

The Interpretive Turn: It's Our Turn

Peter L. Hagen, Stockton University

This is the text of the keynote address for the 2018 NACADA Annual Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. The author discusses two main epistemologies in academic advising research and practice, and argues that both positivist epistemologies and constructivist epistemologies should be available to practitioners and researchers.

[doi:10.12930/NACR-18-1009]

KEY WORDS: narrative, interpretive turn, epistemology, positivism, constructivism

So, let me tell you a story. There were these three umpires. They called the game on account of rain and went out to have a beer at a nearby bar. There they were, just shooting the breeze and talking about their profession and boasting about how good they each were at umpiring. All of a sudden, the first umpire raises his mug and boasts, "I calls 'em like I sees 'em," and slams his mug on the bar in triumph. The second umpire, not to be outdone by his colleague, raises his mug of suds and says, "You're as blind as a bat! I calls 'em like they ARE," and slams his mug down on the bar. The third umpire, secure in the knowledge that he really knows the score, outdoes them both by saying, "They ain't NOTHING until I calls 'em," and slams his mug down on the bar so hard that some beer sloshes out over the rim.

That first umpire approaches his job from the philosophical point of view of *phenomenology*, a movement in philosophy made famous by Edmund Husserl (Beyer, 2016). A phenomenologist draws knowledge from experiencing the way things *appear*. As a phenomenologist, the first umpire's project is to describe his experience directly. And what could make more sense than that? You probably know people like him. Maybe *you* are like him.

The second umpire is supremely confident that he can see things as they really are. He is a *positivist*, someone who believes that there is a knowable external reality and that the scientific method, coupled with careful observation, is the

only way to obtain knowledge. Positivism is a philosophical stance that was first put forward by Auguste Comte (Bourdeau, 2018). A positivist believes that inquiry must be true to the data of experience and that we must describe those facts, establish general regularities or laws, and make predictions based on those regularities. And what could make more sense than that? I know lots of people like that second umpire. You probably do, too. Maybe *you* are like him.

The third umpire is the one that interests me most for the purposes of this talk. Okay, he is arrogant and a narcissist, but he's exhibiting a *narrative, constructivist* epistemology that sees knowledge as created, not discovered. In his world, what matters is what he interprets, the meaning that he creates. Jean Piaget (Staver, 1986) is credited in many circles as being the "father of constructivism." In our world of advising, I would argue, what matters most is what we interpret, the meanings that we create and co-create, the understandings that we achieve. And what could make more sense than that?

So, what does this story have to do with academic advising? Why should we care about these umpires? They all get the job done. Well, we probably can see ourselves as one or more of these umpires. Like the first umpire, many of us rely on empirical evidence, the way things appear to us. We listen with extreme care to learn everything we can about the student before us. Like the second umpire, many of us rely on data, the particulars that are given to us. We assemble all the information we can find, establish general regularities, and make predictions to help the student before us. However, like it or not, empirical evidence and data are not enough. Like the third umpire, we all create knowledge and meaning along with the student who is with us, even when we think that we are not, even if we would like to see ourselves as coming to know external reality, as the second umpire does. Perhaps epistemology is not your mug of suds, but taking a deeper dive into it may change your mind.

Table 1. Positivism versus constructivism

Rational World Paradigm (Positivism)	Narrative Paradigm (Constructivism)
Humans are rational (<i>homo sapiens</i>).	Humans are storytellers (<i>homo narrans</i>).
Decision making is based on arguments.	Decision making and communication are based on “good reasons.”
Arguments adhere to specific criteria for soundness and logic.	Good reasons are determined by matters of history, biography, culture, and character.
Rationality is based on the quality of evidence and formal reasoning processes.	Rationality is based on people’s awareness of internal consistency and the situation’s resemblance to lived experience.
The world can be understood as a series of logical relationships that are uncovered through reasoning.	We experience a world that is filled with stories, and we must choose among them.

Note. Adapted from Fisher (1987).

Advising is a discursive realm where discourse reigns supreme. In the discursive realm of advising, positivism is not enough. In the performance of our advising duties, knowledge about our students is not acquired in such a way that unmediated reality impinges upon our brains directly, but instead, knowledge is produced—constructed—in the interaction between one mind and another.

If you feel like you are already getting stuck in the weeds, maybe this explanation will help: The narrative paradigm first developed by Walter Fisher in 1987, contrasts with what we might think of as the ruling paradigm in the West: the rational world paradigm. Table 1 presents a comparison of the rational world paradigm with the narrative or constructivist paradigm.

People coming from the humanities traditions tend to identify with the right side of this Table 1; people in the social and natural sciences tend to line up on the left side of it. I will admit to having a bias toward the narrative paradigm. I believe it to be wider in scope and ultimately more useful to an organization that calls itself “The ‘Global’ Community for Academic Advising.” All cultures value stories, but both paradigms are valid, and the proponents of each need to recognize that there are two high roads to knowledge about advising and two highways to inform our practice. I am not saying that we need to run the rational world paradigm off the road. I am saying that these two paradigms provide us with the two main highways into the conducting of scholarly inquiry in academic advising. In advising research, the humanities highway has been less heavily traveled than the social sciences highway, so I will outline some general features

of the humanities and explain how scholars can use the humanities to conduct scholarly inquiry—research—in academic advising.

But first, we need to recognize that we are looking at our own *epistemology*, which is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of knowledge; the limits of knowledge; and how knowledge is produced, stored, and retrieved. In broad terms, many people in the humanities hold an epistemology that views knowledge not as uncovering facts that have, until now, remained hidden; rather, they see themselves as *constructing* knowledge, like our third umpire.

Generally speaking, one’s epistemology just seems like common sense. It is exceedingly difficult to take a step back from one’s research project to examine the epistemology within which one operates. Steeped in the positivist traditions of the social sciences, a researcher might say, “Well, of *course* we must use the hypothetico-deductive method! How else can we dispel uncertainty and get as close as we ever can to the truth?” In contrast, a researcher nourished in the traditions of the humanities might say, “I’m going to do a close reading of these texts, examine them in their historical and cultural contexts, and take into account the author and the audience. How else can we dispel uncertainty and get as close as we ever can to the truth?” Both researchers are in pursuit of the truth, but their two notions of truth may differ somewhat. The positivist regards truth as fixed and knowable, as espoused in the rational world paradigm; the constructivist regards truth as mutable and constructed by human subjects, as espoused in the narrative paradigm.

It is difficult to see things outside of the epistemologies one has already adopted. From the vantage point of one epistemological stance, the other seems like madness. Yet, as the 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson wrote, “Much Madness is divinest Sense” (Franklin, 1998). I agree with Emily Dickinson that we need to step back and take a God’s-eye view of advising. The field of academic advising needs researchers and practitioners who travel either of the major highways so that we may come to know and understand the whole of advising. It follows from such an integration of epistemologies that we need researchers (and consumers of research) who, though they may primarily drive one of the two highways, respect and understand those who travel the other and trust that we need both ways to get there. One of my favorite lines of the British poet and mystic William Blake (1757–1827) is from “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”: “Without contraries is no progression.” These two highways I am talking about are contrary to each other, but they travel in the same direction, and I believe they need each other to make forward progress in our field.

The positivist advisor, researcher, or administrator looks at *product*—observable facts like graduation rates—and seeks out causes that can explain differences in observable facts. This approach to finding truth is not inherently wrong. It is efficient, but that efficiency comes at a price. A scientific approach to the practice of advising and to advising administration is economical and has the advantage of the approbation of the wider society that, at least in the West, the scientific approach to truth enjoys. This acceptance is why it is easier to use positivist epistemologies than other means to create advising strategies that provosts, legislators, and the public might support. In the current age, there is a thriving cottage industry of software products designed to provide the comforts of such strategies: They are called predictive analytics. However, the narratological or constructivist advisor or administrator looks at *process*, such as the co-creation of education narratives, and seeks out ways that the student can have an ever-more-meaningful experience; this is the road less traveled; this is the road that is more difficult to use if we seek to justify the need for advising. However, we need both roads to get to where we’re going.

“Oh come on,” you might be thinking right now, “Knowledge is constructed? Get real! I watch PBS. You can’t fool me. Knowledge is

about discovering the truth, about things as they are.” It is hard to argue with this widely held point of view. I am tempted at this point to become effete and snotty, and use the argument put forward by the 20th-century American poet Wallace Stephens (1936/1982): “But things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar”; it is a brilliant statement. Taking his inspiration from a painting from Picasso’s blue period, Stephens was asserting that, although there may be an unmediated reality “out there,” it is unknowable without the mediation of observation and cannot be expressed without the further mediation of communication. Both the observation and the telling of it are acts of imagination and interpretation of which art (“the blue guitar”) is the highest form.

It is no secret that academic advising is a field that is still dominated by research stemming from positivist epistemologies. There is nothing inherently wrong with positivist epistemologies. They got us to where we are today, and they will continue to move us forward. There *is* something wrong with an unexamined obeisance to one epistemology over another; that is, it is wrong to practice advising, do research in advising, or administer advising programs without examining our epistemology and being open to the possible validity of other epistemologies.

This is my main point: To tell the whole story of advising, we also need research stemming from constructivist epistemologies. The time is ripe to turn to the humanities for what they can offer to practice, to research, and to the administration of advising. I am not calling for a paradigm shift. I do not assert that positivistic epistemologies need to be replaced by constructivist epistemologies. I do assert that such positivist approaches need to move over a bit to allow for the constructivist epistemologies. Taking a line from the 20th-century American poet Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken”: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,” and we need to take both of them. We have relied too long on one of them, thinking that it is the high road to the truth about academic advising, but it is not enough. Each road is indispensable to the other, and we need to acknowledge that reality. I urge this for academic advising. Logic *and* imagination, reason *and* emotion, rationality *and* narrative need to be conjoined in advising practice, research, and administration so that we can tell the whole story of academic advising and understand its power.

It is time for *the interpretive turn* in advising research and practice, as has happened in other fields such as political science, jurisprudence, education, anthropology, and psychology, where, as with advising, the preponderance of research had stemmed from positivist points of view. This movement, this *turn*, has already been happening to some extent in our field (witness the theme of this conference [Life Stories: The Art of Academic Advising]). It needs to happen a whole lot more before we can feel like we are on the way to knowing the whole story of advising. By my count, we now have four juried journals, four scholarly journals with plenty of space to fill. In advising research, investigators have recently looked at the works of such philosophers as Martin Buber, Thomas Dewey, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paulo Freire, and how their work might pertain to academic advising, always with the aim of understanding advising better and hence doing it better. Here, at NACADA, we have a research center with a director who is eager to promote research from the perspectives of the humanities as well as the social sciences. This is the time. It is our turn to take the interpretive turn.

So what would this involve? People who have taken the interpretive turn:

- Understand that texts are of primary importance, whether those texts are printed or human.
- Understand that there is no underlying, immutable truth that is “out there” completely external to the interpreter.
- Understand that there is no disembodied “I” that observes. The process of observing changes, in possibly unobservable ways, the thing being observed. “Things as they are are changed upon the blue guitar.”
- Understand that interpretation is shaped by history, biography, culture, language, and power structures.
- Understand that validity is itself an interpretation that is based on internal coherence of the text and by resonance with other interpretations and texts.
- Understand, above all, that interpretation requires imagination.

Taking the interpretive turn means incorporating the epistemologies and methods of the humanities—for example, narrative and hermeneu-

tics to take their places alongside the epistemologies and methods of the social sciences, not replacing or turning aside from positivist epistemology and social science approaches.

Rather, I think we should think of the word *turn* in the sense of *turning the field* at planting time: plowing up new nutrients, preparing the soil for new growth.

Will you permit me another story? About 30 years ago, I worked at Penn State University in the Division of Undergraduate Studies, an advising unit that helps undecided students find their way. One day, my boss, Eric White, summoned me into his office, looked me straight in the eye, and said, “I want you to do what you can to raise the level of discourse about academic advising.” It made great sense back then because most of the discourse about advising was not all that lofty; there were lots of handbooks and how-to manuals.

Things are different now. We have four juried journals, and we have conferences at the state, regional, national, and international levels. We have an outpouring of other publications and resources produced by NACADA and others. That’s a lot of discourse! It’s been getting raised up pretty well!

Here is my dilemma: Eric White never told me how I would know when the task he set before me was done. So, for 30 years, I have been trying and trying, but I have been unable to lay down the burden because he never told me when I could finally say “mission accomplished.”

But I’ve found a way: I’m going to put the burden on you.

I want you to do what you can to raise the level of discourse about academic advising.

So how do you do that? How can you raise the level of discourse about academic advising? In the current age, I believe it means incorporating the humanities into both research *in* and the practice *of* academic advising. That’s right, the humanities—literature, philosophy, history—these need to be included in the discourses *of* and the discourses *about* academic advising. I know that some of you are probably thinking, at this point, “Ew! Messy,” but yes, that’s just the thing: To get a complete picture of advising, we need to go down where things get tangled and dark, down to where the wild things are. To the humanities. I’m talking about the old-timey humanities methods for analysis: *hermeneutics* to arrive at understanding; *criticism* to determine value; *rhetoric* to construct valid arguments in

favor of a given proposition; and *philosophy* to examine our ontology, ethics, and epistemology (that is, what advising is, what it should be, and what constitutes knowledge about academic advising).

All right, let's review what we now have in our wheelhouse. Social sciences: check. Quant and qual: yep, got 'em. Humanities: hold on, just coming into view now.

Yes, we need statistical analyses to help justify funding for our offices. People in the humanities understand and value such things, even if we might sometimes snicker to ourselves behind your backs and make derisive comments like "Ooh, standard deviation? That's an oxymoron."

The time for the interpretive turn is upon us. We already know how to do social science in academic advising. Now we need to do humanities in academic advising, drawing upon hermeneutics, criticism, rhetoric, philosophy, even mythology, and narrative!

I don't want to depose the sciences in advising. Rather, I seek a co-evolution, a consilience, a turning of the field to enrich us all.

If your own scholarly background is in the humanities, then welcome home. Your epistemological stance, your research aims, your methods, and your striving for research validity—all are here waiting for you to apply them to academic advising research.

If your own scholarly background is in the social sciences, check it out: There's more than one way to arrive at the truth.

I want you to tell the whole story of academic advising. I want you to do what you can to raise the level of discourse about academic advising.

References

- Beyer, C. (2016). Edmund Husserl. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/husserl>
- Bourdeau, M. (2018). Auguste Comte. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/comte/>
- Fisher, W. R. (1987). *Human communication as narration: Toward a philosophy of reason, value, and action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Franklin, R. W. (Ed.). (1998). 620. In *The poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum edition* (p. 278). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Staver, J. R. (1986). *The constructivist epistemology of Jean Piaget: Its philosophical roots and relevance to science teaching and learning*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED278563)
- Wallace, S. (1982). The man with the blue guitar. In *The collected works of Stevens, W.* (p. 165). New York, NY: Vintage Books (Original work published 1936)

Author's Note

Peter L. Hagen is the associate dean of general studies and director of the Center for Academic Advising at Stockton University, New Jersey. He has incorporated narrative into his advising practice for the past 40 years and has published and presented a wide array of work on narrative and advising in recent years. He can be reached at peter.hagen@stockton.edu.