

Letter to the Editor: Response to “Is Advising a Political Activity?”

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A. Puroway responds to I. Winham’s Letter to the Editor: “Is Advising a Political Activity?” (NACADA Journal, 37[2], 7–8) that addressed “Critical Advising: A Freirian-Inspired Approach” (NACADA Journal 36[2], 4–10).

It was thrilling to see Ilya Winham’s Letter to the Editor in the previous issue of the *NACADA Journal*, made in response to my article, *Critical Advising: A Freirian Inspired Approach*. My goal in writing the original article was to inspire dialogue about the political dimensions of advising and what a critical pedagogic approach to advising might look like. Winham’s letter satisfies that goal. I appreciate the criticality and hope that NACADA continues to foster a culture of engaging and challenging scholarship. The response also provides an interesting opportunity to peel back the layers of articulating an approach to advising.

Challenges of Articulating an Approach to Advising

There is much to acknowledge and even agree with in Winham’s critique of critical advising. In articulating an approach to advising, one must find a balance between the theoretical and practical. Moreover, the attempt at further realizing an approach to advising incorporating the work of Freire and other critical pedagogues is a project that I hope other scholars will continue to advance. There are rich sources of inspiration in the critical pedagogy literature, but these sources need retrofitting to the context of advising. This retrofitting process requires a distinctiveness in the articulation of the approach that, at the same time, fits into existing schemas of advising to make the approach relatable.

Winham (2017) writes that critical advising is “unrealistic and the strategies for its realization inadequate” (p. 7). I agree with this statement in part. On a conceptual level, as I have articulated it, critical advising may be unrealistic because it aims at the higher ideals of social justice and democracy. The strategies, as I have articulated them, are likely inadequate in that I have attempted to make them an easy pedagogy of questions, but the pedagogy depends on in-depth follow-up questions within the dialogue. Dialogue is at the heart of critical advising, but it might look very different when working with a student from a privileged back-

ground than it does with a person who has experienced systemic oppression. There has to be readiness, and the question must be situated in the student’s lived experiences. Each advisor brings a different level of critical consciousness to the interaction.

Moreover, the dialogue does not stop at the initial question, which Winham (2017), referencing Lowenstein, claimed “cleaves rather too conventionally to the goal of integrative advising” (p. 7). Certainly, my approach reflects other scholars’ writings on other approaches. Lowenstein’s (2005) writing was certainly influential in my foundational understanding of advising. Hemwall and Trachte’s (1999/2009) article, which inspired my article, makes statements that are ideals about what advising ought to be. An earlier draft of my manuscript included the 1994 citation for Hagen’s Socratic approach, which likely opened me up to advising as a pedagogy of questions. An articulation of an approach still must have some facets of advising, even if the aim of the approach is novel. Without a central theory, the form and numerous contexts of advising are vague enough that we struggle to find consensus on a definition of advising, but they are self-evident enough that thousands of us gather as an association. An articulation of approach must live in this vague but self-evident tension. Winham’s critique of the conventionality of critical advising is reasonable because balancing novelty with practice in critical advising needs more scholarship, more trial and error, and more dialogue.

If Winham (2017) is correct and my approach is excessively idealistic in the aim of promoting critical consciousness, while too conventional in form, is this then not a critique of all earlier approaches from which Winham drew parallels to critical advising? If this is a critique of approaches, then I believe that I have good company in articulating my idealism. The introduction to *Academic Advising Approaches* cites the NACADA Concept of Academic Advising, which states, “Through academic advising students learn to become members of their higher education community, to think critically about their roles and responsibilities as students, and to prepare to be educated citizens of a democratic society and a global community” (The National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 2006, para. 6).

In the context of the Concept, Kimball and Campbell (2013) wrote: “Academic advising facilitates the development of meaning through engagement in experiences and interaction with others. Academic advising—done well—assists students in interpreting their values, beliefs, and experiences” (p. 6).

Two Points of Disagreement

The idealism posited gets to two points upon which I disagree with Winham. First, Winham (2017) critiques the proposed critical questions for students by saying:

[Inquiries that challenge worldviews are] all excellent questions for students to think about in a classroom setting, but I believe they are out of place in a one-on-one advising setting not because they are political but because they demand far too much from the advisor–student relationship. Faculty and professional advisors are different and have different relationships with students. Professional advisors (among whom I count myself) should be realistic about who they are and what they can achieve in an advising appointment. While a professional advisor qua advisor may be a “teacher” in a general sense, and his or her office may be a place of “learning,” the advisor–student relationship does not compare to the rigorous daily learning experiences that take place between faculty and students in the classroom. I do not think it is a defense of the status quo, a failure of imagination, or a blinkered vision of what academic advising can be to say that advising is not the place to aim to foster a dialogue about freedom, the common good, and citizenship. (p. 8)

This would seem to contradict Winham’s judgment, rendered in the two paragraphs prior, that the approach is too conventional. If it is too conventional to ask anticipatory questions about the curriculum in the context of choices, why is it too radical to ask these sorts of reflective questions about the experiences of the curriculum? That said, I agree that the robustness of advising conversations are not the same as an entire semester-long course. However, I disagree that advising is not the place to have those dialogues for the simple reason that I have had these conversations with my advisees.

For example, last semester, I asked my advisees to reflect upon a quote, attributed to Friedrich Beuchner, featured on a poster in the department: “Your vocation in life is where your greatest joys meet the world’s greatest needs.” I asked one student if he thought that his joys and the world’s needs fit with his learning as a marketing major. He explained that the world would always have need for selling and that marketing was a great service in meeting that need. In response, I somewhat off-handedly mused, “I wonder what Marx would make of that as a life’s work.” The student then noted, “It is funny that you mention Marx. We have just been talking about him in my history class.” Our conversation then turned to both the challenges the student found with how resonant Marx’s writings were for him and what real existential purpose means. The student did not leave my office radically changed, but it was a far more robust conversation than what we might have had in that moment had I just jumped into interpreting his degree evaluation.

Sometimes a pedagogy of questions aimed at praxis works and sometimes not, in the same way that any other approach may or may not succeed in meeting a student in that moment. Advising is a chance to connect the bigger dots of the classroom and the consonances and dissonances that come from those experiences and impact worldview and life work. Critical conversations likely will not radically alter the worldview of an advisee from a single advising session. Any approach to advising requires assessing the readiness of the student, but I believe an advisor can help students make sense of their experiences of power in higher education and beyond through questions that come from a desire for social justice, which is arguably, a political aim.

A second point of disagreement has to do with the nature of praxis. Winham (2017) suggested that “A fruitful way of approaching advising as a political activity. . . . is not to redefine the advisor–student relationship as a serious conversation about political matters, but to reflect on relationships of power in higher education” (p. 8). Winham then offered a series of questions that effectively model the kind of critical reflection that was the first of four ingredients in my articulation of critical advising—that advisors “cultivate the habits of critical reflection” (Puroway, 2016, p. 6). However, this begs a “so what?” question: If advisors reflect upon the relationships of power in higher education

and it does not impact the practice of advising, then what is the point of all that reflection?

Praxis, as Freire (2000) defined it, is the dialectical unity of theory and practice. What good is the thought without some change of action leading to further reflection? If an advisor reflects upon the relationships of power in the curriculum and determines them to be racist, sexist, homophobic, and pure class-reifying socialization, should that reflection not impact the one-on-one conversation at the heart of advising? Can advising integrate the curriculum along with student's lived experience and effectively "comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable" with regard to power and privilege in our society? Like other advising approaches, there is much work to be done to further develop the connection of theory, practice, and measures of impact. I look forward to that work.

References

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