



A Narrative Approach to Academic Advising: Helping Students Create Their Stories

Presenters:

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Overview

Our presenters will share their insights about how narrative—storytelling—can inform the work we do as academic advisors. When we listen to the concerns that bring students to our offices, we are essentially listening to them tell the stories of their lives. When we impart advice to them, we are essentially sharing with them how their stories might unfold. In this webinar, the presenters will explore how advisors might become more skilled at storytelling and story-listening. Moreover, the presenters will outline some ways in which we might cultivate the storytelling skills of our students in order to help them to create their own educational stories. The presenters will share their stories with you and also some ideas and techniques about how you can implement a narrative approach to advising.

The Seven Basic Plots in Advising

(adapted from Booker, C. (2004) *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, Bloomsbury Academic Press.)

Plot Type	Examples from literature/film	Hypothetical advising situations
Overcoming the Monster (Battle; thrilling escape from death; kingdom restored)	<i>Beowulf</i> <i>Epic of Gilgamesh</i> <i>Dr. No</i> <i>Hunger Games</i>	Your student has dropped Organic Chemistry twice and is failing it currently. That failing doesn't seem to you, as the advisor, to be based on inability.
Rags to Riches (A central crisis moves protagonist to maturity)	<i>Aladdin</i> <i>Cinderella</i>	Your student comes from a poor socioeconomic background. S/he tells you that s/he is majoring in engineering in order to earn lots of money in life.
The Quest (Protagonist sets out on journey with companions; overcomes obstacles; attains goal; finds meaning)	<i>Odyssey</i> <i>Lord of the Rings</i>	The student is searching for a sense of fulfillment. S/he is majoring in biology in order to prepare for occupational therapy. S/he has taken several philosophy and religion courses as electives and has a strong passion for these areas.

Voyage and Return (The protagonist lands in a realm where the normal laws don't apply)	<i>Priscilla, Queen of the Desert</i>	Your student had to leave school for health or financial reasons. Comes back to college now as an adult learner better prepared to encounter the demands of college work.
Comedy (Plagued by misunderstandings and dark forces, the protagonist is finally redeemed)	<i>Emma</i> <i>Strictly Ballroom</i>	Your advisee is juggling full-time credit load with a full time job. S/he comes to you to approve a course overload to complete the third minor and graduate this semester. To do so, s/he will have to take 28 credits this semester. How to turn this potential tragedy into a comedy?
Tragedy (The flawed protagonist is destroyed by his/her own blindness)	<i>Oedipus Rex</i> <i>Hamlet</i>	Your student's priorities have shifted away from academic pursuits and moved to social pursuits big time. Not only have grades suffered, but graduation is also threatened. Is an unhappy ending inevitable?
Rebirth (The protagonist is not only redeemed, but transformed)	<i>Silas Marner</i> <i>Lion King</i> <i>A Christmas Carol</i>	Your student is a returning veteran who suffers from PTSD, has no prior college experience. S/he is gradually but totally transformed by experiences in classes where s/he learns to see the world in completely new ways and is "reinvented" as a new person. The PTSD diminishes, too.

A Narrative Approach to Academic Advising: for Further Reading

Overcoming the Monster

Anonymous: *Beowulf*
Silver Linings Playbook [Film]
 John Irving: *A Prayer for Owen Meany*
 Wagner: *Siegfried* [Opera]

Rags to Riches

Aladdin [Film]
Cinderella [Film]

The Quest

Seven Samurai [Film]
Rocky [Film]

Voyage and Return

Homer: *Odyssey*
 J.R.R. Tolkein: *Lord of the Rings*
Priscilla, Queen of the Desert [Film]

Comedy

Jane Austen: *Emma*
Strictly Ballroom [Film]
Muriel's Wedding [Film]
 W.A. Mozart: *The Magic Flute* [Opera]

Tragedy

Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex* [Play]
 Edward Albee: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* [Play]

Rebirth

George Eliot: *Silas Marner*
Lion King [Film]
 Charles Dickens: *A Christmas Carol*

Narratives 2.0 (not for the faint of heart!)

Phillip Glass: *Satyagraha* [Opera]
 John Adams: *The Death of Klinghoffer* [Opera]

Moshim Hamid: *Reluctant Fundamentalist*
Francis Poulenc: *Dialogues of the Carmelites* [Opera]
Mikhail Bulgakov: *The Master and Margarita*
James Joyce: *Ulysses*
Joseph Conrad: *Heart of Darkness*
Apocalypse Now [Film]
Hilary Mantel: *Wolf Hall*
Ian McEwan: *Atonement*
Jeffrey Eugenides: *Middlesex*

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Website for "Project MyStory" at SUNY Albany -
<https://ualbanyadvising.wordpress.com/projectmystory/>

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NACADA WebEvents



Major Claim #1

We can view human life as a narrative

“We spend our lives crafting stories that make us the noble—if flawed—protagonists of first-person dramas. A life story is a “personal myth” about who we are deep down—where we come from, how we got this way, and what it all means. Our life stories are who we are. They are our identity. A life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings.”

-Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal* (2012)

Major Claim #2

Students are humans

- If we can view human life as narrative and view students as human(!), then we can begin to see advising those special humans as having something to do with narrative.



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Major Claim #3

So maybe it's not going too far to say that good advising depends on narrative

- **Listening.** Students' lives might not literally be stories, but putting their lives into a story is the only way they have to convey to advisors what that lived life is like.
- **Advising.** Telling stories is one of the main modalities advisors use in order to advise.

Major Claim #4

We help students write the Story of Their Education

- The chapters that advisors are helping their students to write are very important ones.
- We could call them "The Story of This Student's Education."
- In the field of literature, stories of education or acculturation are called "**bildungsromane.**"
 - James Joyce: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*
 - Jane Austen: *Emma*

Major Claim #5

What we already know about narrative can foster good advising

- If academic advising is so very much tied up in storylines, in narrative, then what we already know about narrative can foster good advising.
- So! What do we already know about narrative?

Context

Context—The frame in which the other elements of narrative house themselves. The reading situation. The speaking situation. In advising, the discourse in the office/email.

- Author
 - Real author
 - Implied author
- Audience
 - Real audience
 - Implied audience

Style

Style—*how* the story is told

- **Point of view:** Who is really telling “The Story of This Student’s Education”?
- **Characterization:** How does the student portray his/her identity? Valiant Warrior? Victim of Circumstance?
- **Symbols and imagery:** What metaphors are the student using to relate his/her experiences?
- **Diction, language usage:** Frankly, how good is the student at telling the story? Is that student a trustworthy narrator?

Theme

Theme—the meaning of the narrative for the author and the audience. This is only available to us through the art or science of interpretation: hermeneutics.



Photo courtesy of The U.S. Army via Creative Commons

Plot

We have been heavily influenced by the work of Christopher Booker (2004): *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, wherein he argues that there are, well, **seven basic plots**:

- Overcoming the Monster, *Beowulf*
- Rags to Riches, *Aladdin, Cinderella*
- The Quest, *Lord of the Rings*
- Voyage and Return, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*
- Comedy, *Taming of the Shrew*
- Tragedy, *Hamlet*
- Rebirth, *A Christmas Carol*

Conclusion

Based on above claims: If we advisors are helping students co-construct “The Story of Their Education,” then students’ and advisors’ narrative skills should be fostered and developed.



Photo courtesy of NACADA member Nancy Markee

How shall *advisors* be taught narrative skills?

- As **listeners**, we can enhance our interpretive skills by exposing ourselves to difficult narratives.
- As **storytellers**, we can focus on our own stories and by reading biographies/autobiographies. Or by reading *bildungsromane*.

How shall *students* be taught narrative skills?

- Ask questions that focus on the narrative.
- Demonstrate your interest as a listener.
- Assign readings.
- Ask them to write!



Photo courtesy of NACADA member DeLaine Priest

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