Exploring Innovative Approaches to Advising: Applying Learning Communities, a Learning Paradigm, and Structured Reflection

A project funded by a grant from DoE-FIPSE (PB116B100047) at Kalamazoo College

Project Overview

As described in Kalamazoo College’s proposal to the Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (Dueweke et al. 2010), the focus of our project is to identify, develop, test, implement, and disseminate particularly effective academic advising practices. Through our project we will seek answers to (at least) the following three questions:

1. What can a student and advisor do to foster active engagement in constructing an undergraduate education, and thereby help the student develop from external definition toward self-authorship (Baxter Magolda and King 2008; Kegan 1994) while attaining Kalamazoo College’s goals for learning outcomes?

2. Can employing structured reflection through advising increase the likelihood of students participating in “high impact practices” (AAC&U 2008), making connections among the many facets of their education, and building a whole education that is greater than the sum of its parts?

3. Can the advising relationship increase student retention and persistence to graduation?

As a means of addressing these questions, we will carry out our project (using a quasi-experimental approach), described in more detail below, starting in the fall of 2011 with students and faculty (including advisors) in eight First-Year Seminars (FYS) and finishing when those students graduate in the spring of 2015. Building on a sense of shared knowledge and shared knowing, developed in learning communities (Tinto 1998) that will be established in the FYS, and applying a learning paradigm to advising (Hemwall and Trachte 2005), students and their advisors will employ structured reflection (to varying extents depending on the FYS to which the students and advisors are assigned) to foster transformational learning (Mezirow 2000) in the context of students constructing their Kalamazoo College education. All students will be advised in ways that are at least comparable to those of all other Kalamazoo College students while we explore innovative and potentially more effective approaches to advising. We will assess effects of various advising practices, while remaining especially attuned to differences among students in their access to and participation in high impact practices, through surveys and annual interviews, carried out by the Western Michigan University Evaluation Center (WMUEC; http://www.wmich.edu/evalctr/about/). When we discover approaches to advising that have positive effects on students, we will strive to implement those approaches more broadly at Kalamazoo College and disseminate what we learn throughout the higher education community.

Project Design

Assessing efficacy of advising practices will entail following students in four Groups of FYS (two seminars per Group; schematic on next page), starting in the fall of 2011 and finishing in spring 2015, and evaluating outcomes of those practices as per our Implementation and Evaluation Plan2. Each of the eight FYS in our project will become a learning community for (at least) the duration of fall term 2011. And, all students in our project will have access to a “K-Plan Commonplace,” where they can construct and reflect on a record of their own individualized version of The K-Plan (http://www.kzoo.edu/college/?p=kplan) with help from their advisors during their four years at Kalamazoo College. Though creating learning communities will not necessarily be unique to FYS in our project, only those students who continue to participate in our project will have access to a

1 Kalamazoo College’s 2010 grant proposal to DoE-FIPSE (Dueweke et al. 2010) provides rationale for this project and was the source of many excerpts around which this project description was composed. The proposal, as well as cited literature and other supporting documents, can be found at (https://reason.kzoo.edu/fipse/).

2 Available at our project website (https://reason.kzoo.edu/fipse/).
K-Plan Commonplace to record and reflect on their individualized K-Plan. Advisors of students in three of the four Groups will employ structured reflection within a learning paradigm focused on helping students construct their own K-Plan. Faculty teaching the four FYS in two of the Groups will incorporate structured reflection into the seminars, and students in one of those Groups will be assigned a K-Guide (one per seminar) in addition to their academic advisor. Thus, we will employ increasing layers of advising practices in the four Groups of FYS in our project as illustrated here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Community</th>
<th>My Kommonplace</th>
<th>Structured Reflection in Advising</th>
<th>Structured Reflection in FYS</th>
<th>K-Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group One</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Two</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Three</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Four</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We anticipate detecting differences among the four Groups in how well students make use of their K-Plan Commonplace, the degree to which they develop self-authorship by taking an active role in constructing their education, the extent to which they engage in high impact practices, as well as retention and graduation rates. The following are descriptions of the “layers” in our project.

**Learning Communities** – As educational settings promoting collaborative and coherent learning experiences that encourage students (and faculty) to learn together rather than apart, learning communities have two features in common: shared knowledge and shared knowing (Tinto 1998). Constructing knowledge together “promotes intellectual development as well as an appreciation for the many ways in which one’s own knowing is enhanced when other ‘voices’ are part of that knowing” (Tinto 1998) and can help learning community members become better at connected knowing (Clinchy 1989). Gaining a voice in the construction of knowledge, noted by both Tinto and Clinchy, helps validate learning and engenders self-authorship of one’s education. Tinto also noted that learning communities are effective in fostering and combining social and academic engagement, both of which increase likelihood of student persistence to graduation. Furthermore, membership in a learning community appears to boost student engagement which, in turn, leads to a host of positive educational outcomes (Pike et al. 2011). Thus, establishing learning communities as a feature common to all eight first-year seminars in our project will likely encourage all students, irrespective of their project Group, to engage more fully in their education while being open to exchanging advice with others about what it means to become better educated.

**K-Plan Commonplace** – Though still being developed and tested, K-Plan Commonplace can be conceived of as melding an expanded degree audit, available to each student and the student’s advisor, with a “commonplace book,” which will provide space for the student’s reflections on decisions made and trajectories followed through four years. Like a degree audit, populated by titles of courses completed by the student and maintained by the Registrar’s Office, part of each student’s K-Plan Commonplace will be a “My K-Plan,” an all-encompassing record of engagement in features of The K-Plan – in and out of the classroom, on and off campus – that comprises the student’s Kalamazoo College education. Much of each K-Plan Commonplace will be recorded routinely by personnel in many College offices at the end of each academic term in which a student engages in an experience. Keeping a commonplace book, a practice referred to as “commonplacing,” was a tradition of many intellectuals from the 17th through early 20th centuries and served as a means of keeping track of ideas, quotes, book passages, etc. In a similar way, dialogue space will be provided in each K-Plan Commonplace for students to record periodic reflections on their own K-Plan and thereby foster self-authorship of their college education. And, students in Groups One, Two, and Three will be encouraged by their advisors and K-Guides to use their K-Plan

---

3 Scaffolding for constructing a K-Plan Commonplace is available at our project website (https://reason.kzoo.edu/fipse/)

Structured Reflection within a Learning Paradigm for Academic Advising - When engaged in structured reflection, an individual, or a group of interacting individuals, steps aside from being a subject in a life and begins viewing ideas held and experiences encountered as objects in ways that can promote transformation of the individual from being externally defined to developing self-authorship (Baxter Magolda and King 2008; Kegan 1994; Mezirow 2000). Our definition of structured reflection, developed and refined by faculty and staff at Kalamazoo College and illustrated in what has come to be known on campus as the Structured Reflection Triangle (please see Page 6 of this document for two versions of this triangle; the version at the top of the page was first published in Cunningham 2010), is the following: Structured Reflection is a process that can catalyze transformational learning (i.e., learning that ultimately fosters a change in habit of mind, or change in frame of reference) by employing intentionally designed exercises, activities, or assignments that help students (and others) interrogate, make connections between, and examine consonance or dissonance between assumptions held, theories and concepts, and experiences encountered.

We will employ structured reflection within a learning paradigm for academic advising (Hemwall and Trachte 2005) in Groups One, Two, and Three. According to Hemwall and Trachte (2005), using learning as an organizing paradigm for advising entails answering two questions: What should students learn through advising, and how might the learning take place? Advisors (and K-Guides) will engage students in reflective conversations, starting initially with prompts suggested by Baxter Magolda and King (2008), that use the Structured Reflection Triangle for Academic Advising (see Page 6) to guide the students as they develop a clear understanding of The K-Plan (and the College’s goals for learning outcomes) and explore how it and Experiences Encountered while in college help them recursively (re)construct their unique version of an undergraduate education (i.e., My K-Plan). Addressing what it means to learn through experience (Ayers 2010) will be integral to these conversations, and fostering advising relationships through which students have opportunities “to grapple with the dissonance they encounter – to try, fail, receive feedback, and try again – before anyone makes judgments of their efforts” (Bain and Zimmerman 2009) will be essential when guiding students toward self-authorship.

Structured Reflection in First-Year Seminars - Students in Groups One and Two will become familiar with and use the Generalized Structured Reflection Triangle (see Page 6) in their FYS as a means of considering, discussing, and writing about material covered in the course. Building on what has been learned about helping students develop the ability to carry out structured reflection in several FYS during the recent past, faculty teaching FYS in Groups One and Two will continue to explore ways to use the Structured Reflection Triangle in class and share what they learn with the learning community of faculty and advisors participating in this project.

K-Guides - Students in each of the two FYS in Group One will be assigned a K-Guide. K-Guides (one for each seminar) will meet with their group of Guidees periodically throughout the first year to get to know the students and build community within the group. Like the students’ advisors, K-Guides will help students identify and pursue passions, adjust to college, engage in high impact practices, and integrate the various parts of their college experience through collaborative structured reflection that focuses on constructing each student’s My K-Plan. K-Guides will continue to meet with the same group of students at key points in subsequent years throughout the project (e.g., after students return to campus at the beginning of sophomore fall term, before
Major Declaration Day, after returning from Study Abroad, etc.). As a cohort of students who learn together over four years, each K-Guide group will serve as a learning community extending through time that engages in collaborative structured reflection on students' developing educational narratives with the goal of increasing learning, intellectual development, self-authorship, and persistence to graduation.7

The following is a summary of the four Groups in our project.

**Group 1: K-Guide Group** - Students in two first-year seminars will be assigned a K-Guide in addition to their regular academic advisor and will receive explicit instruction in structured reflection through their FYS course assignments and course-related activities outside of class. Academic advisors for these students will use structured reflection in individual advising sessions to help advisees construct and examine their K-Plan Commonplace, assist with selecting appropriate courses, and encourage participation in high impact practices.

**Group 2: Structured Reflection Seminar Group** - Students in Group 2 will be in one of two FYS that provide explicit instruction in structured reflection through course assignments and course-related activities outside of class. Academic advisors for these students will use structured reflection in individual advising sessions to help advisees construct and examine their K-Plan Commonplace, assist with selecting appropriate courses, and encourage participation in high impact practices. These students will not be assigned a K-Guide.

**Group 3: Structured Reflection through Advising Group** - Students in Group 3 will not be assigned a K-Guide and will not learn structured reflection explicitly through their FYS. They will, however, have an academic advisor who will use structured reflection in individual advising sessions to help advisees construct and examine their K-Plan Commonplace, assist with selecting appropriate courses, and encourage participation in high impact practices.

**Group 4: Current Practice Group** - Students in Group 4 will experience academic advising as it has traditionally been practiced at Kalamazoo College, i.e., no K-Guide, no formal instruction in structured reflection through the FYS, and advising sessions that do not intentionally include structured reflection techniques. However, as described above, these students, like students in the other three Groups, will experience a learning community in their FYS and will have the option to construct a K-Plan Commonplace as long as they remain active participants in the project.

**Closing Thoughts**

Ultimate success of this project will depend heavily on active engagement by all project participants (students, FYS faculty, advisors, K-Guides, and project staff) in various interacting learning communities that employ structured reflection to guide our thoughts and actions. Developing a thorough understanding of “the project” (accomplished by reading, thinking about, and discussing this project description and the relevant literature cited) and having clear perceptions of “experiences we encounter” will help us, along the way and in the end, construct an accurate account of “our project” as we explore innovative approaches to advising.

In *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr explores (on pages 167-168) a tension between allocating “time for efficient data collection and time for inefficient contemplation, time to operate the machine and time to sit in the garden.” Our project will succeed if all participants, individually and collaboratively, manage to “strike a balance between those two very different states of mind.”

7 Kuh (2009) noted that, “Bringing small groups of students together...to discuss what they are learning on the job and how it relates to their studies would give students practice in reflecting on and integrating these experiences. Most traditional-age undergraduates - especially first- and second-year students - do not often or ever do this on their own, and all would benefit from hearing their peers talk about these important aspects of their college life. Initial discussions about these matters will probably be replete with sometimes awkward silences. But after a few sessions, students will have had enough practice to do more of this without too much prompting. And this is, after all, the kind of experience that helps students to develop the capacity for deep, integrative learning, the gate way to a lifetime of continuous learning and personal development.”
Literature Cited


Document Authors

Paul Sotherland: Associate Provost for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment; Project Director for FIPSE Project P116B100047 at Kalamazoo College, 2011-2013

Anne Dueweke: Director of Institutional Research and Faculty Grants, Kalamazoo College

Kamille LaRosa: Post-graduate Fellow, Kalamazoo College

Michael McDonald: Provost, Kalamazoo College
GENERALIZED STRUCTURE REFLECTION TRIANGLE

STRUCTURE REFLECTION TRIANGLE FOR ACADEMIC ADVISING AT KALAMAZOO COLLEGE