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DICO Toolkit for Digital Career Stories

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Design thinking in career planning. Implementing tools and mindsets

Dorottya Féja*, Fanni Csernátony**, Anna Pais***

Abstract

This chapter looks at visual tools that are used mainly in design thinking methodologies. It explores how these tools can be utilised in storytelling and career planning. The implementation of a designer mindsets allows one to look at one's own work with a critical eye, to be open to improvement, to not fear mistakes and to be able to learn from those mistakes. The identification and the correct use of divergent and convergent mindsets allocating the appropriate tools for a given career design challenge are the key aspects of a successful career plan.

Building up a narrative can be challenging when the only tools available are verbal ones and often leads to linear, one stranded outcomes. Planning a career path is even more challenging, as one may not have a clear goal or a sense of where the narrative should go next.

* Dorottya Féja, Lecturer, Design Institute, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Zugligeti út, 9-25, 1121 Budapest, Hungary, e-mail: feja@mome.hu.

** Fanni Csernátony, Assistant Lecturer and Researcher in Design Methodology, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Zugligeti út, 9-25, 1121 Budapest, Hungary, e-mail: cserfan@gmail.com.

*** Anna Pais, Assistant Lecturer, Head of Design MA Programme, Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design, Zugligeti út, 9-25, 1121 Budapest, Hungary, e-mail: paispanni@gmail.com.

In the next sections we will try to provide insight and tools into life design. These tools and methods can be useful in a wide range of situations, whenever one is feeling stuck or has to make an important choice or where there is a moment to ponder one's life journey and wants to plan ahead. The same tools that are used to define a company's strategy are also useful to create a personal vision and plan the necessary steps. Introducing visual tools and design thinking mindsets into the career story creating process enables the creator to build up a story much more like a drawing or a picture; not linear, highly associative and layered in meaning.

1. *Design thinking in business*

What is design thinking?
Why is it widely used and in what fields is it utilised?

Design thinking is a human-centered approach to innovation that draws from the designer's toolkit to integrate the needs of people, the possibilities of technology, and the requirements for business success[1].

Design thinking is generally defined as an analytic and creative process that engages a person in opportunities to experiment, create and prototype models, gather feedback, and redesign. Several characteristics (e.g., visualization, creativity) that a good design thinker should possess have been identified from the literature[2].

Design thinking is a creative, structured approach to problem solving. It is used widely in business, innovation, education, engineering and other fields. It helps us understand the context of the problem, to see opportunities for development and create new solutions and knowledge on the given subject. The thinking processes include the user's perspective by utilising different tools to make sure the outcomes are usable and connected to the needs of the user. An important quality of design thinking is that it acts as a roadmap for any unknown subject or environment, and it can be utilised for individuals as well as it can for groups or teams.

Design thinking is usually used in the business world to come up with new ideas for products or services, to plan events, to make processes easier or to create a strategy for the company. It helps design teams to involve stakeholders in order to create holistic solutions.

[1] Brown 2019.
[2] Razzouk, Shute 2012, p. 330.

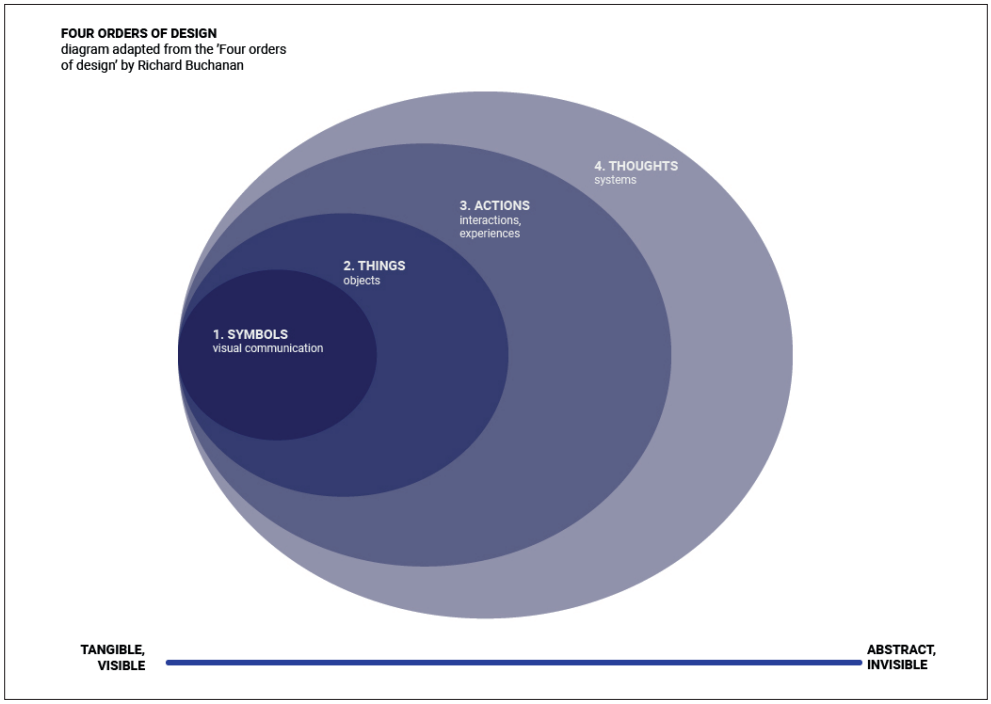

Fig. 1. Buchanan's orders of design (source: authors elaboration on *Buchanan's Orders of Design*, <http://redeinovagov.blogspot.com/2015/11/four-orders-of-design-richard-buchanan.html>, 22.12.2022.)

As shown in figure 1, the main levels of design are graphic, industrial, interaction and systems. Interaction and systems are really interesting in relation to career design, as it is about connecting with other people and recognising patterns is one's life.

In the middle of the 20th century, we realised that we can also design activities and processes. We work progressively more with these activities and services. That's the third order of design. In the beginning we called it Human Computer Interaction. Now we work with any kind of interaction – it's about how people relate to other people. We can design those relationships or the things that support them. It's this interaction I'm after. [...] The fourth order of design is the design of the environments and systems within which all the other orders of design exist. Understanding how these systems work, what core ideas hold them together, what ideas and values – that's a fourth order problem. Both the third and the fourth order are emerging now very strongly. Some designers have the ability to deal with these very complex questions that lie at the core of our social life. Not every designer, but some have the ability to grasp the ideas and the values at the core of very complicated systems. Those are fourth order designers[3].

[3] *Buchanan Orders of Design*, quot. in <http://redeinovagov.blogspot.com/2015/11/four-orders-of-design-richard-buchanan.html>, 22.12.2022.

A point that could be added to this quote is that the skills that allow us to deal with complex questions and understanding services can and should be developed in design education.

For this process of design thinking and complex problem solving to work effectively we need creativity, cooperation and experimental attitudes. The methodology relies on mostly visual tools to help all participants achieve their fullest potential in the aforementioned mindsets.

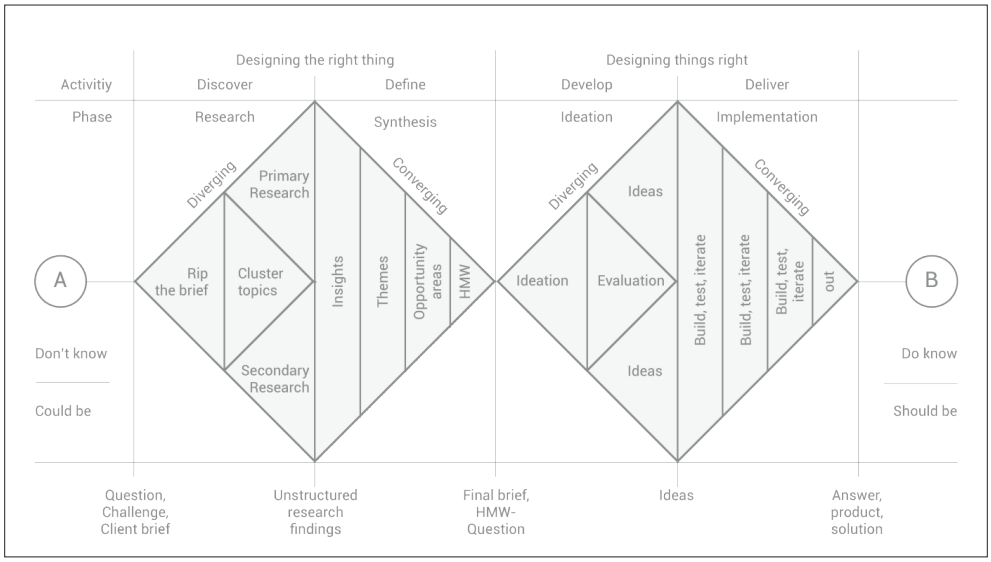

Fig. 2. The Double Diamond revamped (source: Nessler 2016)

As presented in figure 2, two dynamics alternate throughout the process. Divergent (widening) and convergent (narrowing). One of the most valuable tools a designer can have is knowing where they are in the process. Placing themselves on this roadmap determines what tools can be most useful and what outputs can those tools provide.

Divergent processes require curiosity, a non-judgemental attitude, a certain hunger for information and a setting aside of one's own preferences and prejudices. In a more traditional project where the designers work on a product for example, these divergent phases are useful for exploring the needs of the user, empathising with them and generating ideas that may solve said problems. In the career planning or life design sense these divergent parts of the process are more about self-exploration without fear or judgment and free ideation for any type of solution, no matter how crazy, unattainable or risky it may seem. The result of a divergent phase is a wide range of information or ideas, a pool of knowledge. However, utilising the divergent mindset alone cannot yield concrete results. To achieve concrete results we need to use the convergent mindset.

Convergent mindset is about narrowing down our possibilities, making decisions and setting priorities. For example, in a product design process this means finding insights in the research, naming the most pressing issues to be able to see the essence of a problem or evaluating and then deciding between ideas to make them feasible. In a life design context, this convergent mindset is about evaluating what is possible, what is most important to work on and deciding on which steps to take to get to the defined destination. The result of a convergent phase is a well-informed decision and a thoughtfully worded challenge.

The design thinking process can be divided into four further phases: discover, define, develop, and deliver. Following these main steps allows the designer to get a deep understanding of the given subject (discover), find the core problems that need solving (define), generate original and innovative ideas (develop) and finally choose and build the most viable concept from those ideas (deliver). These phases alternate divergent and convergent mindsets.

The process needs to start with mapping out opportunities and problems (discover), which is a divergent phase. In this process the main goal is to get as much information about the subject as possible. No finding is too small, we do not look for order or patterns yet, we just collect data.

The next step is to make sense of all of the information we obtained so now we have to switch to convergent thinking. This means clustering information, finding patterns, recognising priorities, choosing information to act on and reframing the problem.

When the first two phases are done correctly, often the problem we started with takes on a different form. This is called the "debrief" and it is a key element to the whole process. Very often this is a big "AHA!" moment for the designer.

For example, a designer is hired to design new chairs into the waiting room of a telecommunication service provider. The client says that the old chairs must be very uncomfortable as no one wants to sit down while waiting for customer service. The designer goes through the first two phases of design thinking; he researches the situation and, in an interview, asks a customer why she does not sit down in the waiting area. The customer says "I'm sure it's comfortable, but if I sit there, I can't see when they call my number". Now the problem is not the chairs, the reframed problem is the arrangement of the waiting area. Had the designer not been so diligent in his process and only designed what was asked of him initially, the new chairs would still have been empty in that waiting room.

Once "discover" and "define" is complete and the rebrief is worded correctly the ideation phase begins. This reframing moment is a crucial part of the process. People who jump right into ideation or even building a solution might just miss the whole point of the project and spend time and energy on the wrong problem.

In a life design context this rebrief is the moment of realisation, this is the point where a vague feeling or motivation becomes a clear goal and a tangi-

ble, actionable challenge. For example, a student's initial career goal is to be famous but when diving deep into the "whys" and evaluating the findings of self-discovery he may find that it is more precisely a longing for validation and a fear of being an impostor. That positions his further ideation and solution searching in a different way than when he is just aspiring for fame.

Design thinking is usually used in the business world to come up with new ideas for products or services, planning events, making processes easier or to create a strategy for the company. It helps design teams to involve stakeholders to create holistic solutions.

Once we have a clear challenge, preferably in the form of a question, then we can start the long-awaited brainstorming session. Often, when working with non-designers or participants who are not used to this frame of thinking, they cannot wait for this part. In their minds, the main event of any innovation driven workshop is brainstorming, so any work preceding that is perceived with a bit of frustration. Ideation or development can be interpreted in a career design context as a tool to map out all the possibilities and all the choices one could make. This requires a distance between the subject and the problem so the session it is often playful in nature and quick in timing to keep the ideas fresh and to not leave space for hesitation.

The fourth phase in the process is "deliver", which can mean many different things depending on the length of the project and the medium of the desired output. A delivered output may be a storyboard, a prototype or a fully developed product or anything in between. This is a strongly convergent phase of the design thinking process. In a career design context this is the place for making plans, deciding which ideas to act on and how exactly to do that. Often these actionable ideas can be separated into short term or long-term categories. Short term tasks give an opportunity to act instantly, to receive quick feedback and provide a feeling of satisfaction – it may be a phone call, sending over a portfolio or going to a conference, anything that has the possibility to yield quick results. These tasks are important, but we cannot neglect the long-term tasks as they provide longevity and authenticity to the whole career plan. Long-term tasks might be starting a new project, bringing in new colleagues, or starting to learn a new skill.

As you can see from this description of the design thinking process, this approach is a great fit for mapping out possible futures and imagining several outcomes for a given situation.

> Designers do not aim to deal with questions of what is, how and why but, rather, with what might be, could be and should be. While scientist may help us to understand the present and predict the future, designers may be seen to prescribe and to create the future, and thus their process deserves not just ethical but also moral scrutiny[4].

[4] Lawson 2010, p. 138.

Design solutions also need to be applicable as without practical considerations, all concepts and ideas are stuck in the theoretical realm.

2. *Personal design thinking*

How can we use design thinking in personal life (like career planning)? Why can career design be considered a "design problem"?

«The subject matter of design is potentially *universal* in scope, because design thinking may be applied to any area of human experience»[5].

As discussed in the previous paragraph, design thinking is a great fit for complex problems or in the case where the ideation needs to involve numerous stakeholders. But how is it a convenient toolbox for exploring one's career and professional identity? We can find many similarities between design problems, design methodologies and how we make decisions about our careers and personal lives.

As outlined in Lawson's book[6], design problems have a few indistinctive elements, such as the possible solutions to a given problem are not finite and there is no one right answer. Once we decide on a solution it will bring out, other questions and challenges thus propelling the design process into infinity. The process with which we approach these complex or "wicked" problems seems to be parallel of the way we approach our life decisions, that is the process does not have an ending point. Resting points and milestones appear but never for too long as there is no final or correct answer "everything is a prototype". The process involves finding the problem and then trying to solve the problem and, most importantly, both the process and the solution are subjective in nature.

«The problem for designers is to conceive and plan what does not yet exists, and this occurs in the context of indeterminacy of wicked problems, before the final result is known»[7].

As Buchanan writes in *Wicked problems in design thinking*, design thinking is particularly equipped to deal with "wicked problems". These are defined as problems that are complex, ever changing and have no determined solution. Career or life design fits into the "wicked" category of challenges, as it is full of moving parts and unknown outcomes[8].

Problems, such as questions around one's career, cannot be fully understood and analysed via scientific approaches. One needs to consider the personal, the financial and many more ever-changing factors that play a role in our career

[5] Buchanan 1992, p. 16.
[6] Lawson 2010.
[7] Buchanan 1992, p. 18.
[8] Buchanan 1992.

decisions. Of course, every person's own priorities play a huge role in deciding what parameters should be included in that decision making. Design thinking helps to navigate this complex problem, by allowing the person to create their own set of rules for determining what has positive or negative consequences in their context. Visualising, prototyping, testing different hypotheses and implementing feedback each time aids in gaining a clearer understanding of the "wicked" problem and aids in synthesising solutions accordingly.

Design thinking employs divergent and convergent mindsets for each given phase of the process. It is very important to learn the appropriate mindset for a process. For example, the divergent mindset is needed for successful ideation, but the same divergent mindset can be destructive in a decision-making phase. The same goes for personal career design: one has to identify which phase needs our attention and what mindset and tools can be utilised for further exploring that theme. The practice of this switch between divergent and convergent mindsets is essential to come up with effective and innovative solutions.

Why are career design and design thinking skills important in developing students' work and attitudes?

> Thus, to help students succeed in this interconnected, digital world we live in, educators should support students in developing and honing 21-st century skills (e.g., design thinking, systems thinking, and teamwork kills) that enhance their problem-solving skills and prepare them for college and career[9].

What are the tools that can be used in storytelling and career planning? Our proposed method to create personal career plans combines the benefit of visual thinking and storytelling to create future scenarios with the back-casting method used in strategic design. These methods work in tandem with a canvas as a tool to provide the framework for the whole design process. To understand the benefit of each element, we provide a brief explanation why these steps can help in the difficult process of creating a personal vision and planning the necessary steps to achieve it.

3. *Mindsets and tools connected to life design*

What are the main mindsets that can be developed with design thinking? How are these mindsets useful in the career design context?

Design thinking requires certain attitudes and mindsets to make the process work. As discussed above, knowing when to use divergent or convergent

[9] Razzouk, Shute 2012, p. 331.

thinking patterns and being able to switch between those two mindsets is crucial. This paragraph describes in more detail the nine mindsets that create the framework for open-minded and innovative problem solving.

Accepting uncertainty

Usually this is a hard one to master. This means accepting the aforementioned "wickedness" of the problem, seeing a problem as a complex, changing system of parameters and not be intimidated by it. It requires one to trust the design thinking process to make sense of any given complicated problem.

Human centred approach

Human centred design is implied in the context of career or life design. But in a broader context this means empathising with different points of views. For example, empathising with the perspective of the employee and simultaneously the perspective of the employer. Stepping outside of our own point of view can be very difficult but at the same time it can yield great insights.

Visual thinking

Being able to communicate our thoughts, concepts and questions in not just verbal ways is a very useful tool. Creating symbols, using visual tools, and adding layers of meaning to a story has great potential for revealing emotions, associations, and deeper connections in one's own narrative. In a broader sense, visual thinking refers to the skill and the willingness to instinctively communicate via visual language, thus making any ideation processes more straightforward.

Practicality

This approach does not only mean to think about what is feasible in the short term. Practicality in this sense means "thinking with your hands", a kind of "try it and see" attitude that accelerates the creative process and gives great opportunity for iterating, developing ideas.

Storytelling

Storytelling is the ability to frame a situation in a narrative thereby making it easy to understand, clear to navigate and interesting to improve. It helps us empathise with any persona involved in the story. Just think about how a great metaphor can be useful in understanding an abstract problem, that is the power of great storytelling. We go into detail about this mindset later in the chapter.

System thinking

Knowing that no idea or solution exists in a *vacuum,* and it has effects, consequences is something every designer should keep in mind. It is easy to

forget about the context of a problem when we are hyper focused on one a tiny detail of the project. A skilled designer has a sort of dual vision that allows them to see the problem in its context, the big picture and simultaneously is able to zoom in on details of a solution. This is crucial for achieving a long term, implementable and sustainable solution to any problem.

Cooperation and co-creation

No design, product or concept is made in a totally solitary manner. In the case of product development, cooperation with different departments is fairly obvious. But even in a life design context, one cannot synthesise, ideate and create all alone. We live and work in communities, our lives are connected to others, so it makes sense to involve certain stakeholders, viewpoints, and feedback from outside. Of course, the final decision rests on the designer's shoulders.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to "walk a mile in someone else's shoes". When the aim is to create a solution for a specific user group, we can use our research skills to obtain information about the group but something more is needed to create truly usable and loveable results. That "something more" is empathy, a skill that is very valuable in design and often underrated. Empathy, in regard to life design, is important for understanding our past selves, seeing our situation through someone else's perspective.

Divergent thinking

This mindset was discussed in the previous paragraphs. The most important thing about divergent thinking is to keep an open mind about possibilities. This mindset is extremely useful in brainstorming, collecting data and imagining futures.

Convergent thinking

It is the complementary mindset to divergent thinking. As seen in the chapters above, convergent thinking is useful for synthesising, prioritising, creating categories. Creating a complex research report or a complex product concept relies heavily on convergent thinking patterns.

4. *Visualisation*

Why is visualisation important?
Why are visual tools different from verbal tools?
What is visual storytelling and how is it different from verbal storytelling?

Most of the tools borrowed from design thinking that are used in career planning are visual ones. This is no accident, as visual tools help us communicate more to the point, ask more vital questions, and come up with more innovative ideas. Moreover, drawing or visualising a problem or challenge opens up more inquisitive questions about the nature of the problem and the attitudes/motivations of the persons themselves. Creating pictures helps systems thinking and visualising future scenarios – which is the first step to reach a desired outcome.

For example, by drawing a roadmap about what major milestones and decisions lead to one's current position we might decipher a lot of layered meaning and ask more questions that help us see one's life in context. It is not a coincidence that we sometimes call this ability "big picture thinking". As you will see in the next paragraph, mapping out one's past, present and future can yield a lot of additional insight into one's professional and personal values.

Verbal storytelling is at the basis of every human interaction: we understand the world through stories, from the earliest ages, we make sense of our surroundings via stories.

Verbal (written or spoken) narratives can be very detailed, descriptive, and useful in exploring a problem which has clear chronology – as it is used in psychotherapy for example. Mapping out a complex situation or wicked problem, as mentioned above, might need some other tools that allow the designer and the user to see these layers and meanings simultaneously and draw new connections between parts of the picture.

Visual storytelling creates an opportunity to be less specific, more associative at first try. This quality is very helpful when working with such a sensitive topic as one's life or career choices and can sometimes act as an antidote for writer's block. You do not have to "start at the beginning". With visual tools you can start at whichever point is the most tangible and work your way around that.

Drawing or any visual medium for that matter allows this non-linear approach not only for the creator but for the viewer as well. A story or a problem visualised leaves more space for interpretation than text. Moreover, visual tools have a unique quality that they let the viewer decide the order in which the information is taken in. Diagrams, drawings, collages etc. can facilitate gradual development (working from a main theme and going into more intricate details) and reflection[10].

«The order in which a viewer gets information from a drawing is not determined by the author. Even the order in which we draw is less predictable and structured»[11].

[10] Razzouk, Shute 2012.
[11] Lawson 2010, p. 291.

5. *Storytelling*

How do visual tools and storytelling connect?
How is storytelling useful in the design thinking framework?

As established before, design thinking employs divergent and convergent mindsets, or analytic and synthetic approaches. Being able to use both of these mindsets when fitting, finding the right balance of analysis and synthesis is a difficult thing to master. Storytelling naturally brings these mindsets together in an organic way[12].

The main use of storytelling in design practices is to gain insight and empathy toward the user to make the solutions easy to use, loveable and altogether human-centred. Similarly, when designing our own career, we exercise empathy towards ourselves, try to learn new insights about our path in life. Creating a narrative, expressing it and looking back on it has an investigative function. It can act as a simulation in which we can examine the stakeholders and how they react to certain changes applied to the storyline ("what if this character chooses to learn a new profession?"). We can also use storytelling to understand patterns of causes and effects and how one step can logically follow another, combining separate ideas into a coherent concept.

From the standpoint of a reader or listener, stories are revealing journeys that we can take multiple times, discovering new things in each telling. But storytelling itself is also a process of discovery for the teller[13].

6. *Back-casting*

Using back-casting as a tool to visualise a future scenario

The back-casting method, linked to John B. Robinson[14], came into design thinking from the area of future research. The novelty of this method is that it is not forecasting (as the name suggests), it does not look at the future from the present's perspective but rather sets a future goal and looks back at the present to find out what steps are necessary to achieve said goal.

First, we create an ideal vision of the future and go from there, backwards, trace our steps back to the present – resulting in a much more ambitious plan then we would have if working with forecasting. With forecasting we can

[12] Parrish 2006.
[13] Parrish 2006, p. 73.
[14] Robinson 1990.

avoid that our present problems cloud the possibilities for the future, as we usually assume that things that we do not like now can become even worse with time resulting in a dystopia[15].

When defining an expected outcome of a design project, planning the steps for an ideal vision of the future can be just as useful as in career design since in both cases our task is to set up a positive vision whether it is short term or long term. During the back-casting process we ask our participants to set a goal 1-3-5-10 years into the future. Then, step by step, backwards, we uncover what needs to be done to get back from our vision to our present. This way a vague, unreachable vision becomes a tangible, actionable set of tasks, a sort of backwards roadmap on which we can mark hurdles and dangers that may hinder our journey but also sources and opportunities that help us keep on track.

Back-casting is a method that works best with not only verbal but also with visual tools. Imagining an ideal future vision is in itself a visual task performed by seeing a desired outcome in your mind's eye and then expressing it in various forms. The more detailed, deep, nuanced, and colourful this vision is, the more accurate our aim for a future can be and we can express ourselves more clearly when communicating with others on this topic. In conversation about our careers often an arc or a timeline is the main visual aid that guides us. We can use these motives on which to base our detailed visualisation. It can be hand-drawn, digitally edited, painted, collage-work or whatever is comfortable for the one creating their vision. Using visual tools opens up more possibilities for delivering meaning – for example the use of colour or icons can indicate emotions.

Creating images throughout the process makes our own thinking easier, more playful and also creates the possibility of a deeper, more layered discussion with our peers regarding our career goals.

7. *Canvas*

How can we provide a visual framework for activities?

Using canvases can help us to design something in a visual way, following certain steps. For this reason, they are widely used in design and business (e.g., the business model canvas)[16].

A canvas is a visual workbook. It can show a complex task in its entirety, while at the same time have space for working out the details. These canvases

[15] Wasserman *et al.* 2015.
[16] Osterwalder, Pigneur 2013.

can be used online or in printed versions. When printed, it is useful to work in big formats, such as A3 and upwards. Online use is best if the platform we use is optimised for real time multi-user interaction, such as Miro or Figma.

The role of canvases in facilitation is to make any complex task more transparent and intuitive and thus easier to tackle. It is widely used in various contexts from business plans to career design. The user can see the individual steps as well as the whole process laid out in front of them. It is very useful to look back on every step at the end of the process thereby seeing the process as a whole. A complex task, such as designing the next five years of one's life, may seem too big to handle the question could be asked where do we even start? But if we break down this huge task into smaller, structured, and well-instructed parts, suddenly it becomes a step-by-step sequence of manageable tasks. This change of scale allows the individual or even groups to make complex plans and visions for the future.

The individual tasks of a canvas can build upon verbal or visual skills. The main criterion when working on the canvas is that any thought expressed should be easy to understand and transparent for even those who did not participate in the task. The order of the sub-tasks on a canvas is predetermined and needs careful consideration from the facilitator or the designer of the canvas. The order just like the tasks themselves need to be easy to follow. There should be strong visual cues such as colours, while markers such as arrows can help the user navigate the canvas intuitively and confidently. Within each subtask there is usually a short-written instruction that describes the main goal of the task and gives an ideal timeframe for it.

As a facilitators or instructors, our role is to introduce the user to the canvas's primary goal. For example, we might tell participants that this canvas will help you map out the next five years of your career. The facilitators job in this sense is to prepare the canvas ahead of time and to help clarify any instructions, remind the participants of the timeframe, and provide any help needed on sight to make the use of the canvas as easy as possible.

A good canvas visualises and thus makes a complex process transparent and easy to navigate. It helps with time management and acts as a documentation tool for partial and final results alike. The canvas should make communication easier between and within teams and can be used as a valuable presentation tool, since parts of or the whole canvas can act as a visual aid when presenting. The canvas can be used again and again, going into further details on each sub-task or based on user's feedback can be developed and refined for more efficient further use.

8. *Conclusions*

In the book *Designing your life*, Bill Burnett and Dave Evans talk about how they needed a set of tools to help their students prepare for the lives in front of them and that design thinking offered a solution to that.

> Design doesn't just work for creating cool stuff like computers and Ferraris; it works in creating a cool life. You can use design thinking to create a life that is meaningful, joyful, and fulfilling. It doesn't matter who you are or were, what you do or did for a living, how young or how old you are—you can use the same thinking that created the most amazing technology, products, and spaces to design your career and your life. A well-designed life is a life that is generative—it is constantly creative, productive, changing, evolving, and there is always the possibility of surprise[17].

For students starting their career, faculty and anyone who may be interested in designing their next steps in life, design thinking mindsets and visual tools can facilitate finding challenges and opportunities, generate ideas to set and achieve goals and give space to share and reflect on past experiences. With the right direction and application of the fitting mindsets the process of creating a future vision can be a playful, manageable task.

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