

Looking Back to Move Forward: A Career Life-Role Constellation Exercise in a Theory-Inspired Capstone Course

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic presented opportunities for higher education institutions to reimagine career services programs, at curricular and co-curricular levels, in order to better support students as they navigate new career possibilities and challenges. In response, a university senior career capstone course's final class session was redesigned to encourage career adaptability for students. The class session incorporated components from traditional and contemporary career development theories: Super's notion of Life-Roles; Savickas' Career Construction Theory; Niles, Amundson, and Yoon's Hope-Action Theory; and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. Integrating theories into curriculum inspired a career constellation activity that enabled graduating students to draw connections between key life roles and events, and engage in group discussions and individual reflections to identify their immediate way(s) forward after undergraduate studies. Preliminary quantitative and qualitative data are shared, along with limitations and future directions for research and practice.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced not only a new virus and way of living to the world, it also significantly impacted people's career trajectories. Notably, people began to experience novel career-related considerations for all workers including the need to reassess priorities to minimize colliding life roles, coping with long-term chronic effects from contracting the virus, and navigating the world of hybrid working and learning, to name a few. Impacts on career success are exacerbated for those who are not yet in the permanent workforce, such as post-secondary students. Concerns around an uncertain labour market and how to best leverage educational skills and experience (Günay, 2022; Haekal et al., 2021; Hooley, 2022) are most noteworthy. Perhaps of key concern is growing evidence for a direct connection between pandemic-induced uncertainty and the rapid increase of disclosed student mental health issues (Chen et al., 2020; Evans et al., 2021; Zimmermann et al., 2021).

In early 2022, the author of this article was teaching a senior career capstone course at two teaching universities in Canada. Throughout the pandemic, she remained curious about how to best leverage this popular course to help students navigate their careers in this new normal by developing greater self-awareness, self-confidence, and a clear sense of what their immediate next steps could be to effectively ladder into their profession of choice. She saw opportunities to emphasize the notions of life roles (Super, 1980) and hope (Niles et al., 2019) as important elements to consider in students' career development management process. Furthermore, responding to Schlesinger et al.'s (2022) call for the career development profession to better articulate how career development theories inform career courses and curricula (Reese & Miller, 2006), she also began to identify the theories she employed in course design and components.

In this article, the author describes a curricular experiment conducted in January to April 2022, where several career development theories were used to inform the design and

implementation of the final class session of the senior career capstone course. Initial student reception is shared, along with future directions and recommendations.

“We Want Meaning and Inspiration”: Significance of the Final Class Session

The senior career capstone course typically spans 13 weeks over the course of a four-month semester with a combination of weekly asynchronous content and monthly synchronous classes. While the final class session is designed to wrap-up key concepts learned in the course, it also presents an opportunity for faculty teaching the course to develop and facilitate additional learning they determine to be valuable and relevant for students during that semester. Such learning also tends to align with the individual faculty’s discipline and expertise. Past final classes have discussed topics from mental health, intersectionality, equity, diversity, and inclusion, social and emotional intelligence, and building a lifelong professional network.

Students in the senior career capstone course faced tremendous barriers in the winter of 2022. A historic natural disaster devastated the institution’s local region in November 2021, resulting in emergency evacuations that disrupted course delivery and learning. Furthermore, the COVID-19 Omicron variant strain became rampant in the beginning of 2022, and as a result, the synchronous classes, originally intended to be delivered in-person, moved to an online delivery over Zoom. Recognizing these unexpected events as external stressors impacting student wellbeing, the author solicited student ideas on what they wished to learn and to do as part of their final class session. These conversations indicated a collective desire from students to conclude the course on a hopeful yet practical note, where they could generate individual insights to inspire momentum, while given ample time to connect and learn from one another.

Theories as Inspiration and Grounding

Student feedback shaped the final class session, where the core activity – a career constellation exercise – was inspired and grounded by multiple career development theories, both traditional and contemporary. These theories are briefly outlined in this section. A student scenario is also provided to illustrate how each theory may interpret the student’s context and circumstance.

Super’s Concept of Life Roles

Though conceived over seven decades ago (Super, 1953), Super’s notion of Life Roles continues to hold relevance in present day circumstances. The pandemic provided an opportunity for people to examine the life roles they play, and consider the levels of salience each role holds within individual (e.g., alignment with personal values) and environmental contexts (e.g., societal and cultural expectations). Furthermore, the pandemic amplified Super’s notion of role conflict as people grapple with living multiple life roles concurrently and strive to find ways to reduce strain and/or increase complementarity as life roles interact with one another. For instance, an undergraduate student with family members suffering from long-term health implications from contracting COVID is faced with additional household responsibilities. This additional life role as a caretaker can provide lived experience and insights to their studies in Health Sciences (life role complementarity), while potentially delaying their plan to pursue graduate studies (life role collision). The role of career development professionals, then, is to help individuals examine their life circumstances, identify and navigate these complements and collisions, and to make informed, holistic life decisions based on the life roles they take on rather than a single life role.

Savickas' Career Construction Theory

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2013) is not just about the story that an individual tells, but also how the story is told. The description of a client's role and context is important, and Savickas identified three roles that depict the self as: actor, agent, and author. He posits that these roles progress over one's life span, from seeing oneself as an actor and developing a sense of identity through early familial interactions; viewing oneself as an agent through accomplishing life milestones (e.g., graduation); to perceiving oneself as author of their own story by deriving meaning from their lived experiences. A career development professional working with the Health Sciences student from the previous example might listen for the ways that the student describes their situation and new circumstance as a caretaker in relation to the three roles and devise suitable interventions accordingly. Career Construction has been applied as a theoretical lens to generate insights into job seekers' career experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, from examining the social justice issues amongst young precarious workers (Santilli et al., 2021), informing work-integrated learning curricula (Andrews & Ramji, 2020), to evaluating a career counselling course (Gülşen et al., 2021).

Niles, Amundson, & Yoon's Hope-Action Theory

Hope-Action Theory (Niles et al., 2019; Niles et al., 2020a) and its seven competencies (hopefulness, self-reflection, self-clarity, visioning, goal setting and planning, implementing, and adapting) have been extensively used across multiple contexts, most recently with COVID as a backdrop (Niles et al., 2020b; Yoon et al., 2021). The theory embraces the idea that cultivating a sense of hope "empowers people to consider the possibilities in any situation and propels them to take action...Without hope, however, people would simply give up when encountering obstacles

(and everyone encounters obstacles to their goals)" (Niles et al., 2019, p. 284-285). Applying this theoretical lens to the Health Sciences student's scenario would help them examine their context, values and motivations, level of hope for the future, and identify and take steps toward their preferred future. The theory normalizes everyday obstacles as a reality, such as the aftermath of COVID, and empowers individuals to devise ways to instill hope in order to mobilize action.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Schlossberg's (1981; Anderson et al., 2011) Transition Theory provides definitions to different types of events that signify transition, and emphasized the importance of looking at people's individual reactions to these events based on their context and lived experiences. Examining one's life and identifying moments as *expected* (events that are predicted to take place, such as graduation), *unexpected* (events that are not predicted, such as an untimely death of a family member due to COVID), and *non-events* (events that were expected but did not happen, such as anticipating a promotion but not receiving it) can help clients reflect on the role each moment has served in their life to date, and consider how each moment has shaped the person they are today. Furthermore, the theory articulated four interconnected elements that influence one's ability to cope with the transition at hand. Commonly known as the 4S model, they are self, situation, strategies, and support. Walking the Health Sciences student through the 4S model and having them identify elements under the four components can help them gain a holistic view of their new reality, as well as personal and environmental resources they can leverage for assistance.

Theory-driven Practice: Creating Career Constellations

The theories mentioned above informed the creation of a career constellation exercise, which became the core activity during the final

class session. At the beginning of the course, Magnusson’s (2017) definition of career as “a constellation of life roles an individual plays over their lifetime. It’s their life story” (p. 13) was adapted as a common definition, in order to expand a typical perspective that career only pertains to work and occupation. The definition alluded to Super’s notion of Life Roles and Savickas’ notion of authorship through the self-depiction of one’s life story. The two latter theories – Hope-Action and Transition Theories – informed the reflection and discussion elements of the exercise where students derived insights from their constellations and identified strategies toward post-university success. Therefore, during the final class, it was fitting for students to conclude the course with crafting their own career constellations to date.

The career constellation exercise consisted of several steps:

1. In preparation for the final class session, students were given instructions two weeks in advance to create their career constellations.

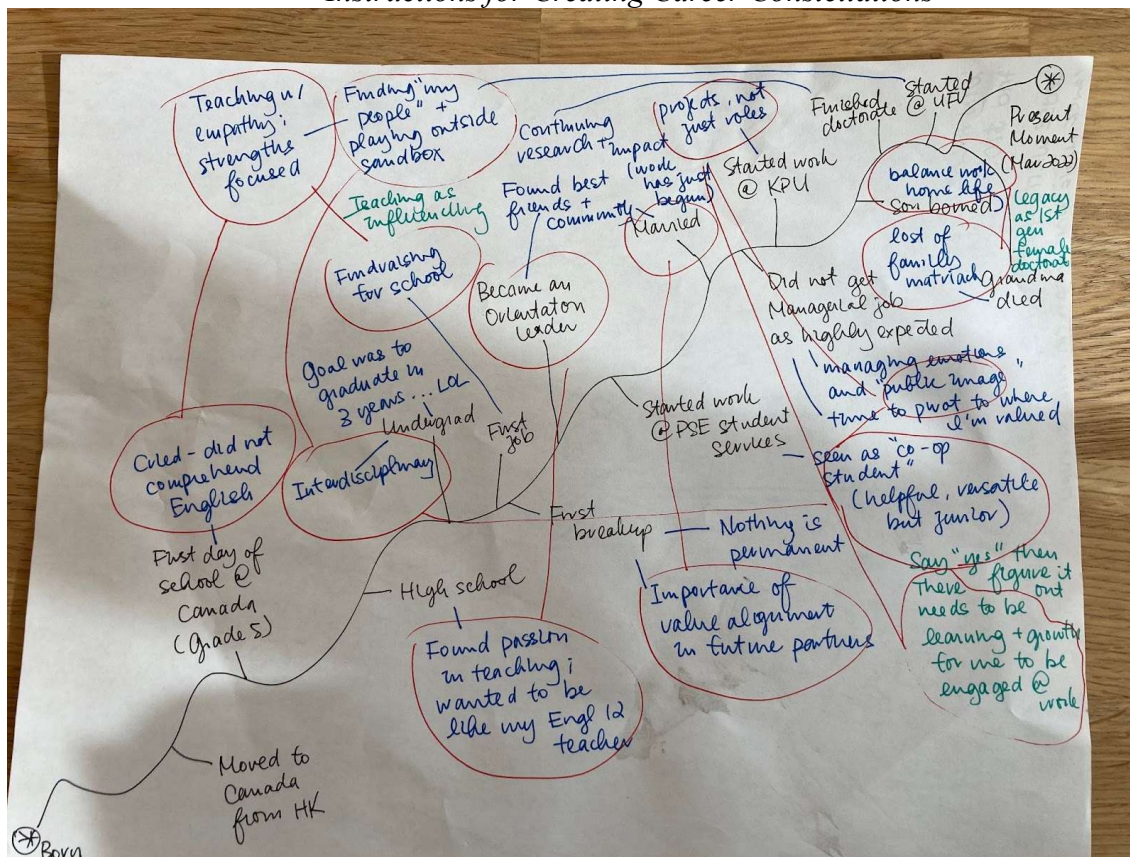
2. During class, in small groups, students engaged in a storytelling activity by highlighting key roles and/or events from their constellation. Then the whole class reflected on this storytelling activity.

3. Individually, students compose a final reflection on the overall constellation creation and sharing experience, identifying strategies to enhance resilience and adaptability.

Step 1: Creating Career Constellations

Prior to the final class, students were given instructions (Figure 1) to create a career constellation in advance so they can bring their creations to class.

Figure 1
Instructions for Creating Career Constellations



In this course, we've been examining career as a constellation of your life roles and experiences. As we conclude the course, I'd like you to craft your career constellation that you will share during our final class together. Creating your career constellation should take no more than 1.5 hours. Below I've included an example of my own constellation for your reference.

Guidelines

1. There is no right way to construct your constellation as you are the author of your story here.
2. As this activity can become very personal, only include and share what you are comfortable.
3. Based on the personal sample I have provided, artistic skills are also not necessary (I think the messiness mirrors the chaos we often experience in life, don't you?), although it might be helpful to construct your constellation in different colours. You are welcome to draw by hand or use technology to construct your submission.

Instructions

1. Begin with drawing two stars on opposite ends: The first is the day you were born, and the second, the present moment. Connect these stars with a line.
2. What do you see as key life roles and defining events in your life so far? Consider things such as: proud achievements, chance meetings and conversations, and failures. Put these as stars along the line.
3. Annotate each life role and/or event and defining moment by considering:

- a. Why is the role and/or event significant for you?
 - b. What has it taught you in terms of skills, attributes, and life lessons?
 - c. Your responses become additional stars that branch out from your role/event.
4. Review your constellation as a whole.
 - a. If there are connections you can make between roles/events, highlight these connections.
 - b. Bring yourself back to the present moment. How have you carried your learning (of skills, attributes, and life lessons)? Note your insights as you see fit in your constellation.
 5. Along the way, capture any aha moments that occur to you as you will be sharing your constellation and reflections with your peers during class.

With their constellation ready, students came to the final class session ready to share their constellation. Figure 2 shows an example of a student career constellation in three snapshots; permission was obtained from the student to share for this article.

In the first three snapshots, the student, Craig, reflected in an earlier part of his life and identified a cycle of trying out and giving up on activities, such as learning French, starting a band, trying out theatre and soccer (first snapshot). The cycle left him feeling disconnected and as described in his second snapshot, desperate “to find passion or purpose” (second snapshot). Finally, in the third snapshot, Craig came to attribute his diverse experience and skills set to getting his first job at a school, which in turn helped him realize his passion for teaching.

Figure 2
Snapshots of a Student Career Constellation





Step 2: Stargazing and Storytelling

Figure 3 details a storytelling activity where each student was given the opportunity to highlight two roles and/or events from their constellation, and for their peers to react to their stories. Once everyone had the opportunity to tell stories from their constellation, the whole

class debriefed the experience (Figure 4). The reflective questions were inspired by the Appreciative Inquiry approach (AI Commons, 2022) to help students recognize the best in themselves, and identify the strengths and possibilities around them and the circumstances they face.

Figure 3

Instructions for the Storytelling Activity

1. Begin by assembling into groups of three or four peers.
2. Ask for a volunteer from the group to facilitate the activity.
3. Each person takes turns being a storyteller and shares two key roles/events from their constellation. How do these roles/events shape the person they are today?
4. Each group member then shares with the storyteller:
 - a. In what ways did the stories resonate with them?
 - b. Highlight qualities and skills they learn about the storyteller.
 - c. Offer a gift: What advice do they have to help the storyteller move forward with their journey beyond undergraduate studies?

Note: Steps 3 and 4 for each person should take approximately 10-12 minutes.

Figure 4

Debriefing Questions for the Storytelling Activity (20 minutes)

1. What was the best part of your discussion?
2. Why do you think you are being asked to create a career constellation in this course, and to share its elements during our class?

3. In what ways might this creation and sharing process help with your post-university transition?

Step 3: Projecting the Future

Earlier in the course, the class was introduced to Schlossberg's (1981; Anderson et al., 2011) Transition Theory, and in particular, the 4S framework of self, situation, strategies, and support and how it can be applied to their

post-university transition. In the final class session, they learned about the types of events that result in transitions: anticipated events, unanticipated events, and non-events. Then, students completed a written reflection and share their final insights with their classmates (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Instructions for the Final Reflection (10 minutes; students can take more time after class to complete)

1. Revisit the two stories you shared and identify their event types. How did you make the best out of each situation?
2. Having reflected on your own story and learned from others, what strategies will you use now to remain resilient and adaptable beyond your undergraduate studies?
3. Be ready to share your reflections in small groups.

Initial Student Reception and Feedback

As this was the first time this final class session and the career constellation activity was facilitated, preliminary quantitative and qualitative data were gathered to gain insights into how students experienced the class and what they felt were useful, in order to inform future iterations. A simple, anonymous, online Zoom poll question was issued at the end of the class session asking students: "On a scale of 0-5, with 0 being not useful at all and 5 being extremely useful, how useful was this class in helping you identify strategies to support your transition beyond university?" Eighty-six responses were collected from a total of 102 students (80% response rate), and resulted in an overall average score of 4.70, indicating that a high number of students found the final class session to be useful.

Anonymous comments were also collected in a post-course questionnaire issued to all students during the last week of the course using the institution's learning management system. One of the questions asked: "What was the most valuable aspect of our final class, and why?" A simple thematic survey of the comments was

conducted where main theme(s) were identified from each comment. Three main themes emerged from reviewing 65 student comments (64% response rate); quotations were extracted that represented each theme.

Some students found value in being able to connect their past and present life roles and events, in order for them to pave the way for their future, as indicated by one student's statement:

I now know that my desire to go into teaching was due to a bunch of experiences. Not only did teaching run in my family, but I continued to be inspired by great teachers I had along the way, and teachers whom,,,[sic] lets [sic] just say have become what not to do examples. Talking with my fellow students through my constellation has me fired up even more to pursue the TEP [Teacher Education Program].

Others expressed initial skepticism with the final class session, but as the learning process unfolded, were also able to discover patterns from their constellation to inspire confidence and hope. One student wrote:

I didn't at first see the value of drawing my constellation and tbh [to be honest] thought it was a waste of time. But then it helped me see how every time I face a challenge in my life, I muster strength and courage to get back up and try again. Although I still feel apprehensive toward life after graduation, I feel more confident than before that I will get through this, just like I have in previous times.

Finally, students appreciated one final opportunity to connect with one another, and through doing so, identified strategies and supports to overcome common challenges as part of their post-university transition process. Two students expressed the following:

Thank you for closing our class so beautifully. I appreciate the chance to talk with my peers about what we're about to go through [graduation] and learning I'm not alone in feeling anxious. We exchanged emails and plan to stay in touch and support one another - this was important for me because it has been hard to make connections in online learning.

This lecture was particularly inspiring to me. While I still don't fully see the big picture of what I want to do post-grad, I've come to learn in this course and talking with my peers who are on the same boat, that uncertainty is okay and in fact might not be a bad thing. I know my NEXT RIGHT THING and from there I can build on it.

The original intent of this final class session was to help students conclude the course feeling hopeful with practical strategies they could immediately implement, and provide a safe space to share their stories with, and generate advice for, one another. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data, albeit preliminary, showed promise in the final class session and the career constellation activity.

Students in general benefited from the learning experience in that they were able to uncover implicit connections from their constellation, instill hope and confidence as they continue to face uncertainty, and connect with each other through shared experiences.

Next Steps and Future Considerations

The final class session and the career constellation activity had drawn from several career development theories: Super's concept of Life Roles, Savickas' Career Construction Theory, Niles, Amundson, and Yoon's Hope-Action Theory, and Schlossberg's Transition Theory. The combination of theoretical elements facilitated a curricular opportunity for students to map out their life trajectory, identify milestones, lessons, and skills they have developed along the way, and contemplate strategies they will employ to pave the way for the future. Under a safe environment, they shared their learning with one another, further harnessing the power of community by vicariously learning from one other and generating collective wisdom.

With respect to facilitation, those interested in adapting the class session and activity might consider two things. To provide further context on the theoretical components and in turn, raise the profile of the career development theories that inspired the class, faculty may provide supplementary readings on those theories as a primer prior to the class session. The theories and concepts can also be woven throughout the course to provide students with ample opportunities to become familiar with them, so that during the final class session they can see how the theories can be applied, and, if appropriate, offer their own interpretation to strengthen their theoretical understanding. Secondly, while this did not happen in the winter of 2022 class session, for some students, recalling life roles and key events might be a traumatic experience, and therefore, access and referrals to counselling support should be

incorporated in the instructions and readily available during the class session.

There is much potential to replicate and adapt this final class session and career constellation activity, especially since this was a single curricular occurrence in one country. Therefore, replications and assessment on this, and across different countries and professional contexts (i.e., not-for-profit agencies), is recommended. A pre and post-assessment could be implemented to provide a snapshot of students' collective sentiments about their pending transition. The pre-assessment, for instance, can be issued when students are in their second or third year – the midpoint of their undergraduate studies – and then again after this course to see how their feelings and thoughts have evolved as they prepare for graduation.

Though preliminary student feedback indicates the class session and activity to be valuable, more full-scale, empirical studies are needed to substantiate these initial results. Future studies might wish to explore longer-term effects of the constellation activity, for example, three to six months after students' graduation. To what extent did creating and discussing their constellation help students identify and fulfill their immediate career goals after graduation? Instill hope and confidence? Identify and execute strategies to enhance career success? Exploring these questions will provide insights to long-term impact of this theory-driven curricular intervention.

Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic becomes normalized as a daily reality, the roles that career development professionals serve – whether it is teaching, advising, program facilitation, etc. – continues to help individuals consider how to live fuller lives by aligning career decisions with shifting priorities and personal values. This article featured one way a faculty member took to incorporate career development theories into her course, and the promising impact this incorporation had on her students. Career

development professionals hold an important responsibility to assist individuals in connecting between past and current life roles, devising success strategies to navigate evolving circumstances, so that they can pave the way forward for themselves. This calls for career development professionals to remain current with traditional and contemporary career development theories to inform their helping approach. Doing so benefits not only clients who receive high quality interventions supported by well-researched theories, but also enhances credibility for the individual profession and collectively our growing field.

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