

Postmodern View of Advisement in Higher Education

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American higher education and its academic advisement practices are founded on the modernist notions of rationality, prediction, and control. The postmodern perspective, which has evolved in the last three decades, suggests that the modernist perspective has become too limiting. This article briefly reviews the modern-postmodern debate and introduces the postmodern concept of chaos theory. Characteristics of chaos theories are used to evaluate contemporary academic advisement from the theoretical perspectives of modernist and postmodernist advisement.

American higher education is a thoroughly modern cultural institution. For more than three hundred years, educational institutions were built and educational practices conceived under the assumption that the universe and its inhabitants are subject to the forces of reason. Contemporary American higher education was conceived in the context of three ideas: the State, which was based on Law; the Church, which was founded on Revelation; and the University, which was founded on Reason. This trinity of law, revelation, and reason—with reason being arguably the most dominant—is preserved to this day in the three stripes worn on doctoral gowns at important ceremonial moments (Brubacher & Rudy, 1968). Higher education is so steeped in modernist rhetoric and practice that any attack today on modernism is tantamount to an attack on higher education (Bloland, 1995).

Since the late 1960s some of the fundamental assumptions about human nature and cultural institutions have been challenged. Scholars have labeled this era of challenge to assumed rationality the postmodern era. Since many of the higher education practices were defined in the modern era, reconsideration of the practices and the assumptions which guide modernist ideas seems appropriate. Academic advisement, a process so integral to higher education, warrants a postmodern evaluation.

Modernism and Postmodernism

Although the distinctions between modernism and postmodernism are fluid and ill defined, essential differences, which are critical to understanding the concepts, exist. Modernism grew out of the spirit of the Enlightenment. Modernism is generally characterized as a period in history where rationality and scientific reasoning were dominant. A fundamental

premise of modernism was the correlation between human action and predictable outcomes. Implicit in this view was the assumption that the world is an orderly place where cause-effect ruled and the specifics of relationships could be discovered by a judicious application of scientific methodology and reasoning. Thus, by viewing human nature through the laws of reason, humanity would advance towards the transcendent goals of affluence and happiness (Touraine, 1995).

The postmodern era, perhaps a dialectic response to the limitations of modernism, may be generally characterized by its reaction to the supremacy of the scientific method, especially its emphases on linearity, prediction, and control. Bloland (1995) interpreted postmodernism as a new historical phase characterized by rapid and unfamiliar change, the impact of the information age, a consumer oriented society, multiculturalism, growth of the service sector, and growing levels of disorder in the culture. Given these and other factors in the environment, the precepts of chaos theories have crept into the jargon of postmodernism and higher education (Lind, 1995).

Chaos theories offer new opportunities for examining and evaluating complex social phenomena and present a challenge to the Newtonian view of an ordered, predictable universe. Modernist or Newtonian thinking was founded on the precepts of stability and order while postmodern thinking is grounded in the notion that disorder and complexity are not only widespread in nature but also essential to the evolution of the universe. This view suggests that much of the success that social scientists have had in prediction to date has been in relation to rather simple systems where strong relationships exist between variables. As social scientists have shifted their focus to more complex systems, such as those that exist in higher education, the quest for certainty has yielded to a greater appreciation for uncertainty, disorder, and disequilibrium. Chaos theories provide a new way of looking at advisement in higher education since they acknowledge the uncertainty, nonlinearity, and unpredictability of the natural order (Elliott and Kiel, 1996).

The terminology of chaos theories can be misleading. Rather than rejecting traditional scientific reasoning and assumptions, these theories seek to enhance and complement scientific reasoning. They affirm that even in apparent chaos there is an underlying sense of order. Lind (1995) conceptualized a continuum of

conditions ranging from one extreme of predictability and stability to the opposing extreme of turbulence, disorder, and unpredictability. Some systems evolve along the continuum in a realm labeled the "edge of chaos." This realm is characterized by high levels of interaction and adaptation. A momentary sense of order, a synthesis, is constantly emerging out of perceived disorder at the edge of chaos (Lind, 1995). Advisement in higher education occurs at this metaphorical edge of chaos.

Implications of Postmodernism for Academic Advisement

Academic advisement is a process which is fundamental to higher education. In an era of growing demands for accountability, the impact of advisement on areas such as retention, progression, employability, and even customer satisfaction must not be denied. Just as postmodern theory does not deny the contributions of modernist theory, postmodern thinking about advisement must not be treated as a panacea for the ails of academia or as an absolute alternative to the practices of modernism. The notion that one perspective can complement the other, however, adds breadth and vision to advisement practices. Academic advisors may expand their understanding and effectiveness by examining advisement theory and practice from a postmodern perspective.

To facilitate discussion of implications, two extreme positions on a theoretical continuum will be hypothesized: the modernist advisor and the postmodernist advisor. Ideally, the actual academic advisor will operate somewhere in between the two extremes, at a creative nexus similar to the edge of chaos proposed by Lind. The implications for postmodern advisement will be discussed in regard to certain characteristics of chaos theories proposed by Lind (1995).

First, chaos theories suggest that order emerges out of perceived disorder. Every academic advisor is familiar with the seeming lack of decisiveness and confusion surrounding new and undecided students. Even so-called decided students go through periods of reevaluation, angst, and self-doubt. Modernist advisors have a tendency to negatively evaluate such states and begin arbitrarily and prematurely pushing for order and purpose. The modernist advisor has trouble dealing with the seeming chaos because the advisor believes that human nature is logical, linear, predictable, and controllable.

The postmodernist advisor must operate in an environment where degree and progression requirements, financial aid, pressure from parents, and life after college are all legitimate concerns. However,

the postmodernist advisor will view the student as operating in an exciting, creative, opportunity-filled, albeit chaotic, environment. The postmodernist advisor will not be unduly concerned with apparent chaos; in fact, the postmodernist advisor may initially promote a certain amount of constructive disequilibrium. The postmodernist advisor knows that order can emerge out of the seeming chaos; the postmodernist advisor views apparent chaos as a teachable moment in the advisement process. Adequate time, open exploration of alternatives, encouragement, faith that order will emerge, and occasional forgiveness, are the tools of the postmodern advisor.

Second, postmodern theory suggests that a direct relationship between two variables does not always exist and that presumed cause-effect relationships are not always predictable or proportional (Elliott & Kiel, 1996). The modernist advisor genuinely believes, for example, that there is a direct relationship between student scores on standardized tests and academic performance. The modernist advisor also believes that there is a direct relationship between what the advisee is told and what the advisee actually does! The postmodernist advisor will not ignore the possibility of correlation and cause-effect. However, the postmodernist advisor will not stereotype a student based upon limited correlational data. The postmodernist advisor will view each individual as a unique person and each advisement session as a unique opportunity.

A postmodernist advisor will remain aware that even the seemingly most insignificant interactions between student and advisor can have a profound and often disproportional impact on student outcomes. Chaos theory metaphorically refers to this phenomenon as the "butterfly effect" which suggests that the flight of a butterfly in South America can influence weather patterns in North America (Lind, 1995). Postmodernist advisors know that a simple conversation, a caring attitude, a probing question in the hall, or a simple challenge to a student may dramatically influence an individual advisee. These "flap of the wings" become intentional tools of the postmodernist advisor.

Third, change can be iterative, where each outcome becomes the next input. Ultimately the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The modernist advisor does not welcome change. A mind changed is time lost to the modernist advisor. The postmodernist advisor, however, views change as an ally rather than as a nemesis. Change of mind, major, or preference are all viewed as positive signs of growth. The postmodernist advisor must comply with external demands such as those imposed by time and money restrictions, but knows that change

within limits can be positive and additive.

Fourth, specific long-term predictions are impossible in a constantly adapting system. The modernist advisor views academic advisement as an entirely rational process. The modernist advisor believes that planning is possible and that prediction is certain if the student will just adhere to certain guidelines. The postmodernist advisor believes that the impact of advisement upon student outcomes is not predictable or linear. Therefore, planning which occurs in advisement is strategic and emphasizes the unpredictable and unstable nature of the future. Consequently, postmodern advisement may emphasize ideas that will help the student adapt to contemporary demands as well as change and complexity in the future. The advisor can assist the advisee in developing a postmodern perspective: the knowledge and acceptance that change is certain and that fundamental skills and attitudes are essential for the future. Communication skills, computer literacy, personal flexibility, job search skills, strategic personal planning, and a positive attitude about lifelong education are appropriate topics for postmodern advisement.

Conclusion

Higher education is organized around the assumptions and myths of order and rationality. Modernists advise students to prepare for a rational, predictable world. The reality of modern life offers a constant challenge to the assumptions of modernism. Academic advisement must move students to prepare themselves intellectually, physically, and emotionally for the great constant-change. John W. Gardner (1984), the often quoted author and former Health, Education and Welfare Secretary, evaluated the current situation as being firmly rooted in the level of complexity and rate of change that is occurring in technology and society. Gardner went on to

recommend that we must educate people not just in the facts of the hottest new fields, but to cope with change.

Academic advisement in higher education may be conceptualized as a form of strategic teaching and caring where students learn to adapt, change, and prepare for a generally unpredictable future. Advisement can be a creative, contextual process which can teach students the skills and attitudes necessary for the unknown future rather than imposing a seemingly rational but stultifying sense of order on a process which is inherently continuous and complex.

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