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# Practicing Dialogic Advising

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# Practicing Dialogic Advising

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An advisor tried to help a student, Bill, and because she was open to the encounter with his reality, she felt the internal indifference of a student who had already given up. The surface interaction did not agree with Bill's actuality, but the advisor's receptivity to a dialogic interaction flashed an image of him sleeping his way to failing class. Insight of that kind felt like intuition, but in fact, resulted from her receptivity to information on multiple levels, including a merging of the experience of self. I-You encounters of this kind enable participants to encompass the other without feelings of otherness, to have genuine, full comprehension. Bill's advisor switched directions, and rather than suggesting academic remediation, she advised him to withdraw immediately from the class. The wholeness of this kind of dialogic encounter helped Bill's advisor discard expectations and instead touch the authenticity of that student.

Advisors use dozens of tools to aid students, including advising styles, recommendations, curricula, academic coaching, and more. Any one of these may be appropriate with different students, or with the same students at different times. But when advisors' roles can include teaching, reviewing a checklist, making referrals, and more, how does the advisor know when to use which tool, when to offer a checklist, and when to engage in behavior counseling?

## **Martin Buber's Philosophy and Advising**

Martin Buber's dialogic philosophy of the self (1970) provides a conceptual foundation for an overarching theory of advising and also addresses the question of how advisors know when to apply particular techniques and styles. Appropriate advising choices may feel intuitive, but advisors respond to dozens of cues from students which shape their advising reactions. Willingness to be attuned in this manner provides a sense of visceral sureness derived from full engagement with the student.

Buber was an Austrian Existential philosopher, 1878-1965, whose most renowned work, *I and Thou*, first appeared in 1923. Buber believed our primary experience of self was relational, so subsequent experience of self was dyadic, or paired. He labeled the pairs I-It or I-Thou (Thou is interchangeable with You) depending on the nature of the interaction. Since humans experience their 'selves' in relationship, all knowledge and experience of self emerges out of ongoing dialog with others/It. "There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It" (Buber, 1970, p. 54). The other half of Buber's pair could be You, experienced holistically, or It, experienced for its utility.

This revolutionary idea can shape advising. Buber's mystical description of encountering You reflected the totality of the engagement: "Neighborless and seamless, he is You" (p. 59). You, encountered through dialog, becomes everything in that moment. Advisors can encounter the totality of the student universe generated by and through dialog with You. "This does not mean that the person 'gives up' his being-that-way, his being different; only, this is not the decisive perspective but merely the necessary and meaningful form of being" (p. 114). In other words, while our selves may become something distinctive in an encounter with other, we retain the integrity of our person, the unique individual engaged in a shared moment with another. For an advisor, this means gaining a full understanding of a student by fully experiencing I-You.

Buber further claimed that individual selves differed as they moved between I-It and I-You dialogs. The self interacting with and acting upon an It "appears as an ego" which "sets itself apart from other egos" (p. 111-112). Someone acknowledging You "appears as a person and becomes conscious of itself as subjectivity. Persons enter into relation to other persons" (p. 112). The ego-centered self is separate and fueled by usefulness, but the relational self encountering You was "touched by a breath of eternal life" (p. 113). Both have a place in academic advising, but sharing a dialogic encounter with You provides a richer engagement with a student, which supports better advice based on that person's whole truth.

### **Dialogic Advising**

Academic advising is comprised of personal interaction, but also of record-keeping, policy-relaying, etc. When advisors check off necessary details, they apply what Buber called I-It interactions. I-It interactions are mundane, purpose-driven, quantitative, analytical, and objective. I-It necessarily detaches self and other. Advisors enmeshed in I-It interactions are still involved in dialog, but it is objective, a transaction rendering the other into something to be acted upon in a specific fashion. Some students desire a task-focused, checklist approach to academic advising.

Certain fields of knowledge, such as science, math, and business, rely heavily on I-It understanding of the world; advisors in those disciplines may have intellectual training which values concrete, reproducible, known factors. However, helping a student may require more depth of engagement. Buber preferred the wholeness of merged realities. His disdain for constant I-It was evident, "O mysteriousness without mystery, O piling up of information! It, it, it!" (p. 56).

Moreover, a predominant I-It orientation can preclude mindful advising and obscure student cues by encouraging advisors to prioritize institutional goals. Additionally, I-It may inhibit students' dialogic encounter with content, faculty, and fellow students while prioritizing a narrow, institutional definition of success. I-It is not inherently negative, but both types of dialog belong in advising. Advisors must examine their practices and assumptions to ensure they are prepared to address the whole student.

I-You consists of powerful, relational interactions that enable us to *encounter* the 'other.' To cultivate an I-You encounter, advisors must minimize their deepest assumptions and barriers of ego, personal defenses that act as impediments to truly comprehending others. The easiest way to accomplish such a vulnerable state is realizing the advising session

meets the students' needs, not the advisors', and any negativity students bring to the session is rarely about the advisor. Advisors can listen with their eyes: relaxed focus on the student enables advisors to pick up cues that might be missed if the focus is primarily on the usual menu of progress-to-degree questions which have a narrow range of 'correct' answers. An I-You encounter permits an interaction without regard to overarching objectives, time, location, or other externalities, so advisors encounter only the student. Advisors must deliberately neglect the internal timekeeper, which insists this meeting must be not more than 15 or 30 minutes. Not that the advising session must be prolonged, but one cannot engage fully with You if focused on minutia and externalities.

Effective advisors interact with students as unique humans, and the *exchange* permits advisors to address persons with specific needs, needs that advisors meet using a variety of techniques. Some are developmental advisors; other programs require intrusive advising; advisors of mature students may identify as prescriptive; others think of themselves as coaches. These labels describe practices. However, advisors rarely employ only one approach. Substantial research focuses on the tasks to be accomplished; for example, the Council for the Advancement of Standards – Academic Advising says "Each approach . . . help[s] students delineate their academic, career, and life goals as they help students craft the educational plans necessary to complete their postsecondary objectives" (Drake, Jordan & Miller, 2012, para. 2). Advising approaches may include activities "such as discussing course selection, explaining degree requirements and sharing registrations procedures," according to Mottarella, Fritzsche, and Cerabino (2004), or interactions can be more "growth oriented" and focus on students' intellectual, social, and emotional development (p. 48).

Practitioners of all kinds of advising can and do engage in I-You dialogic exchange, and that relationship permits advisors to blur the lines of differing advising practices. Because the prescriptive advisor inhabited the student's entire reality, his awareness of what it felt like to be that student in class, of her learning needs, resulted in course or section recommendations tailored to the whole student and not just to program and graduation requirements. The intrusive advisor, rather than requiring specific interventions, revised her menu of obligatory actions because her student's life did not include the time or attentive capacity to conform to all her suggestions. She perceived the despair the student felt at the futility of being compelled, so she modified her approach to embrace his limitations and found him willing to participate.

During dialogic advising, student and advisor construct a reality in the space between them. It is not necessary for students to be as open to relating to You as advisors; rather, advisors can still engage the student as You, and by opening oneself to Other can participate in students' actuality. Often, students have preconceived notions of what advising is, but advisors attuned to You do not have to abandon the knowledge and experience of the It of their programs, courses, institutions, or even the It of the student in order to both provide what students think they need and what they really need (Buber, 1970). And because dialogic advising is reciprocal, students encounter You whether they expect to or not.

### **Conclusion**

Dialogic advising is a conceptual and practical tool. Buber establishes the depth of connection possible with advisees, and once engaged in I-You dialog, advisors develop an effective means of determining students' needs. Awareness of students as You can enable

advisors to shed preconceptions and to determine when to bridge advising methodologies. Further, dialogic advising provides advisors with the tools to engage in critical self-examination. Advisors know the focus should be on student needs but sometimes become enmeshed in the I-It of institutions or objective checklists. Dialogic advising enables advisors to rediscover students at the the heart of the advising relationship. As an overarching theory of advising, dialogic advising is a work in progress, but is already a useful means of responding to the whole student.

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