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"Dropping Out and Working":

The Vocational Narratives of Creative Graduates

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the vocational narratives of creative graduates. While there has been much qualitative research on the experiences of creative workers in precarious employment as part of a critical response to Creative Industries policy making, there has been less attention to the performative aspect of the discourse of creatives considered as an investment in a particular kind of work identity, one that is redeemable beyond specifically creative activities. Given that the work identities of creatives are sustained less by employment arrangements than the socially recognized status of possessing a "cultural vocation" (Dubois 2016), one that requires ongoing symbolic work in order to maintain visibility within a field of insecure employment prospects, then it is important to understand how such vocational

identities are produced by creatives, and how they understand the relationship between creative skills and employment more broadly.

While our approach is anticipated by studies on the discursive “identity work” of creative workers (eg. McRobbie, 2002; Taylor, 2010) and the techniques for “organizing identity” studied in cultural economy (du Gay, 2007), our focus on employability is partly normative. One of the effects of the massification of Higher Education in countries like the UK and Australia over the last three decades has been an increased focus on “employability skills”, with a significant attempt to consider the needs of creative graduates in particular (Brook, 2015). While vocational narratives are clearly crucial to the employability skills of creatives who are all too aware of the need to self-promote, our approach here is more descriptive. We take the term “narratives of employability” from Phillip Brown, Anthony Hesketh and Sara Williams’s (2004) critical sociology of the strategies of graduate job seekers seeking to distinguish themselves in the labor market for skilled work. Focusing on the graduate recruitment processes for professional positions in major international companies, Brown *et al* use the notion of “personal capital” to refer to a range of personal skills, such as charisma and self-presentation, that are necessary supplements to cultural capital, where the latter is regarded as a set of institutionally certified capacities. “Personal capital” is displayed in the “narratives of employability” that are used to construct a coherent vocational identity across multiple forms of activity (both paid and unpaid), and which has value above-and-beyond past work experience and educational attainments (Brown *et al.*, 2004, pp. 34–39). This proposition is based on Brown *et al*’s observation of the declining ability of credentials to signal capacities (as opposed to screening applicants), and the increased need for competitive job seekers to demonstrate “an economy of experience” based on extracurricular activities (Brown *et al.*, 2004, pp. 36).

While we are sceptical that the notion of personal capital adds to cultural capital analysis (given that it is anticipated by Bourdieu's notion of embodied cultural capital), such an approach nevertheless enables a sociologically nuanced account of the work identities creatives cultivate across a range of discursive contexts beyond the formal job interviewee. More importantly, it enables attention to the ways in which creative vocational narratives may be related to employment opportunities outside the creative sector. As discussed in our conclusion, attention to "embedded" creatives is an important development in creative labor studies (Hearn *et al.*, 2014), and our approach would support the argument that cultural vocations are one highly visible and increasingly valued narrative of employability. As such, it may address a puzzle that has bedevilled contemporary research on the creative economy: namely, the evidence of strong demand for cultural work identities, including student demand for university courses (Faggian *et al.*, 2013) in which such identities are cultivated, in the context of low returns to creative workers and graduates.

"Narratives of employability" of course include the stories told by creative labor researchers themselves, no less than their interviewees.¹ In the context of interviews produced for academic research on creative labor, it is important to recognize that the research agendas of the former are crucial in establishing (but not thereby determining) a discursive context. The academic creative labor researcher provides the creative interviewee with a meaningful context in which to practice and project various narratives of the employable self. The interviews discussed below were collected as part of two discreet research projects that took place in Australia and Britain. "Working the Field" was a three-year Australia Research Council (ARC) funded project that investigated the ways in which writing and visual arts graduates developed cultural vocations in the first ten years after

¹ The social proximity between interviewer and interviewee in the field of creative labor studies is something of an "open secret" in the field, with many creative labor researchers working in university programs that are themselves significant agents in the cultural sector, and which clearly have an interest in creative sector employment.

graduating. The study focused on the role of social networks and unpaid creative work in developing a socially recognised “vocation”, one that signalled employability skills even as it was not reducible to employment. The project² interviewed graduates in Melbourne, a UNESCO recognized City of Literature, during 2016 and 2017, and we interpret the narratives of two Melbourne-based writing graduates below. The second project was conducted during 2013 as part of larger AHRC funded research project (AH/J006807/1) entitled “Music Communities” that looked at the importance of social networks in the development of music and musicians’ careers and work. Part of the project investigated the views of recent music graduates in the UK and their network and career strategies.

Narratives of employability also include the policy context of the “creative industries” in which creative labor has emerged as an object of critical inquiry and sector promotion. It is for this reason that we commence with a background context to the research. We then turn to our interviewees³ – young creative graduates in two celebrated “creative cities”, Melbourne and London – considering their own accounts of creative employability.

Background

The premise of the Creative Industries policy push was a proposition about the future of work in advanced, post-industrial societies. Although the evidence base for creative industries policy arguments have focused on the economic scale and growth of a specific set of “creative” industry sectors, rather than the employment circumstances of creative workers, such evidence has always been part of a broader narrative about workforce planning; specifically, the transition to a services-based, knowledge-intensive, and technologically

² This research was supported by the Australia Research Council Discovery Project “Working the field: Creative graduates in Australia and China” (DP#150101477 2015 – 2017).

³ All the names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their anonymity.

networked society (Banks and Hesmondhalgh, 2009). It is for this reason that Creative Industries policy making has always been vulnerable to political critique as simply a local manifestation of neoliberal ideology: the promotion of a future “Creative workforce” always being more prescriptive than descriptive, in so far as it was pitched in the genre of social forecasting than labour market analysis.

While the ideology critique of this discourse was effective in highlighting the articulation of creative industries policy with a range of macro-economic theories of post-industrial adjustment (Garnham, 2005), and hence the inadequacy of this policy for a specifically *cultural* sector, the first evidence based critiques came from qualitative and quantitative studies on the work experiences and labor market outcomes of those working in the UK’s cultural and creative industries (e.g. McRobbie, 2002; 2004; Comunian, Faggian and Li, 2010; Hemondhalgh and Baker, 2013). Unsurprisingly, these studies showed the difficulties and prevalence of underemployment faced by those trying to survive by their creative skills – including insecure work arrangements, poor remuneration, multiple job holding and routine skills mismatch and underutilization. Drawing on national graduate destination data from 2006/07 collected by the UK Higher Educational Statistical Agency (HESA), Comunian *et al* found that not only did graduates with creative industries-oriented degrees suffer a salary disadvantage in the general labor market, but that this disadvantage extended to the creative sector in which they earned almost 4,000 pounds per year less than their colleagues with non-creative degrees (Comunian, Faggian and Li, 2010).

To some extent these findings were to be expected, given that cultural economists and sociologists have long studied the poor returns to artists (Menger, 1999), and indeed even accepted that there is no human capital argument for degrees in the creative arts (see Towse, 2001). According to Randel Filer’s seminal study, the best argument for university training in the arts is that the degree enables people to pursue careers *outside* the arts (Filer, 1990). More

recently, Kate Oakley (2009) has considered the role of universities in shaping the attitude of artists towards work, considering whether the attitude towards “sacrificial labor” (i.e. accepting lower economic rewards and putting emphasis on gratification coming from their practice) is in fact an acquired framework that is embedded in their training.

Nevertheless, that the labor market situation of the newly graduated “creatives” as defined according to a far broader account of the creative sector – one that included commercially oriented sectors – might resemble the situation of “artists” (a somewhat boutique population studied by cultural economists) was sobering. And yet, as noted above, the argument for the creative industries was not established on any account of the pecuniary returns to creatives, but rather a more flexible discourse suited to the broader discursive terrain of the “new economy”; as such, it could appeal to both utopic and dystopic accounts of how the labor markets of advanced capitalist economies were changing. At times, it has mobilized a counter-cultural critique of work and education in order to recuperate precarity as a marker of a welcome generational shift in values, with young people and their educators increasingly liberating themselves from the (oppressive) Fordist model of work and school (for an Australian example, see McWilliam, 2008; and Bentley, 2012 for the UK). In such a context, graduate underemployment can always be recuperated as a progressive “lifestyle” decision. Indeed, much discussion of the future creative workforce can be understood as a symptom of the incorporation of the artistic critique of work into normative human resource management literature described by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappello (2005).

At other times, creative industries researchers have drawn on a dystopic narrative, citing the adaptability and economic resilience of creative artists as exemplary of the employability skills now required by all workers in order to survive in an increasingly insecure labor market where all workers must invest in their employability (Bridgstock, 2005). Such an account draws on the first response of human resource managers to the

economic downturn in the US in the 1970s (such as Douglas Hall), and has found traction with cultural economists who suggest artists now “lead the way” in terms of adapting to a deteriorating labor market (Throsby, 2012; Brook, 2015). Crucial here is a dawning realization that “new economy” assumptions about labor market demand for knowledge workers have themselves not born up well. A major study of US labor force statistics showed that demand for college educated labour has in fact steadily *decreased* since the 1980s (Goldin and Katz, 2008: Table 3.2, 101); that is, during the period in which the economic importance of knowledge has become widely accepted, labor market demand for knowledge workers has objectively shrunk. Such findings are supported by Phillip Brown, Anthony Hesketh and Sara Williams’s warning to researchers that demand for “knowledge worked” is not the same as demand for “knowledge *workers*” (Brown, Hesketh and Williams, 2004).

It is in this context that the prevalence of creative work identities can be interpreted as responding to a general need for “vocational narratives”; narratives that demonstrate essentially professional work values of commitment, resourcefulness, self-awareness and adaptability. In the next section, we report four case studies focusing in particular on two types of narrative: narratives of employability and narratives of risk management. In the first, we focus on the ways in which interviewees narrate the employable self via accounts of the value of their knowledge, experience and flexibility. In the second, we look at the ways in which interviewees describe strategies for mitigating the economic risks associated with creative work. While such narratives clearly evidence strategic practice, a premise of our approach is that the narrative is not simply a “report”, but is itself a key manifestation of this practice – one that makes good use of the research interview as an opportunity to exercise professional skills. The case studies below were selected for the ways in which they clearly *exemplify* a range of narratives of employability through their explicit reference to values, habits and interests that sustain a work identity. While the employment outcomes of the

selected interviewees might be regarded as “successful” according to different sets of criteria – such as achieving fulltime work, working in a sector related to one’s studies, or being able to subsidize one’s creative practice through multiple job holding – they are not presented here as exemplary *outcomes*. Rather, our selection was guided by the demonstrated capacity of the interviewee to articulate a narrative about their work identity that balanced both paid employment and creative practice. As we discuss below, a conspicuous feature of our case studies is that they are highly articulate about perceived possibilities and constraints of the creative sector, including their own positions and future options, even as they project a highly agential and engaged work identity.

Case Study 1: “Why Would I Restrict Myself?”

Mary is a professional writer and musician aged 30, now based in Melbourne. She graduated in the late 2000s from a regional university with an Arts degree and an advanced diploma in Creative Writing. After graduating she volunteered with a street press magazine where she subsequently got a part-time job as an editor. She describes this transition from volunteering to paid employment as a seminal experience: “[B]ecause I was employed as a 21 year old in publishing already, it kind of set the scene then for always being really employable”.

At the time of the interview Mary was self-employed producing and editing copy for business clients and government organizations. She says she has more work than she can handle (“I have *too much* work!”), and boasts that “writing is a day job” that supports her other interests, such as poetry and music.

Mary is also a musician and song writer, performs in a band, and at the time of the interview had just been accepted into a Masters in Music therapy. She describes herself as a

“multipotentialite” – a term she found on the internet to describe artistic people like herself who have multiple interests and skills:

I think why would I restrict myself? If I have those interests across all of these areas, and they all weave together, they all draw on the same core creativity, communication skills, and project management skills.

She frequently refers to herself as someone who easily becomes bored (“I’m just interested in lots of different things and I get bored really quickly”). When she first moved to Melbourne she had a communications job at a large prestigious cultural organization, but had difficulty settling into a role where she felt she didn’t have the time to finish projects:

I kept quitting and then going back. And yeah, I'd just worked for that many places that I felt that I had enough contacts to make it work.

It was after this experience that she began freelancing. She set up her own business with support from a government small business scheme available to social security recipients. In order to qualify for the scheme, Mary proudly proclaims she reduced her income by rejecting freelance work.

Mary is very conscious of the importance of socializing across a range of fields, an awareness that seems to have come from experiences working for a street magazine and performing in live venues (“I had all those contacts and I was clearly kind of active in the scene”). She attributes some of the success of her freelance work to the networking opportunities in a co-working space in Melbourne:

And networking not just with your own discipline, networking with all the creatives because you all need each other to get something done generally.

Case Study 2: “Dropping Out and Working”

Alex is a published poet aged 30 based in Melbourne. He graduated with an English degree from an elite university in Queensland. He set out with an interest in journalism, but studied a significant amount of creative writing for his degree. He says he took almost ten years to finish his undergraduate degree, during which time he wrote for publications, played in bands and worked in numerous entry level hospitality and clerical jobs: “And so yeah, ended up sort of dropping out [of university] and working to be able to do that[.]”

He subsequently moved to Melbourne where he completed a Masters of Professional Writing. He has since published poems in a number of literary magazines and been awarded several national literary prizes for his work. Since graduating he has generally had fulltime jobs, and now works part time in a large government organization. When asked why he had always worked, when many other writers don’t, he responds:

I guess it's part of sort of my upbringing, with parents with a relatively severe Protestant work ethic of “that's what you do and you don't get to play until you've done that”. And I guess I've always conceived this stuff [poetry] as play, the creative side of things. [...] I also always grew up sort of learning about the history of the writers that I loved and what their stories were; and always sort of admired writers like Franz Kafka who had full time jobs and wrote and some were successful in their lifetime as writers as well. Some gave up the job, some didn't, but I've always just assumed that I would need to work full time.

Alex also notes that his interest in writing is non-commercial – “I'm not going to write anything that makes any money, that's not going to happen” – and that his sense of “duty” doesn’t just relate to paid work, but also extends to his literary practice:

I find it incredibly wasteful or feel incredibly disappointed in myself if I come home from work and spend a night watching TV without writing down an idea that might become something else. So, I don't know, it might be ego but just this general belief that these ideas that I have throughout a day that connect up in a way that seems appealing to me, must at some point be appealing to someone else; so therefore I have some sort of duty to get them out.

He has worked in call centres in several large organizations that he has found quite frustrating. He has, however, generally been able to renegotiate his position so as to move into senior roles that require higher skills levels and more interesting tasks. He has worked in his current job (part-time) in a large public organization for three years:

It was initially just answering the phones. Within a few weeks I realized I had no training resources so I said, "Can I write training resources for you?" and they said, "Can you do that?" and I said, "Sure, I've got a Masters in writing, just let me write something, I'll show you". And they did and that parlayed immediately almost into this role that I've been in now for about two and a bit years.

Alex describes his promotion as a result of both luck and the opportunity to present his literary knowledge to a new director:

And then I just was lucky that a new director came in. I had a good conversation with him. I think the conversation involved the history of the cemetery and some writers who are buried there. Frank Hardy is buried there and a few other Australian writers. And he went, "You seem like an interesting guy, what's your story?" and I told him about my degree and he said, "Oh can you write policies?" and I went, "Yep".

Alex is quite aware of the value of his vocational identity for employment opportunities within cultural management, and even refers to the value of his “cultural capital” as something he might “trade on”. When asked about his future work plans, he states:

[O]ne of my big goals would be to work doing the kind of work I do now [but] in an arts or cultural organization, and probably to get that role by leveraging my success as a writer. So to be able to trade on the cultural capital all that has [being a Poet] to get into a cultural organization.

Case Study 3: Safety Blankets

Sandra (24) is a recent graduate with a Music degree from a prestigious UK university based in London. When interviewed she was performing, working as a music teacher and organizing music events through a company she had founded during university. She was very clear that her choice of university – not only of degree – had an impact on the career possibilities after university:

[...] the perception is that if you go to a reputable university and you get a research degree, it is very academic and on paper you have a good degree and a good university and that will open doors.

This awareness of the value of the institution was supplemented by an account of the transferable skills that are developed in music studies, and their value relative to other areas of creative arts study:

Musicians are very good at working in a team, very motivated and disciplined [...] Our skills are more broadly applicable in life in most jobs. Musicians have to be very organized with time, and be very efficient with our time [...]

While dedicated to developing a music performance career, Sandra had a clear understanding of the importance of having a job as well as acting entrepreneurially within the field. Sandra has a very clear set of preferences in relation to these three activities, and a long-term strategy:

In my head, I would love to do more performing, number two is developing the company, and then teaching. At the moment, it is the other way around doing mostly teaching, secondly the company and thirdly gigging. So in the long term, I am trying to build the company so that the teaching can diminish [...]

The rejection of teaching as a long-term goal is partly based on a commitment to the autonomy and stimulation that comes with her primary creativity practice:

And if I wanted full time work teaching, I could get it, but I restrict myself to two days teaching because I find it not very stimulating and creatively stifling, so it would be quite hard [...]

Nevertheless, Sandra is also explicit about the economic basis of her preferences. While teaching work was clearly an economic support in the process of developing a performance career, Sandra acknowledged family as the most important “safety blanket” in terms of her ability to continue to be based in London and develop a performance career:

I am very blessed because my parents are Londoners and I live with them and I acknowledge that it is a financial safety blanket [...] So that enabled me to start

being self-employed without immediately needing an income which is fairly unique. I know a lot of my colleagues went home for a period afterwards, but I had a bonus of being in London that was a real benefit [...]

Case Study 4: “I Do Not Have To Take The Gig To Eat And Pay The Bills”

At the time of the interview Mark (24) was a recent graduate who moved to London after studying at a music conservatoire in central England with a specialization in Jazz and living in Birmingham for a while. In his account of his transition from study to work, he described a typical disconnect between his studies, his passion for music performance, and the labor market:

there was very little in my degree, whereby I could say “well, I have learned that ... how can I apply that to the real world?”. I think it was very much I am learning about music and I am in my own little music bubble. And then suddenly you leave university and you find there isn't a job for a music graduate. You need to find what your strength is and what the jobs available are, because I did not have a clue really, of what I could do with my degree [...]

Nevertheless, Mark was successfully gigging while looking for work mostly within the cultural sector:

having put all the effort in, I was gigging regularly in several bands. There was enough work to sustain me throughout the summer, thankfully, which afforded me the opportunity to look for jobs. I had 75 job applications during the period, 65 of them were related to arts and music in one way or another, the other 10 I would have been a chief salesman, bar tender [...]

Mark was genuinely passionate about his performance and love for music, but after graduating chose a career as events and venue manager:

it is a performance degree [...] focused on the music itself, but I always thought there should be also something else, a fall-back position, which I do not think lots of musician think about. Lots of them are solely focused on the music [...] it is risk management for my point of view. If the playing does not work out I need to think of something else.

Mark also considered the competition in the music sector and the fact that “everybody can get a music degree but not everyone can have a music degree with experience [...] I needed to make myself more attractive to a potential employer, it was a big eye opener”. While he has opted for the safety blanket of stable employment in venue management, he states he has turned down better paid jobs outside the cultural sector. The work in venue management “was in a career, in direct relation with what I wanted to do [...] I could use the value of it to carry on”.

Mark was very articulate about the strategic relation between cultural sector work and developing his performance career, with the former providing him with a level of economic security that supports a more autonomous relation to his emerging performance career:

I did not want to have to rely on the insecurity of not knowing where the next month's rent is coming from [...] so it was a conscious decision for me. Music is a passion, a hobby [...] For me I can still go out now and gig two, three times a week. If I do not want to, or I cannot, I do not have to take the gig to eat and pay the bills[...]

Mark was also able to articulate the disadvantages of his previous location, as well as its advantages in terms of encouraging a more proactive relation to career choices and making opportunities:

in London, where the industry is based, it is a lot London centred. There is a lot more opportunities if a record label sees you, an agency, they can pick you up from an early age and develop you. While there it is kind of isolated, you have to make things happen [...]

Mark highlights the quality of his networks, especially those developed during his studies, and his ability to continue mobilizing these for work opportunities:

I met other musician via the Jazz Society from other universities [...] Having made those contacts, I can now contact them for gigs, and through those networks you meet endless more [...] All of the musicians that I use now in gigs, there is some contact from having met someone at university. So you can almost trace it back, and a lot of venue owners and people who run events [...] I still use those contacts now.

Discussion

Clearly all four case studies exhibit complex and dynamic strategies for articulating study and work. While Mark has clearly taken on venue management work as key support for his vocation as a jazz performer, in Mary's case such a "strategy" isn't quite so clear – her artistic pursuits were clearly not oriented towards success *as an artist*, supported as they were by freelance copywriting, and a career in music therapy appearing as a possible future. While Sandra has taken a common path in the early stages of music performance careers – music teaching in order to support herself while she builds a profile – Alex hopes to be able

combine his experience of working in government organizations with his literary reputation in order to eventually achieve a job in arts management.

Our interest in these case studies is less in the particular pathways for writing and music graduates, than in the reflexive and agential “vocational self” that our interviewees project. These narratives balance a number of antinomies that are common in self-reports of creative career development in its early stages. We can identify three sets here. First, statements that testify to the integrity of one’s vocation (calling) as a primary motivation are offset by statements that testify to flexibility and a pragmatic relation to the field. Second, statements on the importance of an autonomous relation to one’s practice – the freedom to choose the conditions under which creative work occurs – are tempered by statements on the importance of highly instrumental and entrepreneurial strategies necessary to sustain such practice. And thirdly, statements that proclaim the key role of personal effort in making opportunities – through networks, strategies, and a disciplined work ethic – are matched with a keen awareness of the role of key advantages (universities, geographic locations, family financial support) in supporting a creative career.

Firstly, all four interviewees evidence a commitment to creativity as a vocation that transcends financial returns or concern for employability. These statements reference the dutiful nature of a personal artistic practice that must be maintained (Alex), passion for the activity (Mark), long term preferences (Sandra), or the “core creativity” (Mary) that drives the interviewee. Mary’s references to her “core” creative potential is interesting, as it suggests a vocational narrative that is not restricted to a specific practice or field (such as writing or music), but is always capable of moving on, where it shades into what is ultimately a highly flexible and pragmatic relation to the field. While Mary’s pursuit of her creative potential is demonstrated in leaving a secure job she felt constrained by, it also manifests as a radical adaptability in the context of short term freelance work. Similarly, Alex’s dutiful

relation to literary practice also manifests as an explicitly referenced work ethic that curiously *refuses* the classic bohemian refusal of work. Such a refusal has both artistic integrity and precedent – Alex’s discussion of Franz Kafka’s employment as an insurance assessor is related to an aesthetic theory of the importance of writers undertaking real work – as well as an entirely pragmatic appreciation of the transferable value of his experience in government employment to an arts management context in future.

Relatedly, in all four cases this vocational commitment was backed-up by economic relations that ensure a certain level of creative autonomy. For Mark, his decision to work in venue management is presented not only as a pragmatic form of risk management, but also enabling his economic freedom to choose the conditions of his creative work – being able to say no to gigs. Similarly, Mary’s decision to start her own freelance business is presented as the key move that enables her to choose how she works, while her “day job” enables her to maintain artistic pursuits independently of any concern for their professional success. Similarly, Alex was very clear that his literary writing would not “make any money”, and, therefore, his income generating activities would – for the time-being – have to be completely separate. Meanwhile, Sandra was candid about the fact that her entire early career strategy – currently reliant on a restricted amount of teaching which she ultimately hoped would be replaced with performance work – was itself subtended by the advantages of both family and geography (living at home in London).

In this, Sandra exemplifies an ethical self-awareness that publicly acknowledges the role of personal advantages in supporting a creative career. Whether it refers to privileged institutional positions – such as networks obtained through university (Mark) or creative work contexts, such as co-working spaces or venues (Mary) – the symbolic capital of being a graduate of a particular university (Sandra), or the cultural capital of a literary education for jobs upgrading (Alex), such statements testify to an awareness of advantage. Significantly,

this awareness was not presented as a critique of privileges within the sector – although in other interviews this was present – but rather as a ground for a strategic awareness of opportunities that, ultimately, testify to the interviewee’s own efforts and capacities. While the advantages of geography, university and family were clearly referenced, such references were ultimately part of a narrative of personal attributes and capacities, demonstrating a strong strategic field awareness and appreciation of the role of effort and a proactive disposition in generating opportunities.

Conclusion: Vocational Narratives And Embedded Creatives

In general, we can observe that vocational narratives appear to have a relationship to what has come to be known as “embedded” forms of creative work. This term is used variably to refer to those with creative occupations located outside the creative industries (such as music teachers in education) or those with creative skills and qualifications outside the creative sector (such as a writing graduate working in a government bureaucracy). Implicit to the notion of “embedded creatives” is a claim not so much for “transferable skills” – a well-established object for education studies – so much as a claim for creatives as a particular caste of new workers whose existence is a harbinger for broader socio-cultural changes (Barbrook, 2006).⁴

While the notion of embedded creatives is to a certain extent a “fuzzy” object of study, in so far as it is hard to quantify the creative skills component in non-creative sectors

⁴ This is clear when we consider the case for transferable skills has long been made in relation to numerous disciplines across the arts and sciences, such as the humanities, natural sciences and mathematics, and that such an argument has never entailed any claim to such graduates being “embedded” representatives of a particular skill set (for example, that historians, naturalists or mathematicians are “embedded” in the Public Service or Secondary School system).

(and especially when the term is used as a synonym for “innovation”), it is useful in so much as it presumes a recognized social type – *the* creative – that exists independently of specific employment. In short, to be “a creative” is to possess a *calling* (as Max Weber’s term for vocation) that testifies to both skills and values that transcend any immediate application in the labor market. Such a calling might manifest as a capacity to undertake supporting (non-creative) roles in an industry to which one is committed (such as venue management) as part of a portfolio of skills, or the ability to take one’s creativity outwards towards the general labor market.

Building on Ruth Bridgstock’s account of the artist as protean worker (2005), we might suggest that vocational narratives signal a protean form of human capital. Vocational narratives would be a strong way of signalling skills and capacities that, in their protean form as “personal capital”, can be re-articulated to a range of employment options both within and without the cultural sector. For example, in Mary’s case, it is clear that her employability – her capacity to impress clients and gain contracts – is directly related to her demonstrated capacity to work across a range of activities; from project management through copywriting to communicating with co-workers. And it is her highly visible vocational identity as a “multipotentialite” that signals this package of skills. While this vocation is supported by specific skill sets (networking, teamworking, multi-tasking, self-managing), these skills are rendered visible through the vocational self-narratives that are themselves the capstone capacities for gaining work.

This chapter has explored the notion of “vocational narratives” as a key aspect of creative work identities. In the case studies of creative graduates reported here, we have found that such narratives balance a set of common oppositions, including commitment/flexibility, autonomy/instrumentalism, and personal effort/constraints of social context. One implication of this focus – that we would like to highlight in conclusion – is that

the interview relation cannot be simply regarded in positivist terms as a neutral source of qualitative data on the cultural sector. Rather than a neutral report on the creative graduate field, the interview is an occasion for a discursive presentation of the self that strives to “make sense” of individual graduate pathways, one which is to a certain extent cued by the critical purpose of researchers and the instrumental applications of such research in curriculum planning (as evidenced in plain language statements to interviewees). Such presentations rehearse and further cultivate skills in strategic field-awareness and professional reflexivity in a manner that we suggest demonstrates exemplary career management skills. We suggest that research on these narrative skills holds potential for understanding the pathways they reference, as well as the relation of creative labor studies to its object.

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