Advisors as Storytellers: Wordsmithing, Worldbuilding, and Whimsy
About Us

- Small, private university located in Manchester, NH
- 3,000 on-campus students
- 70% resident students
- 30% commuter students
- 90,000+ online students
- 8 advisors
- 1 Graduate Assistant and 1 intern
- 1 Director of Advising
### SNHU Incoming Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Generation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female: 111</td>
<td>Male: 380</td>
<td>American Indian (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male: 103</td>
<td>Female: 338</td>
<td>Asian (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total: 214</td>
<td></td>
<td>Black or African American (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Hispanic (23)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nonresident Alien (13)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two or More Races (5)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Unknown (11)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White (145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grand Total: 214</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gender
- Male: 380
- Female: 338
- Grand Total: 718

### Race/Ethnicity
- American Indian (1)
- Asian (18)
- Black or African American (21)
- Hispanic (46)
- Nonresident Alien (15)
- Two or More Races (14)
- Unknown (40)
- White (563)
- Grand Total: 718
“Narrative is not merely something we tell, listen to, read, or invent; it is an essential part of who we are.”

- Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*
Why “Storytellers”?

- Stories can be helpful frameworks for:
  - Understanding our students
  - Prompting reflection
  - Identifying goals
  - Reframing failures
  - Helping students to find a voice

- We believe that the act of discovering and constructing stories helps our students develop into self-aware, independent decision-makers.
Why “Storytellers”?

- “Life stories do not simply reflect personality. They are personality, or more accurately, they are important parts of personality...”

- Dr. Dan McAdams, APA Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology
Why “Storytellers”?

- “… stories provide a powerful gateway to meaning.”

Why “Storytellers”?

● “Narratives offer the fictive comfort of structure...”

● Dr. Gillie Bolton, “Stories at work: Fictional critical writing as a means of professional development”
Why “Storytellers”? 

- “We forget the names of teachers and friends, chemistry formulas, the dates of battles. If we ever knew algebra before, we don’t know it now. Just try to help your kid with homework. But, we remember stories.”

- Jonathan Shapiro, Lawyers, Liars, and the Art of Storytelling
Storytelling & Appreciative Advising

- How storytelling maps onto an Appreciative Advising model:
  - Disarm & Discover (*Wordsmith*)
  - Dream & Design (*Worldbuild*)
  - Deliver & Don’t Settle (*Whimsy*)
Types of Stories & Where to Find Them

- **Literature**
  - Fables & Folk Stories
  - Fairy Tales
  - Memoirs & Autobiographies
  - Personal Essays
  - Myths & Legends

- **Pop Culture**
  - Movies & Television
  - Social Media (Instagram “Stories”)
  - Blogs & Vlogs

- **Business**
  - Elevator Pitch
  - Mission Statement
  - Television Commercials
  - Cover Letter
  - LinkedIn Profile Summary

- **Law & Politics**
  - Defense and Prosecution Story Arc
  - Victim Impact Statement
  - Opening/Closing
  - Cross Examination and Questioning
  - The Winning Side
Wordsmithing
Wordsmithing

What is it?

- **Noun:** “A skilled user of words”
- **Verb:** To skillfully use words to help our students...
  - identify strengths
  - acknowledge successes
  - reflect on, reframe, and redefine failures
  - establish achievable goals
  - mindfully plan out their future
Wordsmithing & Appreciative Advising

How do we wordsmith?

- Listen carefully and be the reader, the navigator, and interpreter of student stories.
- Take note of patterns and themes in what students share.
- Reflect back emotions, beliefs, or attitudes.
- Empower students to choose their story.

**Disarm**
- Your words have power
- Choose wisely and generously
- Validate, affirm, and encourage

**Discover**
- Empower and educate
- Name it
- Authentic guidance
“Failure is the raw material of success, and the failure reframe is a process of converting that raw material into real growth.”

“Failure Reframe Exercise”

- Step one: Log your failures.
- Pair up with a partner. What are common “failures” that you hear from your students? Create a list.
Practicing Wordsmithing

- Step Two: Categorize your failures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Screw-ups</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Growth Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Simple mistakes about things that you normally get right”</td>
<td>“Our abiding failings” Character flaw</td>
<td>“Failures that didn’t have to happen”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I made a mistake.</td>
<td>I don’t want to change.</td>
<td>I want to change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I slept through my alarm and that’s why I missed class.</td>
<td>I work well under pressure, that’s why I procrastinate.</td>
<td>I failed the course because I didn’t seek out support or tutoring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practicing Wordsmithing

- **Step Three: Identify growth opportunities.**
- What steps can the student take to effect positive change?
- What resources are available?
- How can the student “fail forward”?
- What *wordsmithing* needs to happen?
  - For example:
    - NOT: “I need tutoring because I’m *dumb*.”
    - BUT THIS: “I seek tutoring because I’m *smart*.”

- Let’s share out!
Worldbuilding
Worldbuilding

What is it?

- Considering, constructing, and configuring the settings, characters, actions, motivations, driving forces, and goals of our stories
- Relies on reflection and active participation

What are the benefits of thinking in “world” terms?

- Find and understand connections between people, places, actions, and feelings.
- Connect past experiences or observations with future action.
- Observe and understand your role in the world around you.
Worldbuilding

Dream

● Evoke a student’s hopes and dreams for the future
● The reflection stage of worldbuilding
● Reflect on what is and what could be

Design

● “Making their dreams a reality”
● The participation stage of worldbuilding
● Taking meaningful steps towards constructing and configuring our world
Worldbuilding

How do we worldbuild?

- We identify places, people, goals, and sources of inspiration that carry meaning or are important to us.
- We reflect on connections between these pieces.
- We assemble these into a “world” that we continue to shape over time.
Practicing Worldbuilding

Writing Exercise - Part I

- **Free writing**: Write what comes to mind, don’t censor yourself, and don’t let the pen leave the page.
- For **4 minutes**, practice free writing! Describe in as much detail as possible one of the following:
  - Someone who inspires you
  - The place where you do your best work
  - An activity that energizes you
  - Your *ideal* day, from morning to night
Worldbuilding

Writing Exercise - Part II

- Circle three details that stand out to you.
- Underline patterns that you notice or any repeated words.
- What do these details tell you about your “world”? How can you use this information to actively participate in worldbuilding?
Worldbuilding

Free Writing & Worldbuilding in Advising

- First-year seminar journal assignments and/or in-class writing
- “Mini” writing prompts during sessions
- Small group sessions and/or workshops for new students
- Surveys prior to sessions to prompt reflection
Whimsy
Whimsy

What is it?

- The plot twist
- The unexpected
- Remain open to possibility
- Embrace new experiences
- Applied learning
- Develop parallel plans
- Open up that foreclosed student
Whimsy & Appreciative Advising

Deliver

- What brought them here?
- What do they really want?
- What are career paths that could combine strengths, interests, passion, and career?

Don’t Settle

- What can I do?
- How can I be involved?
- What experiences would support and challenge this student?
How do we support the incorporation of whimsy into a student’s story?

- Be specific.
- Consider students strengths: which activity, organization, or training will help the student build on these strengths?
- Build up a student with intentional recommendations (Resident Advisors, Peer Advising Leaders, Sophomore’s Rising, President’s List, Dean’s List, etc.) and commendations.
Let’s Brainstorm Whimsy at Your Institution

Pair up!

- What are some co-curricular and extra-curricular opportunities at your institution?
- What questions could lead a student you advise to see that whimsy or the unexpected has value?
- How do you discuss the unexpected?
How do you incorporate whimsy into a student’s story? Let’s share out!

- Encourage co-curricular activities:
  - Study Abroad and/or National Student Exchange (NSE)
  - Alternative Break Trips
  - Involvement in student organizations
  - Undergraduate Research Day
  - Service learning opportunities
- Cheat sheet handout to showcase how opportunities on campus connect to student strengths
- Intentional outreach
Why Stories Matter
Why Stories Matter

● We create our identities through narrative ("narrative identity").
● Our self-narratives can help us or hurt us.
● The words we use to describe ourselves, the world around us, our goals, and other people directly shapes our perception of relationship to those things.
● We learn through stories.
Applications

- One-on-One Sessions
  - Intake Survey
  - Reflective prompts prior to an advising session
  - Writing prompts during a session
- Group Advising
  - First-year seminar courses
  - Book clubs
- Career Development
  - Career exploration workshops
- Academic Coaching
  - Goal setting exercises
  - Reframing failure for students on academic probation
- Professional Development
  - Team building exercises
  - Career advancement
  - Goal setting
References & Resources

Books


Journal Articles


Websites

Brain Pickings https://www.brainpickings.org/
Jeff Lyons: The Writer: https://www.writermag.com/
The School of Life https://www.theschooloflife.com/
Thank you!

Neena Fink
n.fink@snhu.edu

Abby Thibodeau
a.thibodeau@snhu.edu