Dialogues on Graduate Student Academic Advising

at Parsons The New School for Design

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This paper details the planning and facilitation of a series of three dialogues on the topic of graduate student academic advising at Parsons The New School for Design in New York in April 2014. The dialogues were convened to explore the various practices employed at Parsons to provide academic advising for Parsons' graduate students. They were also convened to provide research and the opportunity for practical application of the dialogue facilitation methods detailed in *Fostering Dialogues Across Divides: A Nuts and Bolts Guide from the Public Conversations Project* by Maggie Herzig and Laura Chasin of the Public Conversations Project and C. Otto Scharmer's model of dialogue. I felt that Herzig's and Chasin's prescriptive methods for mapping session topics and participants, meeting planning, facilitation, and assessment would help me to provide a container in which dialogue might have the opportunity to develop. Then, using Scharmer's model of dialogue, I planned to examine how discourse proceeded in the facilitated conversations that were part of each of the three dialogues I convened.

Part One

Parsons The New School for Design offers sixteen graduate programs in art and design disciplines. These programs are operated by five schools within Parsons: The School of Art, Design, History and Theory, The School of Art Media and Technology, the School of Constructed Environments, the School of Design Strategies, and the School of Fashion. Parsons employs several different models of academic advising for its graduate students. Program directors, faculty, and/or professional academic advising staff members may advise Parsons graduate students.

I work as Director of Global Advising within the Parsons Office of Advising. I advise

graduate students in five programs: M.Arch Architecture, dual degree M.Arch Architecture/MFA

Lighting Design, MFA Interior Design, MFA Lighting Design, and the double major MFA

Interior Design/MFA Lighting Design.

Planning

I met with my supervisor J.P., Assistant Dean for Advising, on March 24, 2014 and

proposed that I convene and facilitate a series of dialogues on the topic of graduate student

advising to provide information for our Advising team about our current practices, and to

provide research for the final project for my Dialogue Processes class. I shared portions of

Fostering Dialogue Across Divides with her, and explained that I would use this resource to plan

and facilitate the dialogues. J.P. approved of my proposal. Together, we mapped the plan for the

dialogue sessions, deciding that the series should include one session for program directors, a

second session for academic advisors who work with graduate students, and a third "lessons

learned" sessions for participants of the first two sessions. We set boundaries to shape the

container for the program director dialogue by limiting participants to program directors and

deans who have the responsibility for running programs. Although full-time faculty members

and some part-time faculty members advise graduate students, we limited the program director

group to program leadership only. This limitation also helped to keep the group from becoming

too large.

J.P. suggested that I write to the Deans of the five schools within Parsons to inform them

of this endeavor and to seek their support. I followed her advice and wrote to the school Deans

on April 4, 2014. Three of the five Deans responded. Two Deans said that they would like to

participate in the dialogue series. One Dean said that he would encourage his graduate program directors to participate.

Fostering Dialogue Across Divides recommended that each dialogue session last for a minimum of two hours. I scheduled the program director dialogue session for Wednesday, April 16, 2014 from 10:00 a.m. to noon. I scheduled the program director dialogue session for Friday, April 18, 2014 from 10:00 a.m. to noon. I decided to shorten the "lessons learned" session to one hour to encourage participation. I scheduled this third dialogue session for Wednesday, April 23, 2014 from 11:00 a.m. to noon.

The Invitation

On April 7, I wrote an e-mail message to the thirteen directors of all sixteen graduate programs at Parsons, inviting them to participate in the dialogue scheduled for April 16. Two school Deans responded affirmatively. Six program directors representing four of the five schools within Parsons responded affirmatively. Two Deans and two program directors did not respond at all. I also wrote on April 7 to the eight academic advisors who advise graduate students at Parsons. I invited them to participate in the dialogue session scheduled for April 18. Six advisors responded affirmatively. Two advisors could not participate. Both sets of invitations provided a context for convening the dialogue sessions, along with brief information about how the sessions would be structured:

> We currently use several different models of advising for graduate students throughout Parsons. My hope is that you may, together, generate ideas for one model of graduate advising that we'll follow throughout Parsons. I will follow the Public Conversations Project of Watertown, MA and Otto Scharmer's model of dialogue as guides in facilitation (J. Corson Lake, personal communication, April 7, 2014).

On Monday, April 14, I sent confirmation e-mail messages to individuals who had confirmed their participation in either the April 16 or April 18 dialogue session. The body of my message included a list of proposed communication agreements derived from Appendix C8 of the *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides* guidebook (Herzig & Chasin, 2006), William Isaacs' Initial Guidelines for Dialogue derived from his article "Taking Flight: Dialogue, Collective Thinking, and Organizational Learning (Isaacs, 1993), and Otto Scharmer's model of the four conversational fields of dialogue. I attached two documents to each message – an agenda for each dialogue session based upon the agenda in Appendix C7 of the *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides* guidebook (Herzig & Chasin, 2006), and a document containing Appendix C-1: What We Mean by "Dialogue," Appendix C-2: Distinguishing Debate from Dialogue, and Appendix C-3: Dialogic Aims and Sample Tools to Achieve Them, from the *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides* guidebook (Herzig & Chasin, 2006).

Session Design

Meeting space is difficult to acquire at The New School, Parsons' parent university. I booked Wollman Hall, a space that seats about 100 people, for the first and second dialogue sessions. While Wollman Hall is too large for both dialogue sessions, it is a pleasant space. It has floor-to-ceiling windows on the north and south sides of the room. It has a hardwood floor, a high ceiling, and non-fixed seating. So, seating can be arranged in any way that is suitable for a meeting. Bathrooms are located on the same floor of the building, adjacent to the hall. I booked the Donghia Gallery for the third dialogue session. It has one homasote wall for pinning up art and design work for critique, and three glass walls. It has non-fixed seating, and is adjacent to bathrooms. It is one-quarter of the size of Wollman Hall.

I relied on Chapter 4. The Art of Session Design in *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides* to assist in planning the dialogue sessions. I followed the Single-Session Dialogue format, because I was working with two different groups of individuals. Additionally, the questions I posed for the dialogue are derived from those suggested in Appendix B-1 of *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides.* This is the agenda for the first and second dialogue sessions, which were two hours long:

- Welcome and Orientation

- Review of Proposed Communication Agreements

- Introductions and Hopes

- First Go-Round

   o Question: Why is graduate advising an important topic for us to discuss? What's at the heart of this matter for you?

- Second Go-Round

   o Question: How do you define academic advising for graduate students? What about your life experiences have informed this definition?

- Facilitated Conversation

   o Suggested starting point: Please speak about any value conflicts, gray areas, or uncertainties you've experienced as you've thought about this issue.

- Parting Words

The Introduction and Hopes and First and Second Go-Round sections of each dialogue were held in a "go-round" format. In a go-round format, each person in the group receives an allotted amount of time to respond to the question. I timed the individuals. The participants may certainly elaborate on what another individual has said during their own segment of the go-

round. But, the go-round is not a time for back-and-forth discussion. The individuals in the first dialogue session were given more time, because that group was smaller. The time adjustment was the only difference in the plans for the first and second dialogues. Otherwise, the plans were identical.

For the third "lessons learned" dialogue, I modified the agenda. Instead of posing a new question to the participants, I chose to share with them the emergent themes from the first two dialogues. For the bulk of the meeting, I wanted to provide time for the participants to explore and ask questions of one another about the emergent themes. This is the agenda for the third dialogue session, which was one hour long:

- Welcome and Orientation

- Review of Proposed Communication Agreements

- Introductions and Hopes

- Review of Emergent Themes from the First Two Dialogues

- Facilitated Conversation

- Parting Words

I created scripts to use to facilitate the dialogues by modifying the sample scripts in Appendix A-1 of *Fostering Dialogue by Design.* These scripts worked very well to help me explain the plan and content for each session, keep the sessions moving, and remain on time. Additionally, I found the "Decisions You Need to Make" and the "Supplies and Materials" checklists to be very helpful tools in planning the dialogue sessions. They are both provided in *Fostering Dialogue by Design.*

For all three dialogue sessions, I arranged chairs in a circle. The circle faced a wall on which I had tacked up sheets of Post-It Note flip chart paper so that I could make notes during each session. On each chair, I provided:

- The agenda

- The proposed communication agreements

- A notepad

- A pen

- A bottle of water

For the third dialogue session, I provided the items listed above, and added a list of the emergent themes from the first two dialogue sessions. Additionally, for the third dialogue session, I printed each emergent theme on a piece of 8.5" x 14" paper and pinned all of the themes to the homasote pin-up wall in the Donghia Gallery.
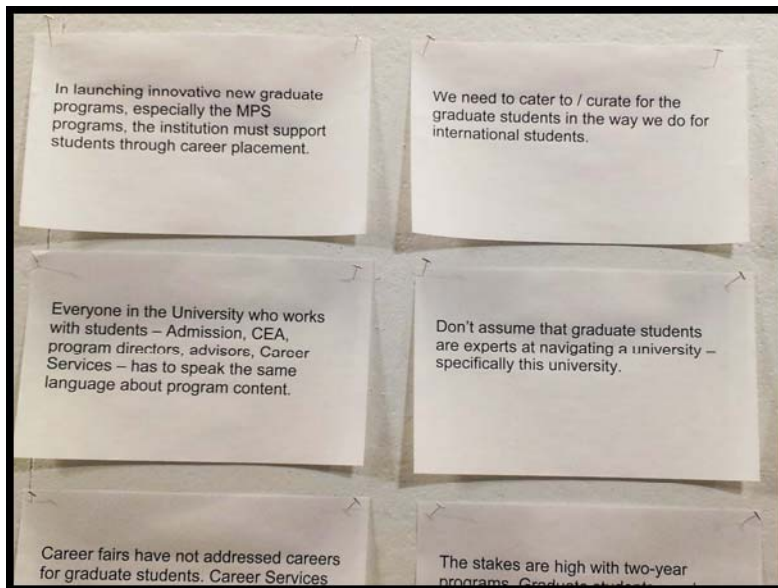

Figure 1. Emergent themes displayed at third dialogue.

During the third session, I spoke objectively for five minutes about the emergent themes displayed on the wall. I identified the common themes that had emerged from both groups,

themes that tie together, and unique themes that came from either the program directors or the advisors. I did not interject my opinion about the themes. Rather, I explained what emerged from the first two dialogue sessions.

In each session, I began by sitting in the circle with the participants. Following the Welcome and Orientation, Review of the Communication Agreements, and Introductions and Hopes, I left the circle and stood at the wall and began to take notes on the flip chart paper. I told the participants in the Orientation in each of the three meetings that I would leave the circle and take notes. I changed the placement of the chairs in the second session held in Wollman Hall. In the first session, we were situated on the north side of the room near the HVAC blower, which was loud. We had to speak up to hear one another. For the second session in the same space, I placed the chairs on the south side of the room. We did not face the same issue with the loud HVAC blower in the different location in the second session. The groups had no other distractions in Wollman Hall during first and second sessions. That room is the only room on the fifth floor of its building. So, there is no foot traffic. The Donghia Gallery is different, because it has three glass walls, and is located on the floor where undergraduate architecture and interior design students' desks are located in a huge design studio. The participants told me that they found it distracting when students walked by. I had situated the circle to face the homasote pin-up wall, but, the participants could still see activity outside the room.

Dealing with Change

On the evening before the program director dialogue, one Dean and three program directors from the School of Art, Design, History and Theory canceled their attendance. Early on the morning of April 16, a program director from the School of Constructed Environments canceled his attendance. Fortunately, that morning, one additional program director from the

School of Constructed Environments said that he would participate in the dialogue. In the end, four program directors from four of Parsons' five schools participated in the April 16 dialogue session, along with two observers. I felt this number of participants was fine, because the Public Conversations Project recommends groups of five to seven people for its dialogue format (Herzig & Chasin, 2006). Additionally, I chose to view the size and composition of this first dialogue session from the perspective of Harrison Owen's Open Space Technology gatherings. The first principle of the Open Space Technology meeting framework is "Whoever comes is the right people" (Owen). I reflected on Owen's assertion:

> Those present are the only ones there. Whatever gets done will get done with them, or not at all. There is little point, therefore in worrying about all those who should have come, might have come, but didn't come. It is essential to concentrate on those who are there. The experience is that, in some strange way, the group present is always the right group (Owen).

Four programs directors and two observers participated in the first dialogue session. Six academic advisors participated in the second dialogue session. Three academic advisors and the Assistant Dean of Advising participated in the third dialogue session. No program directors or Deans attended the third "lessons learned" dialogue session.

Feedback

In my closing remarks in each dialogue session, I told the participants that I would like to receive feedback from them about their experience as a participant. I used four of the feedback questions from Appendix C-14: Participant Feedback Form in the *Fostering Dialogue Across Divides* handbook. I posed the following questions via e-mail on April 24, 2014 to all twelve individuals who participated in one or more of the three dialogue sessions:

1. What was most satisfying, enriching, or valuable about your experience in this dialogue?

2. What was less than satisfying, frustrating, or disappointing?

3. Can you say something about what you are taking away from the experience?

4. Other comments?

I received feedback from four individuals: the Assistant Dean of Advising and three advisors. These are the participants' responses to my questions:

1. What was most satisfying, enriching, or valuable about your experience in this dialogue?

- BM: "Getting to know the other advisors and the program directors and learning how they feel about advising and services here. I really loved being given the time and space to talk about advising, students, programs. Its so rare to take the time to do that!"

- JP: "It was helpful to hear the perspectives on graduate advising from the Program Directors. I appreciated Alison's comments about considering the arc of advising extending from admission through job placement and how advisors play a critical role at key points throughout that arc, particularly as students transition on campus, or are experiencing challenges to their progress. It was valuable to learn that the Directors who participate tend to view or define advising for graduate students in similar ways to my personal perspective; that we are collaborators with the Program Directors and faculty advisors contributing different but complementary areas of expertise...faculty providing mentorship and curricular/career guidance while advisors provide a breadth of knowledge about administrative functions, academic policies, student development, and university resources."

- MR: "I think the most satisfying/valuable experience for me in regards to the dialogue was getting to hear about others practices and experiences in advising and working with grad students. As someone who only started advising grad students very recently, it was a great opportunity for me to hear what everyone else had to say. The dialogue made me consider my role as a graduate student advisor and how we can move forward to best advise our students, as well as keeping them informed of New School policies and opportunities through items like NSO, program director involvement, etc."

- KS: "The most satisfying/enriching/valuable aspect of these dialogues was that we were able to get perspective from both sides; program directors and advisors. It was great that we were able to come up with some common, reoccurring themes in which both advisors and program directors feel are important to the success and retention of our students. Additional perspective is always good. I hope we can use this information moving forward."

2. What was less than satisfying, frustrating, or disappointing?

- BM: "I really wish we had more program directors and that they had come to the wrap up session. I think we could have put more of our thoughts into action with them there!"

- JP: "Though impossible to control, I was disappointed there was no representation from ADHT, or some of the other AMT and SDS programs. It would have been illuminating to hear a wider variety of perspectives."

- MR: "I would not say that anything was frustrating or disappointing. I suppose my only feedback here is that we could have perhaps benefited from more time to speak with each other and a bit less time to answer questions independently."

- KS: "I would have liked for some program directors to have been present the April 23rd meeting. I completely understand everyone's busy schedule though, especially this time of year. I was happy that the facilitator was still able to convey their perspectives and themes through a list that was put together which was really helpful."

3. Can you say something about what you are taking away from the experience?

- BM: "I think the whole experience has given me a much broader view of the process of grad advising and how the grad departments work!"

- JP: "These dialogues hopefully will be the beginning of ongoing conversations that will help us share more unity of practice across Parsons and to improve the quality of our graduate students' experiences."

- MR: "From this experience, I am taking away how much we can really do in graduate student advising and how much I appreciate my unique position of being very involved in both the program I advise and advising these students. In our dialogue, I realized that this is not everyone's experience, and I feel thankful that I can have this much involvement and hope this will allow others to consider additional ways they may be involved in grad student advising and with their program directors overall."

- KS: "I found that the set up of these dialogues were very well organized and we tended to stay on topic and not go off on tangents – which sometimes happens when meeting or dialogues have no agenda/outline. I appreciated that we had an outline and

that the facilitating made the dialogue/meeting go very smoothly. All points in the

outline were covered and I felt like everyone had the opportunity to contribute as we

spoke in a go-around fashion."

4. Other comments?

- BM: "Thank you so much for including me in the process! It was not only great to

  listen to other but felt so wonderful to share some of my thoughts and feelings on

  advising."

- JP: "Thanks for facilitating these dialogues towards our common academic advising

  goals. I hope your project and paper turn out well."

- KS: "I also appreciated the communication agreements. I think we all spoke from our

  own experiences and from our own perspectives. I felt the communication agreements

  helped facilitate open conversation in a way in which we can all learn from. Having

  visuals like the open notes and the themes pinned up on the wall helped too!"

Part Two

The Container

In *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together,* William Isaacs notes that "we cannot

manufacture a 'field.' But we can create conditions under which a rich field for interaction is

more likely to appear" (1999). The Public Conversations Project framework, the communication

agreements, the placement of chairs in a circle, and the provision of comfortable space created

settings in which interaction could occur between the participants of the three dialogues. I

focused on the physical space, time space, relational space, and intentional space. The

communication agreements observed by the participants in all three dialogues helped to govern

the relational space. They were:

1. We will speak for ourselves. We won't try to represent a whole group, and we will not ask others to represent, defend, or explain an entire group.

2. We will avoid making grand pronouncements and, instead, connect what we know and believe to our experiences, influences in our lives, particular sources of information, etc.

3. We will refrain from characterizing the views of others in a critical spirit, keeping in mind that we're here to understand each other, not to persuade each other.

4. We will listen with resilience, "hanging in" when we hear something that is hard to hear.

5. We will share airtime and refrain from interrupting others.

6. We will "pass" or "pass for now" if we are not ready or willing to respond to a question—no explanation required.

7. If asked to keep something confidential, we will honor the request. In conversations outside of the group we won't attribute particular statements to particular individuals by name or identifying information without permission.

8. We'll avoid making negative attributions about the beliefs, values, and motives of other participants, e.g., "You only say that because…". When tempted to do so, we'll consider the possibility of testing the assumption we're making by asking a question, e.g., "Why is that important to you?" (Herzig & Caslin, 2006)

The containers holding each of the three dialogue sessions provided energy, possibility, and safety – three elements that author Joseph Chilton Pearce says are required for successful child development – and that Isaacs says are required for successful dialogue (Isaacs, 1999). It was very important to place the chairs in a circle. Isaacs explains that the circle is "a leveler: It implies that everyone is on the level (1999). I observed a noticeable change in interaction when

there was no table in the center of the participants, and no laptops creating barriers between the

participants.

In terms of both intentional and relational space, the boundaries and rules that J.P. and I

established really helped to create and maintain the container of the dialogues. We decided that

conversation would be limited only those who were invited, and no others. We did face one

challenge and possibly hurt feelings over this decision. A program director could not participate

in the first session. She asked if she could send a part-time faculty member in her place. I talked

with J.P. about this request before responding. She and I felt it was not appropriate for a person

who was not in a program leadership role to be engaged with Deans and program directors in the

first session. I told the program director that the part-time faculty member could not attend. She

was not happy about that decision. However, J.P. and I felt it was key to preserve the container

by regulating access to the session. Additionally, after the Dean and three program directors from

the School of Art, Media and Technology canceled their participation in the first session, I did

not invite them to attend the third session. By missing the exchange in the first session, they did

not have a context for involvement in the third session. During the Welcome and Orientation of

each session, I asked if anyone needed to leave early, and if everyone could stay for the whole

session. Every participant in all three dialogue sessions agreed to stay for the entire sessions. As

Isaacs notes, "gradually growing a set of norms for how these kinds of interactions are handled is

an important part of container building" (1999).

The Fields

Because the participants truly did observe the communication agreements, and because

they felt safe in the container, the discussions moved very quickly out of Fields I and II in all

three dialogue sessions. The participants in the first session, some of whom did not know one

another, took time to tell stories about their personal backgrounds and the eccentricities of the academic programs they lead. Once they felt comfortable, they moved very quickly into Field III. In the second and third dialogue sessions, all of the participants knew one another. People giggled during the Introduction section, but then did manage to share things about themselves that they had not shared with their colleagues before. One person is a bird watcher. Another collects mid-century toy cars. This period of sharing helped to charge the container. In the second and third sessions, the participants also moved very quickly to Field III.

In the first dialogue with the program directors and a school Dean, the participants were very quick to see the system in terms of Scharmer's definition of seeing. In the go-rounds, they identified problems caused by a disconnection between the Parsons program directors and the Office of Admission, Career Services, and Communication and External Affairs at The New School. At first, they were in a blaming mode. But then, during the facilitated conversation, the participants redirected their collective attention. They recognized themselves as part of the system they were trying to fix. At the end of the facilitated conversation, they reached a point of presencing, and together generated an idea that it would be helpful if program directors, Admission staff, Career Services staff, and Communication and External Affairs staff engaged in a dialogue together, like the one in which they were currently engaged, to explore the best ways to recruit students, advertise Parsons' graduate programs, and provide career placement for students. During the same session, the program directors and Dean were able to see and identify many problems that new graduate students face when entering the university. Together, they took a deep dive and opened their hearts. They began to tell stories of individual students, and they spoke about those students in the manner of becoming, and being students, as Scharmer describes in the *Theory U* chapter on Sensing (2009). From this discourse, they developed the

idea together that students need guidance from the point of recruitment through career

placement. They defined this timeline as the Advising timeline, which coincides with the goals

of the new Student Success Center within The New School.

In the second dialogue, the advisors discussed their individual advising practices during

the facilitated conversation. It was apparent to everyone that the practices were very different.

The group was reflecting together in Field III at this point. Participants expressed sadness about

the lack of information they had about each other's work with graduate students. This feeling of

sadness changed and moved to a type of resolution to do something about the current situation.

Together, the participants expressed the need to spend time together to share advising practices.

They expressed the importance of coming together on that day for the dialogue session, and

stated that they did not want this process to stagnate. Rather, they wanted to create an integrate

network of graduate advisors who share best practices and emulate the model of advising

followed by MR and the Fashion Studies program director.

In the third dialogue, PN began talking in the facilitated conversation about how the

program directors feel about advisors. I observed that he was making assumptions. BM and JP

who had attended the program director dialogue as observers stated, somehow without trying to

persuade, their observations from the program director dialogue. They both said that the program

directors had conveyed deep respect for the graduate academic advisors. They explained that

most of what the program directors addressed as emergent themes for action involve improving

advising from recruitment through career placement, and creating better working relationships

with Career Services, Admission, and Communication and External Affairs. PN really listened. I

observed that he suspended judgment and was able to get himself unstuck. He was able to move

on productively without retaining a chip on his shoulder, which may have been based on an

assumption. BM and JP told first-person stories to PN. As Scharmer notes, "one of the most effective mechanisms for suspending judgment and connecting to wonder is to draw people into one another's first-person stories" (2009). I witnessed the transformational power of the first-person story in that session.

All three groups reached Field IV at different points near the end of each dialogue session. For the most part, I believe the groups spent most of their time in Field III.

What Was Generated

Emergent Themes from Program Director Dialogue. The following are the emergent themes from the program director dialogue held on April 16, 2014:

- Program directors are curious about best practices and wonder if they are advising correctly.

- Program directors need for support when dealing with student health and emotional crises.

- It's important to help students find classes that meet their career interests and aspirations.

- Guidance in the transition from working life to academic is critical for new graduate students.

- Students need to be introduced to the culture of Parsons and their program during the summer before they enter their program.

- Student anxiety about the future is marked in the first semester of the transition from undergraduate to graduate. Students are delicate.

- Advisors who have deep knowledge of the university's resources are very valuable to new students.

- The Advising timeline goes from recruitment through career placement.

- Program directors want more information about the Student Success Center and centralization of Advising within The New School.

- Program Directors want to engage in a consultative and collaborative process in working with the Student Success Center to integrate all things from recruitment to career placement.

- In launching innovative new graduate programs, especially the MPS programs, the institution must support students through career placement.

- Everyone in the University who works with students – Admission, Communication & External Affairs (CEA), program directors, advisors, Career Services – has to speak the same language about program content.

- A homogeneous approach to career services does not work.

- Career fairs have not addressed careers for graduate students. Career Services needs to get out and talk with graduate directors.

- Recruitment done by CEA and Admission does not make sense for each program's target market. Ads in The New Yorker don't make sense. Problems with advertising lead to problems with program fit and retention problems.

- Admission and CEA need to engage in deep ongoing conversations with program directors. This type of dialogue format would be very helpful.

- It's embedded in the program directors' identities to help their students become successful.

Emergent Themes from Academic Advisor Dialogue. The following are the emergent themes from the academic advisor dialogue held on April 18, 2014:

- What's the role of Advising at The New School?

- What the role of Advising for graduate students? Is it different from the role of Advising for undergraduate students?

- Parts of undergraduate support can be applied to graduate advising.

- Professional advisors are curious about best practices and wonder if they are advising correctly.

- Advisors can help students connect concepts and understand what courses meet their interests.

- Advisors want more information about the Student Success Center and centralization of Advising within The New School.

- We need to cater to / curate for the graduate students in the way we do for international students.

- Don't assume that graduate students are experts at navigating a university – specifically this university.

- The stakes are high with two-year programs. Graduate students need a thorough introduction to their programs and the culture of the program, Parsons, and The New School. We need to make sure that all information is abundantly clear.

- Early each summer, begin to orient new grad students to the culture, through online orientation.

- The Fashion Studies program orientation is a good model. It is four days long and resource- and content-rich.

- The MFA Photography program orientation, advising, and registration practice is a very poor. It must be changed. It does not encourage student success.

- Early on boarding can encourage students to deposit, and can help to retain the top candidates for each program.

- Advisors feel a tension between their role as administrators and their freedom to share values, feelings, and knowledge about programs.

- Advisors are educators. They should not be diminished as professionals. They should have latitude for thought and judgment.

- M.R.'s advising model and relationship with the Fashion Studies program director was viewed as a model to follow.

- Advisors want to share best practices in graduate student advising.

- Advisors want the work of these dialogues to continue – not stagnate.

Emergent Themes from "Lessons Learned" Dialogue. The following are the emergent themes from the closing dialogue session held on April 23, 2014:

- Desire to focus on orientation practices for incoming graduate students.

- Desire for the graduate student advisors to continue meeting to share practices before the advising and registration period for new graduate students begins on June 2, 2014.

- Hope that the dialogues will push Advising and program directors forward as the start of a continued plan of action.

- Designation of graduate student orientation as the action plan.

- Desire to include program directors in the meetings about improving orientation for
  graduate students.

Facilitation

Before facilitating the three dialogue sessions, I re-read "The Personal Disciplines of a
Facilitator" by Jon and Maureen Jenkins. I have advised graduate students since 2008, and
currently serve as the advisor to 145 students in five programs. So, I certainly have opinions
about best practices in academic advising and methods to assist students facing challenges. But,
as facilitator, I played a different role. I needed to be extremely engaged in the moment, yet
detached in terms of my opinion about where the conversation would go. I needed to give
ownership of the content of each session to the participants. They owned each session. I was
their guide – there to ensure that they abided by the communication agreements and time limits.
And, I was also there to help them to enact decisions. Jenkins and Jenkins write:

> Engagement is in the first place is service. A facilitator is a servant of the group's
> processes to make creative and meaningful decisions. Engagement is the discipline of
> caring about the quality of people's decisions and their capacity to enact them. Caring in
> this sense is not the emotion but the act (2000).

The script I used specified that I would call time, and wave my hand to let a participant know
that she was out of time. I told the participants that they did not have to stop in mid-sentence.
They could finish their thoughts. I did experience instance in the first and second dialogues in
which I permitted a participant to exceed the time limit because an important idea was emerging.
Jenkins and Jenkins note that part of the principle of Engagement "is knowing when to break the

rules for the sake of the growth or creativity of the group (2000). I found that I possessed this capacity of engagement.

I also found that I possessed the principle of awareness. I paid attention to the unique ideas expressed in each dialogue and found that I could "'swim' well in the currents of common wisdom in which the group [was] immersed (Jenkins & Jenkins, 2000). Each session was different. I could not have predicted their outcomes. I found it exciting, exhilarating, and rewarding to help these individuals reach conclusions and generate solutions together. I intentionally thanked each group several times for sharing their time and ideas. I was very grateful to have the opportunity to work with them in this manner. Additionally, I believe I expressed my intentionality about the importance of the process by building a container using the structure of the Public Conversations Project model. The communication agreements recommended by the Public Conversation Project, and agreed upon by all dialogue participants, helped the participants to feel safe to feel that they could voice their concerns and questions. I also showed my intentionality through my concern for the room set-up, writing supplies, the printed agenda, printed communication agreements, and bottles of water. I thought that it would be very helpful to the participants in the third session to see the emergent themes displayed on the wall, and on a list in their hands. In her feedback, KS wrote: "Having visuals like the open notes and the themes pinned up on the wall helped too" (J. Corson Lake, personal communication, April 24, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the three dialogue sessions went very well. I was pleased with the ease and flow I felt as a facilitator. It was not difficult or scary. Rather, it was illuminating to participate as facilitator. The four participants in the third dialogue and I were disappointed that no program

directors attended that session. However, if I view that session through the lens of Open Space

Technology, I see that the right people showed up. And those people embodied service in Field

IV. They defined the highest end to which their conversation could serve. I am most pleased and

grateful for the opportunity to help my colleagues collectively see together. As Otto Scharmer

writes in *Theory U*, "the leader's real work is to help people discover the power of seeing and

seeing together" (2009). Although I was the facilitator, and was not a "participant" in the

dialogues, I experienced a personal moment of presencing. I felt "linked to [my] highest future

possibility and destiny" (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers, 2004). I saw an emerging future in

which I could do more facilitation, and help other groups to See, Sense, and engage in

Presencing. "The bottom of the U is where . . . you discover 'who you really are as a servant or

steward for what's needed in the world" (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, Flowers, 2004). This

project has produced meaningful and valuable outcomes for Parsons graduate students, academic

advisors, program directors, and me.

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