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The Journey of ‘Becoming’ a Learning Advisor: A Reflection on my First-Year Experience

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Becoming a ‘Perfect Learning Advisor’

I am now finishing up my third year as a learning advisor. Three years is not long; however, looking back at my own professional development, the pathway of “becoming” was full of discoveries and challenges. While I had a clear idea of what a learning advisor does from the literature, being one was fairly different from what I had imagined. The principle of advising in language learning concerns learner reflection as a crucial aspect in learner development. Simultaneously, I found that becoming a learning advisor also requires constant reflection on my own advising practice as well as my beliefs (such as my educational philosophy), which stem from my own learning experience. This year, I had the opportunity to meet colleagues who had just started advising training. The communication with new advisors was refreshing; indeed, it encouraged me to reflect on my first year experience and tell my own story about “becoming” a learning advisor. To do this, I will share a piece of autobiographical writing based on a series of shared journal that I compiled with my mentor.

Reflecting on Where I Came From

In my first year as a learning advisor, I was assigned a mentor, who had substantial advising experience in my institution. As a part of our mentorship, we decided to share journals. Although we were sharing an office, I thought writing might be a good way to reflect on my own practice in depth, and to be honest about what I was feeling. Rather than making it a scheduled routine, we decided to share our thoughts in writing whenever we felt like it. While I was not entirely sure what to write in the journal, my mentor started off by writing about her educational background to explain how she came to become a learning advisor. She was describing her first English teaching experience with a female immigrant, which encouraged her to pursue a TESOL degree. Each piece of her story helped me understand who she is. At the end of her first journal entry, she wrote a question; “What would you like to share with me?” I remember that I

responded to her as soon as I finished reading her entry. I imagine my hurry was due to my willingness to be understood where I came from as well.

In my first journal, I mainly wrote about my own language learning experience as well as my experience in advising. Describing how I had struggled with finding a reason to study English, I shared my own study abroad experience and wrote, *“I guess I felt something needed to be changed”*. When I was junior at college, I decided to study in England. The experience, according to the journal, changed *“everything”* and *“it was probably my first time to become autonomous”*. Another learning experience I shared in the journal was an encounter with a Japanese professor who inspired me to become a teacher of English. *“The first course (on a TESOL program) blew my mind-it was taught by a Japanese professor who was very supportive and encouraging to us. She changed my idea of English teaching to a great extent.”* Without her, I wouldn’t have been inspired to choose a career that allows me to support English language learners. I also wrote about my experience with helping a diversified group of students at an American university while working as an academic advisor. *“I think I genuinely like helping students in one-to-one setting because I can open up their mind and give them opportunities to think about themselves and grow”*. In total, I wrote three pages for my first entry. Reading it through again, I can see the foundation of my advising philosophy stems from those experiences.

Reflecting on my Emotion in Advising Practice

Rereading my journals, my old self as a new learning advisor seemed to be experiencing a number of challenges in everyday advising practice - I was overwhelmed by engaging in individual advising sessions, I was upset about students who stopped coming to see me, and I felt pressured by my colleagues who do a great job as researcher-practitioners. Before starting my current career, I had confidence in my advising skill to a certain extent; unlike other learning advisors, my entire career was based on working with individual students in education. I was also positive that I would become a good advisor. However, I lost the positive image of myself throughout various advising training sessions. Although I had substantial advising experience prior to my current career, the concept of advising seemed fairly different from what I believed as advising; my belief about advising was leading students to "successful" academic pathways. Thus, I had a strong belief that knowledge building was the most crucial aspect of professional development for advisors. On the other hand, what I often heard from experienced advisors was about taking an indirective approach to encourage learner reflection in advising session. I was stuck in a dilemma between two opposing ideas; moreover, looking back, I was worried if I could successfully reform my entire advising approach into a more reflective one as other experienced advisors did.

Reflecting in Interaction: Shaping my Identity as a Learning Advisor

Continuing along with this winding road, the shared journal with my mentor was a good place for me to reflect on those feelings in everyday advising practice. Not only jotting down my own thoughts, but my mentor's comments and questions also allowed me to focus on the axis of my advising philosophy; willingness to help. When a list of advising skills is presented, the majority of advisors (I believe) strive to acquire all of them quickly in order to be a good advisor. As my inspiring senior colleague, Satoko Kato always mentions, the first stage of an advisor education programme involves a great deal of conscious reform in advisor talk. As I discovered, this conscious talk can be overwhelming as deciding which skill(s) would be appropriate, what kind of questions should follow, and how a question should be asked can be a lot to take on at once. For the first couple of months, I felt my talk was very unnatural. I was also seriously concerned if this unnatural conversation would have given students an impression that I was a novice advisor. "Am I serving as a good advisor?" was a question that frequently came up in my journal. My mentor, in her response, indirectly and repeatedly highlighted the importance of our role. "Advising is not about us, it is about a student", "we have to be a mirror", "We desire to help learners". These comments helped me stay focused on why I chose to pursue this career, while shaping my identity as a learning advisor.

Final Thoughts: Still in the Process of ‘Becoming’

By telling the story of my own first year experience, I strongly feel that this has become a locus of my advising philosophy. Becoming a learning advisor does not merely entail skill acquisition; rather, the process of “becoming” constantly challenges our beliefs, including our values, our educational philosophies and our own language learning experiences. I believe this is the most crucial aspect of our professional development. In my case, as I was already in the field of advising prior to my current career, revisiting my own beliefs, as well as experience, it was truly helpful to ask myself what kind of learning advisor I was aiming to become. Instead of sticking to my previous advising experience, I was able to develop multifaceted advising approaches that enabled me to engage in advising without biases. Simultaneously, the constant reflection with my mentor throughout my first year was the biggest help in becoming a learning advisor. Because the majority of advising training requires advisors to control their speech acts as well as their emotions while engaging in an advising session, I believe reflecting with others, especially experienced advisors is essential. As I have described, I faced several rough spots mainly in the early stages of my first year by comparing myself with other learning advisors and losing confidence in my own advising skills. It was my mentor that always encouraged me to stay focused on why I am here without losing my willingness to help learners. This mindset has not changed after three years have passed. As I call it “a journey”, professional development as a learning advisor is ongoing. Although I am now used to my role, each advising session is full of new discoveries.

Advising in language learning is still an emerging field; thus, it is my belief that disseminating our experiences will become a key tenet in establishing a community of learning advisors where each of them openly shares and discusses their advising practice. It is my hope that this piece of my own story will encourage other members of the community to reflect on their journey of “becoming” a learning advisor.

Notes on the contributor

Kie Yamamoto is a learning advisor at Kanda University of International Studies. She holds an M.S.Ed from Temple University Japan, and is currently pursuing an Ed.D at the University of Bath in the UK. Her research interests are language learner identity, second language socialization, advising discourse, and narrative analysis.