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ABSTRACT

The ability to comprehend, act upon, and disseminate essential communication plays a critical part in student success in higher education. Yet many faculty, staff, and administrators can recollect dozens of stories about students who missed important information, and the resulting consequences ranged from hilarious to tragic. Therefore, academic advisers must read the signposts of missing comprehension; advisers must detect students' selective hearing, partial reading, or limited grasp of complex, detailed instructions. Acquiring diagnostic skills, including practices from other disciplines, enables advisers to engage students in an I-You dialog where the adviser actively participates in the student's understanding.

Introduction

When students arrive on campus for orientation, employees of colleges and universities inundate the newly matriculated students and their families with jargon unique to higher education. Miscommunication in higher education has many causes: fear and perplexity, emotional baggage regarding fitting in and transactions with authority, educational development that attenuates a student's zone of proximal development (Derry, 2013) wherein optimal learning and communication take place, all these and more complicate genuine exchanges between human minds. As a consequence, before students even set foot in class, they encounter many potential speedbumps and potholes on the communication pathway.

Importantly, just because university and college employees impart information does not mean it has been communicated. Communication is far more complex than a simple delivery: receipt of information parcels. Academic advisers, therefore, must diagnose when and whether crucial information reaches students and must also develop the capacity to elicit relevant information from students. Most fields of endeavor require effective communication, and a brief exploration of the literature follows. An example with accompanying analysis, followed by questions for advising consideration leads to a call for developing diagnostic tools for assessing effective communication in advising.

Communication in Academia

College students collect and transmit vast quantities of communication, both overt and implied. While much of the flood of information occurs prior to their arrival on campus, once enrolled, students must navigate the turbulent waters of new policies and rules, new knowledge, and new social and academic expectations in a new physical environment. This paper focuses on academic communication, but other varieties and venues of transmission certainly affect the academic. Advisers need to integrate the entirety of students' experiences—academic, social, and emotional—in order to draw effective conclusions and provide credible advice, which students will more likely implement. Effective advising remains one of the best ways to connect students to their curricula, faculty, and institutions; advisers are “central to retention and to student development” (Shockley-Zalabak, 2012, p. 16). Often, student do not arrive in advisers' offices until the middle of the academic term. Advisers cannot begin to diagnose and rectify communication problems if students do not interact with them. Hunter and White (2004) lamented missed opportunities for timely graduation, and meaningful engagement with lessons on the part of students who “dodge advising systems” (p. 21). Students choose, actively or passively, when and whether to participate in advising, and they may opt for absence of attention even when physically in the adviser's office.

Additionally, students constantly receive feedback from faculty in the form of grades and comments on papers but may not have the skills to correctly interpret or apply such corrective information. Feedback from professors may identify gaps in content knowledge or gaps in cognitive skills, but student receptivity to this critical information varies widely (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010). Advisers, then, must identify to what extent students have grasped their professors' evaluations. Students often have a ‘one and done’ approach to faculty feedback; in other words, many students see their grades as the final word on that particular content. Because the message is not explicit, they might not understand grades and comments from faculty as suggestions, a dialog, regarding areas that need further development. “Feedback can only be effective when the learner understands the feedback and is willing and able to act on it” (Price, et al, 2010, p.279). However, students frequently misunderstand the most common form of academic communication in higher education.

Ostrich Effect

Additional impediments to effective advising communication include time constraints which dictate the length of advising sessions, institutional and departmental advising loads and disparities, the sheer magnitude of detailed tasks involved, and more. In addition to such structural obstacles, advisers and students may suffer from selective exposure: in other words, people use information management to allocate attention based upon their prior conditioning and beliefs (Karlsson, Loewenstein, and Seppi, 2009). Thus, information advisers share which conflicts with students' world-views, beliefs, or self-perception will meet internal barriers to effective communication. Furthermore, economists Karlsson, Loewenstein, and Seppi (2009) described an active avoidance technique which they labeled the “ostrich effect” (pp. 96-97). Brashers, Goldsmith and Hsieh (2002) observed medical patients who avoided diagnostic testing and results in order to reduce anxiety (pp.260-261). Mindset, as described by Carol Dweck (2016), may impact a person's susceptibility to the ostrich effect and motivated ignorance since

“people in a fixed mindset often run away from their problems” (p. 242). Humans may avoid information with the potential to cause cognitive dissonance, and the ostrich effect explains why some students avoid their advisers; they simply do not want to confront anticipated negative information.

When students make choices not to engage with classroom and advising professionals, they actively employ a form of “information management,” described in a medical context by Brashers, Goldsmith and Hsieh (2002) as “communicative and cognitive activities such as seeking, avoiding, providing, appraising, and interpreting those environmental stimuli” (p.259). Avoidance as information management might be similarly used by both patients and college students. In my practice, inexperienced students, especially, exhibit a tendency to reach conclusions in the absence of information, and dissuading them from the resulting inaccuracies and generalizations challenges the most experienced advisers. Foreclosed students, of which these students are a subset, may resist corrective communication from advisers because of the positive reinforcement they experience from certainty (Shaffer and Zalewski, 2011). The fixed mindset of foreclosed students often stems from internalized fear of failure or from self-characterization as someone who has failed in a particular area (Dweck, 2016, 206). Advisers are educators who can reframe foreclosed thinking, according to Shaffer and Zalewski (2011), by engaging in open-ended, two-way communication designed to nurture examination of assumptions, such as asking “How did you decide . . . ?” (p. 72).

In addition to economics and medicine, researchers in the field of social psychology described a similar self-protective tactic in politics called “motivated ignorance” (Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017). People engage in this kind of selective exposure, according to Frimer, Skitka, and Motyl (2017), because of a need to defend against beliefs and truths which conflict with their self- and group-identities. While the authors researched political beliefs and behavior, advisers and classroom faculty sometimes observe motivated ignorance in college students. Students whose self-perception relies upon incomplete information, such that they circumvent exposure to conflicting data like poor test scores, frequently develop avoidance techniques, for example: not being physically present when tests results are posted. In the classroom and lecture hall, professors sometimes relate tales of the “banal desire that ideologically minded people have to avoid listening to people with opposing ideals” (Frimer, et al, 2017, p. 11). Students have to manage overwhelming, new, hugely varied information from sources including faculty, texts, fellow-students, and more. When that information conflicts with ingrained beliefs, students face a dilemma: do the work of analysis to determine which world-view has more basis in truth and work to integrate it, or find some rationale for declaring the invalidity of the new data. Unfortunately, ignoring negative information does not make it go away or make the situation better as education professionals know. Upon reflection, the unconscious beliefs we have about self and others and events, which may impede academic success and advising communication, can yield to logic, analysis, and work (Dweck). To facilitate open-mindedness and accurate communication, advisers must accurately distinguish when and whether communication occurred.

Diagnosing Advising Communication

Advisers, then, must navigate the shifting waters of institution-to-student and student-to-institution communication. They must determine when communication has not actually happened and, if possible, take steps to correct the situation. To detect misunderstandings, advisers must place themselves in the students' contextual reality. Champlin-Scharff (2010) recommended advisers apply Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy in order to understand the whole student by comprehending each student's shifting contexts. Hagen (2008) also advocated a broadening of the social scientific, analytic education perspective by encompassing the philosophical viewpoint of the humanities (p.15). Thus Heidegger: students interpret information and events through the lenses of their experience, roles, beliefs, and more, so advisers seeking to communicate effectively need to connect with how students make sense of their own lives. Champlin-Scharff advocated participating in open-ended discussions with advisees in order to "allow students to reveal their contextualization through conversation about their everyday lives" (p. 63). Contextualizing students' actualities leads to insight regarding what they have understood and also adds depth to information imparted by students.

The key to fully engaging with students' contexts lies in encountering the whole student in a dialogic process, which yields insight regarding students' realities. Advisers who encounter students in an I-You dialog of shared self "construct a reality in the space between them" (Colgan, 2016, para. 13) enabling the adviser to participate, for that moment, in the student's understanding of experience. This application of Martin Buber's dialogic philosophy of the self provides a range of tools for diagnosing and addressing communication issues by firmly placing students' experiences, learning needs, feelings, and more within the comprehension of advisers. Such depth of perception permits advisers to diagnose students' interpretation of communications. Advisers can imbue their meetings with students with the kind of acceptance and openness to other which does not require a leap of faith or what Hagen (2008) called a "leap of the imagination" (p. 19). Since I-You dialog preludes the need for such a leap (Colgan, 2016), the adviser's self recognizes the other with gentle appreciation for a student's own self-sense. The scenario that follows explores several circumstances of diagnostic perception on the part of an adviser.

"That's Not What I Said!"

Alexa considers herself a developmental adviser and works with mostly first-year students. She deliberately asks open-ended questions about students' academics in order to evaluate their transition to college in several areas. One fall semester, as she worked with that year's new students, Alexa discerned a disturbing pattern.

About five weeks into the semester, she welcomed Jeff into her office and asked, "How's everything going?" Jeff responded, as students often do, "Good." Alexa always uses that categorization to define terms, so she said, "Good, to me, means As and Bs." "Oh," Jeff clarified, "I'm pretty sure I have that in most of my classes, but I'm not sure about BIO."

"Why aren't you sure about BIO? How'd you do on the test last week?" Alexa wanted to know. "I don't know," Jeff explained, "We get the test grades during lab." After deliberately waiting

several seconds, so Jeff could hear the echoes of his own statement, Alexa clarified to make the situation plain, “You didn’t go to lab. Why not?” “Oh,” Jeff waved his hand breezily, “Lab is optional.” Alexa’s astounded response: “Wait! I’m pretty sure it’s not optional.” The advising session continued with Alexa’s admonition to return to attending lab because lab quizzes, administered every week, count towards the final course grade and 25% of test questions on exams come directly from those quizzes. This critical information was easily located in the course syllabus, but since Jeff was a first-year student, Alexa knew he had limited exposure to the importance of the syllabus.

By itself, this incident provides an emblematic example of selective listening since Jeff isolated and gravitated to partial information out of context of the total conveyed by the professor during the first class session. He did so because the partial information corresponded with his view of the effort he planned to invest in the course. Alexa worked with Jeff to discover accurate material which contradicted his shallower impression of the course requirements and urged him to revise his conception of the professor’s intent. However, in the week that followed Alexa had similar conversations with two additional students, and none of the students were acquainted, so they did not simply share erroneous beliefs.

Baffled, Alexa contacted the professor, a friend of hers, and asked, “Max, are you telling the BIO100 students that lab is optional because I’ve met with several students who think it is?” Outraged, Max sputtered, “What? That’s not what I said!” Once Max calmed down, he explained, “What I tell students on the first day, and what’s written in the syllabus, is that students will earn 30 extra points towards their final grades if they attend ALL the labs.”

Analysis

The professor told students they could earn extra points, but these particular students engaged, perhaps unconsciously, in a rationalization. The students reasoned, without examination of total course requirements or consequences: “30 extra points for all labs; I will not need 30 extra points; I can skip labs.” The professor and the syllabus described the course expectations clearly, but students’ internal calculations distorted the intent of those communications. Students’ attention, or lack thereof, resulted in their failure to update critical behaviors based on new reference points exclusive to higher education and, thus, impacted the utility of information (Karlsson, et al, 2009). They employed information management strategies developed in secondary education, where frequent ‘extra-credit’ opportunities may permit students to cherry-pick the intensity of their participation in more rigorously academic coursework.

Recent high school graduates, further, may have distorted notions of the amount of effort required for college success. Their self-perceptions affect their mindsets about the messages provided by grades and professor feedback (Dweck, 2016). The students in the scenario above may have had an additional reason for avoiding lab: they dreaded confirmation of their fears regarding their test grades. Student aversion to acquiring negative performance information (Karlsson, et al, 2009) may originate from a need for academic stress reduction based upon a perceived lack of coping and recovery skills (Brashers, et al, 2002). Consequently, while the failure of the students described above to attend lab resulted from interpretive mistakes, they may have been driven by an unconscious craving for self-protection.

Questions for Consideration

The most obvious question in this type of scenario is what could the professor, and perhaps the adviser, have done differently to circumvent students' misapprehension of decisive components of the course and syllabus? This question assumes that newly post-secondary, transitional students likely experience inevitable misunderstandings, but is that necessarily true? In addition, the first question assumes the capacity of members of the University community to employ a theory of mind to the effect that we recognize what students have most likely mis/understood. Assuming the possibility of obtaining that depth of understanding, how can advisers develop methodologies to guarantee the consistent application of effective tools for ensuring communication?

Conclusion: What's an Adviser to Do?

Advisers observe the interplay of new students and the various constituencies of their unfamiliar learning environment. While intervention can positively affect student outcomes, advisers must accurately diagnose issues with the potential to negatively impact student success. Using hermeneutic advising advocated by Champlin-Scharff (2010) by applying the dialogic advising described by Colgan (2016), allows advisers to develop a complex and profound appreciation for each student's intersecting contexts. Of course, students' multifaceted identities do not simply cohere to their various classifications, but integrating contextual realities into advising comprehension enables a more accurate perception of students' experiences and construction. Additional tools and methodologies from outside academia have the potential to assist in the development of new diagnostic techniques.

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