

Toward Reflective Conversations: An Advising Approach that Promotes Self-Authorship

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Academic advisers can play a special role in students' lives, as they are in positions to brainstorm possible futures with their advisees and map out paths to get there. In partnership with other faculty and staff, they can use this opportunity to promote students' self-authorship, the capacity to internally generate beliefs, values, identity, and social relations (Baxter Magolda 2001; Kegan 1994). Jane Pizzolato writes that "if students were self-authored, they would be more likely to choose majors that were appropriate and interesting to them, engage in critical thinking about their choices, and develop healthy relationships with diverse others" (2008, 19). Becoming self-authored requires transformational learning that helps students "learn to negotiate and act on [their] own purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those [they] have uncritically assimilated from others" (Mezirow 2000, 8). Unfortunately, most traditional-age college students have not yet developed these capacities, both because many enter college having been socialized to uncritically accept knowledge from authorities (including well-intentioned advice), and because many influential people in students' lives are inclined to simply offer such knowledge. Academic advising is a key venue through which educators can assist students through this transformation.

This transformation extends beyond developing cognitive skills. The interplay of one's view of knowledge (epistemological development), view of self (intrapersonal development), and view of social relations (interpersonal development) are clearly articulated in research recounting young adults' transformation from external definition to self-authorship (Baxter Magolda 2001; Kegan 1994). Late adolescents typically view knowledge as certain and possessed by authority figures. They do not see themselves

as active agents in constructing knowledge, and their interest in acquiring others' approval often restricts their ability to engage in debating multiple perspectives. For example, a student in a course where the instructor modeled knowledge construction offered this reaction:

I understand what he was trying to do. He was trying to give examples to show what happened. But if he had just said cryoprotectants whatever, just said the point, I would believe him because he is the teacher. I don't need the proof, it's not like I'm going to argue with him about it. (Baxter Magolda 1999, 3)

Her assumptions about knowledge precluded her from seeing that her instructor was modeling knowledge construction. Instead,

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she interpreted his approach as trying to prove the truth. Her view of herself precluded the possibility of arguing with the teacher; she perceived their teacher/student relationship as one of purveyor and receiver of knowledge, respectively. These assumptions about knowledge and self lead students to view faculty and academic advisers alike as having the formula for students' academic and career success.

The shift to self-authorship occurs when students encounter challenges that bring their assumptions into question, have opportunities to reflect on their assumptions, and are supported in reframing their assumptions into more complex frames of reference. However, college students commonly report that adults and peers in their lives tend to attempt to solve their problems

for them rather than helping them learn to do so themselves. Thus, one of the myriad reasons that this shift seldom occurs during college may be related to the way advice is given and the lack of opportunities for guided reflection. Based on our work with the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education, we constructed a conversation guide to assist educators in engaging students in reflective conversations. Here we portray how this guide can be used in academic advising.

THE WABASH NATIONAL STUDY CONVERSATION GUIDE

The Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education Interview was structured to learn how student characteristics, including their views of knowledge, self, and social relations, mediated their participation in educational experiences. The interview further explored how students interpreted their educational experiences and which ones promoted their epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development. Encouraging interviewees to reflect on their experiences and consider why they found them useful helped students consciously analyze their assumptions about the world, themselves, and their relationships. Realizing that the structure of this interview could be beneficial in routine interactions, we translated the interview to a conversation guide for educators who wish to engage students in guided reflection.

In the introduction to the guide, we describe the purpose of these conversations as offering students an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their experiences and to help them develop reflective habits. In academic advising contexts, an additional purpose is using these reflections to guide academic decisions. The role of the educator is to initiate conversation, listen, and help students learn from their experiences.

The guide highlights ways to initiate conversation, invite students to tell their stories, and encourage them to reflect meaningfully on what their experiences mean for developing beliefs, identities, relationships, and future plans. This conversation is most successful when the student does most of the talking and the educator's contributions are limited to comments that keep the reflection flowing and encourage deeper reflection. *The key element is encouraging students to make sense of their experience rather than the educator making sense of it for them.*

Although there is no particular formula for this conversation, we suggest that it unfold in four general phases: getting acquainted; encouraging the student to reflect on important experiences of his or her choosing; encouraging the student to interpret those reflections; and concluding the conversation. Successful conversations will be directed by the students' interests and by their willingness and ability to reflect on and interpret the experiences they choose to share.

Getting acquainted and building rapport. Start the conversation with questions that invite students to tell you about themselves in ways that are comfortable. Possible conversation starters include:

- Tell me a little about yourself
—For first-year students: tell me about your background and what brought you to [institution]?
For continuing students: tell me about your background and your involvement here at [institution]?
- What did you expect college would be like for you this year?
- How has your college experience gone for you so far? To what extent does it match your expectations?
- What has surprised you most about your college experience so far?

- What has disappointed you most about your college experience so far?

When using these conversation starters, try to get the student to talk substantively about the topics. Nudge them to give you a good description of particular experiences they bring up, why these were important to them, and what they took away from these experiences.

Encouraging reflection about important experiences. Once the conversation is rolling, you can use the following ideas to encourage students to identify, reflect on, and make sense of their salient experiences. Ideas for soliciting these include:

- Tell me about a significant experience you've had so far at college.
- What has been your best experience thus far?
- What has been your worst experience thus far?

As you ask for these types of stories, invite students to describe and examine them fully, including what made it noteworthy,





and how it affected them. To help students reflect meaningfully, encourage them to explore beyond *what* happened to them to *why* it was important or meaningful and how they interpreted the experience. For students who need a little more structure in talking about their experiences, these prompts might be useful:

- Tell me about some of the challenges you've encountered. Follow-up: How did you approach them?
- What kind of support systems do you have? What role have they played in your college experience thus far?
- Have you had to face any difficult decisions? Follow-ups: What was that like? How did you handle it?
- College is often a time of exposure to multiple perspectives—encountering people who grew up differently than you, people who hold different beliefs than you, encountering new ideas in classes, etc. Have you encountered new perspectives? Tell me about them. Follow-up: How did that experience affect the way you see things?
- Are there aspects of college that you find stressful? If so, tell me about them. Follow-up: what are the common threads of the aspects you find stressful?
- Tell me about aspects of your college experience that have brought you the most joy or satisfaction. Why do you think this is the case?

Encouraging interpretation of these reflections. Near the close of the conversation, it is helpful to encourage students to step back and “make sense” of the stories they’ve been sharing. The goal at this point is to help students interpret how their experiences have affected them and how they might use insights from this conversation to inform academic decisions. Possible approaches to prompt this interpretation include the following questions.

- It sounds like you’ve had a variety of experiences thus far. How do you think

coming to college here has affected who you are and the way you see yourself? Has it affected the way you see your academic goals?

- How do you think your college experience here has affected your beliefs or values?
- Tell me about what you’ve learned about relating to other people from your college experience.
- In what ways do you see yourself as the same as when you began college? In what ways do you see yourself as different than when you began college?
- What questions does this raise for you to explore in the future? How might you go about doing that? [Responses here might raise an opportunity to discuss choosing a major, internships, or other educational activities, and to offer resource referrals.]

Concluding thoughts. At the close of the conversation, affirm the value of students sharing their stories and of thinking through experiences to discern lessons and implications for one’s beliefs, values, identity, relations with others, and

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academic decisions. Encourage students to reflect regularly and to keep track of their reactions and insights. Invite them to bring those reflections to the next academic advising conversation. Respond to students’ requests for answers and advice by returning the focus to exploring and following up on their questions. If asked for your perspective, share it briefly, but emphasize the importance of students exploring what is most appropriate for them; you could also offer to think through the implications together.

USING REFLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS TO PROMOTE SELF-AUTHORSHIP

These reflective conversations are one approach in educators’ overall efforts to guide students through the transformation from external definition to self-authorship. They are one way to construct learning partnerships that intentionally combine challenge, reflection and support to help students develop increasingly complex frames of reference to guide their academic decisions. What kinds of experiences enable college students to transform their frames of reference in ways that enhance their capacity to use their understanding to fuller advantage? Baxter Magolda (2004) drew from an extensive body of research to synthesize key components of experiences that young adults identified as helping them achieve self-authorship, and subsequently proposed the Learning Partnerships Model. Learning partnerships challenge learners by explicitly portraying knowledge as complex and socially constructed,

emphasizing that learners must bring their sense of self and values to deciding what to believe, and sharing expertise and authority among educators and learners in interdependent relationships. These partnerships support students in facing these challenges by validating students’ capacity to construct knowledge, situating learning in students’ experience, and defining learning as a mutual interaction between educator and learner. Learning partnerships engage students at their developmental edge: they welcome



students' current assumptions yet invite exploration of more complex ones. (Detailed examples showing how these principles have been used to guide educational and administrative practices are described in Baxter Magolda and King 2004.)

This conversation guide creates a learning partnership that can help students learn from their experiences in ways that enable them to make better informed academic decisions and learn what it means to take responsibility for their academic and life choices (Pizzolato 2008). These conversations guide students to consider how their values, interests, skills and goals for further exploration affect academic and career choices. Were these types of conversations to become commonplace throughout students' advising experience, reflection could become a mainstay of their college learning, and advising a richer context for learning. Students would be able to take better advantage of educational opportunities by better understanding their experiences and based on this understanding, construct such opportunities themselves.

Despite their value, the insights gained from these reflective conversations must be used carefully. Students at early phases of development should not be judged as incapable of growth because their development reflects a successful response to external demands rather than their capacity for complex meaning making. There is an inherent tension in accepting students "as they are" while encouraging them to transform their meaning making frameworks through learning and personal growth (i.e., to change). We resolve this tension by using students' development as a starting point, avoiding judging them as deficient or incapable of moving forward, and helping them evaluate their current frameworks

in terms of their current struggles and future goals. Another dilemma arises from the rapport these conversations may generate. Students may share information the adviser might have preferred not to know about students' personal behavior, which may make the adviser uncomfortable and uncertain how best to respond. Balancing respecting students' privacy and educators' responsibilities is a challenge. Used judiciously, the insights gained from such conversations can promote transformational learning toward self-authorship. ■

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