

# The role of imagination in emergent career agency

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## Abstract

Career agency is a vaguely defined concept that is usually explained in terms of cultivating self-reliance, while it is at the same time being critiqued as a difficult to reach goal as a result of societal pressures. Instead of viewing agency through the lens of these opposing viewpoints, focused on people either being self-reliant or determined by outside forces, this article proposes a 'medial' perspective on agency. People can be assisted to develop agency when it is conceptualized as an emergent phenomenon that can be fostered through imaginative and playful writing, where individuals are invited to engage in a field where an expansion of both symbolic and material space can be promoted. The dangers of an instrumental focus on career management skills are outlined and the philosophical considerations underlying the idea of imagination as fostering agency are explained.

## Keywords

Agency, career writing, game, holding space, imagination

Western societies are quickly becoming less coherent (Giddens, 1991; Inkson, 2007). As a result, it is increasingly unclear how individuals should act in a range of situations or how they might understand themselves. To a certain extent this development towards more diverse perspectives and a broader range of ways to act is a positive one, as cultures can only develop when confronted with different perspectives. A uniform culture would simply reach a standstill. That said, current society now demands of its citizens that they become increasingly self-reliant, and by extension, develop a capacity to be self-governing. In the labour market, self-reliance and self-determination have been considered par for the course even longer. It is no surprise then that terms like self-direction, self-governing

teams, employability, and resilience are part of the standard repertoire of politicians and employers (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2017). This naturally has implications for career counselling practice, where an ability to be self-governing and self-reliant is associated with the concept 'agency'. However, the latter is a fairly vague, multidimensional concept (Arthur, 2014) that refers to the 'scope of action' an individual has in a fluid society (Bauman, 2000). In this article, we will explore the concept of agency whereby we focus on the role of imagination in enacting it. In doing so, we explain how a focus on career competencies alone is too instrumental in contributing to the emergence of agency. We also introduce the narrative method of career writing as a creative way to foster agency

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through the active and playful engagement of the imagination.

## Agency

In an unpredictable society, individuals are challenged to 'position' themselves on an ongoing basis (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) in order to act in ways that are meaningful in a space that is limited in particular ways. They must ask questions about existing power differences ('What am I allowed to say?'), diverse media ('With what medium can I say what I want to say?'), one's own social network ('To whom can I say what I want to say?'), and one's history and perception of self ('What is it I actually have to say?') within natural and cultural circles of interdependent relationships. This consideration of power applies in every actual societal practice in which an individual participates. To be able to successfully engage in response to this challenge is referred to as 'agency'. In other words, agency is about creating space to act (i.e. expanding one's scope of action), both in the material and the symbolic sense.

In the academic debate about career development, agency is viewed from two opposing perspectives. First, there is a perspective that emphasizes the possibility of making or creating one's own career. A number of scientists led by Savickas et al. (2010) do not hesitate to speak of 'life designing' as the challenge of the 21st century. The concept of self-direction that is used in this context owes its assumptions to some of the ideals characteristic of enlightenment thinking. These ideals, however, are often taken too literally in career guidance in schools (Draaisma, Meijers, & Kuijpers, 2017) and assume subjective autonomy and the powers of the conscious and rational will (Kant, 1976/2002; Taylor, 2006). In this line of thinking, people are actors who are or can be in control of life designing and career planning. The idea of autonomy is indeed an ideal that dominates Western thinking about the individual (Gergen, 2009). This is often interpreted as the freedom to achieve one's own goals, whatever they might be. The assumption is that goals have their source in individual deliberations, either calculated from zero sum games or stemming from one's deepest being; and in achieving them one can actualize one's self. If that turns out not to be possible the fault lies in unfortunate circumstances, with 'others', or even worse, with oneself. It is this assumption that is at the foundation of neoliberalism, in the sense that the goals are conceived of as one-dimensional and instrumental for value creation in terms of economic egoism (Schirrmacher, 2013).

Second, the discourse that is developing in opposition to this individualist approach is the deterministic viewpoint that people are either merely pawns, and at the very least completely dependent on the psychosocial and cultural-economic powers that be in societal and organizational contexts. Indeed, there are at least

two objections to the voluntaristic view, as Crawford (2015) explains. First, needs and goals cannot be seen merely as being essential to an individual. They are instead continually being manipulated by others, for instance by the media. Goals don't have a kind of unchanging 'core', but they take shape in the span of one's life, influenced fundamentally by others and the surrounding culture. Second, people are not able to act in a way that is free of constraints. Action too is dependent upon the opportunities and limitations that are offered within a cultural context, and these are in part internalized by every individual and have become a part of them. In a context of complete freedom, if we can even imagine such a thing, we would not in fact be able to start anything (Gergen, 2009; Yuthas, Dillard, & Rogers, 2004).

Increasing criticism regarding this individualist (or voluntaristic) approach, and the limited space or scope that many actually have in determining their own fate is now being emphasized in the literature (Reid, 2016; Sultana, 2014). However, the deterministic discourse that is developing in opposition to this individualist approach still does not provide people with a useful response. That careers are indeed decided for a large part by social-economic and socio-cultural factors (Avis & Orr, 2016; Berlant, 2011; Leach, 2017) and that individuals have a very limited influence over their lives are valid observations but does not remove the need for career agency. Therefore, instead of following these dichotomous lines of reasoning between voluntarism and determinism, we suggest a third or medial (Kisner, 2017) route between the assumption of being wholly 'in control' and/or seeing one's self as a victim of outside forces. We suggest that people might be seen as *players* in a playing field, where through imaginative play they can enlarge and re-envision the space to act in symbolic and literal ways.

This third way offers a response to both the voluntaristic and the deterministic view and makes it possible to include the reality that most people have a limited scope of action while at the same time they need to become increasingly self-reliant. This is important because society has become a risk society, in which only those with enough social, cultural, and economic capital can survive of their own volition (Buyken, Klehe, Zikic, & Van Vianen, 2017; Maree, 2017). Those who are not getting the opportunities to thrive have the tendency to explain this as pressure (or even caused) from outside, by the 'elite', or because 'immigrants' or other minorities are taking up the space and opportunities that one is entitled to. On the other hand, the fear of freedom to act (Fromm, 1960) and the fear of the complexity of life in today's society have resulted in people limiting their own scope to act in order to avoid the perceived pressures (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Arndt, 2012). For instance, by prescribing rules and protocols in the context of societal practices, one attempts to reduce the chances of 'error'. Or in the individual context, one

reduces one's perspective to a so-called manageable whole as envisioned in dominant scripts (e.g. the perfect citizen, the good student) or even going as far as cultivating perspectives that lead to radicalization (Smet, 2017). Such a negation of the complexity does not only apply to the world outside oneself, but also to the complexity and motives for action and ideas within one's self. In a sense this is a form of agency that invalidates itself (Landau et al., 2004).

### Invalidated agency: An example

It is exactly this invalidation of agency that we are seeing in careers education, where agency has been narrowed down to so-called career management skills or career competencies, which are seen as unrelated learnings and are therefore often presented as separate lessons (Andrews, 2011; Career Development Institute, 2014; Draaisma, Meijers, & Kuijpers, 2018). In addition, politicians argue that 'career education', in line with the rest of the curriculum, should be defined and differentiated through distinct measurable learning outcomes (Hooley, Watts, Sultana, & Neary, 2013). If politicians get their way, students will have to show that they can reflect at various levels (beginner, intermediate, expert) about their motives, qualities, and career plans (Hughes, 2015). Precisely defined and differentiated outcomes are even seen as the official mark of quality. This development unfortunately goes hand in hand with the instrumentalization of career guidance in the form of personal development plans, portfolios, and reflection formats (Mittendorff, Faber, & Staman, 2017; Winters, 2012; Winters et al., 2012).

Boud and Walker (1998, p. 195) show what this means for reflection in the classroom. First of all, reflection follows a recipe whereby learning activities take students through a sequence of steps and require them to reflect on demand. The result is that reflective activities are not guaranteed to lead to learning, and learning activities are not guaranteed to lead to reflection. Reflective activities might, for instance, be inappropriate or badly used. The belief that reflection can be easily contained by the teacher and kept on topics within the teacher's comfort zone is identified as another problem. Reflection can lead to seriously challenging both the experience of the student, the concepts a teacher uses, and the context. Instrumentalization of reflection also results in a mismatch between reflection and assessment. This is acutely problematic in curricula where students are required to demonstrate evidence of a capacity for reflection. Typically in education, the expectation of assessment is that students are assessed for what they know rather than what they do not know, and expecting students to publicly reflect on their uncertainties in a situation where they will be assessed requires education to make a major cultural shift.

A further issue is the 'intellectualization' of reflection: because emotions and feelings in the educational

context are often ignored, it is normal for reflection to be viewed as a purely intellectual exercise – simply an act of rigorous thinking. However, unconscious thoughts are central to all learning and crucial in decision-making (Bechara, Damasio, Damasio, & Lee, 1999; Strick et al., 2011). Inappropriate disclosure is identified as another problem that can occur between students and staff. Students might, for instance, disclose material that the staff do not know how to deal with. Moreover, reflection in educational settings often takes the shape of non-critical acceptance of experiences, and these felt experiences often give important but not unambiguous information. What we feel is always influenced by our assumptions and formal or informal theories in practice.

Experiences can thus be interpreted in different ways. They cannot be seen in isolation from knowledge and must be interpreted as something in context that is certainly not yet complete. While imagination opens a space for investigating subtleties in meanings attributed to experiences and future possibilities, Boud and Walker (1998) and Den Boer and Hoeve (2017) found teachers to have insufficient expertise to assist in meaning-making activities. When students, for instance, begin to speak about traumatic experiences, teachers have a tendency – likely motivated by a desire not to abandon their students – to carry on, when they could better refer a student to seek specialized help (e.g. psychological counselling). Students are not helped by well-intentioned non-professional help in order to deal with traumatic experiences. As Lengelle, Luken, and Meijers (2016) stated, reflection can too easily turn to rumination. A last issue is that in much of reflection that takes place in education involves the excessive use of power by the teacher: the use of reflection can lead to teachers having influence over students. 'Worryingly, for a minority of staff this may be part of their attraction. (...) A degree of mature awareness beyond that possessed by many teachers may be needed if reflective processes are to be used ethically' (Boud & Walker, 1998, p. 195).

In conclusion, we might say that instrumental forms of reflection often result in invalidation of agency among students as well as teachers. Both see reflection, although intended to allow students to develop more agency, as a necessary evil that is done for the sake of completion (Meijers & Mittendorff, 2017). In this way reflection becomes an activity of anticipating what teachers expect and fulfilling those expectations (Zijlstra & Meijers, 2006). As an antidote to the issues described, the next section focuses on how imagination can foster the emergence of agency.

### Agency and imagination

We want to avoid the dichotomous thinking inherent in believing that the choice is between autonomy and determinism, and propose a 'third way' of thinking

about agency. This view is based on the idea that ‘meaning’ is a basic feature of human existence, and that meanings are neither totally pre-given nor free to choose.

Human life and action do not take place primarily in an objective, ‘natural’ reality, but in inter-subjectively, culturally, and historically constructed and developed virtual worlds, or ‘figured’ worlds (Gergen, 2009; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). This is exactly what differentiates people from animals (Harari, 2015). Everything we know has already had meaning attributed to it. That is the main reason why people have so much to learn from birth onwards, and what they learn often becomes ‘second nature’: virtual worlds are experienced to be just as real as natural worlds; in fact within a person’s experience no difference is felt between them (Baudrillard, 1999). That said, people are not completely bound by existing ‘figurations’ either. They also interpret the world in their own way, and those interpretations, when confronted with other people’s perspectives, can be revised. Moreover, the characteristics of those cultural worlds are not stable – they change continually because different worlds are interacting, and they can be deliberately altered, though perhaps painstakingly because others and one’s own experience of identity resist, causing unanticipated side effects. In other words, there is some room for play regarding our perceptions of reality. It is not surprising then that Wittgenstein (1977) spoke of language games, though it should be said that the constitution of figured worlds is not only a matter of language (Holland et al., 1998).

Agency, seen as the possibility of creating room to act or expand one’s scope of action, has to do with two dimensions: on the one hand with limitations others (i.e. people and institutions) set, or the space they allow, and on the other hand the room that a person allows him/herself to see or has the courage to use. Agency is a paradox: ‘We have it and we do not have it. Some of us have it more than others, but no one has it absolutely or lacks it absolutely’ (Joseph, 2006, p. 238). But even this formulation by Joseph is rather misleading. Agency is not something that you can ‘have’, it is not a person’s inherent ability, but it emerges time and time again in the exchange between a person and in given situations: it is an emergent phenomenon.

Emergence itself is a term borrowed from dynamic systems theory (Homan, 2008; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984). It points to the fact that empirical observations such as colour, form, and states of aggregation, such as fluid or solid, are not inherent characteristics of a substance, but rather they are (changing) states. They are qualities that show up, that come to be, in the context of other forces acting upon particular substances. By speaking of ‘emergence’ as central to agency, we are creating a perspective where

phenomena relating to ‘agency’ are in a *space between*, a playing field where different forces (‘adaptive and accommodating’ forces) work on each other. Agency, in this sense, is strictly speaking neither a cause, nor is it being caused; the dichotomy between autonomy and determination is a false one. Agency is instead a ‘medial’ phenomenon that does not limit ‘itself to the categories of activity or passivity’ (Kisner, 2017, p. 36) – rather, it is always in a state of ‘becoming’ in the interplay between various forces, in which the participating players (persons and circumstances alike) reflexively influence one another.

A consequence of understanding agency as an emergent phenomenon is that it is not possible for a person to permanently acquire ‘agency’, nor can one speak of someone consistently ‘having’ more or less agency. However, it is possible to explore under which circumstances and in which situations a person is more likely to have agency emerge. In this article, we will only analyse one of those aspects: the possibility and skill that a person has to imagine a space for meaningful action that is not present in the current situation, or that seems to not be present. We speak of this skill as ‘imaginative power’.

What scope or space for action one sees for oneself is not in the first place determined by objective characteristics of the situation, but it pertains to the (ever-changing) perception of the situation, that is the way in which a person imagines the space for meaningful action within the situation (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). The ability to apply this ‘informed creativity’ is what we deem to be imagination. It refers to installing a space between (i.e. an interspace), imagining the realm or reality of the ‘what-if’ (Winnicott, 2005). An interspace we see as a playing field (De Ronde, 2015), a space where new stories can take shape about existing experiences and where new experiences can take shape through new stories. It is in that space that people can play with ‘reality’ and ‘try on’ different possibilities and alternate scripts, and learn how to give direction to life on a playing field of diverse and interdependent cultural and natural forces and relationships. In the same spirit, Zittoun and Gillespie describe imagination as follows:

Imagination, we propose, is the process of creating experiences that escape the immediate setting, which allow exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities. Imagination feeds on a wide range of experiences people have of, or through the cultural world, through diverse senses, now combined, organized and integrated in new forms. [...] Imagination, we maintain, is a social and cultural process, because, although it is always individuals who imagine, the process of imagination is made possible by social and cultural artefacts, it can be socially allowed or constrained, and because the consequences of imagination can be significant changes in the social world. (cited in Zittoun (2017, p. 144))

## Agency as imaginative play

The starting point for the idea of the human as playing animal or 'homo ludens' has been explored and explained as a cultural reality by linguist and historian Johan Huizinga (1938/2008). He saw imagination as a form of play that takes place both in the arising of a religious cult (as 'holy game') and also in the form of myths and theatre (the tragedy and the comedy): 'From the act of a mythical theme gradually evolves a presentation, in dialogue and in mimetic action, of a series of happenings – the presentation of a story' (Huizinga, 1938/2008, p. 175, our translation). Human as player is also at the foundation of the existential call to 'shape one's life in the form of artwork' (Foucault, 2005), as an individual, but also supported by helpers. With that, the imagination and the mythical become a guiding principle and a fundamental way in which to view reality (Campbell, Cousineau, & Brown, 1990; Lévi-Strauss, 1985).

Our starting point is a hypothesis that we want to explore further: instead of self-direction as guiding one's 'autonomous' self or of being 'determined' by outside forces, we assume that the ability to navigate comes about through the creation of (play)space within a dominant discourse and the social forces that exist (e.g. organizational, economic, and cultural). This play-room (i.e. wiggle room) refers to the creation of a play space by engaging in play in diverse contexts: as a creative act, as adventure, by seeing one's self as a central node in networks in an open system, and by being able to constantly reposition one's self in relation to others, to the larger whole and to one's self.

By choosing interdependent relationships within the interaction of poles, instead of one of the aspects (either the pole 'autonomous agency' or its opposite 'determining structures') as our starting point, we bring a cluster of concepts into position: agency as a process of emergence, as social play in cultural and natural playing fields, by means of experiential learning and imagination, and internal and external dialogues (multivocality, perspectivism, silent voices – see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). These things, precisely in their interplay, point to a constructive tension between the poles. Just as an actor acts according to a script and a pawn follows the steps in the protocol, a player exists by the mere fact of the act of playing the 'game', and embarks on the journey as an adventurer; in reverse, the game only exists by the fact the players are there. In other words, not the conscious will of the subjects, nor the objective structures (formalized rules for instance) are primary, but the interaction in a field of play (i.e. possibility) is at the crux.

Another way to articulate this is that through play, the medial voice can emerge which transcends the false dichotomy of either construction (autonomy) or discovery (determinism) (Kisner, 2017). Primary

is a playing field in which processes of individualization, participation, community building happen alongside one another and contribute in an organic way to the broadening and deepening space for interaction, both literally and symbolically. By understanding agency as characteristic of playing rather than something we 'possess' as individuals, we give primacy to the space between players who interact in a 'play room'. Play is seen as an ongoing participatory process of (re)interpretation of what is at stake while playing. Therefore, we focus on constant change and reconfiguring of positions that reshape the play and the players, the goal of playing and rules emerging, in resonance with forces in the context. On the playing field there is no 'is' but 'becoming'; no fixed rules and winning or losing in an absolute sense but as part and parcel of the play that unites both teammates and adversaries.

Asma (2017), in his study of the evolution of imagination, illustrates these principles with an analysis of improvisation in jazz. In improvisation, there are rules (the basic tonal scheme has to be kept in mind), but these need not be strictly adhered to and thus allow considerable playing room. The important point, however, is that improvisation is not an intellectual or language-based art; the playing space needs to be filled instantly, and this calls for what Asma calls 'hot cognition', a bodily and emotional involvement of the improvising player. Such improvisation can fail for many reasons, and thus involves risks; a succeeding improvisation therefore creates a feeling of success. It would seem that in most situations where imagination is called for, emotional involvement is essential. However, in many cases the products of imaginative work then need to be assessed intellectually; this is, as we will argue later on, where metaphors play an important role.

The shift that we suggest from the dichotomy between voluntarism and determinism towards a 'deconstructive' approach conceptualizes agency as an ongoing, contextually based process. We thus reframe agency outside the assumed dichotomy between voluntarism and determinism as the art of handling paradoxes in life – it is about how to play with tension *between* poles (instead of the contradictions). By extension, this shift has consequences for how we see the 'self'. There 'is' no predetermined 'self', but there are multiple identities emerging in a space between un-decide-able aspects and polarities, contingencies, and coincidences (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). The philosophy on the art of living (Foucault, 2005) conceptualizes this art as the becoming of a 'self' in social contexts. We thus assume an endless process of meaning-making about oneself in relation to the world outside. In this way, we see imagination as a constructive breeding ground for meaning-making, to be differentiated from conceptual frameworks that bring closure. Often one places imagination at the start of a knowledge

acquisition process in the context of discovery, assuming that fruits of the imagination, like metaphors, will eventually be redundant in the context of arriving at the destination of evidence-based knowledge. However, from the proposed perspective, imagination is not (just) the start, but an important principle of knowledge construction (Muijen & Brohm, 2017). Derrida (1972) and Nietzsche (1984) put the rhetorical power of metaphors above the logical truths of concepts in the sense that, ‘the tone of the music’ (Nietzsche, 1984, p. 386) seduces people into believing in the truth of words.

### Metaphors as bridge

Imagination, seen as the ability to envision possibilities about how things could be different than they are, also offers a playing field to create living metaphors (Ricoeur, 1978). We suspect that metaphors play a crucial role in the development of agency because they form the bridge between intuitions, emotions, and new insights. They can fulfil this role because they (a) resonate with the emotional brain (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), (b) are specific and clear enough to be articulated (Maasen & Weingart, 1995), and are at the same time (c) vague enough to leave room for the creation of new meanings and interpretation (Jaszczolt, 2002). Metaphors make communication and interaction between I-positions – the various voices in the landscape of the mind possible (see Dialogical Self Theory, Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, for a fuller explanation) – and with that put words to lived experience in an internal dialogue. However, they also make possible the external dialogue, by creating a collective understanding of the way in which images, concepts, and emotions are being communicated, and facilitate new ways to give meaning to experience (Barner, 2011). They make the transfer of coherent bits of sensory, cognitive, emotional, and experienced information possible using a known ‘vehicle’ to describe what is as yet unknown (Hofstadter, 2001). According to Ortony (1975) metaphors ‘express in a succinct manner that which is implicit but is unable to be expressed in discrete, literal language’ (p. 50). The metaphor offers for what is vague – the often half-conscious images, thoughts, and feelings that together form I-positions – a clear label and in this way functions as a ‘messenger of meaning’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008).

### Imagination and play

In order to grasp the central role of the imaginary, playful interspace, we assume imagination to be an emergent, emancipatory power, that questions established frameworks and false dichotomies by breaking open dominant discourses (both as it pertains to what is happening externally and also with regards to what has been internalized) and imagining things

differently. In this sense, the deconstructive, participative approach that we stand for is also a critical emancipatory one, which makes the human as player conscious of his/her role and responsibility as co-creator in the interaction with others and in response to contextual factors. The continuous dynamic between the disruption and reestablishment of a temporary equilibrium in the interplay of forces leads to the emergence of a particular play: the nature and the rules and shape of the game vary between more structured or more open, more rule-governed or more playful, more competitive or more cooperative (Sutton-Smith, 2009). This depends on certain game goals (e.g. making profit; societal creation of added value), in which values such as efficiency and sustainability are at stake (Nussbaum, 2010). People can, in a creative and experiential way (by ‘informed creativity’), shape their role and sphere of influence, by becoming conscious and proactive as one of the players in diverse social contexts.

Below we provide an example of the central role of the imagination in shaping career counselling as an art of creating a ‘playing field’. In this way, agency is fostered as people are enticed to become players and to create room to play. Congruent with the proposed approach, imagination is envisioned as an in-between power, a medial voice, an interspace instead of something people ‘have’ or ‘have-not’. We see imagination both as a ‘subjective’ (rhetorical) power of people finding striking images, as well as an ‘objective’ power that assumes (articulated) forms of imagination, like metaphors and metonyms, analogies and models, myths and symbols.

Imagination as an in-between force can give a shattering, innovating twist to the ‘turn of events’. Political utopias (Achterhuis, 2006), for instance, are able to do this. Take the example of the utopia in *The New Atlantis*, where Francis Bacon envisions a society ordered by technical renewal, which in part contributed to the establishment of the Royal Society in 1662, and which, in a sense, we see realized around us in myriad ways (Bacon, 1626/1989). We maintain that in order for this to happen, the imagination must be dialogically stimulated to create interspace in which we might experience relationships in an existential way as interdependency between each other and ourselves, as well as in relation to a time-space continuum. In the sense of Heraclitus’ quote ‘We both step and do not step into the same river twice. We are and are not’: the existential void sets the stage for immersing oneself in the field of experience and then stepping out again. Within the broader scope of the art of living, we envision the art of sense-making: of giving meaning to experience by way of rhetoric and reflection, dialogue and forms of play and by gleaning power to take actions from this (Troop, 2017).

## Imaginative learning

One career-learning method that is being employed to facilitate the emergence of agency – aimed at enlarging both symbolic and actual space to act – through engagement with imagination is ‘career writing’ (Lengelle & Meijers, 2014). In this form of creative, reflective, and expressive writing, students write personal stories, poetry, dialogues, and fiction, and explore life themes and struggles. They are also stimulated to write in order to examine assumptions they have, and to try on or imagine new ones. They are stimulated to play and not focus on answers but on an evolving narrative of self.

Career writing is done in a group setting and although students may keep what they have written private, this is also a collaborative process: fresh texts are read aloud to one another, some partner work is done, and participants are invited to respond to another’s work. Tears regularly flow in the process of sharing, and there is often laughter in the learning space as well – in other words, where emotions are often ignored in educational settings, here they are welcomed and made useful.

As well, the career-writing course does not begin with the theory or concepts of why writing creatively and expressively is aimed at playfully changing entrenched identity narratives that have often trapped us in dualities of ‘autonomy’ or ‘determinism’ as discussed above. (Though students are often eager to learn what conceptual frameworks are behind the learning they are doing once they have an experiential base from which to view their writing work.) A structured journal-writing method using instrumental baroque music called proprioceptive writing (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002) is the first exercise used, as it focuses both on listening to what wants to be written and noticing what one writes, while asking the proprioceptive question, which is, ‘What do I mean by that...’ (e.g. What do I mean by ‘frustrated’? I mean ‘exhausted’ actually. What do I mean by ‘exhausted’? I mean that I don’t want to do it anymore). This exercise is the first encounter with one’s internal dialogue and while it gives freedom to express random thoughts, concerns, and whatever emerges, it also has a reflective component in the instruction to notice what is written and to inquire about what the writer actually means. This exercise sets the stage – or rather to use a fitting metaphor, it sets the initial parameters for the game or play. It does this in a way that is both structured (just as a sports field where we might play has painted lines and particular game rules), but also allows room to ‘run’ and try things out. This metaphorical playing field also allows room for emotions to be made fruitful because the proprioceptive question stimulates the unpacking of interpretive comments and results in more direct or concrete language.

## Metaphors of the self

Subsequent exercises become more structured, while always leaving room for imaginative expression. For instance in one exercise, students explore negative labels that they have heard said about them or they fear are true. While their tendency might be to ‘fix’ such a trait in themselves (voluntarism) or force some form of acceptance of it (determinism), they are asked instead to play. Instead of directly talking about a trait like, ‘pushy’ or ‘drama queen’ or ‘anti-social’ or the validity of such labels, they are asked to personify this trait: write about it as if it is a character with clothes, a particular way of looking, idiosyncratic habits, perhaps even a job (e.g. ‘pushy’ wears a red hat that has a wedge pointing forwards; it sits like an icebreaker on her head; she is a little anxious but doesn’t admit it; she works as a typist in the last office in the world where typists are still needed, and her life motto is ‘if I don’t get it done, who will?’).

Reading these aloud is fun, and in that sharing, some of the ‘stress’ of the label already disappears. It is indeed much less scary when this ‘being’ is brought fully on to the stage, than when we fear it is behind a kind of black curtain within our psyches, ready to jump out at some inopportune moment. One of the greatest benefits of this imaginative exercise is to see that this ‘negative trait’ is usually serving us in some way. It is most often innocent in its intent, but misguided by unexamined beliefs. As well, this inner character is but a single aspect of the self. By witnessing such an ‘I-position’ (see Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), the clenching around the label lifts – the creative space to play (e.g. to literally play a kind of psychological ‘dress up’ game) is liberating and provides meaningful insights. A person need not fix nor accept the trait, but rather can see it as an ally, a trickster, a resource, or an interesting stumbling block that was/is useful in some way – it is in fact likely that after writing, a person will experience these seemingly conflicting viewpoints ‘unified in a trait’, and can experience it as a creative and creating force.

This creative work has practical repercussions for agency – indeed to imagine fully such a ‘character’ can mean it can become part of the action in an act of repositioning (e.g. pushy becomes assertive and self-directed) or can, for instance, be kept at bay through self-care (e.g. I understand I can be pushy, so listening for what I’m afraid of not happening if I’m not pushy can be a useful first strategy).

The (optional) reading aloud of other work is a part of the dynamic of social play (Troop, 2017). Like children, a course participant is saying,

Look, I’m going to put on this play dress now and act out a part of me, and I want you to see me so I can better see myself too – and because this is just make-

belief, I will not be judged or condemned to the role permanently.

After a variety of exercises where childhood themes are explored, and students have worked playfully around issues that are often a source of pain or struggle, the course provides the theory of identity development through narrative (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). This is the level at which the dialogue becomes a kind of meta-logue and the players take to the stands and become part of the audience: they get to witness what they are enacting. The delight and revelation this witnessing often entails is moving to watch and frequently expresses itself in phrases like, ‘I did not know I was so scared’ or

The story I have been telling myself all my life is that *you shouldn't speak up* – while this can be and has been a deterrent in my work. I also see that I have honed the skill to choose words carefully. I wonder where this will show up again. Likely noticing it at play I can see when it is useful and when I have to be braver in voicing.

### The playing field as a ‘safe holding space’

It is important to note that the work of career writing is not primarily about yielding and expressing insights, but it is about the imaginative space to ‘try things on for size’ and to witness and be a witness to the other vulnerable players in the game. The others in the field become a point of reference as well as support. Participants frequently report ‘feeling very supported and heard’, noting that they are not alone in their struggles as others are dealing with their own life themes and fears. The safe space to play – Winnicott (2005) referred to this as a ‘holding environment’ – is an essential element to the success of the course (Lengelle & Ashby, 2017) as the facilitated process stimulates internal and external dialogue.

Our argument is not about having or not having ‘agency’, but rather about creating the play space so that agency is more likely to emerge. Perhaps paradoxically, career writing has no specific goal, though the enlarged imagination through play results in a sense of greater actual and symbolic space, which makes acting on goals and making work-related and life choices possible. Although a ‘second story’ created in a career-writing course can be a product of some kind (e.g. a Haiku, a script), the outcome of which is most likely to be a sense of experiencing one’s self and one’s life differently, as evolving and as more spacious and more full of possibility. At the same time, a clearer idea is developed about one’s individual direction and what others might contribute. These ‘outcomes’ give a narrative perspective on agency: the old story is felt as not having the same pull or salience, for instance, or an acceptance of circumstances feels

peaceful, though not without the possibility of new developments and living a new story. Indeed, there is a sense of space to take a step previously not imagined or dared – there is more room to play and learning is seen as a process and not as merely a desired destination.

### Conclusion

As argued above, living and working in liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000) is not easy, and agency is a concept regularly used to respond to the challenges. However, the term is either defined vaguely, made too instrumental within guidance practice, or conceptualized in dualistic ways. It seems in this context that there is a loss of ludic elements in culture. Stricter regulations, a fear of ‘strange’ cultures, and the dominance of the neoliberal model of humans as economic egoists, all contribute to this loss. This results in there being fewer opportunities for creative action, for example in the context of education, which is especially important as much of the preparation for life and work, including much of career counselling, takes place in school. Admittedly, formal education has never been very strong at fostering creativity and the development of imagination, as its dominant rationalist paradigm separated these from the ‘real’ learning of knowledge and skills. The emphasis present-day authorities place on test results and narrowly defined ‘21st century skills’, however, threatens even those initiatives that try to foster imagination in students and to integrate these with more classic ‘content’ orientation.

In an analysis of a number of industry disasters, Langemeyer (2015) has concluded that the consequences would have been less destructive if the operators involved had relied less on predefined protocols, had had more insight into the processes they were monitoring, and had been able to use this insight imaginatively and cooperatively. Knowledge and imagination are not separate things; they need to be integrated. And this has to be learned – preferably within an educational context. This implies that the present emphasis on knowledge and career management skills in education is precisely the wrong response to a world in which processes and work are increasingly complex. What we need is not less imagination, but more, coupled with knowledge that does not just reside in memory, but becomes part of one’s outlook on one’s self and the world. This integration of the ludic element in the emergence of agency is a big (yet inspiring) challenge, not just for education, but for our society as a whole.

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