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More Than a Conversation: Using Aspects of Dialogue to Improve Academic Advising

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More Than a Conversation: Using Aspects of Dialogue to Improve Academic Advising

It's 2 p.m. on a Wednesday in late April. The stack of student files on your desk is reduced to one or two and the barrage of questions about overrides and graduation requirements has subsided. Jake, one of your advisees, pokes his head in and asks, "Do you have a few minutes to talk? I've been thinking about studying abroad next year but I'm not sure what my next steps are."

Do you: a) Hand Jake a brochure about study abroad opportunities and remind him where the Study Abroad office on campus is? or b) Invite Jake to sit down and share his ideas about the programs and locations he is considering? Maybe your answer depends on how you feel that day or Jake's past track record with stopping by for informal chats. Discussing study abroad opportunities, career directions, and major changes ideally requires academic advisors to engage in meaningful and intentional conversations with their advisees. Our advising exchanges can be more than one-sided interactions; consider moving beyond a discussion on the conversation spectrum and closer towards dialogue. Even if we can't engage in a true dialogue for all of our advising appointments, there are some aspects of dialogue advisors can use regularly to improve the quality of conversations with advisees.

Defining Dialogue

Dialogue has played a fundamental role in society since the earliest civilizations, including those of ancient Greece, New Zealand, Africa, and Native Americans (Isaacs, 1999). As a term, dialogue is often used interchangeably with conversation. Dialogue is much more than a conversation, however. In her book, *From Debate to Dialogue*, Deborah Flick (1998) highlights the basic elements of dialogue:

Dialogue...involves intentionally seeking to understand by listening deeply, inquiring and advocating in order to uncover meanings, revealing assumptions, and walking in another person's shoes. Although dialogue is, in and of itself, outcome-free, it can enhance the effectiveness and creativity of our actions. (p. 32).

Jane Vella, a long-time dialogue educator and researcher, stresses the use of open-ended questions as crucial in a dialogue process (2008). William Isaacs' formula for a successful dialogue includes listening to yourself and others present; respecting the other person(s); suspending your own opinion; and finding/speaking your voice (1999). Does the line between discussion and dialogue still seem fuzzy? Read on.

Isaacs (1999) differentiates between a discussion and dialogue as "A discussion attempts to get people to choose one of two alternatives. A dialogue helps to surface the alternatives and lay them side by side, so that they can all be seen in context" (p. 44). Isaacs, who has written about using dialogue in business and life situations, notes many conversations could go in either direction, a dialogue or a discussion. When a decision (closure) is needed, discussion is necessary. When wanting to explore new avenues of insight, dialogue makes sense (Isaacs, 1999).

An accepting dialogue atmosphere inspires ideas to flow and be explored freely through insightful questions (Flick, 1998). Although engaging in dialogue requires you to suspend your own thoughts and focus on understanding those of the other person, it does not mean you have to give up your own beliefs and agree with the other person (Flick, 1998). Flick further explains

When we listen in Understanding Process (dialogue) mode we accept at face value what another person is saying as being true and real for that individual. Even if it's contrary to

our own beliefs and values, we listen to understand how it makes sense to and has meaning for the speaker. (pp. 22-23).

Connecting the Aspects of Dialogue to Advising

While the majority of our exchanges with advisees probably fall into the discussion category of conversations, there are times when true dialogue is appropriate, as well as instances where aspects of the dialogue process can be integrated into our discussions. An ideal academic advising relationship is supportive and interactive between students and advisors (Nutt, 2000). When I am seeing my 10th advisee of the day, however, it is easy to slip into the “Here’s what you need to do; have a good afternoon” approach without having a genuine conversation, much less anything that resembles a dialogue. Including aspects of dialogue (and if appropriate, conducting a dialogue) with our advisees can enhance our knowledge and refresh our intentional conversation skills.

Some advising situations are more appropriate for using a dialogue approach than others. Obviously an advisor would not have a dialogue about the number of hours required for graduation or what courses fulfill which requirements. But advisors could use a dialogue approach to discuss a student’s motivation to earn a particular degree or interest in a specific course or topic. Dialoguing with an undecided student about his major choice also is appropriate. Laff (1994) emphasized the use of critical thinking when working with undecided students. His recommendations of consciously raising questions, probing students’ assumptions about majors, drawing inferences and challenging conclusions could just as easily been used to describe how to have a dialogue about major choice.

Habley’s (1994) suggested tasks for advising undeclared students could also incorporate a dialogue process. These tasks include assisting students with “awareness of individual values,

abilities, and interests”; “exploration of the relationships between life and career goals”; “exploration of educational combinations leading to life and career goals”; and “evaluation of experiences for confirmation or redirection of plans” (pp. 18-19). Each of these tasks could be a dialogue between the student and advisor.

Several advising techniques already use aspects of dialogue, such as Appreciative Advising and Narrative Advising. More information about Appreciative Advising can be found at: <http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/020829jb.htm>. More information about the use of Narrative Theory in Advising can be found at: http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/AAT/NW30_3.htm#4.

Take Away Points for Incorporating Dialogue into Advising Interactions

Remember Jake, the student who was considering studying abroad? Here is how your conversation with him might incorporate aspects of dialogue:

- Use open-ended questions. *Jake, what interests you most about studying abroad?*
- Remember each student is different. Approach each advisee with curiosity and ask yourself, What can I learn from the student sitting across from me? *Jake, what locations most appeal to you?*
- Before jumping to conclusions with advisees or telling students what to do, take time to understand student from their point of view. *Jake, we've talked about why you want to go abroad. What is holding you back from committing (i.e., financial considerations, major progression, relationships at home)?*
- Use your ears more than your mouth: Listen more to the student than you talk.

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