

Research Proposal

“Coaching Through Literature: Another Tool for Academic Advisors”

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ABSTRACT

Katherine Santana Brickey, academic advisor for the English department at Utah Valley University (UVU), combines her interests in literary studies and academic advising into a unique research proposal investigating the ways literature has been used in professional coaching programs and can, in turn, be used in academic advisor-student relationships to foster student development and success. Like coaching, academic advising teaches students essential skills in critical thinking, decision-making, and goal setting. Katherine examined Christine A. Eastman's work with graduate students, which focused on coaching using selected short stories. Eastman explored the effects short stories can have on students' voice, memory, reflection, and introspection during coaching situations. Katherine plans to build on Eastman's research to explore how integrating literature into the advising process can have a positive impact on advising-student relationships and lead to better student outcomes. She intends to implement a study at UVU with a group of advisors and students to participate in "coaching through literature". After a one-month period, a survey will be distributed to participants to gather qualitative and quantitative data on the effectiveness of the approach.

Key terms are bolded.

Statements of limitations are included within the literature review.

INTRODUCTION

As an academic advisor and student of the English major, for both undergraduate and graduate-level studies, I recognize the impact literature can make in a student's development and success. I see the potential literature has in the academic advisor-student relationship. According to the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) **academic advising** "is integral to fulfilling the teaching and learning mission of higher education" (Concept of Academic

Advising). Academic advisors play a crucial role in helping students succeed not only in obtaining a university degree or certificate, e.g., their learning mission, but also in the student's learning. Academic advising's three core components, "curriculum (what advising deals with), pedagogy (how advising does what it does), and student learning outcomes (the result of academic advising)" (Concept of Academic Advising), should encourage students to challenge their world views, acknowledge their unique characteristics, and resolve their own values and motivations.

Much of what academic advising teaches students involves institutional policy & procedures, institution-specific mission and culture, and enrollment and graduation requirements. However, just as important as institutional policy & procedures, the academic advising curriculum involves teaching students skills related to the social sciences, humanities, and education. More specifically, academic advising teaches students essential skills in critical thinking, decision-making, modes of thinking, and goal setting. NACADA's Pillars—Concepts of Academic Advising explains the pedagogy of academic advising as "the preparation, facilitation, documentation, and assessment of advising interactions" and makes clear that "specific methods, strategies, and techniques [of said pedagogy] may vary" although "the relationship between advisors and students is fundamental and is characterized by mutual respect, trust, and ethical behavior" (Concept of Academic Advising). This interaction is the ideal relationship for coaching and exploring different methods of promoting student development and success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coaching for Professional Development: Using Literature to Support Success by Christine A. Eastman, senior lecturer at Middlesex University in London, examines how seven fictional

stories can help professionals from diverse fields and coach mentees in areas such as leadership, memory, emotion, and family. Eastman argues that “fiction helps us to imagine lives outside our own and how this sensitivity of language brings out the unconscious within us and others,” and by doing so helps us find solutions to problems and better articulate our ideas through imagination and innovation. Eastman describes how she used the following literature to coach undergraduate and graduate level students: Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A story of Wall Street,” Willa Cather’s “Neighbor Rosicky,” John Cheever’s “The Swimmer,” James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son,” Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*. Eastman illuminates an aspect of our common human experience in each of these works, and provides ways to make meaning and, again, find solutions to hardships.

My primary focus was on Eastman’s work with graduate students studying business. She used John Cheever’s “The Swimmer” and James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son, to explore the effects these short stories could have on student’s voice, memory, failure, and struggle. It is important to note that these are deeply personal issues, usually tabooed and difficult to speak about in most social interactions, particularly in professional settings. However, the literature—“The Swimmer” and “Notes of a Native Son” proved to be “an emotional conduit in order to facilitate frank and productive coaching conversation [...] thus minimizing any suggestion of accusation and blame that a straightforward coaching conversation on behavior might produce” (86). In other words, the stories provided a safe way for students to look at the characters’ behavior critically and express emotions, and then apply these to their own lives, without having to expose their personal experiences, failures, or doubts.

More experimentation, application, and outcomes like Eastman’s must be done before conclusive reports on coaching and coaching with literature can be made. This is one of the

major gaps in the field of coaching—"there is a plethora of writing on how to coach, what coaching is and what the characteristics of a successful coach are, but little analytical literature examining 'assumptions and beliefs'" (84). Although there is significant information about the practical aspects of coaching, coaching must be approached carefully. For example, effective communication must be the premise of all coaching-coachee relationships. Mainly, coachees must feel their voices are being heard. Eastman warns, "Without a voice, there is the danger that 'coachee's more complicated problems will be swept under the carpet, ignored, or dealt with inadequately," causing more harm than good. Therefore, I will make a priority to ensure that academic advisors participating in my proposed research take available training in effective listening and communication. It is also important to note that coaching through or with literature allows those involved to articulate their "voices better but also in educating our responses to real-life events" (85). In other words, it is by default that analyzing a text provides a medium to voice our thoughts and give us the words to articulate these.

Eastman illuminates another gap in coaching—that of the role of memory or reflection. Eastman asserts that memory (or remembering) "has a central role in narrative" (86). Reflection, which involves memory and remembering, is incredibly important in coaching. If we don't reflect on our own experiences, specifically as it relates to the literature, we don't know how to change, be better, and grow. Coaches using literature should encourage coachees to reflect. Literature can help students reflect on how methods of the past have been exhausted and will no longer (necessarily) work in the present or future. Literature could help students build "better habits and discourage negative habits" (86).

In "Responsible Grammar Rebels: Using the Hunger Games Trilogy to Teach the Intentional Sentence Fragment," Amber M. Simmons, an English language arts teacher,

examines the way in which popular culture and student-valued texts can be used as mentor texts in the classroom to help students be more engaged in an otherwise unfavorable academic task—grammar instruction. Simmons uses the *Hunger Games* trilogy to illustrate her thesis. She argues that “teaching grammar from a workbook is not a successful way to teach students about the nuances of language”. Instead, educators should find ways to engage students in their learning by finding ways to “create not fix [their grammar]”. Moreover, Simmons encourages educators to allow students to challenge conventional (grammar) rules to further increase engagement. By challenging conventional rules, students can become empowered in their learning experiences.

This article is insightful to my research because it underpins and exposes the question behind the question that my research is intending to answer. The foundational question we—those in (higher) education—asks ourselves constantly, how can we increase student engagement? Specifically, literature, and more specifically student-valued literature, can be used to increase students’ engagement, thereby increasing student persistence and success. Simmons’ research also presents a potential problem or critical question that must be asked in my research—what value will selecting specific literature have on the effectiveness of academic advising through literature? I intend to distribute a survey in which students (and advisors) choose from a list of varied, preselected short stories and poems. The goal is to have the literature be conducive of meaningful discussions, but also be relevant enough to keep the students’ interest.

What is *Academic Procrastination*? **Academic Procrastination** is a form of avoidance in a task that should be done by an individual. How can we avoid Academic Procrastination? Researchers Erik Teguh Prakoso and Wida Reni Kristianti argue that through *biblio-counseling*—a psychotherapeutic approach that uses literature to support good mental health—

guidance counselors can affect a change in student persistence. Prakoso and Kristianti used a quantitative approach to design a study in which they tested a pretest and posttest group on the efficacy of biblio-counseling. Results showed an average of 29.71% decline in the level of academic procrastination between pretest and posttest results.

Prakoso and Kristianti research represents an important part to my research for several reasons: (1) the research conducted is quantitative, which represents diversification from the typical research methods of the humanities, (2) the research is centered around the psychology of student non-success, which will provide important context for my research, and finally, (3) the research is conducted in a higher education setting, which is the setting my research is mostly concerned with. Because the research done by Prakoso and Kristianti centers around psychological and psychotherapeutic ideas, I will have to be careful to make and communicate to participants a clear distinction between coaching and clinical counseling.

Teacher and writer Laurel Taylor's article *More Than a Reading Assignment: Using Nonfiction Texts as Mentor Texts* uses a specific genre of creative nonfiction, to introduce the idea that literature can be used to mentor high schooled aged teens and first-year college students through writing assignments—in this case a persuasive, research-based writing project. She argues that although fiction can also be an effective tool for teaching young readers about life, nonfiction should also be considered for its ability to encourage teens to write about themselves and find their voice; furthermore, Taylor argues that young readers tend to gravitate toward nonfiction anyway. The author uses, both as a tangible example from her classroom and to illustrate her thesis, *Savage Inequalities* by Jonathan Kozol—a creative journalistic book about disparities in education between schools of different classes and races.

Susan Laird, professor of Educational Studies, Women's and Gender Studies at University of Oklahoma, reports on the profound effects mentoring can have on individuals. She is particularly concerned with the way in which the genre of autobiographies can do this for women in higher education. Using a feminist lens Laird introduces the lack of accessibility or exposure women have had to effective mentoring models within patriarchal institutions. To illustrate this point Laird uses Carolyn Gold Heilbrun's 1988 autobiography, *Writing a Woman's Life*, to assert that "women have been deprived of the narratives, or the texts, plots, or examples, by which they might assume power over—take control of—their own lives". Nevertheless, Laird concludes that through "a literary legacy" left by women who overcame the odds, women intellectuals' can reach their full potential.

"Auto/Biographical Mentoring for Women" by Susan Laird presents a great example of how specific populations, such as women, can benefit from using creative writing works, such as autobiographies, to succeed in higher education and other intellectually focused spaces. I am particularly interested in Laird's article because it studies the way in which a historically underrepresented group can use a genre of writing or literature to find successful examples of persistence, overcoming, and succeeding in spaces largely dominated by systems designed to favor the dominant group, like that of higher education institutions. I intend to preselect literature, to be used in my proposed research, that is inclusive to gender, race, and other marginalized demographics.

DESIGN OF STUDY

My research will begin by soliciting a group of UVU academic advisors to begin a month-long study, in which strategically selected (shorter) literature pieces will be used during advising coaching sessions. This solicitation will be distributed campus-wide via advisement forum

announcements and Qualtrics registration survey. Once a group of academic advisors is gathered, these advisors will be asked to complete a set of tasks. These include:

- Voting on strategically selected works of literature.
- Completing a short LinkedIn training on effective listening and communication skills.
- Completing a short LinkedIn training on diversity and inclusivity.
- Contract agreement of participation, which includes a month-long commitment and pledge to use “coaching through literature” responsibly and equitably.

Literary works can range from nonfiction to fiction within the genres of poetry, essays, short stories, to excerpts from longer works such as novels and memoirs. As an academic advisor, I know students typically meet with their advisors for an average of 30 minutes per visit. As such, the literary genres that are most favorable to this interaction would be shorter works, like the aforementioned. Additionally, literature works will be diverse and inclusive, that is the strategically selected pieces will include authors and characters that are representative of our diverse student body. This includes race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.

Academic advisor will be reminded to allow students “enough time to read the reading material,” if not being read jointly in the appointment, providing students “time to meditate and reflect on the material,” and to follow up with students (95). These concepts are related to the previously mentioned training in effective listening and communication. Finally, academic advisors will be made aware of the distinction between coaching and clinical counseling.

Upon being fully trained academic advisors will ask students who are scheduling meetings with them to consent to participate in the study. Consent will be documented in advisor notes and a separate document for tracking which students participated. Advisors will be provided sample questions to help prompt reflection and sharing, such as

- What pressures do the characters in this poem/story have?
- What influences are contributing to these pressures? Do the characters overcome these pressures?
- How would you approach the characters' problems?

After a one-month period, a survey will be distributed to participating students and advisors to gather qualitative and quantitative data via Qualtrics surveys on the effectiveness of the approach.

CONCLUSION

Literary studies or literary criticism presents an excellent pedagogical instrument for academic advisors because it fosters a critical analysis of one's world views, values, and motivations.

Literary studies are the "art or practice of judging and commenting on the qualities and character of literary works" (Oxford Languages). Moreover, literary studies can encourage students to think critically about their own morals, value-systems, and stance on social issues affecting the society they live in, thereby helping students make important decisions about their education, career, social interactions, and life, as members of a society.

Exploring how literature—poetry, short stories, or short essays, in the case of academic advising—can be used to establish the connection between reading, intellectual development (e.g., critical thinking and decision-making skills), social cultural events, and success in college students, can prove to be transformative to the relationship between student and advisor, and advisor and pedagogy. Upon researching potential overlap between specifically academic advising and literature, I found there has been no exact research conducted on this topic.

Therefore, the primary focus of my research proposal will be to explore: can works of creative

writing (literature) be an effective tool for academic advising in higher education, that is can literature engender student development, persistence, and success?

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