

# Critical Advising: A Freirian-Inspired Approach

Andrew W. Puroway, University of St. Thomas

*Advising is not a politically neutral activity. It requires pedagogical grounding that promotes critical reflection and action consistent with praxis. Advisors can turn to literature citing Brazilian educator and critical pedagogue, Paulo Freire, for discussions on praxis, and they can use a Freirian-inspired advising approach to connect the curriculum to a postsecondary institutional mission for promoting the common good. Freire also serves as an inspiration for educators seeking to promote social justice. In this article, some basic Freirian concepts are explored so advisors can inspire in students critical reflection and action with the goal of helping them see the world as changeable.*

[doi: 10.12930/NACADA-15-015]

**KEY WORDS:** critical pedagogy, Freire, social justice, theory

To promote the common good, college educators must teach students to challenge the current reality and view themselves as capable of changing that reality. Transformation in the direction of social justice can only come through critical reflection, which advising should foster. In the article, "Learning at the Core: Toward a New Understanding of Academic Advising," Martha Hemwall and Kent Trachte (1999/2009) advocated for a praxis approach to advising as a means of facilitating critical reflection among students.

Brazilian educator and critical pedagogue Paulo Freire explained praxis, referring to it as the dialectical unity between theory and practice with the goal of transforming the world. In his most widely read work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) proposed an educational approach centered on authentic dialogue through which people name the world together and ultimately understand the capacity of each to act with others in the cause of social justice.

Hemwall and Trachte (1999/2009) articulated several advantages to advising as "a form of praxis" (2009, p. 116). First, the goal of world transformation through critical reflection and action, as possible through praxis, "allows advising to be consistent with actual mission statements of colleges" (2009, p. 116), and

advising for praxis provides an opportunity for critical reflection on missions for the common good. Second, the critical reflection of a praxis approach connects advising to the core of a liberal arts education, which offers broad content used to inform wise action. Third, advising as praxis engages students in conversation about the meaning and purpose of higher education. Fourth, the critical self-reflection of praxis-based strategies "might be useful to advisors in helping students sort out their educational goals" (2009, p. 116), a common responsibility for students and advisors in practice.

Furthermore, Hemwall and Trachte (1999/2009) contrasted praxis advising from prescriptive and developmental advising, noting that critical dialogue presumes a change in goals and values, and they contended that change implies learning rather than development. Hemwall and Trachte also included role distinctions in Freire's pedagogy, noting that "paired terms of teacher/student and student/teacher suggest reciprocal communication" (2009, p. 117). Although Freire did not deny the implicit hierarchy in education, he distinguished nuanced roles of teacher-student and student-teacher as a precondition for authentic dialogue. He noted that "authentic education is not carried on by 'A' for 'B' or by 'A' about 'B,' but rather 'A' with 'B,' mediated by the world" (Freire, 2000, p. 93). Central to his pedagogy, Freire (2000) described dialogue as "an encounter among women and men who name the world" together (p. 89). In this definition, he acknowledged language as a social construct that shapes understanding of reality (or realities) encountered in the world.

Freire's prolific career offers a rich source of inspiration for advising. Through his writing, Freire acknowledged education (including advising) as a political act. Therefore, a Freirian-inspired approach to advising is guided by a desire to engage students in dialogue about the common good and social justice. Building off the foundation laid by Hemwall and Trachte (1999/2009), I outline a few parts of a Freirian pedagogy and propose a Freirian-inspired approach to advising.

## Freirian Concepts

The abstract and complicated ways that the terms and concepts in Freire's pedagogy intersect

make defining terms challenging. For example, according to Freire (2005), *liberatory education* is based on a goal of student engagement for understanding reality as changeable and through which students view themselves as capable of bringing about that change. In the way that this realization of empowerment releases people from their current circumstances—through the view of reality as changeable—liberatory education acts as the practice of freedom (Freire, 2005).

At the heart of liberatory education lies praxis, the dialectical unity between theory and practice based on a goal of transforming the world. Through dialectical unity, Freire took the epistemological stances that theory and practice are not wholly knowable apart from one another and that action-reflection-action creates a continual cycle for knowing. Through this Freirian view, an advisor asks questions that cause a student to reflect upon past choices, including actions in courses, then to theorize ways to move forward toward a goal. Furthermore, the advisor prompts the student to consider the reasoning for the selected goals.

A very important concept in Freire's (2005) writing, *conscientization* describes the movement toward critical awareness, which involves passing previously demonstrated states of consciousness such as *intransitivity* and *naïve transitivity*. A person in a state of intransitivity lacks consciousness beyond that of basic biological needs. People expressing naïve transitivity show some awareness but accept the circumstances as fixed without perceiving their own agency for changing the situation. People move from intransitivity and naïve transitivity when the social and political circumstances allow—at the right historic moment. In the conscientization process, individuals gain critical consciousness upon realizing their own increased capacities for dialogue and agency.

As conscientization transpires, students begin to understand themselves as subjects capable of taking action—as opposed to unreflecting objects onto which actions are imposed—because of their “increased capacity for choice” (Freire, 2005, p. 13). They see the oppression in the world and understand themselves as *historical beings*, and as such, able to institute change with others. *Historical beings* refers to those with both critical awareness such that when social and political circumstances allow they influence change. According to Freire, conscientization implies taking action, and part of his epistemology refers to action

as a way of knowing the world. This action connected to theorization forms the essence of praxis and requires dialogue.

For Freire (2000, 2005), dialogue constructs reality because he viewed reality as a social construction undertaken when people apply both thought and action to a word. True dialogue, according to Freire, requires great love and faith in humanity as well as hope and humility. Dialogue does not exist in the absence of critical thinking. Freire (2000) claimed, “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (pp. 92-93). Academic advising in a one-on-one appointment lends itself to the type of dialogue Freire described as constructing knowledge with students rather than by or for them (Freire, 2005); dialogue, seen this way, situates learning in students' lived experiences. Thus, Freire would argue that advisors must investigate and understand students' perspectives and experiences to engage in mutual dialogue with them.

According to Freire (2000), the antidialogical, or the opposite state of dialogue, refers to “banking education” (p. 73), which seems most analogous to prescriptive advising. Banking education is based on the view of students as passive objects to be filled with information (i.e., dominant-culture-approved knowledge) deposited by the teacher. The primary form of communication is telling rather than dialogue as Freire described it, and this form of advising does not comport with education as the practice of freedom. The attempt to deposit information into a student's mind does not fit with a constructivist epistemology. In fact, the banking education model describes a process consistent with a dehumanizing bureaucracy wherein students are regarded as “adaptable, manageable beings” (p. 73). Furthermore, the banking approach does not bolster a student's creative capabilities to transform the world.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) explained a dialectical epistemology wherein words take on a definition through authentic dialogue. Freire distinguished the situations in which the teacher always predominates the relationship from those partnerships in which both participants take meaningful roles (i.e., teacher-students with student-teachers). Although he did not equate the roles of student (*educand*) and teacher (*educator*), he did emphasize the importance of the teacher remaining open to learning from the student.

For higher education institutions with a mission of engendering citizenship, educators must reject limit-setting practices inherent in a banking model of education. A liberal arts education based on dialogue to engage students in posing problems coheres with active citizenship. *Problematization*, the collective task of discussing the real issues that arise from questioning unjust realities (Freire, 2000), immerses students in more cognitive processes than do practices in a banking model of education. Although not problem solving, problematization is associated with articulating concerns extending from power exercised in limiting and unjust ways.

### Critical Advising

Freirian concepts can challenge advisors, who must share information, such as that related to curricular requirements, that neither students nor advisors control. Specifically, to initiate and sustain authentic dialogue, advisors must determine ways to reject the controls commensurate with a banking education. In an era in which every postsecondary input and outcome seems subjected to measurement, how can advisors justify adoption of critical advising characterized by dialogue? Furthermore, does a pedagogy of the oppressed offer relevance for students with privileged identities who may not relate to the lives of oppressed people? In a Freirian-inspired approach to advising, questions about dialogue and pedagogy compel advisors to engage in critical reflection of their own, seek to situate questions for dialogue in the lived experiences of students, problematize curricula and relationships of power in higher education, and place educational goal setting in the context of social justice or projects for the common good.

### Cultivate Habits of Critical Reflection

First, in a critical approach, advisors foster the habits of a reflective educator. They undertake critical reflection both as solo practitioners and in community with one another. Brookfield (1995) explained:

Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinct purposes. The first is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually

work against our own best long-term interests. (p. 8)

Brookfield added that critical reflection, as a hunt for “assumptions of power and hegemony” (p. 28), requires consideration of as many angles as possible. For advisors, this includes the perspective of their “autobiographies as teachers and learners, . . . students’ eyes, . . . colleagues’ experiences, and . . . theoretical literature” (p. 29). Based on Brookfield’s (1995) example, advisors may undertake systematic reflection on their interactions with students through journaling or by otherwise documenting advising conversations that have influenced their perspective.

Second, in addition to self-reflection, an advisor solicits the perspectives of students in ways that allow them to articulate honest recollections of their advising experiences. The advisor may pose a frank question at the end of a conversation or solicit the information through an anonymously answered questionnaire. In either case, students communicate the parts of the interaction that felt alienating and those that proved meaningful.

Third, asking colleagues to observe advising sessions and provide honest feedback opens opportunities for critical reflection. However, it also makes one vulnerable, especially because the most eye-opening feedback often comes from colleagues whose identity differs from the observed practitioner. That is, advisors from different backgrounds or profoundly different experiences may recognize specific practices (good and bad) that like-minded colleagues may not recognize. For example, an advisor experienced with international students may notice behaviors (e.g., direct eye contact) that may place some international students ill at ease.

Lastly, theoretical literature informs the reflection and action of praxis. Advisors must engage in dialogue about the scholarship of advising as a part of their own critical reflection and as a necessary step toward critical advising. Brookfield (1995) explained, “Theory can help us ‘name’ our practice by illuminating the general elements of what we think are idiosyncratic experiences” (p. 36). Staying current on the literature frees advisors from their isolated experience and deepens their understanding of students’ lives.

Moreover, in addition to the practice-specific value of it, critical reflection offers several powerful benefits. Because it demands dialogue,

critical reflection can draw advisors into communitarian processes of ethical reasoning; that is, critical reflection produces “a deepening appreciation of how all teaching is ideological” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 41). This appreciation enhances an advisor’s capacity to question the tradition of a liberal arts curriculum and thereby formulate questions that push students to similarly interrogate the curriculum. Advisors also gain a deeper understanding of the ways their social status, in terms of privilege or oppression, may compare to that of their advisees.

### Pose Questions Based on Advisees’ Lived Experiences

Through the process of critical self-reflection, advisors develop an understanding of the lived experiences of their students and use that knowledge to ask probing questions that advance the dialogue. The application of Freirian practices requires advisors to engage in cycles of listening and questioning that inspires students to think critically and embrace praxis. Contemplating his own experience advising master’s candidates, Freire (1996) wrote, “The true advisor’s role, besides listening to the candidate’s questions and adding to them, is in an open and friendly manner, to both comfort and stimulate the candidate. . . . This should however, return the candidate to questioning” (p. 167). The advisor must be self-reflective to formulate the relevant questions and gain understanding about each student. To know students, the advisors must willingly seek to learn from them.

Despite the value of the probing interactions, advisors must offer instructions and information about academic policy and process not easily translated into questions. Students would likely feel quite frustrated with an advisor who only responds to inquiries for course specific information with existential questions. On the surface, a student’s inquiries on immediate practical matters do not provide an obvious opening to insert a critical advising approach; however, the act of choosing leads to reflection, and so for registration, at least, advisors can apply questioning that inspires praxis. Reading a degree evaluation also offers a potential opportunity to engage a student in dialogue about the reasoning behind the curriculum. Although the response to “What is required to graduate?” requires an advisor to give specific information, the advisor can also raise the question of “Why do you think (or anticipate) the course is

required (will be important) for graduation?” By responding with reasons to questions of why, students develop an understanding of the curriculum or the relevance of a requirement as they complete the course.

In ideal situations, questioning stimulates critical dialogue during the advising meeting. For example, in a 30-minute session, an advisor might spend 10 minutes asking the advisee questions to determine the situation of the current semester. During this time, the advisor makes a point of inquiring about life both inside and outside of the classroom and listens to find the description of the important concerns of the student in that moment. The topics of immediacy that emanate from this initial inquiry may require the attention of the pair during the entire rest of the meeting. Regardless of the topic, discussion should delve deep into the student’s narrative about current studies not just skim the student’s account of a course at surface level. For example, the advisor might ask a student to describe a surprising fact learned in the course; from the student’s response the advisor can formulate additional questions to inspire critical reflection.

In the latter part of an advising session, the advisor should challenge the advisee to think about courses beyond mere content or experience. Reflective questions prompt students to articulate ways their current academic courses motivate changes (or not) of their worldview as well as the ways they inform future action. Appropriate questions include the following (see Appendix for more suggestions):

- Have your classes caused a change in how you see the world or guide the actions that you take in the world? (e.g., vegetarianism, activism, belief in god or atheism)
- How do you define freedom? Do you think that higher education is making you more free? In what ways is it making you less free?
- What does the *common good* mean to you?
- What does *citizenship* mean to you?

The dialogue that can flow from these questions encourages the advisor to find conversational pathways for learning about the student’s meaning making, purpose, and growth as they connect to common good and existential projects.

The advisor as teacher-student shares in this dialogue by offering responses that challenge the student but that maintain a willingness to be challenged by the student. For example, when questioning a student who chooses a major based on projected income after graduation, the advisor learns about the life circumstances that prompted the student's goal for income.

Because of the risks associated with trial-and-error questioning over decisions of import, advisors may preface the inquiry by explaining that the questions offer opportunities for the student to think deeply about important topics because advising serves to promote learning on all levels, not just as needed for class selection. If possible, the approach should be articulated in an advising syllabus given prior to the meeting. Furthermore, in preparation for using questions of emerging relevance, advisors may need to work on their own comfort level with contemplative silence. Some advisors may not ever feel entirely suited for advising toward praxis, and some students may not benefit from it in every situation. In these cases, the advisor's own critical reflection serves as an essential guide of practice.

### **Problematize the Curriculum**

As the advising participants move from the questions to the discussion of course selection, the dialogue can include the extent that the curricular framework allows for choice. Some students follow a curriculum that does not allow for much exploration; however, an inflexible curriculum provides an opportunity for advisors to problematize the lack of choice, missing voices, and power relationships of that situation.

Those with power and cultural capital create the tradition of a core liberal arts curriculum and the prescriptive nature of many major curricula. Freire (1996) wrote of advising master's candidates, "It is not possible to create without serious intellectual discipline; likewise it is not possible to create within a system of fixed, rigid, or imposed rules" (p. 169). In this statement, Freire suggested that advisor and advisee should not uncritically dismiss the entire curriculum any more than they should leave it unexamined.

The advisor and advisee may find the exercise of deconstructing the general curriculum a valuable activity. For example, an advisee who admits to not understanding the reason and purpose behind liberal arts requirements may

seek to learn about their major field in the manner of vocational education. In this case, the advisor might challenge the student to offer a more extensive critique of the liberal arts curriculum.

At this point in the advising session the dialogue runs into a useful paradox. To reject the liberal arts curriculum effectively, a student must understand it; to understand it, the student must be fully engaged in the experience and content of the curriculum. For example, a student may ask, "I want to be an accountant, why should I waste time studying history?" This thinly veiled appeal to reject the requirement is based on the more fundamental question, "How is history important to an accounting major?" The student may articulate the obvious question but not an intellectually honest answer, and in fact, only by fully investing in the study of history could this student render a well-reasoned response. Therefore, critical questions for deconstructing the general curriculum and for inspiring reflection on praxis might include:

- Given your experience with the study of history, what is your primary argument for concluding that a history course is a waste of time for an accounting major?
- Specifically, how would you make the case that history is not necessary for an accounting career without citing elements from the history class itself?
- What other aspects of your life or that of your community will be served by your work as an accountant?
- Does history tell you how accounting might serve the common good?

In another approach to problematizing, one builds understanding about the ways power structures are reproduced. For example, advisors and other educators can problematize mathematics requirements by exploring ways students with less privilege may experience relatively little access and low-quality math education in their precollege years. Inability to perform well in cornerstone mathematics requirements may keep marginalized students excluded from the lucrative and high-status professions entered through these gateway classes. In arguing for the utility of the liberal arts curriculum, Rust (2011) referred to Freire when expressing hopes for advisors to motivate "the individual [student] to question whether sociocultural pressures impacted the choice of major" (p.

9). In another tact, one can argue the converse problems of unjust social mobility: The valuation of STEM fields may create a system in which graduates with highly valued technical skills become objects of the system rather than subjects who change it. The dialogue furthers understanding about ways the curriculum is both robust and political.

### Advocate for Educational Goals That Serve the Common Good

Advising is a political act; any claim to the contrary—that it is or should be an apolitical activity—creates a conundrum because such a statement reflects an ideology, which reflects the status quo. Moreover, if advisors seek to advise for the common good, for citizenship, or for a more socially just world, then they bring biases to their practice. Each should contemplate the following questions: What are my dreams for the future of humanity and the planet? What dream do I have for each student I advise? How do I advise for compassion? Advisors should have answers to these questions in mind during that beautiful and chaotic moment when they sit across from students searching for direction and guidance.

Hemwall and Trachte (1999/2009) listed educational goal setting as a use of praxis. Advisors can actualize this objective by encouraging students to set goals for common good projects. However, the advisor should refrain from pronouncing judgment on a student's ambitions and instead ask questions about major choice, including the rationale for it. Furthermore, the advisor should capitalize on the opportunity to tie the conversation to values and values clarification. While acknowledging the risks of imposing values onto students, critical pedagogues point to the harmful illusion of political neutrality in education. Advisors with dreams for the world, students, and social justice must reject neutrality in education.

By rejecting neutrality, the advisor faces an ethical challenge. On the one hand, if neutrality is impossible, then questions of ethics may seem moot. On the other hand, by imposing an agenda for the process, the advisor risks treating the student as an object to be filled rather than a person to be empowered. To address the second point, the advisors must critically reflect on their own practices and positions. By understanding the source of one's own hopes for advisees, working with others in common causes on campus and in the community, and actively trying to comprehend the experiences of the

oppressed, the advisor can navigate the ethical risks of advising. An ethical position forces the advisor to reject neutrality and embrace communitarian ethics with deep respect for advisees. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire (2007) wrote: "My ethical duty . . . [as] one of the agents . . . is to express my respect for differences in ideas and positions. I must respect even positions opposed to my own, positions that I combat earnestly and with passion" (p. 66).

Whether acknowledging the myth of neutrality or not, advisors face risks in helping students with goal setting, and they must minimize any potential liabilities by acknowledging them, deepening awareness of them, and embracing an enlightened intention when challenged by them. Advisors must embrace risk to open up to others, to transform the world with others, and to advise for freedom and compassion.

### Summary

In summary, advising as praxis dialogically engages both student and advisor in conscientization. One-on-one advising relationships, well-suited to dialogue, prime students for conscientization through ongoing reflections of the power dynamics enshrined in the dominant curriculum. Critical reflection through the act of questioning provides an alternative to banking education and is well suited to a liberal arts curriculum, which is designed for students to seek truth, enter into reflection, and take action for the common good.

The advisor plays an important role in engaging students in praxis and thus in making meaning of their experiences of the college curriculum. The practices of critical self-reflection, questioning students on topics of emerging relevance to stimulate dialogue, problematizing the curriculum, and advocating for common good projects in educational goal setting provide four possible means to engage in critical advising. The writings of Freire deserve further exploration by advisors for their value in making advising a means of promoting social justice.

### References

- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Letters to Cristina*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Freire, P. (2005). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Hemwall, M. K., & Trachte, K. C. (2009). Learning at the core: Toward a new understanding of academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 29(1), 113–118. (Reprinted from *NACADA Journal*, 19[1], 1999, pp. 5–11)
- Rust, M. (2011). The utility of liberal education: Concepts and arguments for use in academic advising. *NACADA Journal*, 31(1), 5–13.

#### Author's Note

Portions of this paper were presented in the NACADA webinar *Academic Advising and Social Justice: Privilege, Diversity, and Student Success* on April 23, 2015. Andrew W. Puroway is in *Academic Counseling & Support* at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. He can be reached at [dwpuroway@stthomas.edu](mailto:dwpuroway@stthomas.edu).

#### Appendix. Questions for dialogue

- What tangible skills are you developing in college?
- What have you learned about how to work with others?
- Have you changed as a result of things you have learned this semester?
- Is any of the learning in one class connected to your day-to-day life? If yes, give examples. If no, why do you think that is the case?
- If you could create your own course of study, what would you choose to study? Why?
- Are you more curious now than when you began college?
- What are some problems you see in the world?
- How do you want to live your life? How has college informed that?
- How do your current courses relate (or not) to aspects of your life?