

NGHIÊN CỨU TƯỜNG THUẬT VỀ THAY ĐỔI NGHỀ NGHIỆP: CÂU CHUYỆN CỦA CỰU GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH TRỞ THÀNH NGHỆ SĨ MINH HỌA NỔI TIẾNG

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Bài viết trình bày kết quả một nghiên cứu về trải nghiệm của một cựu giáo viên dạy tiếng Anh, người đã chuyển biến thành một nghệ sĩ phác họa nổi tiếng được nhiều người yêu thích. Nghiên cứu này là một phần của một đề tài lớn hơn, trong đó sử dụng phương pháp tự sự, phỏng vấn phi cấu trúc với 10 cựu sinh viên trong suốt hai năm. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy cần chú trọng hơn nữa tới việc hỗ trợ giảng viên, đặc biệt là cho những người ít kinh nghiệm tại nơi làm việc. Mặt khác nhóm tác giả cũng gợi ý một số chiến lược nhằm giảm thiểu tình trạng làm việc quá tải của giảng viên. Kết quả nghiên cứu cũng cho thấy ngoài việc cung cấp kiến thức chuyên môn và phát triển các bộ kỹ năng cụ thể, giáo dục đại học cần nuôi dưỡng tư duy phát triển, thói quen và kỹ năng học tập suốt đời cũng như khả năng phục hồi từ những căng thẳng trong công việc. Bằng cách này, giáo dục đại học có thể xây dựng nền tảng vững chắc có khả năng giúp sinh viên đạt được thành công sau khi tốt nghiệp.

Từ khóa: Cựu giáo viên tiếng Anh, quyết định nghề nghiệp, thay đổi nghề nghiệp, phương pháp tự sự.

This article presents the results of a study on the experience of one participant, a former teacher of English, who transformed herself into a viral sketch artist. The study was part of a larger research project that explored the factors influencing the career-change decision-making process, which collected data from a sample of 10 alumni in two years. The article reveals that further attention is paid to supporting teachers, especially the less-experienced ones, at their workplace. Some recommendations and strategies for mitigating teacher burnout are also provided. Furthermore, the findings suggest that in addition to providing professional knowledge and developing specific skill sets, tertiary education should nurture a growth mindset, life-long learning habits and skills, and resilience. In this way, a tertiary education can build a strong foundation, capable of launching students into success after graduation.

Keywords: former teacher of English, career decision, career change, narrative inquiry.

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A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF CAREER CHANGE: HOW A FORMER EFL TEACHER BECAME A VIRAL SKETCH ARTIST

Introduction

Teacher shortage is an ongoing and pressing issue which results from the failure in recruiting young people to the profession and a significant increase in the dropout rate during their career (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023). Similarly in Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) estimates that schools are facing the shortage of teachers with approximately 16.000 resigned teachers out of the total 1.6 million teachers just in the year 2022 (VietNamNet News, 2022). Leaving the teaching profession has been frequently documented and reported in a number of professional development research (e.g., Buchanan, 2010; Huang, 2021; Pennington, 2009).

Teachers leaving the teaching profession has led to international concern (Hong, 2012) and numerous studies have been implemented to examine factors that influence this choice (Mombaers et.al., 2023). In Vietnam, research on the topic, however, mainly focuses on teachers' resilience, and how their identities are constructed (Setiawan & Kuswandono, 2020). This present study aims to contribute to the existing literature by examining the struggles of a former EFL teacher to stay in or opt out of the teaching profession and to become a viral sketcher. Specifically, the study focuses on the "lived experience" which is paid little

attention in voluminous literature on career change (den Brok et al., 2017).

Literature review

Career and career change

This study adopts Hall's (2002) definition of career as consisting of an individual's sequence of perceived work roles. In this way, both formal and informal work are included in an individual's career. Career change can be seen as "movement across occupational boundaries" (Hess, Jepsen & Dries, 2012, p. 280). A long period of globalization and more demand for employability in the knowledge economy have resulted in the changes in the workplace and career development. This eventually encourages individuals to pursue diverse career paths. The aim in the process of career development is one of individual "self- development" and empowerment of the individual (Savickas et al., 2009, p. 243).

The factors that influence the career choices of educational professionals include both contextual and personal factors (Mombaers et al., 2023). In fact, the causes related to work such as high workload and stress are found in the works of Mombaers et al. (2023). Organization and colleague support is another work-related factor mentioned in Mombaers et.al (2023). The lack of opportunities towards professional growth and problems with school culture is also reported to affect teachers' decision to leave their job

(Mombaers et al., 2023). These contextual factors can be seen as negative factors or unfavorable conditions which encourage turnover intention or the desirability of leaving a job (Fu, 2011). However, not only negative factors that influence the decision of leaving a job, positive factors such as high pay, better opportunities, job security, organizational culture, reputation and availability of alternative jobs with similar or better conditions also create the ease of movement from organization and attracting employees toward a new destination (Fu, 2011). Besides these contextual factors, personal factors either facilitate or inhibit the decision to move (Fu, 2011). These factors vary, ranging from teachers' autonomy (the freedom to put idea into practice), self-efficacy (teachers's belief that they possess the necessary abilities to do a good teaching job), general job motivation and commitment (Mombaers et al., 2023; Huang, 2021) to teachers' well-being (Mombaers et al., 2023; VietNamNet News, 2022). These individual influential factors also result from work experience. For example, teachers 's well-being was negatively affected due to high workload, specifically due to the increase of administrative tasks which they found useless (Mombaers et al., 2023).

Understanding career change through narratives

The narrative approach can take into account the temporality and place, which enables the finding of patterns in retrospective study. A narrative inquiry entails understanding "ways in which

individuals make sense of their careers as they unfold through time and space, attending to both the holistic nature of careers as well as to specific career transitions" (Cohen & Melon, 2001, p. 48–49). Life career action can be viewed as an ongoing, ever-changing and holistic experience in the individual's life while narrative is a way of putting together, or making a configuration of, such elements as people, motives, opportunities, means, places, and events.

As we enact our careers, we create "stories". ... A career story is based on the events, such as job moves and job titles of the objective career, but also includes memories of subjective career phenomena such as satisfactions, emotions, and ambitions. (Arthur et al, 1999, p. 42)

Career decisions can be understood "not through an objective body of knowledge of theory, but through grasping the story in which it forms a part" (Cochran, 1991, p.21) as individuals have unique ways of dealing with obstacles, unforeseen events, various circumstances, chance, and inner conflicts, (Bujold, 2004). Therefore, a framework might not include all the "scenarios", human beings make their experiences meaningful through the stories they tell. It is also remarked that in qualitative research with life story, theory emerges from the story, contrary to what happens in quantitative investigations, in which hypotheses emerge from a tested theoretical framework. It is suggested that narrative, for example, helps in the search for themes or patterns and reveals the past-in-the-present, provides a tool for studying the goal directed nature of career behavior,

and how the meaning that career takes for individuals is a shared meaning in the sense that it is closely related to the social interactions in which they are involved.

In short, narratives based on the stories which individuals tell have the capability of highlighting the complexities brought forward by micro and macro factors and their influence in career development, especially career change (Bujold, 2004). Narratives provide means for articulating needs and goals, purposes and actions, and for discovering life patterns, they are highly relevant for the study of career and, for elaborating career theory.

Methods

This research study followed a qualitative approach, drawing on narrative data under the light of constructivism in which “realities are multiple personal and social constructions, in a constant process of becoming” (Cox & Lyddon, 1997, p. 204). The researchers attempted to dig deep into the participant’s career change experiences, with the hope of mapping into her lived stories of joining the teaching profession after graduation from a teacher education program, serving a prestigious school within five years, leaving this school, being a free-lance teacher within one year, quitting teaching, and later becoming a viral sketcher.

Context and the participant

This case study belongs to a broader project involving 10 participants who are alumni of a prestigious teacher training institution in Hanoi. Purposive sampling was used for this study, which allowed the

researcher to identify available and accessible participants to the study. Alumni from 22 to 35 years old in the alumni list of the school were identified, and sent the information of the project. Ten people finally contacted us and voluntarily participated in the study. Consequently, they were chosen as participants of this study. Besides, the two researchers of this study suppose that the age 22 to 35 is the period in which individuals have less career stability because it is thought that this is best age for career change. This is the reason why alumni aged 22 to 35 were chosen.

The case study participant, Minh (pseudonym), entered the teaching profession in fall 2011, upon graduation from a BA in English language teacher education program. She was an EFL teacher for about 5 years before she quit teaching English in 2017, and since then she has been a sketcher. She used to be the researchers’ colleague, an advantage in collecting data as the mutual relationship brings openness and trust. Together with the researchers, the participant reflected her career development within 11 years after graduation. She explained why she left the teaching profession and compared her experience in working as a teacher and as a sketcher.

Data collection & analysis

Narrative inquiry was employed to understand career transitions of the participant. Therefore, unstructured interviews were used as the main method of data collection as meaning of behaviours

and events in people's lives were conveyed in the natural flow of a conversation (Bujold, 2004). Participants preferred chronological narrative form, telling the story from beginning to end, making sense of it as a whole before being comfortable with taking it apart. The data should be allowed to speak for itself insofar as possible, so the researchers let the participant choose the beginning and ending of her story and tie them together to make their point. The researchers' role then was to follow up and ask questions. In this way the interviews appeared in both chronological and thematic way.

The constructed narratives, based on interviews and all supplementary data, were shared with the participant for further data additions, amendments, and clarifications. This both ensured the trustworthiness of the data analysis, and at the same time helped the researchers elicit more information through the participants' further elaborations of stories.

Finally, the researchers re-examined the themes in depth through re-reading the original data and composing mini-stories with a focus on the specific time, space, and characters involved. A thematic, inductive approach to data analysis based on a life-history methodology was adopted. The consistencies and inconsistencies which reflect and relate to prevailing social conditions were identified. Then the social meanings were deconstructed, constructed, and reconstructed through writing mini-stories that referenced the identified themes. The storyline of the teacher's

narratives was then developed and knitted into "story constellations".

Findings and Discussion

The following sections present the participant's working experiences during the 11 year period after graduation, revealing not just the career decision-making but also aspects of career change. Three identified themes in the participants' narratives attributed as a source of career change.

Workload

Workload is the first emerging theme in the participant's narratives, and it influences the participant's decision to leave her teaching job at school and then stop teaching English completely. After graduation, Minh applied for a teaching position at the same school from which she received her BA in English language teacher education. She worked there for 5 years, teaching general English to both English major and non-major students. She described herself as a creative and innovative teacher who would always explore different teaching methods to encourage students to really use English, especially in speaking and writing.

I enjoyed teaching and I still like teaching now. Working with students definitely gave me a lot of enjoyment. I had many cheerful moments with them. I was also glad that I could help them become better in their study journey. As for me, teaching is not a repetitive job, but a creative and rewarding one.

(Interview 1, hour 1, minute 50)

In addition, she had a good relationship with students. She enjoyed talking with her

students because there was mostly no age gap between her and her students at that time. Building a rapport with students also made her teaching journey more joyful.

It is obvious that her teaching passion is strong, so it is enticing why she left her teaching job at school. The participant considered workload as a decisive factor. She experienced numerous pressure in making lesson plans, making tests, marking students' work, invigilating exams, and doing research.

Once the class schedule was set, it was hard to cancel one because students could not arrange another time to make up for the canceled class. It seemed that work never stops. I spent almost every evening preparing lesson plans. When I thought I was less busy preparing for class, other tasks sneaked up. I could see an increase in time doing other stuff than teaching.

(Interview 1, hour 2, minute 20)

As Minh recollected, it can be seen that her high workload included both the nature and the amount of work (Buchanan, 2010). This confirms that workload is still one of the influential factors pushing teachers to come to the decision of leaving the profession (Buchanan, 2010; Mombaers et al., 2023). It is extremely difficult for them to find a work-life balance due to the high workload. Minh found that the out-of-school-hours demands took her away from her "personal" time. Encountering heavy workload, lower positions, and high social responsibilities, language teachers in their early career stage are likely to suffer identity struggles and professional burnout, which leads to career change (Huang & Yip, 2021). However, for some

participants in Mombaers et al. (2023), their workload was rarely mentioned as a factor pushing them to leave school. This can be explained by the fact that people deal with pressure from workload differently.

When it comes to support, the participant emphasized that she appreciated the bond she had with other teacher colleagues. Minh recollected:

I learnt a lot from my colleagues, especially in my first years of teaching. We often shared with each other teaching techniques, useful materials and how to manage different types of class. My knowledge in testing and assessment, building curriculum and materials was also improved through the teamwork tasks. Outside school, I was rather close to some of my colleagues. We are still best friends now.

(Interview 2, hour 1, minute 20)

Minh added that one she missed after leaving job is the support from her colleagues. As Mombaers (2023) stated, the bond with colleagues could reduce the desire of leaving a teaching job, which also makes teachers hesitate to make decisions. Colleague support appeared several times in Minh' stories. However, the local and school support seems to be blurred in this picture. Minh did not mention school support as a negative factor pushing her to leave the job. She did not mention it as something retaining her at school, either.

Minh recalled another important reason for her leaving decision, which was the commute between her home and her school. As for her, it can be seen as a kind of "workload" because it added more

exhaustion to her work. The distance to her home is within 15 kilometers but given living in a big city this distance was definitely an obstacle for her. “I was exhausted every time I had to thread my way in bustling and chaotic roads and after this long journey of commuting, I had to be “on stage” – presenting the lessons and organizing class discussion or other activities. Although many people get used to it, this distance is not for me.”, Minh described. This reason made the researchers surprised because we agreed with Minh that many people get used to it.

The attraction of alternative job

It is not only high workload and working distance that are work-related reasons for the participant to quit teaching. After having left the teaching job at the university, Minh still continued teaching as a free-lance teacher for about one year before completely quitted teaching English. Minh recalled:

The pressure of workload lessened when I left school and started free-lance teaching and tutoring. However, teaching is not my only passion: I was also keen on drawing. I started drawing when I was a little child, and I have kept this hobby since then. I thought one of the reasons why I left my teaching job at school is because I would like to draw more. I need to invest more in drawing although I had never considered drawing as a job before. I still remember it was around the time I was a free-lance teacher. I had a chance to do some illustrating jobs which made me realize that drawing can be a “real” job for me. Then I quitted teaching English and started another career as a sketcher.

(Interview 1, hour 2, minute 50)

It is clear that not only these negative factors push people away from a job but the availability of alternative jobs could pull people farther away (Fu, 2011). Here opportunities and constraints in the career construction are presented through the changes in jobs and career (Chinyamurindi, 2012). It means individuals might experience constraints such as broken employment, part-time working, suffering from former job dissatisfaction while being exposed themselves to opportunities to try new things as the findings shown in Chinyamurindi’s work. Daly & Dee (2006) also agree that increased opportunities for alternative employment tend to reduce the intent to stay.

An interesting finding is that Minh’s transition from a teaching job to a non-teaching one occurred without constraints. She was determined to invest more time and effort in drawing. The decision to stop private tutoring thus was inevitably made. Unlike Minh, the participant in research of Huang (2021), who is a former ESL teacher and aspired to be an innovative teacher, experienced the disorientation, anxieties, and worries of her transition from a teacher to an education organization officer as she weighed the potential risks and benefits of staying or leaving the teaching profession and started doubting her teaching capability. She encountered various difficulties in her early years of teaching, including the lack of opportunities for professional learning, funding unavailability, little concrete support on the departmental and personal levels and surveillance mechanism. Especially,

triggered by an “insulting” classroom revisiting, she decided to resign, suffering depression for several weeks. All of these might explain her rough profession transition. In contrast, the crucial factor attributing to Minh’s decision was her drawing aspiration, though job dissatisfaction also triggered her to leave.

Personal growth

The participant’s stories show patterns of interrupted employment records and working part-time. Minh recollected that at the time when she quitted teaching, she just wanted to draw more. When recollecting that time, Minh thought she used her circumstance of teaching part-time after leaving job at school to pave her way to a new career as a sketcher. Similar to the finding in Chinyamurindi’s work (2012), a break time between two jobs or careers was also recorded in the participants’ narratives, which was an opportunity to try new things thus facilitating a career change.

Looking back on the journey of being an EFL teacher and then a sketcher, Minh recalled both similar and contrasting experiences. Both career paths were experimental journeys where new ideas or new approaches could be applied, evaluated and amended. However, drawing eventually gave her more freedom and creativity.

Sketching and illustrating jobs seem to be more interesting and exciting. I can proactively decide the way I want to complete the tasks. Unlike teaching, I had to follow the school syllabus, testing and assessment format, class management regulation, etc.

(Interview 3, hour 1, minute 10)

Similar to Minh, participants in Mombaers et al. (2003) highlighted the lack of autonomy when they missed the freedom to put their own ideas into practice. Moreover, the flexibility of working time and working place of drawing jobs contributed to a wider personal space where Minh could arrange time for self-reflection and recovery.

Since I stopped teaching to focus on drawing jobs, I haven’t found myself being dangled in work. I actually have time for myself and pursue a healthy lifestyle. I have time to develop as a sketcher, too. I have time to think about what kind of sketcher I want to be, and I could choose what painting class to attend. This is so much different from the mandatory but uninspiring professional development activities available at school when I was a teacher.

(Interview 3, hour 1, minute 40)

As for Minh, the amount of quality time for herself plays an essential role in her life and also in her career because it creates a space for her to grow personally and professionally. Doing a “day-to-day, mundane job” made her feel suffocated. In the literature, this has been reported to lead to the decrease in job satisfaction (Pennington, 1991).

Conclusion

Simply put, in this case study three main factors, namely heavy workload, the availability of an alternative job, and personal growth, interwoven to influence the participant’s decision to leave her teaching job. In terms of workload, it is quite similar to the findings in related

literature. Having a high workload lies in the nature of the teaching career, and the number of tasks the teacher was assigned, which created a feeling of work-never-end. Along with the negative aspects of work-related context, the availability of another career path pulled her further away from the teaching job. The decisive moment which made her determined in her leaving decision is partly because of the high workload associated with teaching but mainly because of her desire to invest more in drawing. The latter career path was described as giving more space for her autonomy, creativity and self-development. Compared to the related literature, the factors frequently attributed to teacher leaving profession such as low pay, low self-efficacy, support, communication openness, distributive justice, role conflict were not identified in the analysis of the narrative. In contrast, the participant appreciated what she learned from her colleagues, the professional and personal support she received from them, and the bond she had with them and with her students. The salary was not a major issue for her in the context that she had another source of income from tutoring students after-school hours. However, these teaching jobs added more workload, which was one of the reasons for the participant's decision to leave.

Understanding of how teachers live and work in their personal, institutional and socio-cultural contexts is essential for providing relevant and responsive support for them. This study has highlighted that for early career teachers, a lack of support

from colleagues and mentors in terms of professional identity formation can have a significant if not decisive impact on the decision to leave the teaching profession. Non-teaching related work which can increase teachers' workload is also detrimental. This paper has reported findings based on one single case, so generalization should not be made. Still, we believe that everyone's story can find an echo in another person, and that to some extent, similarities exist between all people (Bujold, 2004). Therefore, listening attentively to an individual narrative can ignite meaningful reflection on bigger issues, thereby successfully contributing to the larger related literature.

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