
On the Value of the Humanities in Academic Advising: A Conversation with Peter Hagen

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Abstract: Janet Schulenberg and Junhow Wei, editors at *The Mentor*, interview Peter Hagen about the process of writing his book *The Power of Story: Narrative Theory in Academic Advising* (2018) and how his thoughts on academic advising have evolved over time. In particular, Hagen reflects on the relative value of humanistic versus social scientific approaches in advising scholarship and practice.

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Junhow: In your new book, *The Power of Story: Narrative Theory in Academic Advising*, you referred to the term Bildungsroman and how students go through an educational journey. I'm wondering if there's a parallel Bildungsroman here in writing a book and your journey.¹

Peter: It certainly is a journey and a story of education and acculturation... I guess it really began at the job interview that I had in the Division of Undergraduate Studies [DUS at Penn State]... A senior staff member, Jim, asked me a question that I pretty much felt sunk all of my hopes for this job. He asked, "Is advising an art or a science?" I mean, at that point I thought, "Well, there goes my chances." I knew that he was involved in a quantitative longitudinal study, along with others, to study the factors that led

¹ Portions of this interview have been edited for length and clarity.



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to persistence from the first year to the second year, especially engineering students. So, I knew that he was a number cruncher of the first order—of the worst sort—whichever viewpoint you want to take. And so I pretty much knew that what he wanted to hear was that, "Well, advising is a science, and if we simply do enough studies, we'll find out what factors lead students to persist to graduate and be retained."

But I couldn't do it because I was on the art side of things, and I wanted to say, "It's an art. Pure and simple. Jim, it's an art form, and it's hard to teach in any methodical way." But I didn't say that either. I think I stammered out something that was a compromise, "Well, I think it's both art and a science..."

Anyway, I got the job so I must have done okay. But looking back from the perspective of 2018, I want to say now, "Jim, you didn't give me enough choices. It's not that it's one or the other. It's a blending of the two, but it's more as well." I think that if I had to choose now, I'd say, "Nuh-uh, it's in the humanities—or it should be looked at from the perspective of the humanities." So, I kind of got started there thinking about the difference between art and science, and the way we approach advising.

I started teaching while I was doing my doctoral program, teaching Introduction to Rhetoric. And I began to see ties between the writings of Plato and the stuff that I was doing every day in advising. And so, back in 1994, I wrote something that was in the *NACADA Journal*, about viewing advising as dialectic (Hagen, 1994)... and it grew from there.

Sitting in my office in the second floor of Grange Building there [at Penn State]—It was a nice office. I had three windows, lots of bookcases—I kept seeing characters from literature sitting in the chair beside my desk. Cordelia showed up a lot, paying too much attention to family concerns, being overly dedicated to parents or spouses or sisters and brothers. And Hamlet showed up a lot too... He'd come there with his fraternity brothers, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. I saw him a lot. And it wasn't limited to Shakespeare. I kept seeing characters from literature. So, right there in Grange Building, there's been a long parade of characters from literature.

And this, maybe, fantasizing didn't stop. It kept going. As you might know, in 1996 I moved here to Stockton University, and just

one thing led to another. I kept seeing parallels to literature, to philosophy. And it seemed to me at the time—this is going back almost 20 years, in the late '90s—it seemed to me that NACADA's [the National Academic Advising Association] approach to advising lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi*. It lacked philosophy. It lacked theory.

So, I and a group of other ne'er-do-wells got together and started the theory and philosophy interest group [in NACADA]. As with most initiatives, it was at a bar in a conference. We sat around and said, "We need this; we need this." ...So, we created that interest group, and it kind of caught on. Within the first year, there were over 1000 people signed up for that interest group... So, I guess I just wanted to promote the perspectives that the humanities have to offer to academic advising. Ten years later, in the monograph on scholarly inquiry (Hagen, Kuhn, & Padak, 2010), I wanted to make sure that had a good, healthy dose of something that went beyond—not "beyond" in a hierarchical sense, but beyond in a horizontal sense, beyond qualitative and quantitative social science. I always saw a third major approach, which I called "critical inquiry" in that publication.

Then one day Sarah Champlin-Scharff wrote to me and said, "Dr. Hagen, I'm thinking of doing a piece on hermeneutics. Do you think it would have any traction in the *NACADA Journal*?" And I wrote back, "Yes!" And so, that led to an article or two from her, and a wonderful collaboration [chapter] that we did in the approaches book (Champlin-Scharff & Hagen, 2013)... And they didn't know what to do with us because it's not an approach. We were sort of arguing that hermeneutics is not a simple approach to advising, like appreciative or intrusive or this or that. It's the way we do advising. It is central to the process of advising. We interpret students. They interpret us. And if we're not good at interpreting, well, we're just automatons... So, it's been a lifetime project to try to bring the humanities to the field of advising...

It was in 2013 at the conference in Salt Lake City... I was walking through the conference area and minding my own business, and up stepped Marsha Miller, and she asked, "Well, what are you writing now?" Basically, "What do you got for me?" And I didn't want to look like I was stupid or empty-handed, and so I made up something on the spot that was way too outrageous, and I knew she would never go for it. I said, "I'm thinking of doing a book-length study on narrative and advising." And much to my surprise, she

said, "Get me an outline." So, I did. The next day, I handed her a sheet of paper, a handwritten sheet of paper, with this book sketched out in pretty much the form it's now taken. And she has been a huge, huge support every step of the way...

Julie Givans Voller, who I'm very happy to say took on the role of editor, and had so much to contribute to the project that we called her the Contributing Editor to recognize her vision. I couldn't have written what I wrote without her gentle, but provocative, questions. "Well, maybe you could do this. Maybe you could do that. Maybe you could write sort of a screenplay." And, holy mackerel, out comes Chapter 6, which is, in fact, the summary chapter in a most outrageous format—it's in the form of a screenplay. And I wouldn't have the courage to do that, if it weren't for Julie's kind, gentle, but firm suggestions... Regan Baker was the copy editor, and she had a great deal to add to it as well. So, it takes a village. Though it's a single-author work, it takes a village...

Janet: And why did you decide to use that particular, unusual technique to convey your ideas?

Peter: What led to me writing a screenplay instead of a proper concluding chapter was that... In most scholarly works, the concluding chapter is, "Okay, I said this, and then I said this, the bullet points. And at the end of this chapter these are the points you need to know." And that is so boring. I wanted to do a summary chapter that brought out the points from the previous chapters, but to do it in such a way that is natural to us as advisers. Which is we train ourselves, we train each other through dialogue, through questioning and answering, and we tell stories to each other. I've said in the past, the phrase, "Well, I have this student who..." that's the adviser's way of saying, "Once upon a time..." It's the beginning of a story. So, that's one reason I did it that way, because I didn't want it to be boring. I wanted it to be natural.

It takes place in the home of a Chemistry professor and his wife, an artist, and six other characters at a dinner party. And so, "dinner party" is just another word for symposium. I was consciously evoking the way that Plato wrote. He did not write a point-for-point; he didn't have bullet points back then, but even so, he doesn't give us a bullet-pointed list of, "This is what you need to know. This is philosophy. These are the points I'm trying to make." What he did was offer dialogues that said, "This is how we could do philosophy. I provide you with examples." And it doesn't

always come out right. Sometimes the dialogs don't work out in Plato's favor. But, by and large, he was showing us how to do philosophy.

I was trying to emulate that, writing a symposium, a dinner party, about how we can think about advising, not telling you *what* to think about advising, but showing you *how* you could think about advising... how we could see narratives working in an advising situation...

Janet: It felt almost like you left it unresolved then in some ways?

Peter: Yes.

Janet: So, instead of tying things up with a nice, neat bow, you actually left a whole bunch of questions out on the table, which actually kind of felt right to me, to be honest, for this sort of book.

Peter: I'm relieved to hear it, because that's indeed what I was trying to do. Life is messy. Advising is messy. But a skilled adviser, a well-educated adviser... We know how to dig. We know how to dig down deep where it's tangled and dark and it's messy. We know where the wild things are. And it's not something that we can tie up into neat little packages. You're right. It is inconclusive. So, I left it wide open. We don't know how the story turns out.

Janet: So you said that you sketched out this book on a piece of paper... But is the book you set out to write the book you actually wrote? Or did it change along the way?

Peter: It changed a great deal along the way. I wasn't expecting what now appears in Chapter 4, on meta-narratives or master narratives... But it seemed to me that we needed to talk about our philosophy of education as advisers. Our philosophy of education is very, very important. And most of us don't take the time to think about it. We don't engage in self-scrutiny to the point where we think, "Well, this is how I feel about education." I didn't anticipate that in 2013, but in that chapter I've laid out some ways we can think about our own philosophies of higher education...

If your own philosophy of higher education is all about the joy of learning, or mainly about the joy of learning, and less about the practical outcomes, that's all well and good. That's not a bad position to take. Nor is the one that is its opposite, which is all

about a practical outcome. They're both okay choices. There's nothing morally wrong with either one of them.

But if you work for an institution that is all about graduation rates, and they measure your success with the practical outcomes of your advising interactions, and yet you hold a philosophy of advising that is more about the joys of learning, things are going to come to a head between you and your employer. And I think that advisers out there experience this a lot. They're at loggerheads with the advising unit they work with. If you're somebody who is passionate about bringing about a lovely liberal arts education to a student, and you work for a place that is called a student success center—we all know what that means. That's more about the success of the institution and not the success of the student—then, things can come into conflict. I felt it was important to focus on that. And it being a metanarrative or a master narrative—it's a narrative. It's a story. Certain stories ring true in a given philosophical outlook, and certain other stories don't ring quite as true in those same philosophical outlooks.

I wasn't expecting that in 2013 and I also wasn't expecting the connection between... well, it's called Theory of Mind... A professor of psychology here at Stockton told me about Theory of Mind... And I realized right away that this is extremely important for advising. All of us advisers need to have a very well-developed capacity for Theory of Mind. What that means is we need to have a high capacity for being able to figure out the mind of the other person that we're working with, the student in this case. If we don't have a highly developed Theory of Mind capacity, then we're not going to be very good at imagining what it's like to be that student. We're not going to be very good at interpreting their motives, which they don't always speak outright, and sometimes when they do: "I want to be an engineer because my mum and dad want me to be." The motivation is fine, but we know how that story can end...

I've known all the way along that reading Shakespeare, reading novels, viewing difficult films, is good practice for academic advising. But I lacked the language back then to say why it was good practice. Now I have the language and it's in this book. We develop our Theory of Mind capacity by engaging with difficult narratives. It's measurable. I've cited some studies in the field of neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, where people have measured people's capacity, their skill, at Theory of Mind. And it's the same for all of us. It takes place in the rTPJ, right here, the junction

between the right parietal lobe and temporal lobe in the brain. And that has some relevance, I think. It's at the junction between those two important lobes. It's where we make sense of another person. We make sense of their motivations. We infer their motivations. We infer their beliefs. Regardless of what they actually say to us, we focus not just on what they say, but the way they say it, and what is not said. And the high road is literature. So, I wasn't expecting that in 2013. That doesn't show up on that piece of paper.

Junhow: It seems that your thinking has developed more nuance in writing the book...

Peter: I was driven... I guess I just had to say these things. I got tired of being an apologist for the humanities. I'm tired of sort of lurking on the margins at NACADA conferences. "Yeah, there's these humanities things too. Let's talk about film and advising. Let's talk about books and advising." And so, I've been sort of on the margins. But now I'm coming into the center. I like it.

Janet: Let's talk about that. We're now moving into anticipating an annual conference, where the theme is focused on humanities and where you're keynoting that conference.

Peter: Yeah. Someone was asleep at the switch. How'd they let that happen! The humanities are taking over the place!

Janet: Well, how do you make sense of any of this? How did this happen at all?

Peter: Academic advising... We're not like Sociology and Anthropology that are protected in some way. Academic advisers, as a profession—I mean, we're not protected. Central administrations look at us and say, "Well, let's make them into student success people." Or, "Let's now call them 'academic coaches' and we train them on how to call up students and make sure they're taking their medications" and stuff like that. We don't have the same protections that fields in the liberal arts like Sociology and Anthropology have.

Nevertheless, I think that we need to behave in our research journals as though we were protected. And I think it's time to say the things that need to be said. I think our time has come to talk about advising in terms of well-told stories. We still lack the

language to convey that to provosts and deans and state legislatures and parents and taxpayers and voters. But I think we need to find that language. We need to find the language of a well-told story as being yet another means of justifying our existence. The way we do it now is to crunch the numbers: "Look at our graduation rates. Look at our retention rates. We are worthy of funding." But I think that we need more to the story.

And so, I think it's time for us to take the—what I'm calling the *interpretive turn*. I think it's time for us to acknowledge that there are two main highways to knowledge about advising practice and advising research. One road: The social sciences. Yes. Sure. Quantitative? Got it. No problem. Qualitative? Yes. Absolutely. But then there's this other road: the humanities approaches, which draws upon rhetoric—dare I say it—rhetoric and literature and philosophy and history. We need those twin high roads to know the full story of advising.

It's difficult because people on one of those two highways think that the persons on the other side, on the other highway, are crazy. And the people on the other side think, "Yeah, what? These guys over there. Oh my god, this is the artsy fartsy humanities stuff." The two cultures can't see each other very well. It's because we have a basic difference in our epistemologies, based more on positivism on one hand and based more on constructivism on the other hand. I think we need a union of those two. I think we need both epistemologies and research perspectives from both of those advocates.

Junhow: Well, can you talk about that more? Like, what do you see as preventing people at the two sides from reconciling or being able to see the other part? It seems like you're taking a centrist perspective here. What brought you to that? And how do you see them as being able to become reconciled?

Peter: That's the key question that I'm wrestling with right now. So, I don't have a coherent answer for you—you got me pegged right. I'm looking to combine the two. I'm looking for consilience between the two, collaboration between the two. I don't want to portray myself as some sort of flaming humanist, just ready go to the barricades and tear down the dictatorship of social sciences. It's not that way at all. We need social sciences. They've gotten us to where we are today. I just think that there's more to the story.

So, I don't know the answer to your question, but I think that highlighting the humanities and showing their intrinsic value to advising, which is, after all, an interaction, a dialog. It is in humanities itself. We are narratologists every day of our working lives: We're telling stories. We're hearing stories. We're interpreting stories. We engage in rhetoric. We engage in literature insofar as we help to create Bildungsroman, the stories of education and acculturation that come out right.

So, that's a long way of avoiding your question. It's a good question, and that's what I'm working on now. That's what I'm trying to convey, trying to come up with from this keynote address—I don't have it yet.

Junhow: Well, it seems ripe for more thought and research. But something else you said earlier was that we should be aiming to have good stories. What is a "good story" then?

Peter: A good story for a student? I mean, you already know what they are. A student may just love learning and take advantage of all the wonderful educational opportunities, the good old timey liberal arts, the electives, courses in a major, maybe go on an education abroad experience, maybe an internship, and emerge as a graduate ready to take their place in society, hopefully, with a lifelong love of learning. That's a pretty good story and it's a story that has been a good story for about 2,500 years, starting with Plato and Socrates and Aristotle. We know what makes for good stories. I mean, the liberal arts go way, way back. The liberal arts are really older than Christianity. They are older than Islam. I mean, if you think about it as a religion to practice, it's done pretty well.

The bad stories are the ones that we encounter in literature all the time when the protagonist is blinded by their own greed or blinded by something else, and they don't see what's right and what's good for them. And again, we come across this in advising all the time, helping the protagonist, maybe, to shed the blinders that they've put on, help them see that, "Maybe, engineering is not the right choice for you given your scores in math"... DUS [at Penn State] is full of students who either don't know what they want or are not ready for what they want. So, it was a lovely place to help stories come out right. Yeah, it's the stories that we know are not headed for a happy ending that we hope to rescue.

Janet: What would be a good story for academic advising?

Peter: I think we need something much more than measuring ourselves with graduation rates and retention rates. The three of us know that it's not always within our control. So I think we need *not* to measure the success of academic advising solely through graduation rates and retention rates. It's part of the story, but I think we need much more. We need the perspectives of the humanities. We need the perspectives from the arts. We need people who are in charge of advising units to measure the success of their employees in more ways than just, "Oh, how well did they do in getting students to graduate?"

How to do that? I do it in my unit by having meetings every now and again where we don't talk business. We talk about ideas. That, I think, is something we have to do more in our field. The directors of advising, deans, provosts, need to be educated in their humanistic perspectives. This is very vague, I know. I'm giving a very vague answer to your question. But I guess that is the question: How do we do that? This book is an attempt to provide language for others to come along and, maybe, build on narrative theory, and tell a more complete story of academic advising based on narrative and well-told stories. It's a tough, tough question

Junhow: Seems like a story that is in progress that we are building together... I was wondering, for somebody who's interested in humanistic inquiry, what are the important research questions you see that need to be answered going forward, that could, for example, appear in *The Mentor*?

Peter: I think someone could do a really good study on Theory of Mind and advising. What I've written about is Theory of Mind, it's a measure—using fMRI they measure people's response to stories. They measure the Theory of Mind response by having subjects read stories. I think we could do an fMRI study that has advisers reading case studies and measuring the blood flow in their brain, which I would hypothesize is right here in the right temporoparietal junction. And that would, I think, be a really good way of uniting the humanities and the sciences in advising, to give credence to both sides of the house.

That question that Jim asked me so many years ago, "Is it an art or a science?" I think that scientific research in Theory of Mind with advisers is likely to provide the union between the arts and the sciences in advising that I fumbled over so many years ago and am fumbling over right now, but I think that's very ripe for study. It's

going to take some resources. NACADA has a new research center and maybe they could do some of kind of study out there in Kansas.

I think people could write a great deal more about the philosophy of education. Not their philosophy of advising, but their philosophy of education. My book lines up two dialectics that interact, but there's probably much more to it than that. And so, I would think somebody could write further about the philosophy of higher education that advisers hold.

I devote one chapter to what I call the "education of an adviser." And I specifically avoided the word "training" in that chapter. I think we need to go beyond training. Anybody could be trained. "Here are the requirements for engineering. Here are the requirements for business." That's easy. Training's easy. But educating an adviser is hard, and I think the way to do so is through—here's where your readership is going to suffer a stroke—through poetry, through literature—and especially poetry. Because I think that we need to become masters of metaphors.

Somebody could do a research project to dig into that and say, "Is that really true? Do we need to become masters of metaphors? Why do we need to be masters of metaphors?" Or they could argue against it. Somebody could take an opposing point of view. I think I've taken what may turn out to be an unpopular point of view in that chapter also, that a well-educated adviser resists being trapped in one and only one epistemological approach, one and only one research approach, without examining it. So, I think that there could be a lot of work done on epistemologies and advising.

A whole chapter is dedicated to plot and the other parts of literature: theme, characters, and so on. I talked about seven different types of plots, but there's probably a whole lot more. And, well, I mean, if you're Joseph Campbell you're going to say, "Well, there's one and only one plot, and we all go through that same cycle." I think that a lot more work could be done on the importance of plot in academic advising.

I have a question for you. If you could answer in ways that don't feed my vanity, why do you think this is an important work? ...What value do you see for our field?

Junhow: I think the book itself and the way it's written and how it doesn't end on a conclusion, it's bringing in a disciplinary perspective that is unheard of. I think, in general, the field needs to think in less conventional ways.

Peter: Why? Who cares? I mean, why do we need that broadening? Why do you feel that we need to think outside the box? If you could can do an adequate job saying, "Oh, students must take this, this, this, and this; the curriculum is all spelled out for you." "Oh, you got a D in that course, then do this." We've already done everything we need, coming from the social sciences. Who needs this humanistic crap anyway?

Junhow: Well, at a very broad level, innovation is really important, because that's how a field develops. That's the whole point of scholarship, to say something new and different. How are you going to move forward if you don't have different ideas? If we want academic advising to be a scholarly field, this is the basics of what we need. We need scholarship that is different from what came before. Or else, why is it worth publishing?

Janet: Well, something else that this did is it caused us to have a conversation. So, as someone newer to advising, Junhow, and me, stodgy, stuck in my ways... We both read this book and talking about it caused us to have a conversation about epistemology, right? And about what's the point of any of this advising that we do? What's the larger meaning of it? To me that's really important that advisers everywhere think about that on a fairly regular basis and remind themselves what it is they think they're doing this for, which leads to why I think this is an important contribution. It's that, as advisers, we're messing around with people's lives. We think we know things about people, and we tell them things on the basis of that. And to do that unexamined, I think, is unethical and potentially damaging to those individual people, to our institutions, to society, right?

Having this kind of deep thinking with words that we can use around this, provides a theoretical perspective here. There are ways of approaching this that allow us to think deeply about who this person is in front of me, who I think they are and what they're saying to me. I think, this is really, critically important, because this can't be done thoughtlessly. I mean, it can be, but there are consequences to that, which we should be cognizant of and mindful to avoid.

Junhow: Going along with that and to what I was saying before, on the one hand we need to keep pushing things and keep including different perspectives, but part of that is there do seem to be a ton of different perspectives. People come into the field in all different ways, and so there is debate out there, and there are voices that need to be heard, and these things need to become refined and reconciled.

Peter: I agree with—there is no one voice to explain advising. I think we need at least two: social sciences and humanities, maybe more. That's why I wrote about examining our epistemology. The idea further weaves its way through various chapters, basically, "Okay, I'm a business major, why do I have to take an arts course?" Well, I think that any academic adviser worth their salt needs to have an answer that goes beyond, "Well, it's in the curriculum. It's good for you. So, just take it." We need to understand where our curricula come from, and they do really harken back to Ancient Athens, 500 BCE. I think we need to be able to say to that same business student, "You're required to take an arts course because this is your birthright. You're a human being, and this is what your brain can do. Rejoice..."

Janet: Who are you writing the keynote for?

Peter: Good question. For the new advisers. For the millenials and younger that are just coming into the field. I'm going to retire in a few years anyway, so it's all up to them. I want them to not be completely bowled over by the huge pressure of predictive analytics and somehow see advising as the right analytics, "All we need to do is ask the right questions, and we'll get the right answers." Advising, as you know, is so much more than that.

So, I'm trying to say it's time to take the interpretive turn in advising, not turning towards the humanities and leaving the social sciences behind in the dust, nothing of that sort. I think, to put a metaphor in that to explain to you, it's more like turning the field, plowing the field and turning up new nutrients. I think we have a lot of things that can provide nutrition to us if we would only dig for the humanities, the good old humanities: rhetoric, philosophy, poetry, literature, history. It's for the next generation of advisers. I don't know how to reach them, but I'm going to try...

Okay. Well, so, I'm flying out to Dublin tomorrow and going to the international conference to talk about Theory of Mind. I really think it's important.

Janet: Have fun in Dublin. That's wonderful.

Peter: Thanks... In a way, it's a pilgrimage. I'm going to go see the place where James Joyce wrote *Ulysses*, or at least where he put it. You know, if there's one book that every adviser should read I think it's *Ulysses*. Because, yes, it's just about one day in June in Dublin, but it's also about story itself. It's about narratives. There are twenty-four different chapters. Twenty-four different narrative styles. Twenty-four different narrative approaches... if I could recommend one and only one book, it would be that. *Ulysses*, James Joyce. There's your homework assignment, you two.

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