A Bill Law Retrospective: Looking Back on the DOTS, Community Interaction, and Career Learning Theories

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It is a tremendous honour to speak at this seminar[1] on Bill Law. As the founding fellow of NICEC, Bill's ideas are central to NICEC and the evolution of career development in Britain and elsewhere. He's one of the main reasons NICEC is a society for career *education* and counselling.

It is also a considerable responsibility to speak today in front of family, friends, and colleagues. Bill influenced many people and each will have their own memories of him and views on his legacy. My selection this evening is inevitably partial, time-constrained to 20 minutes, and reflective of my own views and preferences. Members of the audience are very welcome to add their own memories and views in the chat box and we'll aim to share these too.

I think the last time I saw Bill was at a NICEC event. The roundtable discussion turned to the old chestnut of how career helpers can help clients with job interviews. A number of fairly routine suggestions were made. Then Bill added that he used to ask the client or student: 'How do you want to be remembered by the interviewers?' 'How would you like them to *remember* you?'.

That's a neat illustration of Bill's creative and unusual way of looking at things. It wasn't something I'd come across in the interview guides I'd read. I also found it quite moving both at the time and when I learned of his passing.

If I may, I'd like to share with you now how *I remember* Bill Law. Initially, in terms of the personal and then, as this is primarily a seminar, in terms of his intellectual contribution.

I remember him as an excellent speaker. Credible, warm, engaging. He could change the atmosphere in the room. I remember that he would sometimes speak to conferences and events in Essex where I first worked as a careers adviser. No matter how beleaguered and ground down we were by government directives and targets, he always helped us to see our work as useful, interesting, and important.

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[1] This is a slightly updated version of a talk delivered as part of the NICEC Seminar: A Bill Law Retrospective, 2 July 2020.

I remember him as a collegial and supportive person. He supported my early work, even though I was critical of the DOTS model (McCash, 2006). He also supported my fellowship nomination for NICEC and encouraged me to edit the NICEC journal.

I remember that *no one* writes like Bill Law! His distinctive style is rangy, engaging, and creative. He was a great reader, a polymath, with his work often marshalling reading from a very wide range of sources, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Koestler, or Jeanette Winterson. Occasionally, it became too much, but more often than not, it was an education. He also had a gift for memorable phrases. Who could forget, once they'd heard it, that career development is about 'who-does-what in society' (Law, 1981a p. 145), and, 'possible selves in possible futures' (p. 156)?

I remember Bill as a brilliant and preeminent career theorist whose work is of international importance. Those of us who write in the career development field can count ourselves lucky if we produce one influential set of ideas. Bill had the distinction of producing a hatful of seminal theories and papers. In this respect, he was like a British version of Donald Super. He assembled a range of theories over the years and it is perhaps only now that we can see how they all fit together and assess the scale of his achievement.

Three of these theories (DOTS, community interaction, and career learning) provide the focus of my talk. I will argue that his work responds to five central questions in career theory: the who, what, how, where, and why of career development. I will also very briefly discuss some limitations of his work but that is not my main focus today.

Decisions, Opportunity, Transitions, Self (DOTS)

Bill writes on DOTS in the book *School, Careers and Community* in collaboration with Tony Watts (Law & Watts, 1977). (Although Bill is very much associated with DOTS it was Tony Watts and Peter Daws who first developed the DOTS framework). Law and Watts make three key arguments in the book:

1/ The importance of career education:

> …careers education…ceases to see the school's central task as being that of providing diagnostic advisory services…instead…helping students develop the skills, and acquire the concepts and information, that will help them make decisions for themselves. This is not only a much more ambitious task; it is also a much more essentially educational one. For it focuses attention not on the diagnostic skill of the careers adviser, but on student learning.
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> (Law & Watts, 1977, p. 1).

2/ The tasks of career education:

Namely, self awareness, opportunity awareness, decision learning, and transition learning (DOTS). I'll return to these DOTS tasks very shortly.

3/ Guidance as a community enterprise:

They express some scepticism around teachers and careers professionals taking too much control in the education of children, arguing, 'the community has a right to participate in the upbringing of its young' (p. 11). They propose an integrated model where the career lead acts as a coordinator and facilitator of school and community resources and sources of help.

DOTS is a theory that finds a central role for learning. Each of the tasks in DOTS relate to learning particularly opportunity, decisions, and transitions.

DOTS is primarily a theory about the content i.e. the *what* of learning. It relates to coverage as Bill subsequently noted in the CPI model (Law, 2001).

It sees learning about the four key topics (self, opportunity, decision, and transition learning) taking place, yes, within the school and within the formal curriculum in explicitly designed lessons, but it also sees learning taking place outside of the formal curriculum in the everyday life of the school.

Even more significantly, it sees learning taking place outside the school itself. So, people are seen as learning about the four topics (self, opportunities, decisions and transitions) in wider community life, such as family life, and time with friends and peers outside the school gates.

So, in this sense, it is, like Bill's other theories, a very special kind of career theory because it is *both* descriptive i.e. makes claims about what happens, and practice-focused i.e. makes claims about what we should do to help.

It asserts that the important aspect of career we need to keep an eye on, is that people learn about self, opportunity, transitions, and decisions, through formal and informal learning inside and outside formal education. That's a claim about what happens – for good or ill.

But, at the same time, it is also what we used to call a model of guidance, because it makes claims about what career development work should aim to do and achieve. It is a claim about what we should do to help people.

In addition, it integrates and unites different forms of career development work such as one-to-one career interviews and group-based career lessons. It defines what those activities should be aiming to do *collectively*. It sets out the scope and content of those activities i.e. they should all work to facilitate self, opportunity, decision, and transition learning.

Not only that, it provides, to an extent, a framework for evaluating career education programmes. For example, Law and Watts (1977) found that the schools they studied tended to focus on opportunity awareness and neglect self awareness, transition, and decision learning.

So, DOTS does an awful lot for a relatively simple theory. It appeals to practitioners who want their theory to go a long way. Who want bangs for their bucks. It suggests that when we create theory in the future, as we must, it should be similarly useful. Rolls Royce analysis, with horse and cart practice will not be enough!

Finally, DOTS is synthetic, that is, it is made up of elements from existing career theories. The main ones cited are Holland's matching, Ken Robert's opportunity structure, and Super's self concept theories. Arguably, there's more of matching and opportunity structure in DOTS than anything, but the main point I'd like to argue here, for the career development professionals of the future, is that we need to help them be similarly creative in relation to designing the content of career education. Theory cannot supply a final proof as to the content of education but it can provide clues as to coverage.

Limitations

There are limits to the scope of DOTS and, even when it was first created, Tony Watts argued it only related to the exploration phase within Super's developmental model (Watts & Herr, 1976). Nowadays, we would further question the scope of coverage in DOTS. It no longer has the field to itself and there are lots of competing claims about career management. To name just a few, Herminia Ibarra has flipped DOTS on its head (Ibarra, 2002). Zella King has turned the focus to career management skills that are useful in the workplace (King, 2004). Tristram Hooley and others have argued there needs to be more focus on power in career education (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018)

There are also limits as to how far DOTS can be used to assess career education because it lacks an explicit attention to learning process.

Community Interaction

To an extent, these weaknesses begin to be addressed in Community Interaction theory. This is another synthetic theory. It attempts to find a middle way between opportunity structure and self concept theory. Additionally, it draws from a wide range of other sources including Basil Bernstein's sociology of education and R.J. Roberts' interactionist career theory.

Community Interaction theory adds four elements: motivation; interaction; the range of communities; and modes of community influence (expectations, feedback, support, modelling, and information). It's argued that, through these four elements, we learn about self, opportunities, decisions, and transitions.

I remember inviting Bill to speak with my students when I first started lecturing on training courses for career development practitioners. He delivered a great talk and the students loved him. I recall him saying that there are two interviews when a client goes for a job. First, there's the informal interview with the client's family and peers when they first discuss possibly going for the job. Then, there's the formal interview with the company. If the client can't get past the informal interview, they never even make it to the formal one. So, our work needs to help clients with both types of interaction: the informal and the formal.

Community Interaction adds some social learning process, but the main contribution is to expand the *scope of contents* – the *what* of learning. Time and again I've witnessed practitioners do great work by simply enabling clients to map their communities and influences using a version of the simple grid included in Bill's paper (Table 1). It can be used across the social spectrum in inner city schools, private schools, universities, the workplace and informal contexts. It enables clients to reflect on their biography so far, learn from the biographies of others, and work out what to keep or change. It avoids taking a decontextualised, individualized, and culture-free approach to self-awareness.

		Range of Communities					
		Family	Neighbourhood	Peer groups	Ethnic groups	Education	Workplace
Influences	Expectations						
	Feedback						
	Support						
	Modelling						
	Information						

Table 1

Community Interaction highlights the role of place in career development – the *where* of learning. Those places include family spaces, neighbourhood, education, and work. In his later formulation, this extended to places on the world wide web.

The theory highlights the role of people in career development – the *who* of learning. Those people include: parents, extended family, neighbourhood contacts, peer groups, ethnic groups, educational staff, and work colleagues. The inclusion of people and places allows the exploration and acknowledgment of relational and emotional dimensions in career development work.

Community Interaction consistently flagged up the importance of culture and the role of class, gender, and ethnicity. Bill was influenced by Ken Roberts' and Basil Bernstein's work on class, for sure, but perhaps most significant was the influence of cultural studies. Paul Willis's *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* is returned to repeatedly by Bill because it draws from lived experience to show how the cultural celebration of a group of working class youngsters leads to the factory gates.

Ethnicity is also strong theme in Community Interaction. Ethnic group is identified as one of the key communities we are all part of. We are asked to reflect on the ways in which ethnicity relates to expectations, feedback, support, modelling, and information and is mediated by the other communities we form a part of.

At the same time, Bill was always cautious about simply reducing people to a class, gender, or ethnic category. He was more interested in the ways that the five modes of community influence could, in his words, "lead to occupational achievement which 'big-picture' sociological categories do not predict" (Law, 1981a, p. 150).

Lastly, in terms of the discipline as a whole, Community Interaction theory *brings career development home*. It relocates career development within the interactionist sociological tradition that gave birth to the study of career in the pioneering Chicago school of sociology in the 1920s and 1930s (Hughes, 1928, 1937; Shaw 1930/1966, 1931). This is most evident in the title of Community *Interaction* theory – that word interaction. It can also be seen in his drawing from R.J. Roberts' (1980) interactionist paper – credited by Bill as 'the closest approach to the formulation of community-interaction theory' (Law, 1980, p. 150). Law also cited George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and the symbolic interactionist tradition in his chapter on theory in *Career Development in Britain* (1981b).

It is perhaps no accident that, on final publication, Donald Super's famous Life-Career Rainbow had a more sociological and specifically interactionist flavour than originally conceived (Super, 1980). His time with NICEC fellows, including Bill, in the late 1970s helped to move it in that direction[2]. I speculate that the more sociological bent of career thinking in Britain, particularly

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[2] For background, Super took up a research programme with NICEC in the UK between 1976 and 1979 with the help of a grant from the Leverhulme Trust (Watts, 1981). Super (1980, p. 282-3) stated that the final version of the

the interactionist variant endorsed by Bill Law and R.J. Roberts, rekindled Super's earlier engagement with the interactionist ideas of Clifford Shaw, Everett Hughes, and George Herbert Mead[3]. Structure certainly features in the Life-Career Rainbow but the main thrust of it relates to life spaces and life roles. In any event, there are strong points of connection between Community Interaction theory and the Life-Career Rainbow approach.

Limitations

Nowadays, there are more extensive approaches to the topics raised by Bill's paper. A good example is provided by Wendy Patton and Mary McMahon's (2014) mapping exercise called My System of Career Influences. Having said that, there is something about the simplicity of Bill's grid that practitioners and clients still find very accessible and useful.

Space and place have recently been taken up by Rosie Alexander in her work linking geography and career development (Alexander, 2018).

Community interaction could also say more about how people learn and it is to this that I will turn next.

Career Learning

Career Learning is a theory about learning processes. It relates to the *how* of learning. It describes four dimensions of learning (sensing, sifting, focusing, and understanding).

It's another synthetic career theory - informed by Krumboltz's social learning theory and Hodkinson & Sparkes careership theory.

Its main claim to fame is that it is the first career theory to be thoroughly grounded in learning theories. For sure, the social learning, social cognitive, and information processing theories from the USA predated it but these were rather narrowly based in theoretical terms. There were also learning theories emerging with a career dimension (e.g. Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991) but Career Learning is a thoroughgoing attempt to bridge career studies and mainstream

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Life-Career Rainbow changed in important respects from its original conception in or around 1975. He indicated it was enhanced to more explicitly include personal and social influences on career decisions, the occupation of career positions, and the playing of roles. He gratefully acknowledged the contributions of participants at the weekly NICEC Career Development Research Seminar in the evolution of his thinking and the contributions of A.D. Crowley, Jennifer Kidd, Bill Law, and A.G. Watts and others were identified.

[3] Private communication between the author and individuals who were present at the NICEC research seminars indicated at least two contrasting interpretations and recollections. One suggesting that Super's openness to ideas was limited as he was suffering from ill health during his time in the UK. Another suggesting that the seminar debates were lively with sociological perspectives on career recurring as a main topic. It was felt that Super was very influenced by the more sociological orientation of his British colleagues and that their role in shaping his thinking could have been given even greater recognition.

educational theory. It is constructed from a wide range of learning theories including those of Jean Piaget, Jack Mezirow, George Kelly, and Sara Meadows.

It also recognises that learning is not monolithic but textured. There is progression in learning from sensing information – what other theory includes the smell and taste of career? - to making comparisons and anticipating consequences. There is a movement from private constructs to public concepts. There is also epistemological progression from the 'god's own truth' of facts and rules to dealing with points of view and developing one's own stance. Something he memorably describes as confronting 'the discomfort zones' and avoiding 'living dangerously' (Law, 1996, p. 63).[4]

The issue of gender stereotyping is discussed in Career Learning. Bill traces how impressions about gender and work are initially formed, recognized, reflected on, and changed.

Career Learning makes space for meaning and purpose – the *why* of learning. This is discussed earlier in Community Interaction in relation to motivation. Career Learning takes this further in relation to narrative. As people gather information through sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste, they assemble what they find into sequences called stories. For example, information about roles such as customer, shopkeeper, parents, and friends is assembled into stories that link these roles in dramatic episodes. (Hazel Reid will discuss narrative in more depth later in this seminar.)

Law's interest in narrative is not, however, confined to the immediately interpersonal. He saw all forms of culture as stories and therefore viable community resources. This included classical literature, philosophy, biography, TV shows, movies, novels, and songs. He wrote that, 'literature from classical myth to television soap opera – offers other people's stories as a clue to our own… (Law, 1996, p. 63). And that, 'people should be helped, through reflection on their own and other people's biographies, to become their own career development theoreticians... (Law, 1996, p. 65).

This last quotation really throws down the gauntlet to career development practitioners and tests our commitment to pluralism and learning goals. We need to design careers work that enables clients to develop their own ideas. In the final analysis, the sign that we're doing great work *might be* that our clients end up disagreeing with us!

Limitations

Career Learning theory certainly had an impact in the UK and elsewhere, for example in careers work in schools, colleges, and youth centres. It could not fully displace the dominance of the American learning tradition based on Bandura and Hunt. For example, social cognitive theory is

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[4] I have slightly revised here the phrasing used in the actual seminar to more faithfully represent Bill's meaning based on my subsequent rereading of the relevant section in his chapter.

now in the ascendancy. This is perhaps because the American tradition is more counselling-based than pedagogic?

Career Learning is possibly more focused on learning in children and young people than adults so its application more widely was limited.

The main paper on Career Learning (Law, 1996) is very learned but quite a dense read. In a later paper, Bill linked the four dimensions of Career Learning to learning verbs and improved the practical utility of the model (Law, 2001, p. 21).

Final Thoughts…

Bill Law was an original and creative thinker who helped to revolutionise the theory and practice of career development work by giving it a more sociological and educational basis.

He never felt that theories were eternal. He argued we need to continually harvest the insights of the past and *make it new* for the times we live in.

I've been working with NICEC fellows Pete Robertson and Tristram Hooley on a new book entitled the *Oxford Handbook of Career Development*. Our starting point was *Rethinking Careers Education and Guidance* with which Bill was heavily involved.

One of my chapters draws on Bill's work to develop a cultural learning theory linked to the five questions identified earlier: the who, what, how, where, and why of career development (McCash, 2020).

Another contributor, Julia Yates, draws on career learning theory to develop an integrative approach to career theory (Yates, 2020).

These are our attempts to build on Bill's legacy…

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