Job hunting can be daunting, especially for students who are first in their family to go to university, come from a low SES background, and have never worked in a professional capacity. Many such students have years of hospitality or retail experience while juggling immense family commitments, but fail to recognise the skills gained from their life experience as relevant or significant to a prospective employer.

Applying a constructivist approach, this paper will discuss the use of narrative in written job applications in a simulated shortlisting exercise. The application procedure was modified to include the students’ personal stories in addition to standard bio-data. It explores how adopting a storying narrative can elicit compelling insights from students about their supposedly unremarkable experiences. It is theorised that storytelling in the application stage will impact employability.

This paper proposes that current skill matching practice in written applications does not allow students to fully illustrate their skills as unique individuals. It is argued, that students should be celebrating their experiences rather than apologising for them. Through this paper, UWS Careers will help them colour outside the lines.

Keywords: Narrative, graduate employability, equity students, reflection, storying experience

INTRODUCTION

More than ever before, University students will expect their institution to prepare them for future success, and for many students ‘success’ means a full-time graduate job upon completion of their degree. Graduate employability is positioned as an important institutional performance indicator as Government fee deregulation broadens competition within the Australian tertiary sector. This poses a challenge for all institutions, but particularly those with high representation from equity groups including low socio-economic status (SES) students. Literature supports the premise that Low SES students enter the University system with less social capital than their middle and high SES peers (Jardine, A 2012). Students with little or no university educational capital may struggle to navigate the academic landscape and are less able to predict the shape of their university experience (Leese, M 2010). This may impact negatively upon career decision-making and subsequent graduate employability.

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) has the largest number of low SES student enrolments (Department of Education, 2012) of any Australian University, with 60 percent of students the first in their family to attend University. Access to opportunity is a key mission of the University, and whilst UWS sits above the sector in the enrolment and retention of low SES students, UWS graduates are underrepresented in full-time employment upon completion (Graduate Careers Australia, Graduate Destination Survey, UWS unpublished institutional data 2012).

It is the experience of the authors of this paper that lack of social capital inhibits student ability to effectively promote their transferrable vocational and life skills to prospective employers. To address this issue, and attempt to demystify recruitment practices, the UWS Careers unit has trialled a career storytelling initiative in written applications for on-campus jobs. This initiative was further informed by Larry Cochran’s book Career Counselling: a narrative approach which states that “there has been growing disenchantment with impersonal techniques that match an individual’s traits with skills required for a specific vocation, because such techniques neglect human purpose, passion and life history” (Cochran, L 1997, outside back cover). Bujold (2004) also asserts the limitations of such trait-factor matching in traditional recruitment practice as a process that “does not take into account all the complexity of career behaviour” (p471).

This paper will explore narrative in job applications through experimentation and analysis. It is hypothesised that storytelling in the application stage will positively impact employability.
CONSTRUCTIVISM AND NARRATIVE THEORY

Constructivism proposes that each individual is an active agent in constructing meaning in their world based on their lived experiences and cognitive processes (Young, R and Collin, A 2004). Savickas applies constructivism to career counselling with his Career Construction Theory, as a way of explaining the “interpretive and interpersonal processes through which individuals impose meaning and direction on their vocational career” (Savickas, M 2005, p42). One of the components shaping Savickas’ theory is ‘life themes’ in which personal narrative is pivotal to understanding and shaping one’s sense of self in career development. In the words of Savickas, “in telling their career stories about their work experiences, individuals selectively highlight particular experiences to produce a narrative truth by which they live” (Savickas, M 2005, p43). Not only does Savickas’ seminal work note the importance of narrative but also clearly positions the career counsellor as a co-agent in the meaning-making process.

Narrative Career Counselling Theory focuses on these ‘life themes’ whereby the individual and counsellor collaborate to find meaning through storytelling. This can help the individual deepen their understanding of what they want (Ibarra & Lineback 2005, p5) as “it provides a framework for understanding the past events of one’s life and for planning future actions” (Polkinghorne, 1988 cited in Bujold 2004, p11).

While this paper is informed by Narrative Career Counselling Theory from the epistemological standpoint of constructivism, this paper will focus on the individual being the sole agent in their narrative career construction. This paper will redirect focus from how career storytelling impacts an individual’s process of meaning making to how it impacts on gaining employment.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative empirical investigation of a simulated shortlisting exercise, and semi-structured interviews were employed to conduct the research.

Three Jobs on Campus (JOC) employment opportunities were selected - Jobs A, B and C. Jobs A and B were advertised to UWS students in 2013 and Job C was advertised in 2014. The recruitment for all three opportunities was completed prior to the commencement of this exercise and all three opportunities were analysed retrospectively.¹

For these JOC opportunities, students applied online by addressing the skills-based selection criteria and attaching a current resume. In addition, the application also included an optional free-text field called About Me. This was to encourage applicants to write a personal statement or story in support of their application using the following prompt (no word limit was applied to the field):

Writing a job application can be tough. This is your opportunity to provide us with some additional information about you (the person, not the resume). What interests you? What are you passionate about? Why did you choose to study your degree? What are your life experiences, and how have they shaped you? There is no right or wrong answer here, just be true to you. This field is optional for all applicants.

Two Recruitment Assistant interns (Reviewer 1 and Reviewer 2) were selected to participate as shortlisters. Recruitment interns are extensively trained in recruitment processes and are responsible for the initial shortlisting of all applications received.²

In Phase 1, Reviewers 1 and 2 were provided with a copy of all applications for each role and were asked to read the selection criteria and resume component of the application first and categorise applicants as ‘shortlisted,’ ‘not shortlisted’ or ‘reviewer undecided.’

¹ This exercise did not impact on the actual selection of candidates for any opportunity. This venture was purely a simulated shortlisting exercise.
² The Recruitment Interns who took part in this simulation were not involved in the initial recruitment.
In Phase 2, Reviewers were asked to read the ‘About Me’ field of the application in conjunction with the rest of the application and again categorise as ‘shortlisted,’ ‘not shortlisted’ or ‘reviewer undecided’.

In Phase 3, Reviewers reflected on their experience during both shortlisting exercises.

The reviewers employed the regular shortlisting protocol used in all JOC recruitment processes and viewed applications independently without consultation. The reviewers were not made aware of the number of positions available for each opportunity, nor given any restrictions on the number of applications to shortlist. Applications were assessed based on individual merit without being ranked or compared.

RESULTS

Although the About Me field was optional, the majority of applicants for the three opportunities chose to provide some information (Job B 73% Job C 88% and Job A 79% response rate).

The shortlisting exercise was quantified by each reviewer and analysed. The analysis revealed a change in the number of ‘shortlisted,’ ‘not shortlisted’ or ‘reviewer undecided’. This suggests that the About Me field, the only variable in the applications, had an impact. The results are as follows:

**Job A**
Reviewer 1 - About Me positively impacted 12 applicants. Five moved from ‘not shortlisted’ to ‘shortlisted’ and seven applicants moved from ‘reviewer undecided’ to ‘shortlisted’.

Reviewer 2 - About Me positively impacted 15 applicants. Three moved from ‘not shortlisted’ to ‘shortlisted’ and 12 moved from ‘reviewer undecided’ to ‘shortlisted’.

There were no negative impacts associated with the About Me field for any applicants.

There were some commonalities across reviewers with agreement on two applicants who moved from ‘not shortlisted’ to ‘shortlisted’ in Phase 2 of the simulation. There was also agreement on four ‘reviewer undecided’ applicants who all moved to ‘shortlisted’ in Phase 2 of the simulation.

**Job B**
Reviewer 1 - About Me had no impact, positive or negative, on the shortlisting decision. Numbers remained consistent across the two phases of the simulation.

Reviewer 2 - About Me positively impacted one applicant who moved from ‘reviewer undecided’ to ‘shortlisted’. There were no negative impacts associated with the About Me field.

The applicant impacted in Reviewer 2’s simulation was originally marked as ‘shortlisted’ and remained ‘shortlisted’ by Reviewer 1 in phase 2 of the simulation.

**Job C**
Reviewer 1 - About Me positively impacted one applicant who moved from ‘reviewer undecided’ to ‘shortlisted’.

Reviewer 2 - About Me positively impacted one applicant who moved from ‘reviewer undecided’ to ‘shortlisted’.

There were no negative impacts associated with the About Me field for any applicant.

Different applicants were impacted. In the first instance Reviewer 1 and 2 were both undecided in Phase 1 of the simulation, then Reviewer 1 changed the applicant to ‘shortlisted’ and Reviewer 2 remained undecided.

In the second instance, the applicant was marked as ‘shortlisted’ by Reviewer 1 in both Phase 1 and 2, and Reviewer 2 was originally undecided, and then changed the applicant to ‘shortlisted’.

During Phase 3, three themes emerged from both semi-structured interviews which are important to the career story telling arena.
1) The emergence of a ‘likeability’ factor

Both reviewers indicated that they felt more invested in applicants that completed the About Me field. The reviewers “liked [the applicants]” and felt more inclined “to give them a go”. This is consistent with Ibarra and Lineback’s discussion of the effective use of narrative as providing accounts that are “so engaging that listeners feel they have a stake in our success” (2005, p2). One reviewer commented that the About Me field prompted a “kind of care for [the applicants]”; that this feeling was “weird” and not something experienced during the traditional JOC shortlisting process. The About Me field triggered an emotional connection and changed the way applicants were perceived, that is, from homogenous ‘applicants’ to unique individuals.

Interestingly, both reviewers felt disappointed if an applicant left the About Me field blank. They perceived it as a lack of effort or motivation rather than the applicant making a conscious choice not to disclose personal information. Both reviewers agreed that while this was disappointing, a blank About Me field did not alter the original short listing decision in any instance.

2) Common characteristics of good stories

When asked about the qualities present in the About Me field that had the most impact, some elements were common for both reviewers. Good stories demonstrated a passion, showed a depth or strength of character, as Reviewer 2 put it, “resilience, perseverance and optimism”. They were also reflective with the applicant learning or growing from a past experience. Interestingly, language and grammar were less important in the About Me field than the traditional application. A good story was a good story. Reviewer 2 commented “In instances where I may have seen grammar...was a bit poor...[but they had] a really good story...I would think this person seems like they have the right mindset...I really wanted to give this person a go”. One reviewer mentioned the length of the response was also noted, linking this to the notion of effort.

3) The usefulness of story in assessing applicants

The reviewers agreed that the About Me field enhanced the overall application, giving a depth of insight into the personality and motivation of an applicant. Both suggested that the About Me field helped to elucidate non-technical skills or attributes which often complimented the formal requirements of the role.

Both reviewers indicated that a field such as this would make it easier for employers to find a good person-role fit. One reviewer suggested the About Me field could provide employers with insight into an applicant’s ability to fit within a team or organisation’s culture. Reviewer 1 commented “there are things you can’t get about a person from their selection criteria because it is predominately their skills and work attributes” and “you get to know the person before you interview them”. Personal attributes are important “when you talk about things like cultural fit”.

Both reviewers seemed to agree that the About Me field had the most impact if they were undecided about an applicant after Phase 1 of the simulation. This is consistent with the findings. Interestingly, one reviewer indicated that they would not shortlist based on story alone. This was contradicted in the findings with both reviewers changing applicants from ‘not shortlisted’ to ‘shortlisted’ in a number of instances after considering the About Me field.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The simulation results validated the hypothesis that the use of narrative does increase the likelihood of students being shortlisted for a position. The inclusion of the About Me field had the greatest impact on ‘Reviewer undecided’ applications. However, there were eight instances where an applicant would not have been shortlisted without the inclusion of their story.

Despite the positive impacts evident in this simulation, the use of narrative raises concerns about a reviewer’s ability to remain objective in the shortlisting process. Although not experienced, there is a possibility that divulging personal information in a job application could have a negative impact, leading to a reviewer (or employer) ‘disliking’ an applicant resulting in potential discrimination.
Reviewers were also not asked to shortlist a specific number. If limitations were placed on applications to be shortlisted, the results may have differed. The authors believe that ranking or comparing narratives would have led to additional complexity, foreshadowing the hypothesis to simply investigate the impact of story in job applications.

With UWS having such a large cohort of equity students, it is the authors’ contention that narrative may benefit this group more than other applicants. These students’ lack of social capital may inhibit their skill in describing and promoting their employability skills. This assertion would need to be researched with control groups in a larger sample size. Further research would also ascertain if the use of narrative is suited to some industries more than others, and if ‘real world’ employers are as influenced by narrative as the recruitment interns.

Despite this being a limited study, the authors believe that narrative empowers students, allowing them to connect with prospective employers increasing their likelihood of success in the competitive job market.

REFERENCES

Graduate Careers Australia 2012, Graduate Destination Survey, UWS unpublished institutional data.

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