Creating Self-Portraits

Dave E. Redekopp, Barrie Day & Kris Magnusson

Background

Creating Self-Portraits (Redekopp, Day, Magnusson & Durnford, 1993) is an individual and/or group career development tool designed to assess without testing. As we began to increasingly adopt a developmental approach (*e.g.*, Gelatt, 1989; Magnusson, 1990; Super, 1985) to career assistance, it became apparent that the use of tests (of virtually any variety) was counter-productive. Rather than helping clients to "know themselves," tests were abdicating clients from their self-examination responsibilities. Tests provided clients with labels (*e.g.*, ENTJ, RIA, learning disabled, blue, analytic) that encouraged them to foreclose on their self-exploration processes (much as we prodded them to do otherwise). Once labelled, clients felt no need to further self-analyze. This foreclosure was particularly troublesome because these labels were not all-inclusive; they encapsulated only one component (*e.g.*, interests, aptitudes) of the person's being. Obtaining a classification of one part of themselves, such as interests, clients had a tendency to stop exploring other aspects, such as values.

The self-discovery barrier erected by the wall of test results was not our only difficulty with tests. We found that a large number of tests also prevented an open exploration of the world of work. Clients were looking to tests to discover "what they should be," and they displayed a strong tendency to believe the subsequent test results. We, of course, did our best to dissuade them of these rigid beliefs by pointing out that tests can only provide a sample of possible occupations and that further exploration was necessary, but after some time we began to wonder why we were using methods that we immediately had to disqualify. We felt akin to someone giving travel directions to a tourist and then spending twice the time telling the tourist how the directions would not likely get them to their destination.

The above problems would have not been so troublesome if only our clients and the labour market stood still. They did not remain motionless, however. New occupational roles were (and still are) emerging almost daily and existing roles were (and still are) changing daily. Our clients, too, were changing before our eyes. We saw "technophobes" learn to love computers as they acquired the necessary skills; employees blossom into entrepreneurs; and academics become avid marketers when exposed to the appropriate mentors. The labor market was becoming a "work dynamic" (Redekopp, Fiske, Lemon & Garber-Conrad, 1994) in which our clients were able to actively participate when provided with meaningful developmental experiences. We found that the tests that matched traits with occupations were inadvertently arresting the development of our clients with regards to seeing their own development and the changing nature of work.

We originally resolved some of these problems in the same way other career development practitioners have been doing for years: by taking a considerable amount of time to explain to clients the theories behind the specific tests, the difficulties of test construction, the specific meanings of test terminology, and the limitations of test results. In other words, we made our clients thoroughly understand our discipline. Then we began to feel like automotive technicians who will not repair cars until their customers understand the intricacies of fuel injection.

The above is obviously a slightly fictional characterization of our thinking and practice, but it serves the purpose of demonstrating our motivation for developing **Creating Self-Portraits**. We wanted a tool that would assist people to understand themselves:

- in a way that would encourage further self-exploration;
- in a detailed <u>and</u> broad manner (*i.e.*, including many parts of the self, each part being examined comprehensively);
- in a way in which this understanding can change over time;
- without labels, classifications or taxonomies;
- using their own terminology rather than our terminology; and
- in a way that did not link the individual's self-exploration with an occupational role or set of occupational roles (*i.e.*, divergence promoting rather than convergence promoting).

Description

Creating Self-Portraits is a simple method that assists clients to examine themselves from four aspects:

- meaning (*i.e.*, values, beliefs, interests and barriers to meaning),
- outcomes (*i.e.*, the components of a dream or future vision),
- activities (including preferred, past and needed), and
- tools/techniques (including skills, knowledge, personal characteristics and attitudes).

This information is laid out in four columns on a large (17" x 22") sheet of paper. A partially completed Self-Portrait is shown below (the italicized portions represent part of one of the author's current Self-Portrait; the full Self-Portrait is considerably longer).

The "values" portion of the "meaning" column is intended to capture items that are fundamentally important to the client. These are neither right nor wrong; they are simply important. Values are the client's enduring motivators. The "beliefs" component attempts to identify elements of the client's worldview. These include opinions about self (*e.g.*, "I'm not very smart"), conduct (*e.g.*, "A stitch in time saves nine") and the world (*e.g.*, "There are no jobs"). Beliefs guide the client's approach to fulfilling values. Some may needed to be changed if the client is to move towards his or her outcomes. The "interests" section captures events that the person enjoys. They need not be valuable (*e.g.*, one can value children without being interested in working with children) or in conformity with belief systems: they are just fun and enjoyable. "Barriers" are conditions that prevent meaning from being fulfilled. These are often the "yes, buts" of counselling sessions (*e.g.*, "Yes, I'd love to…, but...").

Partial Self-Portrait

Meaning	Outcomes	Activities	Tools/ Techniques

Values	Personal	Preferred	technical
people	*travel*	*proposal*	*writing skills*
knowledge	*kids*	*writing*	*planning skills*
Beliefs	*old cars*	*public*	*budgeting*
change is	Work-Related	*speaking*	*skills*
constant	*new career*	*researching*	*career*
Interests	*tools/*	Past	*develop't*
innovating	*methods*	*teaching*	*theory*
leading	*int'l career*	*managing*	*educational*
Barriers	*centre*	*projects*	*psychology*
finances	Educational	Needed	*work dynamic*
energy	*broad areas*	*2nd language*	*perseverance*
		international	*honesty*
		network	*stability*

The "outcomes" segment describes the person's dream or vision. The intention here is to list features of the "best of all worlds" for the client, regardless of the realism of these features. "Personal" outcomes comprise the hopes and aspirations for non-work achievements (*e.g.*, living on an acreage, being healthy). The "work-related" outcomes section delineates the ideal accomplishments that the person sees achieving through work (recognizing that the personal/work distinction is rather arbitrary). The "educational" outcomes address the learning achievements the person may have.

Within the "activities" column, "preferred activities" extend the dream by portraying what the person wishes to do on a day-to-day basis. "Past activities" include virtually everything the person has done in the past that he or she wishes to record. This may range from "repair cars" to "break and enter" to "negotiate bargaining agreements." "Needed activities" are those actions the person will need to take to start moving towards the dream. In some cases, these will include "strengthen the dream" for clients who have had little opportunity to do so. In other cases, where the dream is well established, these activities may be very focused (*e.g.*, develop database programming skills).

The "tools/techniques" column lists all the skills, knowledge, attitudes and personal characteristics that the person has used in "past activities." For example, to "break and enter," one needs planning skills, knowledge of security systems, a preference for risk (attitude) and cool-headedness (personal characteristic).

Method

There is insufficient space to fully describe the method we use in **Creating Self-Portraits**. The essence of the method is comprised of (a) client involvement (*i.e.*, sitting side-by-side and assigning portions as "homework" so that the Self-Portrait becomes a living document), (b) encouraging dreams (*e.g.*, "In the best of all worlds, what do you want to get out of life?" and (c) asking questions in a variety of ways to help the client differentiate self.

The Self-Portrait is followed by action planning that emerges from the "needed activities" section. We make the assumptions that: "big" decisions (*e.g.*, occupational choice) are rarely, if ever, necessary; and every decision is a career decision. Therefore, our primary goal is to assist the client to continually manage decisions regarding the next steps required to move toward, rather than away from, his or her vision.

Outcomes

Rigorous evaluations of **Creating Self-Portraits** have not yet been completed. Several hundred clients later, however, we can report that clients enjoy the process, feel motivated by the process, feel less pressure to make the right "big decision," understand themselves and become more flexible/adaptable. The self-portrait is a living document that keeps pace with the client's changing perceptions of self and as such it provides a blueprint for exploration and/or other career planning processes. More importantly, clients who use self-portraits report making life and work choices that are meaningful and that have enduring value. **Creating Self-Portraits** seems to enable them to "follow their hearts" (*i.e.*, dream) and "focus on their journeys" while doing so.

References

Gelatt, H.B. (1989). Positive uncertainty: A new decision-making framework for counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *36*, 2, 252-256.

Magnusson, K. (1990). *An introduction to career counseling*. Edmonton, AB: Centre for Career Development Innovation.

Redekopp, D.E., Day, B., Magnusson, K., & Durnford, C. (1993). *Creating self-portraits*. Edmonton, AB: Centre for Career Development Innovation.

Redekopp, D.E., Fiske, L., Lemon, F. & Garber-Conrad, B. (1994). *Everyday career development: Concepts and practices—a guidebook for secondary school educators*. Edmonton, AB: Learning Resources Distribution Centre

Super, D. (1985). New dimensions in adult vocational and career counseling. *ERIC Document Reproduction Service #ED 261 189*.

Dave Redekopp and Barrie Day are principals of the Life-Role Development Group Limited of Edmonton, Alberta. Kris Magnusson is an associate professor with the University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta.