

## **Book review: Career guidance in communities**

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### **Review**

Career guidance in communities, by Rie Thomsen, Aarhus, Denmark, Aarhus University Press, 2012, 256 pp., £34.78 (paperback), ISBN 9788771240122

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Rie Thomsen makes a simple but critical point in her book *Career Guidance in Communities*. Career guidance, she argues, happens in places and it happens with people.

What is more, these people are surrounded by other people who are often going through similar experiences. The fact that this plea to acknowledge the geographical and social contexts of career guidance is so radical says a lot about the state of the discipline and means that Thomsen's book edges us towards some paradigm-shifting conclusions.

Thomsen draws on Dreier's (1993) thinking, which argues that psychotherapy (and the implication is that this is also the case for guidance) is often practised and presented as if it exists in a 'privileged ideal space' in which context, spaces and even furniture are unimportant. In fact, as Thomsen's research shows, the spaces in which interactions happen shape them, limiting some kinds of interaction and opening up others. However, Thomsen's critique is not merely about the failure of research to engage with context, but also about the assumption that career guidance is essentially a one-to-one individualising interaction. Such practices are challenged theoretically, but also by using empirical observations to demonstrate how alternative ways of organising career guidance can be effective.

Thomsen's book is grounded in two case studies. In the first, she describes the activities of a career guidance practitioner in a paint factory where production is being discontinued. In the second, she looks at guidance practice within a Danish folk high school which provides residential, post-school, vocational education. In both contexts she notes that conventional forms of one-to-one career guidance seem to be ineffective strategies for engaging with employees or students. She describes how people are reluctant to individualise themselves and to place themselves in an intensive one-to-one situation. However, she also observes a great deal of career guidance taking place in the day-to-day contexts where people work and learn. The ability of education and guidance professionals to utilise these opportunities and to use them strategically is therefore critical.

A good example of the creative use of context is provided by the guidance counsellor Ulla's work in the factory. Through the establishment of a career guidance wall (essentially a notice board) in the lunch room, Ulla is able to move out of the individualising guidance office and into the spaces that employees actually inhabit. This shift of location at once serves as a form of outreach, engaging

those who may not otherwise have engaged, and socialises the practice of guidance as the guidance now takes place in a collective context (the lunch room). The context changes the conversation from 'why am I being made redundant?' to 'why are we being made redundant?' and offers opportunities for solidarity and collective problem solving.

Thomsen's argument for the importance of both context and collective approaches to guidance is powerful. She draws on a number of Danish writers (Krøjer & Hutter and Løve) to discuss the potentially individualising and alienating nature of conventional career guidance practice. However, it is notable that despite the advocacy of guidance strategies that make use of group settings and collective experience, the examples given in the book still tend to situate the outcomes of guidance as a primarily individual good. Thomsen is critical of attempts by policy makers to use career guidance as a 'governing technology' whereby individuals are compelled/persuaded to do things because they are in the interests of the state and/or society, for example get a job or not take a gap year. However, this leaves the book in the slightly anomalous conceptual position of arguing for a collective approach to guidance which resists the collective aims fostered by the state in favour of more individual aims. She discusses the balancing role that career guidance has to play between these societal interests and individual interests subtly, but does not fully clarify how a shift to more collective approaches might change this.

Early on in the book Thomsen discusses models developed by Watts (1996) and revised by Peter Plant, which identify four ideological orientations for career guidance (conservative, liberal, progressive and radical). One of the implications of Thomsen's work is surely that collective approaches to career guidance which draw on the collective experiences of clients might also support the development of collective solutions. Such solutions might operate within a progressive paradigm ('together you could set up your own business or orchestrate a workers' buy-out of a closing plant'), but it is also likely that such collective problem solving might move people into more radical approaches ('we won't be able to advance our career unless we collectively bargain, form a union or change the law or government'). Such approaches reframe the individual vs. society debate and require new thinking, perhaps drawing on the radical pedagogies of thinkers like Freire (1996/1970). The fact that Thomsen does not explore these collective solutions to career problems is surprising given the general direction of her argument. It may simply be that such solutions were not observed empirically.

Despite this reservation about Thomsen's decision not to explore radical and collective career guidance solutions, *Career Guidance in Communities* remains a very important book. It provides new analytical ideas for exploring career guidance as well as a persuasive critique about how practice should develop. It deserves to be read by all working in the field.

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