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# The Happenstance Learning Theory

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What-you-should-be-when-you-grow-up need not and should not be planned in advance. Instead career counselors should teach their clients the importance of engaging in a variety of interesting and beneficial activities, ascertaining their reactions, remaining alert to alternative opportunities, and learning skills for succeeding in each new activity. Four propositions: (1) The goal of career counseling is to help clients learn to take actions to achieve more satisfying career and personal lives—not to make a single career decision. (2) Assessments are used to stimulate learning, not to match personal characteristics with occupational characteristics. (3) Clients learn to engage in exploratory actions as a way of generating beneficial unplanned events. (4) The success of counseling is assessed by what the client accomplishes in the real world outside the counseling session.

**Keywords:** *unplanned events; learning experiences; love of learning; action; real world outcomes; improvement; satisfying; research*

A new-born infant is a miracle originating when a one-in-a-billion unpredictable sperm finds a one-in-a-billion unforeseeable egg. The happenstance events that led to the father and mother meeting could never have been predicted in advance. Yet here is this baby, beginning its adventures on Planet Earth, endowed with the DNA from countless unknown ancestors dating back to the dawn of history.

What will happen to babies like this? Will they become criminals or law-abiding citizens? Will they become plumbers, accountants, politicians, tree surgeons, or musicians? Will they marry, divorce, or remain single? Will they be gay or straight? Will they adopt or reject the religious beliefs of Catholics, Presbyterians, or Muslims?

We have no way of knowing in advance the destiny of any individual. Yet we would like to understand the factors that influence that destiny. The Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT) is an attempt to explain how and why individuals follow their different paths through life and to describe how counselors can facilitate that process. It is based on the thinking and research of countless predecessors. I am not claiming any originality, but I would like to distill and illustrate the theory in a way that will have practical benefits.

In a nutshell, the HLT posits that human behavior is the product of countless numbers of learning experiences made available by both planned and unplanned situations in which individuals find themselves. The learning outcomes include skills, interests, knowledge, beliefs, preferences, sensitivities, emotions, and future actions.

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**Author's Note:** The authors is indebted to Al Levin for his collaboration in formulating and illustrating the five components of counseling using the Happenstance Learning Theory (HLT). Please address correspondence to John D. Krumboltz, School of Education, Stanford, CA 94305-3096; e-mail: [jdk@stanford.edu](mailto:jdk@stanford.edu).

The situations in which individuals find themselves are partly a function of factors over which they have no control and partly a function of actions that the individuals have initiated themselves. Individuals may focus their attention exclusively on the factors over which they have no control and conclude that they are in the hands of fate and that nothing they do matters. Those who focus exclusively on their own successful actions may develop overconfidence in their own powers. Every situation can be seen as presenting potential opportunities if individuals can recognize them and then take action to capitalize on them. The interaction of planned and unplanned actions in response to self-initiated and circumstantial situations is so complex that the consequences are virtually unpredictable and can best be labeled as happenstance.

Over the course of my lifetime so far, I personally have been employed as a gardener, magazine sales person, chauffeur, farmer, drill press operator, aluminum foundry worker, cereal packager, railroad loader, elevator operator, chemist's assistant, pancake taster, book publisher's assistant, radio announcer, teaching assistant, tennis coach, camp counselor, career counselor, high school counselor, algebra teacher, military officer, test construction specialist, research psychologist, professor, and author. I did not, and never could have, predicted this pattern of employment. And who knows what I will do next?

I have frequently been invited to speak with groups of career counselors, probably several thousands of them now. I almost always begin by saying something like this: "You are now employed as a career counselor. Had you decided to become a career counselor when you were 18 years old?" So far the number of career counselors answering *yes* is zero. So if we career counselors could not have predicted our own destiny, what business do we have insisting that young people predict their occupational goals?

Some argue that having a plan is advantageous even if it is never realized because it motivates the individual to study and learn about something. Maybe so, maybe not. I have read and learned about thousands of topics that have nothing to do with my occupation. I have no objection to people making a plan if that makes them happy. I do object to requiring other people to make occupational plans when they are not ready to do so, and I especially object to the notion that people have to stick with an unsatisfactory occupation just because they had declared it at one time to be their goal.

The HLT is the latest modification of my own prior explanatory efforts. I originally accepted the common belief that the goal of career counseling was to help clients make career decisions, and I described the multitude of environmental influences that contributed to learning about those decisions (Krumboltz, 1975, 1979). That theory was modified only slightly in various iterations subsequently (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1984, 1990, 1996). Some criteria for good theories on the topic were suggested along the way (Krumboltz, 1994, 1996). An expansion of the theory more in line with my present thinking was represented by Krumboltz (1998) and Krumboltz and Henderson (2002). The most complete and practical guide was the book, *Luck Is No Accident* (Krumboltz & Levin, 2004). A movie demonstrating the application of the theory is now available (Krumboltz, 2008).

My thinking and ideas have been substantially influenced by innumerable predecessors and contemporaries. Without describing the details of each contribution, I would like to credit the work of at least a few of the significant contributors to my education: Hart, Rayner, and Christensen (1971), Ellis and Whiteley (1975), Bandura (1982), Miller (1983, 1995), Gelatt (1989), Cabral and Salomone (1990), Scott and Hatalla (1990), Betsworth

and Hansen (1996), Watts (1996), Zimbardo (2007), Krumboltz and Schroeder (1965), Krumboltz and Thoresen (1964), Krumboltz and Varenhorst (1965), Ryan and Krumboltz (1964), and Kimmer (2001).

## Why People Behave the Way They Do

### Genetic Influences

Though sometimes criticized, the evidence is pretty clear from studies of monozygotic and dizygotic twins who were separated at birth and reared apart that many important psychological variables are associated with genetic variation (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990). In summarizing the results of his research, Bouchard (2004) reported that even vocational interests had a substantial genetic basis. The heritability coefficients range from a low of .31 for the Enterprising interest to a high of .39 for the Artistic interest. Schizophrenia has a heritability coefficient of .80, and the coefficient for intelligence at age 26 is .88.

However, because there is nothing we can do after birth to alter our genetic inheritance, we will confine our efforts here to understanding the environmental conditions and events over which we do have some control.

Park, Lubinski and Benbow (2008) have produced evidence that exceptionally high scores on the mathematics section of the SAT at age 13 are substantially associated with creative scientific and technical accomplishments (patents, publications in scientific journals) in adulthood. They conclude that quantitative-reasoning ability predicts scientific and technological innovation. However, it is not clear from their data whether quantitative-reasoning ability is due to genetic inheritance or excellent teaching. Some fascinating research is beginning to unravel the connections between genetic variation, brain function, and social behavior (Donaldson & Young, 2008; Robinson, Fernald, & Clayton, 2008).

### Learning Experiences

Learning is happening all the time an individual is conscious. Much of it may not necessarily be very consequential, but we notice the dress, grooming, and behavior of other people whether we intend to or not. We develop feelings, for example, warmth or hostility toward others depending on our observations of their behavior and on our generalizations based on the group to which we think they belong.

New learning can occur in a split-second. A quick glance can be sufficient time to learn your impression of a new person or a new environment. We learn quickly from the reactions of others whether our actions please or displease them. The impressions may or may not be accurate, but they are learned nevertheless.

### Instrumental Learning Experiences

Instrumental learning experiences occur when individuals observe the consequences of their own actions. These consequences include verbal (“good job, Mike”) or physical (a pat on the back) feedback from other individuals. Feedback may be negative as well as positive.

It may be a feeling of accomplishment after solving a difficult problem, or a feeling of worthlessness after failing to solve a difficult problem. The feedback may be immediate or delayed. Career aspirations can be influenced by the perceived success or failure of various actions. Hitting a home run may arouse visions of a future baseball career; striking out may have the opposite effect.

With regard to instrumental learning experiences, some children are given multiple opportunities to try out alternative behavior patterns and observe the consequences. For example, learning to play the piano depends on having access to a piano, perhaps having a good piano teacher, and perhaps receiving encouragement to practice. Children can judge the extent to which the experience is enjoyable or painful and may govern their future behavior accordingly.

### **Associative Learning Experiences**

Associative learning experiences occur from observing the environment or the behavior of others with its consequences. Desiring clothing like that worn by famous actors or actresses or being inspired by reading about the noble deeds of historical or fictional figures would be examples of associative learning. Television and newspaper ads are designed as associative learning experiences to lure people into purchasing certain products or services. Political speeches provide an associative learning experience designed to attract voters. They may have either a positive or negative effect depending on the prior inclinations of each voter.

With regard to associative learning experiences, children may have access to various amounts and types of TV programs, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, advertisements, and role models. Children can make judgments about which of the multiple behaviors they observe they wish to emulate. The socioeconomic status of a family certainly has an impact on the nature and number of learning resources that are available for the children in that family (Blustein, 2006).

### **Environmental Conditions and Events**

The circumstances in which individuals find themselves play a major role in what is learned. Zimbardo (2007) has made a convincing case for the power of the environment to control human behavior. He points out how even good people can be induced to behave in evil ways by the social and physical environments in which they find themselves. The people to whom we give power to formulate, implement, and enforce policies and laws have a tremendous influence on the welfare of people within their jurisdictions. These people include legislators, judges, presidents, governors, business executives, teachers, and parents.

### **Parents and Caretakers**

The education of children begins at birth. We have tended to ignore the tremendous learning ability of infants before the age of 2 because most of them cannot yet verbalize their observations. Yet depending on how they are treated, children quickly learn whether this world is a safe or a dangerous place to live. If they are treated with consistent love and caring, they begin to assume that their world is a pretty safe and happy place to live. If they

are treated harshly, frequently punished, their needs ignored or rejected, their efforts humiliated, their failures publicized, and their successes overlooked, they will assume that their world is a dangerous place where they must take drastic self-protective actions.

Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1979, & 1980) developed an attachment theory that described how certain profound negative emotions are generated by the neglect or absence of attachment figures early in life. Koback and Sceery (1988) had described how different attachment histories could generate three patterns of attachment in adult life: (a) secure attachment (willing and able to use others for support), (b) avoidant attachment (restricting acknowledgment of distress), and (c) ambivalent attachment (developing a hypervigilant style that limits self-confidence). A valuable review of how attachment histories affect emotions in adult relationships has been provided by Mikulincer and Shaver (2005).

A longitudinal study by Simpson, Collins, Tran, and Haydon (2007) studied how early interpersonal experiences of 78 target participants predicted the pattern of positive and negative emotions experienced with significant others in subsequent years:

The targets classified as securely attached at 12 months old were rated as more socially competent during early elementary school by their teachers. Targets' social competence in turn forecasted their having more secure relations with close friends at age 16, which in turn predicted more positive daily emotional experiences in their adult romantic relationships (both self- and partner-reported) and less negative affect in conflict resolution and collaborative tasks with their romantic partners (rated by observers). (p. 355)

The interactions between children and their parents (and/or other caretakers) are a crucial influence in determining children's behavior, skills, and psychological well-being. Except for extreme cases of neglect or abuse, these early parent-child interactions receive virtually no attention from our society's policy makers. Yet the way children are treated in these early years sets a pattern that is difficult to alter in adulthood.

Mastering language skills is essential in our society. In the first 2 years of life, children usually learn to speak the language of those who care for them. To learn it, they have to hear it spoken to them. Some parents make it a point to read books to their children at a very early age. Other parents do not read very much to their children. The children who happen to be exposed to more spoken language learn it more thoroughly. They have larger vocabularies, are able to express themselves more clearly, and speak with the same accent as those who speak to them. In an attempt to explain the "achievement gap," Pruce (2008) identified a number of potentially influential home variables. For example, the more often parents read to their preschool children the better the children's subsequent academic performance.

## Peer Groups

By the time children reach the age of 5, they have already acquired an extensive education. Not only have they learned to speak a language to varying degrees, but they have also had playmates or siblings with whom they have learned to share (or hog), cooperate (or bully), or praise (or condemn). Their verbal and social skills are the result of minute-by-minute learning experiences made available by their caretakers and others with whom they happen to have come in contact.

## Structured Educational Settings

Schools are supposed to be institutions where all children can learn, improve, and begin a self-motivated lifelong love of learning (Krumboltz, 1988). Unfortunately, this ideal goal is achieved less often than we might desire. A good part of the reason is that schools have made education a competitive sport. The emphasis is on winning by getting the highest grades, by making the honor roll, or by defeating others in the spelling bee. Those who are more successful in this competitive game (usually from the top half of the class) feel some satisfaction although even they too are troubled by their lack of perfection in attaining the teachers' standards. The losers in this competitive game (usually from the bottom half of the class) are constantly humiliated by their failures even though they may be improving. The losers learn to feel inadequate, to hate school, to hate books, and to hate teachers because they are constantly humiliated by being compared to more successful peers.

In many school districts, children who are slow learners are retained in the same grade and required to repeat the year's work. In summarizing the research on retention, Shepard and Smith (1989) pointed out the negative consequences with regard to subsequent performance, dropout rates, and emotional discouragement. House (1989) in summarizing the book reported

this book demonstrates that the practice of retaining students in grade is absolutely contrary to the best research evidence. Few practices in education have such overwhelmingly negative research findings arrayed against them. Yet educational professionals and the public are almost universally in favor. (p. 204)

In Texas, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) is a test used to determine which children will be retained in grade or not be allowed to graduate. Glass (2008) stated

Texas has the most punitive sanctions of any state in the U.S. attached to performance on these tests. If results are not deemed acceptable by one or another arbitrary criterion, school districts may be placed on probation, have their state accreditation removed, have state monies withheld, have their superintendent replaced, or have the entire school district taken over by the state of Texas. (p. 204)

Citing the work of Nichols, Glass, and Berliner (2006) and Nichols and Berliner (2007), Glass (2008) pointed out that

few benefits in terms of academic achievement have been verified as resulting from the pressure that high stakes testing places on teachers, students and their families. . . . The unintended consequences of imposing these sorts of reforms are negative and serious. Schools stop teaching what is not on the test. At the elementary school level, science, social studies, art, music, even physical education are sacrificed so that more time can be spent in test preparation activities. Pushed to near the breaking point, teachers and administrator are tempted to bend the rules to avoid public shaming resulting from release of test scores to media. Some give in to temptation. (p. 190)

The classic case is the elementary school in Houston which received much favorable publicity for increasing the reading skills of low-income students. It turned out that the increase in test scores was not because of improved reading skills. “Teachers admitted that cheating was standard operating procedure” (Spencer, 2006, p. 1).

The competitive game is not confined to the education of low-income students. Schools and parents who want their children to be admitted to the best colleges and universities are also adversely affected. Adolescents put themselves under tremendous emotional stress and resort to academic cheating to compile a dossier that will impress some college admissions officer (Nathan, 2005; Pope, 2001). Students under this kind of pressure do not learn to love learning; they actually learn to hate and to subvert the process.

## The Imperfect World

Social justice is not equally distributed among humans on our planet. Marked differences in wealth provide great opportunities for some and more limited opportunities for others. War, crime, and accidents kill some, injure and traumatize others, and leave some lucky others unscathed. Some people live in environments where health care is provided, educational opportunities abound, and citizens can choose their leaders. Others live in environments without health care, with primitive educational opportunities while restrained by corrupt dictatorships. Blustein, McWhirter, and Perry (2005) argued persuasively that overcoming social injustice should be an ever-present concern for psychologists in working both with individual clients and in working toward institutional changes.

## Fundamental Propositions

*Proposition 1:* The goal of career counseling is to help clients learn to take actions to achieve more satisfying career and personal lives—not to make a single career decision.

Each word in this goal statement is important.

*Clients* are not only individuals taken one at a time but they can also be groups of individuals—a whole classroom, a whole school, or even the population of a whole country.

The word *Learn* makes it clear that both career counselors and clients are engaged in an educational process. Counselors are educators.

The goal of counseling is not just getting insight or expressing emotions. It requires taking effective *Actions*, for example, exploring, interviewing, researching, expressing interests, establishing contacts, joining clubs, volunteering, or trying part-time jobs.

What is *Satisfying* for one individual may not be satisfying for another. I enjoy tennis. Others enjoy golf. Still others enjoy stamp collecting. Each individual has a choice of what is satisfying. Furthermore, what is satisfying changes over time? A client happy in an initial job may become dissatisfied with it later and want to rethink the occupational choice again.

*Career and personal* aspects of life are intertwined. A job may be satisfying by itself, but it may leave too little time for family pleasures. A wife may get a great job offer in a distant city but the husband doesn't want to move. A skillful career counselor should be just as able to mediate this dispute as a marriage counselor.



Career counselors should be able to help people handle many transitions in *Life*, not just the transition from school to work. For example, there are transitions from work to layoffs, from single to married, from couple to parent, from work to retirement, and from life to death. Sensitive counselors can make themselves available to help people at any or all of the transitions that occur during a lifetime or to refer clients to others with specialized skills. Being a good career counselor can be a full-time job and require a wealth of skills.

The goal is not for clients to make a career decision by declaring their future lifetime occupation. The future cannot be predicted with any dependable degree of certainty. Yet many young people are asked the ubiquitous question, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" It is widely accepted that every student should be able to name an occupational goal. In some cultures, it is even mandatory that an occupational goal be specified during the adolescent years or even earlier. It seems strange that we should expect young people to make predictions about their future career when the future is so uncertain.

We do not know what new occupations will be developed. We now have people employed as web masters, instructional technology experts, and tech support specialists. Such occupations could never have been predicted just a few years ago. One undecided 16-year old high school student put it this way: "The occupation I will enter has not been invented yet."

We cannot be sure which current occupations will diminish. What happened to elevator operators, slide rule manufacturers, and top hat sales persons? Some occupations decline in the demand for workers as a result of new inventions, advancing technology, and changing tastes.

"Take the road less traveled" at one time was unconventional wisdom. It was considered the risky, creative approach. Robert Frost made the uncommon advice popular. Today it should be considered impossible.

On today's journey to the future you don't have a choice between the road less traveled and the road more traveled. No one has been where you are going. No one has experienced the future you will experience. The only choice you have is the road never traveled. (Gelatt, 2008, p. 1)

Committing to an occupation is a one-sided deal. Young people who commit themselves to one occupation receive no commitment from the occupation in return. If the employer goes out of business or the occupation no longer attracts customers, the employee is out of a job.

Naming a future occupation is amazingly simple and can easily be faked. When asked about a future occupational goal, children can easily please their parents by naming some high prestige occupation: "I'm going to be a doctor." Parents are likely to praise this goal much more highly than the goal of becoming a garbage collector. Children are not dumb. They get the picture at an early age. Children learn to tell their parents what the parents want to hear; children don't actually have to do anything about it for a long time.

The hard part is taking the actions necessary for achieving the goal—not just stating it. Career counselors have traditionally considered their work to be successful when their clients were able to declare an occupational objective. Actually becoming a doctor requires studying for years, passing complicated courses and tests, and showing proficiency in practice. Many young people who begin college with the stated goal of becoming a doctor change their minds as they discover more details about what is involved. Helping young

people actually to take active action steps to test the merits of various alternative goals seems far more important a role for career counselors than merely requiring their clients to state a goal.

Counselor colleagues in other specialties think career counseling is simplistic because merely stating an occupational goal is simplistic. Marriage counselors, for example, see helping a troubled couple as a far more complex task than helping someone name a future occupation. They are right; it is more complex. But the work of career counselors as conceived by the HLT can be even more complex than any other type of counseling because it goes far beyond just naming a goal.

Being undecided can be reframed as open-mindedness. The adjective *undecided* seems to have a negative connotation in our society. Politicians who change their mind on an issue are labeled *wishy-washy* or a *flip-flopper*. So if you are undecided about your future (as indeed every sensible person should be), don't call yourself undecided, call yourself open-minded. You'll get more respect even though the two terms mean the same thing.

*Proposition 2:* Career assessments are used to stimulate learning, not to match personal characteristics with occupational characteristics.

*Interest assessment.* An assessment of career interests can stimulate conversations about ways in which current interests can be applied in a variety of occupations. The fact that interests can change over time can be used to help clients realize that they need not commit themselves to any one occupation for life.

An instrument such as the *Strong Interest Inventory* can be used to help clients find attractive activities to explore now.

Client: "I heard that you had a test that would tell me what I should be when I grow up."

Counselor: "If such a test existed, I would give it to you. There is no such test. However, if you would like to fill out this *Strong* answer sheet, we might have a useful talk about what you would like to do to explore some of your current interests."

Client: "But doesn't the *Strong* tell me the names of occupations where I would fit?"

Counselor: "No, it tells you the names of just a few occupations whose active members have interests similar to your current interests. There are thousands of occupations not included, and you might be developing some new interests in the future. But let's talk about it."

*Personality assessment.* A personality assessment instrument can be used to stimulate conversations about alternative circumstances in which people feel comfortable. It may also be used to help clients focus on ways they want to change. For example, the introvert may want to learn how to be more extroverted in certain circumstances even though initially the new behaviors may be uncomfortable. An instrument such as the *Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) may be used as an effective counseling tool to help clients learn new skills and to accept the idiosyncrasies of people with different personality styles.

Client: "I'm worried that I don't have any friends. I don't seem to know how to start conversations with other students."

Counselor: “Like lots of others, your MBTI identifies you as preferring to spend more time by yourself. Still you want to have friendships and we could practice together on some exercises that would get you more socially involved.”

Client: “I have a co-worker who drives me crazy. I am well organized. I plan my day and stick with my plan. My co-worker just floats from one task to another often without finishing the first one.”

Counselor: “I see from your MBTI profile that you are classified as a ‘J.’ I’ll bet your co-worker is a ‘P.’ There is nothing either right or wrong with either classification. People have different personality styles. You are happy with your own style, and I am sure it serves you well.”

*Career beliefs assessment.* An instrument such as the *Career Beliefs Inventory* can be used to identify and examine assumptions and beliefs that have caused difficulties for others. A counselor can use it to start a conversation inquiring as to whether a particular belief is troublesome for this client or to confront a client about a belief that is obviously causing difficulties.

Client: “If I don’t try very hard, I can blame my poor performance on a lack of effort, not a lack of ability.”

Counselor: “I hear you saying that believing you lack ability would be so devastating for you that you would prefer to fail and blame it on not trying. Is that right?”

Client: “My choice of an occupation must be acceptable to my friends and family.”

Counselor: “You may choose whom you wish to please, but don’t forget that they are not living your life—you are.”

*Proposition 3:* Clients learn to engage in exploratory actions as a way of generating beneficial unplanned events.

Unplanned events are a normal and necessary component of every career. Every action involves some risk. Each person must evaluate whether the potential benefits are worth the potential costs. Foolish risks should be avoided. Mistakes are inevitable but provide opportunities for learning.

More complicated actions might include something like the following:

- Taking up a new hobby
- Applying for an internship
- Getting involved in a school project
- Taking the initiative to meet new people
- Taking the lead on a class activity or project

There are three steps in controlling unplanned events:

1. Before the unplanned event, you take actions that position you to experience it.
2. During the event, you remain alert and sensitive to recognize potential opportunities.
3. After the event, you initiate actions that enable you to benefit from it.

Krumboltz & Levin (2004) reported numerous stories of people whose actions enabled them to create and benefit from unplanned events. The book includes the story of a woman

from England who moved to the United States and could not find a job. The unplanned event was a chance meeting where she was told about a bank that was training new staff members. How did this happen?

1. Actions that happened to put her in the right position: She joined a health club and struck up a conversation in the Jacuzzi with another lady who told her about a bank that was hiring.
2. How she recognized a potential opportunity: She obtained the name of the person doing the hiring, and she applied for a position.
3. How her actions benefited her: Despite having no previous banking experience, she learned accounting skills that she put to use when later when she applied for and obtained an accounting job with a high-tech company

*Proposition 4:* The success of counseling is assessed by what the client accomplishes in the real world outside the counseling session.

Although counselors will certainly engage in active listening to understand their clients' feelings and perceptions, such understanding is only a means to the end of clients' finding satisfaction in their real worlds.

The important learning does not occur during the counseling session itself. It occurs out in the real world of the client. An important activity during counseling is a collaborative planning of some learning activity that the client will engage in after leaving the counselor's office. Some activities may be relatively short and simple. A client might make agreements like this:

- I'll ask my mother to tell me the story of how she happened to be working in her current job.
- For one day I'll keep a record of everything I do in my job and rate the satisfaction I get from each task.
- I'll make one phone call to a potential employer and ask to schedule an appointment.

When each counseling session ends, the client should have formulated and promised to take at least one relevant action in his or her own life before the next counseling session. I have found it valuable for clients to promise to e-mail me a brief report of what they did by a date and time that the client suggests. Clients do not always keep their promises, but the counselor should never lay blame on the client. If the promised action did not take place, then the counselor should assume that there must have been a good reason. Perhaps the action was too ambitious to be accomplished in the time allocated. If so, a more limited action should be agreed on next time. Perhaps the action was not sufficiently relevant to the client's real concerns. If so, some rethinking of priorities is in order. Perhaps external events or circumstances, for example, floods, auto accidents, illnesses, interfered with the accomplishment of the promised action. If so, a new time limit can be set for the future.

This emphasis on action should not be called homework. Homework in schools is usually assigned by a teacher, with a deadline set by the teacher, and with criteria of success specified by the teacher.

Action steps in counseling are based on a collaborative discussion in which the client is the ultimate decider. The task is something the client thinks will be a helpful step toward a

more satisfying life. The deadline is set by the client after considering the other tasks, obligations, and pleasures anticipated in the near future. The success of the action is evaluated by the client by the extent to which it provided some valuable learning. The client can agree to or decline the counselor's request for an e-mail confirmation. Most clients hate to break a promise and use the promised e-mail as an extra motivator to overcome procrastination.

The HLT is equally valuable for clients from underprivileged backgrounds.

Consider clients who say, "I have to get a job now. My family is starving. I don't have time to engage in exploratory activities." The client who needs a job now should be helped to find a job right now. The work activities may not be very satisfying, but the paycheck is all that matters to the client at this moment. The career counselor's task is still to help the client use any job as a learning experience.

- What search actions are most likely to yield an immediate job offer?
- When a temporary job is found, what can be learned from the experience?
- What are the concerns of the other workers?
- What are the manager's concerns?
- How could an employee volunteer to be more helpful to the manager?

Every job involves a multitude of possible learning experiences, but some initiative from the employee to take on new and unfamiliar tasks can lead to greater responsibilities and higher pay. Valuable learning can occur for people employed at every level of the career hierarchy.

## Implications

The Happenstance Learning Theory has important implications for the behavior of everyone in our society. Here we will focus on the work of career counselors and educators.

### For Career Counselors

Counseling can take place in a variety of ways depending on the client concerns, the counselor's personality, and the setting where counseling takes place. It is helpful to conceptualize five components of counseling using the HLT. These components are not necessarily steps because they may well occur in different sequences with different clients.

1. Orient client expectations

This orientation may occur either at the beginning of counseling or at times when each issue arises.

Goal: Prepare clients for a counseling process in which unplanned events are a normal and necessary component.

Possible orientation statements could include the following:

- Anxiety about planning the future is normal and can be replaced by a sense of adventure.
- The goal of counseling is to help you create a more satisfying life for yourself.

- A satisfying life consists of many components: work, family, relationships, hobbies, community involvement, exercise, nourishment, meaning, affiliations, entertainment, music, art.
- The career path is a lifelong learning process that requires you to make innumerable decisions in response to unexpected events.
- No one can predict the future—everyone’s career is influenced by many unplanned events.
- Our task is to facilitate your learning to create and benefit from future planned and unplanned events one step at a time.
- Naming a future occupation is only one possible starting point for exploring career opportunities.

2. Identify the client’s concern as a starting place

Goal: Help clients identify what would make their lives more satisfying.

Counselor actions would include examples such as the following:

- Say “Tell me what’s on your mind.”
- Listen actively.
- Make sure the clients know that you understand their situation and feelings.
- Ask “Can you describe activities in your life where you feel energized?”
- Ask “How did you happen to discover these energizing activities?”

3. Use client’s successful past experiences with unplanned events as a basis for current actions.

Goal: Empower clients to see that their past successes contain lessons for present actions.

Counselors may ask clients to tell a story about how some unplanned event has influenced their life or career and then elicit answers to questions like these:

- What had you done that put you in a position to be influenced by that event?
- How did you recognize the opportunity?
- After the event, what did you do to capitalize on it?
- What new skills did you have to learn?
- How did you make contact with key people then?
- How did others learn about your interests and skills?
- So what similar types of actions could you take now?

4. Sensitize clients to recognize potential opportunities

Goal: Help clients learn to reframe unplanned events into career opportunities.

Possible counselor prompts would include the following:

- Tell me a chance event you wish would happen to you.
- How can you act now to increase the likelihood of that desirable event?
- How would your life change if you acted?
- How would your life change if you did nothing?

## 5. Overcome Blocks to Action

Goal: Help clients to overcome dysfunctional beliefs that block constructive action.

Counselors may ask questions similar to the following:

- What do you believe is stopping you from doing what you really want to do?
- What do you believe is a first step you could take now to move closer to what you want?
- What do you believe is stopping you from taking that first step?
- How would your life become more satisfying if you were to take appropriate action?
- What action will you take before we meet next?
- By what date and time will you e-mail me a report of your action?

*Evaluating the outcomes of counseling.* Counseling should not be evaluated by what takes place during the counseling interview itself. The purpose of counseling is to have an impact on how the clients think, feel, and act in the real world after the counseling session is over. Therefore to evaluate the effects of counseling, counselors need to find out the extent to which clients' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the real world have changed. Possible ways of judging when counseling had been successful would include the following:

- When clients expressed increased satisfaction with their lives.
- When clients were able to initiate actions likely to produce beneficial unplanned events.
- When clients took advantage of new learning opportunities.
- When clients overcame internal and external obstacles to action.

*Duration of counseling.* Instead of terminating when a decision was made, counseling could continue intermittently for a lifetime as clients faced new transitions and requested help.

Traditionally, career counseling was conducted to aid in the transition from school to work. However, many other transitions in life require major emotional and behavioral changes, for example, from one location to another, from single to married, from child-free to parent, from married to divorced, from employed to laid off, from unemployed to employed, and from employed to retired.

Career decisions are not a one-time event but occur continually throughout life. Keeping options always open means that new opportunities must be created, recognized, and seized.

Counselors and clients can become partners in discovering enjoyable and fruitful next steps. Clients tend to feel liberated because they no longer must plan their entire future in advance.

## For Other Educators

Education is supposed to help every student learn to become a better citizen in the world where we all live. But what should they learn? There is so much that could be learned. We can go to any library and survey all the books, magazines, journals, newspapers, audio and video files. How many of these books, for example, have any one of us read? A very small percentage most of us would have to admit. Because time is limited, educators have to select a limited number of educational goals that they want their students to achieve.

Many profound arguments have ensued and will continue to occur over the content of the curriculum. The trouble here is based on the assumption that learning occurs only in schools. In fact, learning is occurring all the time. As you read these words, you are aware, for example, of the furniture in the room you are in, others who may be near, and the temperature. Much of what we learn may not have much importance, but we are constantly observing the world around us and trying to make sense of what we detect.

A great effort is being expended to make education more accountable. So some states have *exit examinations* that high school students must pass before they can graduate. We have laws intending to leave no child behind that actually result in more children being left behind (Ohanian, 2008). Multiple choice tests are administered to measure a very few cognitive outcomes, and schools which do not report a steadily increasing number of students passing these tests are deemed *failing schools* with dire consequences for the educators involved (Nichols & Berliner, 2006).

*The real goals of education.* The problem is that we are not assessing the real goals of education? The real educational goals are evidenced by what students do after they leave school, not by what they do in school.

- Are our children really becoming better citizens?
- Are they learning and practicing healthy habits of eating, drinking, and exercising?
- Are they continuing constructive learning activities after leaving school?
- How curious are they about their world and the people in it?
- How many of them obey, or break, the laws of their society?
- How many are in prison?
- How much critical thinking and discussing engages their time?
- How well can they evaluate the claims of advertisers?
- How competent are they in solving problems at work?
- How much initiative and cooperation do they exercise while working in teams?
- How much do they love to learn for their own self-improvement?
- How well can they resist peer pressure to gamble, smoke, or drink excessive amounts of alcohol?

These and other social and emotional goals can be taught by teachers and parents. A comprehensive curriculum with multiple activities and exercises is available for prekindergarten through eighth grade in Petersen (2008). It includes four books, each targeted for a specific range of grade levels.

*The complicated role of poverty.* School achievement is clearly correlated with family financial resources. Berliner (2006) has compiled a persuasive summary of the evidence showing that poverty is associated with low student achievement. Poverty, wealth, and family income are easy to measure because dollars can be quantified. However, is it poverty itself or factors associated with poverty that cause low achievement? If poverty itself were the cause, the solution would simply be a redistribution of the country's wealth, so that every family had about the same amount of money to spend. But would every family spend it in the same way? Almost certainly not. A more interesting question is whether a change in family income is associated with changing school achievement. Dearing, McCartney, and Taylor (2001) conducted a study showing that income decreases were "associated with



worse outcomes and increases were associated with better outcomes” (p. 1779). However, the outcomes were measured on 3-year-old children, and no data is presented on the reasons for the increase or decrease in income. The data are all correlational, and it is all too easy to confuse correlation with causation.

*Walking the talk.* Most educational assessments place more value on the ability to use words than on the ability to perform skills. Cognitive science has made significant contributions to the evolution of expertise, which frequently involves the mastery of skills by people not necessarily inclined toward eloquent verbal explanations of what they are doing. One can only imagine if Yogi Berra were a model not of *catching* a baseball but of *explaining how he does it!* (Italics in original; Feuer, 2006, p. 81)

Now which is the more important skill—the ability to catch a baseball, or the ability to explain how to catch a baseball? Imagine a professional baseball manager hiring a new catcher and paying him US\$1,000,000 per year. Imagine the manager saying to an applicant, “You keep dropping the ball, and you can’t throw to 2nd base, but you are absolutely brilliant in explaining the trajectory that the ball must follow. You’re hired!” It would never happen. The ability to perform a skill is far more valuable than the skill of explaining in words how to do it.

Feuer goes on with the example of bicycle riding:

It is interesting to note that the tasks do not need to be complex: after all, bicycle riding is not complex in any objective sense but only in terms of how difficult it is to capture and communicate its essence clearly. Without such capacity, standards of performance are difficult if not impossible to articulate in advance, which renders the task of accountability particularly onerous, especially if fairness and transparency are valued. (p. 81)

The implicit message here is that accountability for achieving an educational goal depends on the difficult task of describing how to do it. But how difficult is it to determine whether children can ride a bicycle? Watch them do it. Nothing could be easier. The goals of education should be evaluated by performance in the real world, not merely by selecting approved words on an answer sheet.

How do we teach children to ride a bicycle? Do we give them a lecture on the importance of adjusting the balance and manipulating the steering? No, we put them on the bicycle seat and guide them through the process, recognizing that an occasional skinned knee may be necessary in the process of learning. And we evaluate the success of our teaching by observing whether or not the children can actually ride a bicycle. The HLT stresses the importance of evaluating learning experiences on the basis of performance in the real world, not merely by paper and pencil tests in school.

*Learning to love learning.* What educators do in school can have either a positive or a negative impact on each individual student. We can teach in a way that makes children either love learning or hate learning. We can establish environments that encourage students to either support each other or to bully others.

Too many educational environments, though well intentioned, are counter productive for what we really want to achieve. Education has become a competitive sport. Students must compete against each other for the highest grades. There is no incentive for students to help

each other learn. There are only a limited number of high grades, so there is more incentive to inhibit the learning of others rather than to encourage it. Students become rank ordered in this competitive environment so that, unlike in “Lake Woebegone,” only 50% of the students can be above average and the other 50% are doomed to be below average. Thus some students are perpetually humiliated by their classroom experiences. Of course they hate school. Of course they hate learning what the school teaches. Of course they want to escape from this oppressive environment (Meiners, 2007).

*Practical implications.* Applying the HLT to education would produce these recommendations:

1. Help each child improve from his or her own starting point. Do not set the bar for success at any one level for everyone. It will be too easy for some, too hard for others, and just right for very few.
2. Concentrate on individual achievement, not group achievement. The so-called *achievement gap* is based on statistical averages based on large groups beyond the reach of any teacher or school district.
3. Reward improvement and success for a variety of learning outcomes. The high-stakes testing programs tend to sample with multiple-choice items just a few mathematics and English comprehension areas. Success in this world is possible in countless additional ways—computer skills, singing, dancing, painting, archeology, psychology, chemistry, football, golf, history, biology, foreign languages, and food preparation to name just a few.
4. Make the educational process satisfying and enjoyable for all participants—students, teachers, parents, counselors, and administrators. Suffering is neither necessary nor desirable for learning to take place.
5. Arrange circumstances that require students to perform valuable learning tasks. Students learn best from their own actions, not from lectures.
6. Assess the outcomes of education by the performance of students and graduates in the real world. Marking bubbles on a multiple choice answer sheet is not the goal of education.

## Needed Research

The value of any theory is not merely in its logical persuasiveness. The test is in the extent to which its propositions are confirmed, or refuted, by observational data. Ariely (2008) reminded us that scientific research is an exercise in skepticism. Following are a few research questions the answers to which would cast light on the theory’s usefulness.

## Descriptive Studies

- How many adults of various demographic backgrounds attribute their current occupational situation to an early planned choice or to one or more unplanned events?
- How does the Happenstance Learning Theory need to be adapted for people from different cultures, genders, and ethnic backgrounds?
- How can the most influential unplanned events be usefully classified?
- What is the best way to teach students how to recognize and take advantage of unplanned events?
- How would counseling and education change if educational outcomes were measured by behavior in the real world?

## Correlational Studies

- Are people who made an early career choice and stuck with it more satisfied with their current occupational situation than those who responded to unplanned opportunities?
- Are the lessons learned from personal experiences more permanent than lessons learned from lectures?
- Are students who are rewarded for showing improvement more motivated to continue learning than students motivated by competition?

## Experimental Studies

- Among students who are randomly assigned to counselors, are those with counselors using the HLT more satisfied with their lives than those with counselors using more traditional counseling procedures?
- Does requiring students to commit to an occupational goal increase their motivation and ability to learn?
- How useful are career assessment instruments in stimulating clients to engage in exploratory learning experiences?
- What is the best way to teach the Happenstance Learning theory so that students engage in more career-related actions?
- How can students and clients best be taught to use their current employment as a learning opportunity?
- The creativity of future researchers to generate and conduct helpful studies will always be needed to make sure our citizens have available the best possible techniques for creating more satisfying lives.

## Conclusion

The Happenstance Learning Theory explains that the career destiny of each individual cannot be predicted in advance but is a function of countless planned and unplanned learning experiences beginning at birth. Career counselors contribute to that learning process by helping their clients engage in an active lifestyle to generate unexpected events, to remain alert to new opportunities, and to capitalize on the opportunities they find. Other educators contribute by designing engaging activities that enable students to improve their cognitive, emotional, and physical skills. The fundamental goal is to help everyone create a more satisfying life.

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