The Chaos Theory of Careers

Customizing Career Services: Issues and Challenges

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Careers are no longer linear
A Traditional Linear Career

Seniority vs. Time

- Graduate
- Trainee
- Junior manager
- Manager
- Senior Manager

Time
“We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty.”

— Maya Angelou
The ‘founding father’ of Career Development Frank Parsons did not have a linear career . . .
Born 1854

Home educated

Private School

Cornell at 16
Reads Math (Chaos?) & Engineering

Engineer for a railroad

Financial Crash 1869

Steel Mill Laborer

Teacher
Math, History, French

Legal Editor

Passes Bar Exam 1881

Teacher
P/T Boston University, Kansas State, Ruskin

Sets out ideas on Vocational Guidance

Writes on Social Reform

Teacher P/T Boston University, Kansas State, Ruskin
Frank Parsons as Chaos Theorist
From “Choosing a Vocation”, 1909

• “We guide our boys and girls to some extent through school then drop them in this complex world” p4.

• “Boys generally drift into some line of work by chance, proximity, or uniformed selection” p4.

• “A man cannot be fully successful, nor secure against change constantly occurring in the industry, unless he knows a good deal besides the special knowledge applicable to his business” p12
why are careers chaotic?
A tale of ping pong, puppies, predictability and chaos

or why complexity makes prediction tricky
Ping pong pooch!
Good Theories

• provide a compelling account of reality
  • and therefore an account of career development

• provide an overarching philosophy to guide practice and education

• provide a guide for concepts to privilege and prioritise

• provide practical intervention strategies

• provide evidence of outcomes

• and assist and improve practice
Nobody likes being put in a box
Person-job Fit models
a compelling account of reality?

| provide a compelling account of reality | reality is reducible to predictable elements | X |
| and therefore an account of career development | jobs and people are stable | X |
| provide an overarching philosophy to guide practice and education | match people to jobs | X |
| provide a guide for concepts to privilege and prioritise | personality, interests, traits, matching | X |
| provide practical intervention strategies | test and tell | X |
| provide evidence of outcomes and assist and improve practice | Arnold (2003)?? | X |
Chaos Theory of Careers and Shift

- Modern Career Paths involve:
  - Change
  - Complexity
  - Chance
  - Uncertainty

People are complex dynamical systems living in complex dynamical systems

- change is constant
- change is unpredictable
Lorenz, Chaos, Weather & Prediction
Non-linearity

A tiny change in the initial conditions leads to a dramatically different outcome.

In this case the change was $C = C + 0.01$ between A and B.

Lorenz

Modified Lorenz attractor. It is defined by the following 3 differential equations:

\[
\begin{align*}
\frac{dx}{dt} &= -ax + ay \\
\frac{dy}{dt} &= cx - y - xz \\
\frac{dz}{dt} &= -bz + xy
\end{align*}
\]

values $a = 10$, $b = 28$, $c = 3.99$ from 3.98

$x = y = z = 1$
A butterfly flapping its wings can be enough to turn your world upside down.
21st Century Challenge: the need to balance order and change
Chance

unplanned and unpredictable events and experiences that are often crucial and sometimes determinative in the narrative of people’s careers.
Chance Events

• Being in the right place in at the right time
• Being in the wrong place at the wrong time
• An unplanned work or social interaction
• An unexpected injury or illness
• An activity you unexpectedly enjoyed / did not enjoy
• An unexpected insight/message/vision/calling
• An unplanned move or change or residence
Even the best plans do not always work out
and sometimes things work out better than we could have dreamed
concepts to privilege & prioritise & Intervention Strategies

• Change Perception
• Opportunity Awareness (Luck Readiness - Flexibility, Curiosity, Optimism, Self-Efficacy, Strategy, Luckiness, Risk, Persistence)
• Adaptability
• Planmanship
• Creativity
• Slow Shift, Fast Shift, Deep Shift
Chaos Counselling Increases Self-Efficacy the most over 1 month
McKay, Bright & Pryor (2005)
Longitudinal study of High school leavers from Australian High School
Borg, Bright & Pryor (2014)

• 50% of students attending university experienced changes to their degree

• 33% students changing degree entirely

• 17% changing the major

• 71% of respondents reported unexpected change Year 12 that was ‘significant’, ‘large’ or ‘major’.

• 53% of respondents changed career interest
Chaos-informed counselling in high schools (Tony Borg, PhD)
In Conclusion
The Chaos Theory of Careers

people and their careers are complex, dynamic, unpredictable

embrace the complexity of clients

privilege, coach, counsel, prepare and educate

emphasising

Complexity, Change, Chance, Creativity
Contact

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