

UWSP Teaching and Learning Conference – January 2014

Heads. Hearts. Hands.

***Engaging a Community of Learners:
The reciprocity of advising and teaching***

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Part I – Overview – *on the nature of learning community and supporting engaged learners*

Leslie (15 min)

Introduction

In exploring the nature of UWSP as learning community, we consider an engaged community that can be cultivated throughout campus and within each department. An engaged community of learners thrives on a dynamic environment where we each are participating as teachers and as learners. The reciprocity of such a context can serve to energize and support us in our study and work together, while also creating a climate of respect and care.

As faculty and staff cultivating such a context together, we recognize the vital and integral role of advising. While advising may have historically been viewed as preparing a student's plan of study or signing off on course selections, today we understand advising in terms of recruitment, retention, as well as connection during a student's study as a Pointer. Ramos writes, *"Think of academic advising as a course offered to our advisees. We should*

think of ourselves as teachers, our advisees as students, our offices as classrooms, and student growth – along several dimensions – as the learning outcome of the class” (2004).

With the use of well-designed and supportive advising tools, we can engage in conversation with students about what they know, are doing and value as related to their university study/learning. Such conversations can serve to inform our own work as teachers and encourage students in their development as learners. *In this session we will consider aspects of an engaged community of learners, see examples of supportive advising tools, and explore the role of responsive practices in cultivating a dialogic advising/classroom environment.*

Creating the Space

“If you asked me about the importance of creating community in my classroom, I’d say it is everything” (Miller, 2013, p. 21). Building relationships and establishing trust are essential to creating a space for learning and discovery. How is it that we engage a community and climate for thinking, exploration and discovery?

First, let’s begin with a consideration of opening minds set out by Johnston (2012). The *open mind framework* draws upon a view of learning as dynamic rather than fixed. The dynamic, open mindset learners show confidence in solving problems and are realistic about their successes. They do not blame their ‘intellect’ or anyone else for any lack of success, or even think of themselves as failing. Rather when encountering a trouble spot, dynamic learners respond strategically. On the other hand, fixed mindset learners become helpless when encountering trouble spots, adopting an ‘I’m not very smart’ attitude (Johnston, 2012). Learners who have a well-developed sense of *agency*, with a dynamic approach to learning and perseverance, show vitality and steady growth in their

understandings. Such a way of being can be nourished within our advising and classroom spaces.

In creating this engaged space, Weaver and Wilding (2013) offer several considerations, beginning with cultivating an *open heartmind*, as exemplified by a willingness to suspend judgment, to allow and to discover. We are holding the space, trusting in students' inclinations and abilities for thoughtful meaning-making. In nurturing this dynamic space, we engage our own *self-observer*, both as teacher and learner. As self-observer, we sustain mindful awareness, a sense of relaxed alertness, and kindness toward others and our students. The self-observer doesn't have all the answers, rather learns to look into questions with spacious alertness. The self-observer, as teacher/advisor shifts from reacting to responding, from *reactivity* to *response-ability*.

A third aspect of cultivating community and engaged advising/teaching is *presence* (Weaver & Wilding, 2013). The engaged advisor/teacher is fully present *to the student* right in front of her/him, *when* they are right in front of him/her and *with what* it is they want and need. In other words, the advisor is not distracted thinking of yesterday or tomorrow, but is precisely right there. Lastly, engaged advising/teaching works within *respectful boundaries* and with *emotional capacity*; that is, taking responsibility for ourselves, clearly communicating and defining our limits while maintaining caring relationships. Developing emotional capacity gives us the ability to work intentionally and conscientiously with emotions – ours and others. In the classroom/office, we cultivate emotional intelligence, creating emotional safety and sustaining our resourcefulness, resilience and effectiveness (Weaver & Wilding, 2013).

In cultivating community, we also support our *students* in engaging their own self-observer. This can be done by allowing space for silence and reflection. In this way, as advisors and advisees, we learn to pause before reacting and responding, and to bring a thoughtful presence to our work together. Assuring that each student has a voice, that each is part of our community of learners, and establishing that no one is invisible, allows the student to function within the optimal learning model. Through this lens we engage the reciprocity of teaching and advising, the natural back and forth that emerges in the discovery of ideas. We study, explore, question and uncover together, side by side. And with the use of well-designed and supportive advising tools, we can engage conversation with our students about what they know, are doing and value as related to their study/learning as Pointers.

PART II The Role of Effective Advising Tools - *on supportive technical materials allowing for dialogic conversation Maggie and John (15 min)*

- Planning Sheets and 4 Year Plans
 - Planning sheets include GEP and major requirements and suggested electives.
 - General 4 Year plans vs Individualized Plans
- Advising Guide
 - Program expectations, recommended sequence of major courses, terms courses are offered
- Workshops/Group Meetings/Intro to major courses
- GPA Warnings and Semester GPA Reviews

PART III Responsive Practices - *on the role of listening and language Leslie, John and Maggie (15 min)*

As we work with engaging our community of learners, we attend to our language with care. Our language choices have the power to support students' growth and development and it becomes imperative that we step back and mindfully consider our word choices. At first glance this might seem simple; perhaps we strive to bolster a

student's self-efficacy and identity with a simple "Good job!" That might be easy, but it might not be care-full and would not express the words that "can be crucial ingredients to help a student make a breakthrough [in learning]" (Fletcher, 2006, p.189). In guiding our students to new levels of understanding and agency, we learn to notice the feedback we are giving and choose words that inspire and strengthen them as continue in their educational growth and discovery.

Dweck's (2006) research helps us to examine the role of language, especially feedback, through a new lens. Dweck, like Johnston (2012), characterizes *fixed* and *growth* mindsets. With a fixed mindset, students are viewed simply as either smart or not smart. With a fixed mindset, the goal is to *look* smart, and attempting new, challenging tasks and failing is out of the question. On the other hand, with a growth mindset, mistakes are viewed as a natural part of the learning process, and with effort and collaboration, knowledge and competence is expanded. Dweck delves into how we can use language to lay the foundation for growth.

Dweck (2006) characterizes response language in terms of person-oriented *feedback* and *process-oriented feedback*. She reports that person-oriented feedback leads to a fixed performance frame while process-oriented feedback leads to a growth learning frame. Person-oriented feedback puts the teacher/advisor in the position of judge and doesn't leave a path for strategic action. The student is situated within the fixed mindset; a judgment has been made.

On the other hand, a growth mindset is supported by process-oriented feedback such as: "How did you figure that out?" "Look at the precise details you provided about

your experiences; they create a vivid scaffold for considering next steps.” With this type of feedback, the student is encouraged to examine their own work strategically, thus building a *personal narrative as a problem solver* who can figure things out. *The emerging sense of agency increases engagement and motivation, leading to inspired effort.*

It is sobering to think what a difference a few words can make. As advisors we cannot script or pre-plan a dialogic exchange. And yet, through mindfully considering the language we use, we can support our learning community in discovering and developing a sense of agency together. Johnston writes about the value of dialogic conversations—such that we as a community of learners expect to engage, to disagree, and to grow from that disagreement (2012). Growth within dialogic teaching necessitates speaking and listening as reciprocal processes. Perhaps we take these for granted; how can we as a community of learners in our offices/classrooms choose our words with care and listen deeply rather than reactively? Practice. Support and more practice.

Further, how do we go about honoring dialogic conversation? First, let’s be aware of wait time, a bit of spaciousness, silence and reflection, with our students. In dialogic conversations students are invited to say what they think, with each voice being an asset to the community and every response being taken seriously through care-full listening. Working with an understanding of “together, we” requires listening practice. Are we listening just waiting for our turn to give a reply? Or are we listening deeply to know more clearly and understand?

Maggie and John – examples of questions fostering dialogic conversations

Fostering Dialogic Conversations:

- Where is the student at? Do they need anything?
 - What is their definition of “fine?”
- The questions and conversation shifts over a student’s career.
 - Course selection, involvement, major/minor expectations, TLC, Career Services, etc.

“At its core, advising enhances student learning, and advisors’ primary objective is to coach advisees into an understanding of the overall structure and logic of their curriculum”

(Lowenstein, 2005).

Fostering Dialogic Conversations with Struggling Students:

- What do you think affected your grades last semester?
- What do you plan on/could you do differently this semester?
- Are there certain areas you struggle with?
- How much time did you spend working and volunteering?
- How do you manage your time?
- What will it take to improve your cumulative GPA to a 2.75 (if it is not there already)?

Through engaging in dialogic conversations students can come to discover that making sense often requires more than one person, that reaching out to others can offer a balancing hand. The dialogic conversation creates the possibility for agency. “The concept of agency in ... learning is not only central for the individual’s sense of competence and

well-being, and for his or her performance, but also indispensable to democratic living...”
(Johnston, 2004, p. 41).

Conclusion

Through engaging a sense of community, using well-designed supportive advising materials, attending to language and listening, as advisors and teachers we can enhance our students’ sense of agency and ultimately encourage their success as UW-SP Pointers.

Read aloud pg. 225 from Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*

“A friend of mine recently suggested that education is one culture embracing another. It’s interesting to think of the very different ways that metaphor plays out. Education can be a desperate, smothering embrace, an embrace that denies the needs of the other. But education can also be an encouraging, communal embrace – at its best an invitation, an opening. Several years ago, I was sitting in on a workshop conducted by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. It was the first hour or so and Freire, in his sophisticated, accented English, was establishing the theoretical base of his literacy pedagogy – heady stuff, a blend of Marxism, phenomenology, and European existentialism. I was two seats away from Freire; in front of me and next to him was a younger man, who, puzzled, finally interrupted the speaker to ask a question. Freire acknowledged the question and, as he began answering, he turned and quickly touched the man’s forearm. Not patronizing, not mushy, a look and a tap as if to say: ‘You and me right now, let’s go through this together.’”

Part IV **Discussion, Q & A** 15 minutes

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