I signed up for DJA, I was feeling very overwhelmed and generally stressed out about my career prospects and reluctant to take jobs that weren’t my “ideal” and more or less adrift. I was hoping DJA would give me some solid career advice and ended up with a lot more holistic insight into myself than I was expecting” –DJA participant, assessment data

The curriculum of the Dream Job Academy at the University of Toronto, hinges upon the process of experimenting with different ways of engaging with and making connections between relevant life experiences so as to create narratives that can be shared with potential employers and which can be used as a guide during the process of career exploration.

I’ve described the Self Naming Brave Button Exercise and the Tributaries and Rivers Flowing Narrative exercise in detail, but there were many others that relied on this similar model of using arts based narrative activities to reflect on experiences and identify connections between them. For example, artist, author and writing coach Danette Relic from the Radical Creative Sanctuary came as a guest speaker on Valentine’s Day to speak to students about what kind of relationships they want to foster personally and professionally. Students wrote Valentines cards to their sources of inspiration, wrote love letters to their favourite work experiences and drafted their own wedding vows to themselves. All of these exercises got them thinking about how they relate to the world, to work and to themselves.



Prior to graduation, students dread being asked these questions. They are lectured to about the "real world" as though it were a magical land they haven't already been inhabiting. The creative self-cartographical experiments that made up the curriculum of the DJA allowed students to courageously and authentically begin answering these timeless questions in their own intrinsic ways. It gave them a safe place to practice self-narration, to seek out patterns in the stories of their most rewarding and motivated work experiences, to challenging the narratives they've been handed about themselves and to set a course for future exploration. It didn't give them the answers or hand them a map. It helped them learn to chart their course and to tune into their own inner directions. The goal of this

course wasn't to prevent students from being lost—which is both inevitable and necessary— but rather to help them refine their own way-finding tools and to know themselves better as explorers.

Open you eyes and demystify
 the worlds that reside in your dreams where they hide.
 Never mind if they're silly, bizarre or insane ,
 for you'll find that you're willing to explore just the same.
 But remember my friend; the goal is to flow –
 not to measure, to name, to own or to know.
 So question your fears, leave them all at the door.
 Embrace the unknown and prepare to explore... (Stasko)



Acknowledgements

I'd like to express my gratitude to Mary Giamos, Melanie Coleman, and Heather Kelly at the U of T career centre as well as Jenifer Newcombe and Day Milman at Hart House who collaborated in the inspiration and execution of the Dream Job Academy's pilot program in 2014 as well as our various guest speakers and of course the participants who approached the process with courage and creativity while creating a powerful sense of community with each other.

Works Cited

- Beattie, Mary. *Constructing Professional Knowledge in Teaching: A Narrative of Change and Development*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1995. Print.
- Beattie, Mary. "The Making of a Music. The Construction and Reconstruction of a Teacher's Personal Practical Knowledge During Inquiry." *Curriculum Inquiry*, 25.2 (1995): 133-150. Print.
- Beattie, Mary, Darrell Dobson, Gail Thornton, and Laura Hegge. "Interacting Narratives: Creating and Recreating the Self." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 26.2 (2007): 119-141. Print.
- Bohm, David. *On Creativity*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Cobb, Edith. *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977. Print.
- Connelly, F. Michael and D. Jean Clandinin. "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry." *Educational Researcher* 19.4 (1990): 2-14. Print.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. New York: HarperCollins, 1996. Print.
- . *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008. Print.

- Danesi, Marcel. "The Forms of Representations and Communication." *Wish I Were: Felt Pathways of the Self*. Linda Rogers, Ed. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing 1998. Print.
- Dobson, Darrell. *Transformative Teaching: Promoting Transformation Through Literature, the Arts, and Jungian Psychology*. Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, Toronto, 2007. Print.
- Doll, William E. *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993. Print.
- Ellsworth, Elizabeth. "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering?" Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy." *Harvard Educational Review* 59.3 (1998): 237-324. Print.
- Hirshfield, Jane. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997. Print.
- Gal, Susan. "Language, Gender, and Power :An Anthropological Review." *Gender Articulated: Language and the Socially Constructed Self*. Ed. Kira Hall and Mary Bucholtz New York: Routledge, 1995.169-182. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. *Diaries 1910-1925*. New York: Schocken Books, 1988. Print.
- Kolb, David A. *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984. Print.
- McLaren, Peter. "Semiotizing the Self: Social Therapy as Transformation." *Wish I Were: Felt Pathways of the Self*. Ed. Linda Rogers, Linda. Madison, WI: Atwood Publishing, 1988. Print.
- Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1990. Print.
- Piaget, Jean. *Psychology of the Child*. New York: Basic Books Inc., 1972. Print.
- Stasko, Carly, Mary Giamos and Melanie Coleman. *Dream Job Academy Report*. University of Toronto Hart House: Internal Report, 2014. Print.
- Stasko, Carly. "The Power of Stories: Tracing the Creative Thread and Healing the Self Whole." *The Quest for Meaning: Narratives of Teaching, Learning and the Arts*. Ed. Mary Beattie. Sense Publishers, 2009. Print.
- Zwicky, Jan. *Lyric Philosophy*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1992. Print.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike International 4.0 License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>; or, (b) send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 2nd Street, Suite 500, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA