ISSN: 2710-0588

The Implications of Career Construction Theory for the Paradigm Shift of Employment Education in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

Amid growing uncertainty in the labour market and increasingly blurred occupational boundaries, university employment education in China, which has long centred on person-job matching and graduate employment-rate management, is caught in a dual predicament of weakening explanatory power and growing disconnection from practice. Career Construction Theory (CCT), built on the three pillars of occupational personality, career adaptability and life themes, conceives of a career as a process in which individuals actively generate meaning through narrative and action within changing contexts. Starting from the theoretical connotation of CCT, this paper examines the deep-seated limitations of the traditional paradigm of employment education, and argues that university employment education should shift from static matching to dynamic becoming, from administrative management to meaning construction, and from standardised output to subjective narrative. On this basis, the paper reconstructs the educational philosophy, curriculum logic, advising relationship and evaluation mechanism of employment education, so as to provide a theoretical foundation for employment education as an integral part of student development.

Keywords

Career construction theory; University employment education; Paradigm shift; Career adaptability; Narrative; Development-oriented employment education.

1. Introduction: The Triple Dilemma of the Traditional Paradigm

Over several decades, employment education in Chinese universities has evolved from the early practice of job dispatch and administrative formalities into career planning and employment guidance. Yet its underlying logic still bears the distinct imprint of the industrial age, and this logic is now showing its limits in three respects.

First, the matching logic is static. Traditional practice relies on assessment instruments such as the Holland code, the MBTI and career anchors, and presupposes a linear sequence in which students first identify themselves and are then matched to positions. Such a sequence was defensible when occupational structures were stable; today, as new occupations continuously emerge and the life cycle of single jobs shortens, students are labelled before they ever enter the workplace, and their malleability and capacity to adapt to changing situations are systematically underestimated.

Second, the management orientation is administrative. Employment work is often compressed into signing rates, destination-confirmation rates and the number of recruitment talks held. Students figure in this system as objects to be placed rather than as authors of their own careers, employment education degenerates into information delivery and procedural service, and its educational substance is diluted.

Third, the production of meaning is hollowed out. Courses focus on CV writing, interview techniques and policy interpretation, and rarely touch on fundamental questions such as why I choose, what work means to me, or how to settle oneself amid uncertainty. Students learn to

ISSN: 2710-0588

submit applications but dare not choose; technical training has taken the place of value construction.

The root of these dilemmas lies not in the inadequacy of particular methods but in a mismatch at the paradigmatic level: the certainty of outcomes is being managed while the uncertainty of careers is left unaddressed. Career Construction Theory offers an entry point for reconstructing this epistemology.

2. Career Construction Theory: Core Connotations and Educational Implications

Mark L. Savickas integrated constructivist psychology with career development theory at the end of the last century and proposed Career Construction Theory. Its fundamental stance is that a career is not an object to be discovered but a work that is narrated, enacted and repeatedly revised. By weaving scattered experiences into coherent stories, adapting to present circumstances and imagining future possibilities, individuals continuously generate their occupational identity.

2.1. Occupational personality: what is constructed

Unlike trait approaches, which treat personality as a fixed set of scores, CCT understands occupational personality as a repertoire of adaptive strategies formed through culture, family and educational experience, that is, a dynamic configuration of needs, interests, abilities and values. It does not pursue a standard answer; it examines how students mobilise their own resources in concrete situations.

2.2. Career adaptability: how it is constructed

Career adaptability is the core variable of the theory and comprises four dimensions: concern, the capacity to form a future-oriented intention; control, the readiness to accept responsibility for one's own choices; curiosity, the willingness to explore oneself and the occupational world; and confidence, the ability to sustain action in the face of setbacks. Adaptability is not the ability to find the right position, but the ability to set out again and again amid change.

2.3. Life themes: why it is constructed

Through narrative, individuals link fragmented experiences into a meaningful storyline. Life themes explain why I choose as I do, and lift occupational choice above salary and status towards self-identity and social connection.

In short, CCT turns employment education from handing out a map into teaching exploration: it no longer promises a fixed track, but cultivates in students the capacity to travel through the unknown carrying their own stories.

3. The Logic of the Paradigm Shift: From Matching and Management to Becoming and Narrative

Four layers of logical migration can be derived from the foregoing analysis.

3.1. Ontology: from a fixed self to a self in the making

The traditional paradigm assumes that students possess an essential self which education must first identify and then place. CCT holds instead that the self emerges in action: students do not think matters through before setting out, but grow clearer through trial, reflection and re-narration. Education must therefore make room for an unfinished state and turn the career plan from a final draft into a working draft.

ISSN: 2710-0588

3.2. Epistemology: from theory first to experience embedded

The matching paradigm is organised around lecturing concepts, so that students memorise the RIASEC typology without ever having seen a real workshop or office. The constructivist paradigm holds that knowledge grows out of situated experience and narrative reflection: industry exposure comes first and theoretical frameworks are brought to bear afterwards; what I have lived through comes first, and what suits me is discussed only afterwards.

3.3. Axiology: from employment outcomes to career meaning

The employment rate is merely an external indicator. The real measure of quality is whether students can make autonomous, responsible and humane choices in complex circumstances. Employment education thus returns to its very substance as moral education: its task is not to deliver people into jobs but to enable them to locate value in work.

3.4. Methodology: from assessment-based referral to co-constructed narrative

Teachers cease to act as fortune-tellers or information clerks. Through career interviews, story reconstruction and project review they help students connect fractured experience into a continuous narrative. The language of advising shifts from you should take the civil service examination to what keywords keep recurring in the internship story you have just told.

4. Constructing the New Paradigm of Employment Education

Under the guidance of the theory, employment education can be reconstructed along five dimensions.

4.1. Reconstructing the philosophy: development-oriented employment education

The administrative functions of documentation and statistics are retained but embedded in a developmental logic: management is the baseline, education the higher aim. The career centre should be transformed from a placement office into a career development support system, working in coordination with student affairs, academic affairs and the faculties rather than operating in isolation.

4.2. Reconstructing the curriculum: from writing a plan to a narrative-action cycle

The curriculum can be organised in three layers. The self-narrative layer uses achievement events, family influences and turning points to distil life themes. The world-exploration layer is built on the fourfold cognition of major, industry, occupation and enterprise, and carries out project-based field inquiry. The adaptability-training layer hones concern, control, curiosity and confidence through simulated and authentic tasks. Assessment values not how beautifully the plan is written, but whether students can account for the story logic behind their choices.

4.3. Reconstructing the advising relationship: from authoritative direction to accompanying co-construction

Counsellors and career advisors become co-constructors of narrative: they question rather than instruct, and listen rather than judge. Especially in situations such as delayed employment, retaking the postgraduate entrance examination, or hesitation about grassroots employment, advisors first seek to understand the student's story and only then discuss options, so as to avoid individualising and pathologising structural difficulties.

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4.4. Reconstructing the evaluation mechanism: from a single rate to a multidimensional adaptability profile

A composite evaluation of employment quality and career adaptability can be established. Short-term indicators cover the quality of the position, alignment with the major and satisfaction; long-term indicators cover occupational stability, the capacity to learn across role changes, sense of meaning and contribution to the organisation; process indicators cover the frequency of exploration, the depth of reflection and the level of autonomous decision-making. Such a scheme weakens the myopic incentive of evaluating employment by the signing rate alone.

4.5. Localisation: bringing constructivism and the unity of knowledge and action into dialogue

Western constructivist theory must take root in Chinese soil. It can draw on the Marxist view of practice and the traditional wisdom of learning through concrete affairs, so as to form a local logic of career education built on the principles of difference, subjectivity and practice: respecting the distinctive endowment of each student, activating that student's subjective agency, and accumulating lived experience in real occupational settings.

5. Theoretical Boundaries and Reflection

It should be noted that Career Construction Theory does not negate matching and developmental theories; it transcends and complements their boundaries. Two tendencies should be avoided in the paradigm shift.

The first is the romanticisation of autonomous construction. Students' choices are always constrained by family capital, regional industry and institutional thresholds. Liberating the narrative does not mean ignoring structure, and universities continue to bear public responsibility for resource provision, compensation for the disadvantaged, and guidance towards national strategic needs.

The second is the technicisation of narrative packaging. Storytelling must not be turned into a device for polishing CVs, detached from genuine work experience. A narrative unsupported by action is mere rhetorical performance.

The new paradigm should therefore be a form of structure-sensitive generative education: it trusts students to construct while acknowledging that the environment must also support them; it teaches meaning as well as competence.

6. Conclusion

The implication of Career Construction Theory for university employment education goes far beyond adding a narrative workshop; it amounts to an epistemological loosening. The student is restored from a labourer waiting to be matched to an author of a career still in the making, and employment education is restored from terminal placement to education throughout the whole course of study.

In an age when uncertainty has become the norm, what universities truly need to deliver is not a map covered with job listings, but a capacity: to keep choosing, keep taking responsibility and keep creating meaning amid change, carrying one's own story. This is the theoretical self-awareness and the practical destination that the paradigm shift of employment education ought to have.

ISSN: 2710-0588

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