

Queer Eye for Appreciative Advisors

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Abstract

Storytelling is an integral part of appreciative advising, and employing a queer eye in the storytelling process can help advisors avoid the trap of reducing students to a single story, stereotype, or identity. A queer eye encourages advisors to challenge their assumptions and think critically about stories – both the ones students tell advisors about themselves and the ones advisors tell themselves about students. This paper introduces the concept of a queer eye and explores the ways in which advisors can strengthen the appreciative advising relationship by approaching students and their stories through this unique lens.

The poet Muriel Rukeyser (2006) writes, “The universe is made of stories, not of atoms” (para. 9). Indeed, stories are the way we make sense of the world; they shape our points of view, give us meaning, and help us understand ourselves and each other. Appreciative Advising is also grounded in storytelling, especially during the Disarm and Discover phases when both advisors and students engage in telling and listening to each other’s stories (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). When advisors approach students and their stories with a queer eye, the appreciative advising relationship can foster an increased sense of belonging and understanding.

Advising with a queer eye involves working to avoid binary (i.e. either/or) thinking while taking into account the multiple and complex identities students embody throughout their academic and personal journeys. To understand the concept of a queer eye, it is first useful to define the word queer. David Donahue (2012), Associate Provost and Professor of Education at Mills College, provides an excellent place to start:

Queer is a word with two meanings. It can be an adjective used as an umbrella term to describe the LGBTQ community. It can also be a verb meaning “to trouble”: to question assumptions about dichotomous thinking and conceptions of what is natural or inherent. (p. 10)

A queer eye then encourages us to question the ideas, truths, and stories we take for granted in order to progress beyond binary thinking; it challenges us to reflect upon what is normal, who gets seen and heard, who has power, and who is overlooked or forgotten. It is a lens through which to view the world, allowing us to notice the stories we may otherwise have dismissed, ignored, or been blind to.

Returning to Muriel Rukeyser’s poetic sentiment about the universe being made of stories not atoms, a queer eye helps us appreciate that the universe is indeed made of stories while allowing us to recognize that the universe can – at the same time – also be made of atoms. Binary thinking traps us into assuming our interpretations and experiences have to be one way or the other (in this case, either stories or atoms), but a queer eye allows us to see that they can be both – yes/and. Both stories and atoms bring meaning, purpose, and structure to our universe and to our daily lives. A queer eye expands our perspective and changes our story.

Stories are powerful and the stories we tell ourselves about our students begin well before the first advisement appointment. During a recent conference presentation, Louis Macias, Director

of Admissions and Pre-College Programs at University of Wisconsin-Madison, asked over 200 advisors and higher education professionals to write down the first word or phrase that came to mind when thinking about first-generation students. After tallying the results, he noted that 81% of the words and phrases had a negative connotation – and these were the responses of caring professionals who voluntarily attended a session about first-generation students (National Academic Advising Association, non-retrievable webinar, April 23, 2015)!

Macias goes on to explain that the stories we tell ourselves about our students actually change the way we advise them, and not always in a positive way. As Maria Popova (n.d.) notes, “The stories that we tell ourselves, whether they be false or true, are always real” (para. 14). This is what makes stories both exceedingly valuable and incredibly dangerous at the very same time. As advisors, we can employ a queer eye not only to become more aware of the stories we tell about our students but also to discern whether or not these stories are based in reality.

A queer eye also helps us move beyond what writer Chimamanda Adichie refers to as the danger of a single story (NPR/TED Staff, 2013a). When Macias (2015) inquires, “What are the implications associated with looking at students as one thing without really understanding any context, any specific things about them?” he echoes Adichie’s warning about using one piece of a person’s identity to come to a full understanding of that person (National Academic Advising Association, non-retrievable webinar). Adichie elaborates on this concept in her recent TED Radio Hour interview:

I constantly actually have to remind myself that if I want to understand a place or thing, that it can’t be just one thing. You can’t know one thing about a person or place and think that, that’s it. So I think it’s normal, I suppose, maybe human, to make assumptions and to depend on just one single thing. (NPR/TED Staff, 2013a, 8:03)

Returning to Donahue’s (2012) definition of queer, a queer eye encourages us to “question . . . conceptions of what is natural or inherent” (p. 10). Adichie contends it is normal and perhaps even inherently human to rely on a single story, but she encourages us to move beyond this naive approach and challenges us to view the world with a queer eye.

Within the advising relationship, students often teach us as much as we teach them, and such was the case with a former advisee who understood the trap of defining himself by a single story. “James” entered college in his early 20s, and when he walked into my office for the first time, I found him physically intimidating – not because of his manner or attitude, simply because of his size, his strength, and his rough-around-the-edges appearance. Like most of my advisees at the time, he was academically underprepared and likely the first in his family to attend college. As our appointment began, I tried not to label or stereotype James, but it became apparent to me later on that I had already done so.

As we started talking about how to translate his interests into a potential major, James opened up about his life, his goals, and his dreams. While his high school transcripts indicated he was not a strong student, it quickly became clear to me that James had many gifts and talents, among them a keen ability to communicate and empathize. He shared his thoughtful philosophy of life, examining the lessons he had learned along the way and laying out the expectations he had for himself moving forward. Upon reflection, I was surprised by his mature and contemplative nature and realized that I had in fact expected someone different – someone less interested, less engaged, and less willing to share. Even when it is not our intent to define another by a single story, it is easy to do so, sometimes even unconsciously as I did with James. As we continued working together, we each made space for the other to be more complicated than a single story. He furthered my understanding of how to view the world with a queer eye, and we both grew as

a result of our advising relationship.

When it comes to identity, our students are multifaceted and complex. They deserve advisors who see and understand more than just a single identity or single story. Novelist Elif Shafak offers a fresh approach to identity, framing it in terms of belonging: “We always talk about identity - we fight for identity, sometimes we kill for identity, but why is that? Why can’t we talk about belongings - multiple belongings” (NPR/TED Staff, 2013b, 0:58). As appreciative advisors, we can help foster these multiple belongings by being aware of our own stories and how they affect the advising relationship. We can also critically examine the stories we tell about students and encourage our students to do the same. This heightened awareness increases the likelihood that both students and advisors will recognize and avoid the trap of using identity as a limit instead of as a possibility.

Stories about identity, when approached with a queer eye, can engender a greater sense of belonging, purpose, and understanding in the advisement relationship. Adichie again emphasizes the power of stories as she closes her TED talk:

Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity. (NPR/TED Staff, 2013a, 8:47)

As academic advisors interested in appreciative education, we can employ a queer eye in our storytelling so as not to break students’ dignity but rather to build on who they are now and expand their sense of what is possible moving forward.

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