RUNNING HEAD: CAREER DEVELOPMENT & THE SKILLS AGENDA

Career Development and the Skills Shortage: A Lesson from Charles Dickens

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical argument to the profession of career development for the purpose of stimulating reflexive consideration on the myriad influences that impinge upon practitioners. The paper suggests that given the current skills agenda in the Australian economy, it may be timely to reflexively consider career development practice. The paper uses Charles Dickens' novel Hard Times and the character Mr Thomas Gradgrind, who was a dedicated educator in a small industrial town set in the Victorian era, to exemplify how the influence of prevailing social philosophies and economic conditions imbue the practice of professionals. It is suggested that there are potential parallels between the practices of Mr Gradgrind and contemporary career development practitioners. Career development practitioners are asked to consider their position in and amongst high level political, economic and educational influences and to reflect upon if and how these influences manifest in their practices.

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> Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts
> alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You
> can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will
> ever be of any service to them. This is the principle upon which I bring up my
> own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick
> to the Facts, sir! (Dickens, 1854/1969, p. 47).

So said our earnest Mr Thomas Gradgrind—acolyte of proper education for Coketown, a sooty Victorian-era coal mining town; a dirty old town indeed. What educational principle was Mr Gradgrind espousing? Toward what educational objective was he aiming? What was Charles Dickens trying to say through that tirade of the extraordinary character Mr Gradgrind?

Following from Dickens' illuminating critique of industrial society of the 19th century, this paper presents a comment on the economic, political and educational issues associated with the current "skills-shortages" and Australia's concomitant drive to produce a sustainable labour supply for industries experiencing an impaired capacity to recruit skilled personnel now and into the future (Employment Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, 2003). This brief polemical paper raises critical questions about the position and role of career development practitioners in the confluence of their responsibilities to their clients and the broader social and economic conditions in which they operate as human services or education professionals.

A PRACTICAL MAN

Although a literary fiction, Coketown represented the typical English coal-mining town of a nation in the height of industrial productivity—

"a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it;……a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. (Dickens, 1854/1969, p. 65).

Like some bizarre pastiche of architecture that continued to reinvent itself, contemporary industrial cities provide a sobering rendering of Coketown—life imitating art perhaps.

Coketown was riven by class distinctions which were so deftly drawn out by Dickens through characters such as the boorish industrialist, Mr Josiah Bounderby, and the poor girl of the traveling shows, Sissy Jupe. Coketown, and its residents existed for its factories, for its industrial productivity, for the ilk of Mr Bounderby. Though easily maligned as a vile capitalist with his own self-interest as his core, Mr Bounderby was at least transparent in his vulgarity. His concern in life was clear: his prosperity was dependent upon his industry, or perhaps the industry of others. Though crucial, his character is of less significant interest for the purpose of this paper. Instead Mr Gradgrind and his partner in educating the little vessels, Mr M'Choakumchild, are the characters of interest because they represent the pernicious worst of bureaucratised educational systems that are bowed down before the dictates of industry; and for the greater public good of course.

As literary characters, Mr Gradgrind and Mr M'Choakumchild were properly focused upon their profession. Their game was education. Preparing young minds and bodies for the world-of-(poorly-paid)-work was their raison d'etre. For Dickens,

these two servants of public interest were instruments of the prevailing social and economic philosophies, particularly *utilitarianism* (Craig, 1969). A prominent version of utilitarianism was articulated by Dickens' contemporary John Stuart Mill (1863/1972). There is insufficient space here to do justice to Mill's utilitarianism, and whilst acknowledging the risk of unfairly summarising its core meaning out of historical context, it could be described as a moral philosophy by which the pursuit of happiness and the diminution of pain should be the objective for society. Unfortunately this moral code was (mis-)used by unbridled proponents of laissez-faire capitalism and conservatives who were determined to serve their interests and uphold the social order. Their moral rationalisation through utilitarianism justified the subjugation and exploitation of those tethered to the lower socio-economic rung of society for the greater good of national economic prosperity. This may not have been Mill's hope or intention for utilitarianism—as he certainly argued against wickedness—however, the booming engine-rooms of the English economy were far too noisy a place to hear the legitimate sanctions upon utilitarianism; and they would certainly not dent the swollen hubris of Mr Josiah Bounderby—the righteous self-made man that he was.

Mr Thomas Gradgrind was characterised by Dickens (1854/1969) as the epitome of utilitarian and outcome-driven education; he was:

> A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. ….. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in this pocket, sir, ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature, and to tell you exactly what it comes to. (p. 48)

Mr Gradgrind, and without forgetting Mr M'Choakumchild, were the proponents of an education system in which one thing was needed: facts. There was no need for anything else! Children needed facts to get on in the world and the world needed children brimming with facts—a perfect symbiotic dynamic through which everyone should be satisfied. For Mr Gradgrind, education's objective was to serve the greater good by delivering properly prepared children to society—children ready to serve industry; children to be there for the likes of Mr Gradgrind's friend and advisor, Mr Bounderby. Dickens' use of the friendship between these two characters serves to highlight the juxtaposition of education and industry.

POST-INDUSTRIAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

The industrial landscape of contemporary western economies, particular those under the purview of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), has changed since the days of Charles Dickens. Notwithstanding the apparent changes in industry, what lessons for career development practice in this postmodern era (Savickas, 1993) and the post-industrial world-of-work (Collin & Watts, 1996), as it is in Australia (Watson, Buchanan, Campbell, & Briggs, 2003), can be learned from contemplating Dickens' literary expose of industrial England? Can the work of Dickens' contribute to critical reflexive practice in the present era?

Storey (2000) described the core work-related issues of this postindustrial era as: globalisation, deregulation of labour markets, privatisation, technological advances, changing employment patterns, changing organisational forms and structures, demographic and labour market changes, changing balance of work and non-work life, changing psychological contracts, increased job insecurity, and changes in education. Working life in Australia has not been and exception and has certainly undergone significant, fundamental change in recent decades (Watson et al.,

2003). The changes in the world-of-work have stimulated various revisions of career.

Conceptualisations of career are concomitantly changing from a traditional reliance

upon the employer for career development toward a position of personal

independence and individualism (Baruch, 2004; Collin & Watts, 1996; Russell, 2001),

including notions of self-managed career and lifelong employability (Fugate, Kinicki,

& Ashforth, 2004; King, 2004; McKenzie & Wurzburg, 1997; Thite, 2001) and a deep

sense of personal meaning (Chen, 1998, 2001). This movement toward the individual

owning his or her career, as distinct from career being managed by the employer,

ostensibly demonstrates a significant shift in power toward the individual.

       A theory which exemplifies this new post-industrial approach to career is the

protean career (D Hall, 2004; D Hall & Moss, 1998). This theory is the

quintessential model for individualism and is deeply imbued with moral dimensions

of the American dream and the Protestant work ethic. The notion of a protean career

is one in which an individual continues to adapt to the extant conditions of the world-

of-work in order to sustain life-long employability. It assumes that a person should

assess the labour market, acquire the necessary competencies for success in that

market, and implement oneself in the market as if one was a small business. Its

applicability to the current world-of-work is ostensibly laudable, especially given

recent changes in the economic conditions and patterns of employment (Watson et al.,

2003) and policy and legislative parameters (Department of Employment and

Workplace Relations, 2005a) of the Australian labour market in which individuals are

exhorted to take on far more responsibility for their conditions of employment and

remuneration.

THE SKILLS AGENDA

The Council of Australian Governments has placed work-skills and lifelong employability firmly amongst its human capital policy (National Reform Initiative Working Group for COAG, 2006). Their report clearly indicates an emphasis in the responsibility for lifelong participation in the workforce belonging with the individual. Australian industry has promulgated its vision for a labour force that is fully equipped for the exigencies of productivity through its Employability Skills for the Future Framework (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia, 2002). Industry's urgent calls for the development of a skill-base that sufficiently supplies the necessary expertise for national productivity is often expressed through the notion of a *skills-shortage* (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005b). A skills-shortage is essentially the impaired capacity of organisations to recruit sufficiently skilled personnel for their business operations due to a relative shortage in labour supply (Employment Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, 2003). Despite criticism suggestive of industry's relatively limited contribution to the development of a national skill-base (e.g., Watson et al., 2003) there is a contrary argument that it has done its share (e.g., Smith, 2006). The contrasting arguments are important, however, they cannot be given justice in this paper; instead, it assumed that contributions to solving the skills problem have been sought in other quarters.

Career development practice has been acknowledged for its potential for contributing to the economic well-being of both individuals and nations, within the context of advanced and developed economies (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2004) and developing and transitional economies (Watts & Fretwell, 2004). The OECD (2002b) and the Australian Government (e.g.,

Employment Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, 2003) have likewise recognised the potential for career development to serve as a vehicle for solving the skills-shortage problem and to contribute to economic prosperity. Their shared positions have particular gravity given the current skills-shortage and can be construed as a higher order influence that may impinge upon theory and practice.

Viewed through the prism of an individual being self-employed (Collin & Watts, 1996), a business unit or a purveyor of labour products and services (c.f., protean career), career development practice can assist industry by better preparing individuals to participate in the economy by training them to: understand their products and services that they may take to market (e.g., skills and knowledge); understand the current labour market (e.g., know what labour services are in demand); understand how they can promote their services in the market through direct advertising methods (e.g., resumes) and indirectly through marketing channels (e.g., networking). In this way, career development practice can be construed as a type of business development and coaching service. Within the frame of the skills shortage, all of these career development interventions are essentially about getting skills to market—all for the public good.

Furthermore, the Australian Government's acknowledgement of career development's potential for contributing to national productivity has extended beyond supporting the extant adult workforce. It has acknowledged the potential for career development to properly prepare the workforce of the future: children. Toward this end, the Council of Australian Governments (National Reform Initiative Working Group for COAG, 2006) placed a significant emphasis upon the preparation of school children for the workforce.

An excellent example of how the Government promulgates the vision of career development services aligning with the strategy to solve the skill-shortage problem is the entity Careers Advice Australia (CAA). This relatively recent initiative was instigated by the Commonwealth Government and operates across government, non-government, and corporate sectors. CAA career development practitioners operate collaboratively with industry partners which are charged with the overall objective of advising which skills are in short supply and in which particular geographical area career development services should be directed and skill-related education and training services established. An ideal outcome of this matrix of collaboration is that career development practitioners would be well positioned to facilitate school children making well-informed decisions to enter into fields in which there is shortage of labour. CAA is a superlative exemplar of cross-sectoral collaboration toward the goal of addressing the national skill-shortage—surely a vehicle for the public good.

WHOSE GOOD?

Richardson (1993) provided an incisive critique of career development theory and practice and subsequently argued that the assumptions of individualistic theories and practices of career are flawed with respect to their capacity to account for individuals without the resources of the middle socio-economic class or better (Richardson, 2000). Richardson's critique makes an important point: career must be conceived of as something much more than the orthodox understanding of work and the world-of-work. The economics and patterns of the Australian work-life (Watson et al., 2003) illustrate Richardson's argument that career is necessarily more than a simplistic notion based on the ideal of ongoing, full-time employment.

Patton and McMahon (2006a) have comprehensively dismantled an individualistic approach to career through their Systems Theory Framework (STF),

which, albeit centred upon the individual person, casts career as a construct that extends from the proximal and intimate, to the distal and political. Furthermore the STF situates the practice of career development within the nexus of interaction between the client and practitioner (McMahon & Patton, 2006). Within this nexus neither the client nor the practitioner can claim objective separation from the other; they are together in a co-constructed production. It is incumbent upon the practitioner, therefore, to critically and reflexively understand and mediate his or her own systems of influences so as to protect the client from inadvertent partiality.

Richardson's (1993; 2000) criticisms of career theory and practice have reverberated in subsequent Foucault-inspired criticism of career development theory and practice by McIlveen and Patton (2006), who posed a radical argument that orthodox career development practice (viz, trait-and-factor approach) was at risk of being a technology that did not necessarily serve the interests of the individual client. Despite Savickas' (1993) portending a shift in career counselling practice from the expert model to one which is more collaborative through a relationship in which the counsellor's privilege has been dismantled, there remains a need to sustain a critical gaze and to voice dissent upon the emergence of conditions that would encourage counsellors taking on the role of experts, with good intentions, but devoid of reflexive awareness. Thus the criticism leveled on orthodox career development practice by McIlveen and Patton is extended further here, but this polemic has ramifications for all forms of practice and practitioners who are not critically reflexive. Despite constructivism's emphasis upon the client, its theoretical assumptions and practical operations (Patton & McMahon, 2006b; Young & Collin, 2004) make constructivist practitioners especially liable to criticism. Constructivists' location within the profoundly and avowedly subjective process of co-construction implicates them as a

likely source of inadvertent bias, and therefore they too should be brought into question along with the orthodoxy.

Given that any given career development practitioner is, like all human beings, situated within the confluences of multitudinous career-influences (Patton & McMahon, 2006a) and that the confluence is present at his or her operation within the process of providing a career development service (McMahon & Patton, 2006), then how would a career practitioner account for his or her practice that is inherently embedded within the context of the educational, economic and political exigencies of the skills-shortage? The nexus of education, career development and employment is clear and "career development is besieged with argument, blandishment, and enticement. Employers are major persuaders. Freedom from pressure is not an option" (Law, Meijers, & Wijers, 2002, p. 251-252). Their point is sagacious: practitioners are susceptible to the influences of the industries that demand their contribution to the development of a labour supply.

Consider our well-intentioned Mr Gradgrind who was a product of his time. He knew his place exactly. He was a servant of the utilitarian education system—one which prepared and delivered fact-filled children to the furnaces of industry so that the friendly, industry advisor Mr Bounderby could live plump and satisfied. A thoroughly proper situation indeed: Mr Gradgrind contributed to the national good by performing his profession to the best of his abilities; albeit in complete unawares of the pernicious effect it had upon the children. He was simply seeing the industrial world as it was: as in desperate need of a labour supply made up of little units replete with facts ready to do the bidding of local industry. "In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!" (Dickens, 1854/1969, p. 47). Mr Gradgrind was

beyond moral reproach because, in utilitarian terms, his intentions were for the good of the children and for the greater good of all.

CONCLUSION

It needs limited mention that career development practitioners on the whole carry out their professional activities with high regard for their clients and carry on in a manner consistent with local ethics (Careers Industry Council of Australia, 2006). Mr Gradgrind was equally dedicated to his students and was flawlessly ethical in practice. However, when viewed from an historical perspective, it seems that Australian career development practitioners are inextricably involved in the strategic push toward national prosperity; after all, we have a cradle-to-the-grave career blueprint for our citizenry (Miles Morgan Australia, 2003) and praiseworthy examples of OECD and government policy manifest in such entities as the CAA.

It is axiomatic that education and industry relate to one another. It is also true that career development can act a useful vehicle for transitions between the two. Perhaps the extent to which education serves the needs of industry renders down to a value-judgment by stakeholders. In making such a value judgment, career practitioners who operate at the shared boundary of education and industry must bring their own work into question. In considering our position in the confluence of education and industry, what can we career development practitioners learn from the narrative of Mr Thomas Gradgrind?

Mr Gradgrind was a cog in a wheel of the great schooling machine for English people. In good conscience, and as a simple fiction of literature, Mr Gradgrind was unaware of how he was an instrument of the historical, economic, political conditions of his day. In good conscience, can the practitioners of the profession of career development claim such innocent ignorance in regard to their contribution to address

the maelstrom of the skills-shortage? Perhaps our teacher Mr Gradgrind would say:

"In this life, we want nothing but Skills, sir; nothing but Skills!"

In the end of the story *Hard Times*, Mr Gradgrind relented and his ideology

was thrown into relief by the pain of his daughter who suffered under the strictures of

his ideology. Mr Gradgrind learned that life was more than facts. Is career more than

just a job (McMahon & Tatham, 2001)? Is career more than a solution to the skills-

shortage and the demands of industry?

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