

**ACADEMIC ADVISING AS PRAXIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A
TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE**

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Abstract: *There has been a tendency to undervalue academic advising in higher education circles by both faculty and administration in some institutions. However, for academic advising to become transformative, it must be situated as a critical aspect of student life and development. This study advances Paulo Friere's theory of critical praxis and uses the experience of a particular institution to focus on ways in which higher education institutions can incorporate the key elements of critical praxis into academic advising. It also shows how critical praxis can be employed to enhance learner autonomy. The methodological approach is informed by Freire's postcolonial philosophy and will therefore utilize the "critical participatory" approach to data gathering. This study extends the body of knowledge on academic advising in the Caribbean and advances postcolonial discourse through the use of liberating methodologies and theories to interrogate this phenomenon.*

Keywords: *academic advising; praxis, transformative education*

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INTRODUCTION

The fundamental role and purpose of academic advising in higher education goes beyond academics. Yet in many instances, it has been viewed as an appendage, marginalized and viewed as optional in some institutions. Within the Caribbean region, academic advising is a relatively new phenomenon and for the most part, it has been prescriptive and employed as an intervention. For academic advising to become transformative, it has to be situated as a critical aspect of student life and development from the beginning to the end of the student's academic journey.

Current debates on academic advising locate the subject as a retention strategy for at-risk students who would not ordinarily complete tertiary education. Abdelman and Molina (2001) contend that the long-term impact of one-time advising interventions has had a significant positive relationship to student grades and persistence, especially in the case of at-risk youths. In some instances, academic advising has suffered from the stigma and stereotype that it is a service for the intellectually challenged students and, therefore, students who could access and benefit from the service have refrained from utilizing the service because of these perceptions.

There is also the issue of creating a culture of dependency among the students. This culture is fostered when students are given information rather than the opportunity to actively participate in their academic growth by using the discovery approach. The discovery approach can help students to navigate and develop learner autonomy in order to gain their independence and accelerate their development. The information-driven, dependency approach, which is centred around the "spoon-feeding" of students, constitutes the Banking Theory approach postulated by Paulo Freire (1972). As the chief academic officer of a university, I would review student appeals and petitions on academic issues, and over the years I have observed students blaming advisors for their own negligence, claiming that their advisors had never informed them of academic deadlines and certain programme requirements, so they were not aware. Others would claim that they were not aware that specific degree programmes had prerequisites because their advisor had failed to inform them and that delayed the completion of their programme of study. This attitude towards academic advising is not likely to develop critical thinking and intellectual curiosity among students; rather it will reinforce conformity to the existing status quo.

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In advancing Paulo Freire's theory of praxis in academic advising, therefore, I seek to overturn the traditional approach to advising and replace it with a model in which the student takes responsibility for their learning and their consciousness is awakened through conscientization, reflection and action. What is meant by the term "praxis"? According to Paulo Freire (1970, p.51), "praxis is reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." In other words, when we become aware of the social problems and injustices within the society, we have a responsibility to act to change them. Smith (2011) explains that praxis is not simply action that is based on reflection, but rather that the action must represent a commitment to human well-being, respect for others and the search for truth. This perspective is premised on a liberatory approach to academic advising in higher education institutions and is more likely to engender the transformative approach to student performance and development.

The research questions for this study focus on the ways in which higher education institutions can incorporate the key elements of praxis in academic advising in order to facilitate student empowerment and development. These questions are:

1. In what ways can the university incorporate key elements of praxis in academic advising?
2. How can praxis be employed in academic advising to enhance learner autonomy of undergraduate students?

The methodological approach to this study is informed by the postcolonial philosophy of Paulo Freire and therefore utilizes the Participatory Action Research design for data gathering. This includes focus group discussions with lecturers and advisors, interviews with students, as well as a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies on academic advising. It is hoped that the study will make a valuable contribution to academic advising at higher education institutions in the Caribbean region.

Situating the Study

The university referred to in this study is an accredited Christian higher education institution in Trinidad and Tobago, with satellite campuses in Barbados, St. Lucia, Antigua, Guyana, and extension campuses in Tobago and San Fernando. There is an average student population of 3,000 pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees across six schools, namely, Social Sciences, Education and Humanities, Business and Entrepreneurship, Science, Technology and Allied

Health, Theology and Religion and Graduate Studies and Research. Student retention is therefore a top priority. Traditionally, academic advising was done by the regular faculty of the various schools; but as the student population grew and the faculty load increased, academic advising by the faculty became more problematic. After the establishment of the Government Assisted Tuition Expenses (GATE) initiative and the requirements placed on institutions to manage their students' attendance and grade point average, several problems arose. These included students taking additional credits outside of their degree programme that were not covered by GATE; students who had difficulty transitioning from high school to university life; problems of poor advising by the faculty; the unavailability or inaccessibility of some faculty advisors; a younger demographic with greater need for learning support and guidance and counselling being necessary for them to cope with psycho-social problems and university life. These issues led to greater problems of declining retention, high failure rates in some courses, the incidence of low grade point averages among Freshman and Sophomore students in some subject areas, and huge sums owed to GATE for incorrect advising and the reimbursement of GATE funds after students dropped out late in the semester.

Given the nature of the problems and the litigious nature of the student population, the Administration acted to find plausible solutions to these problems. Meetings were held with the faculty and staff of the schools using the Participatory Action Research design. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted with students and faculty. The implementation of a central advising department was recommended and, thus, the Student Advisement Centre (SAC) was established in 2013. The Centre implemented an integrative approach to advising which comprised prescriptive advising, reductive advising and developmental advising, which were all grounded in the university's mission and core values. According to Church (2005), the goal of the integrative approach is the flexibility and utility it provides. It is also premised on four ethical traits advanced by Kitchener (2000), namely, beneficence, autonomy, non-maleficence and fidelity. This approach is driven by the need to provide quality education, to ensure that the students understand the requirements to graduate and to achieve student satisfaction.

Since its implementation at the SAC, the integrative approach has been very nurturing and supportive to the students. The SAC is a "one-stop shop" where all the student's needs are addressed. The advisors schedule appointments to meet with the students individually and they also facilitate "walk in" students who may require assistance or guidance. The advisors are full-time staff whose sole responsibility is to provide advising and support to the students by providing a student-friendly educational experience to facilitate their success.

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Some faculty contend that this integrative system of advising offered by the SAC serves to create a culture of dependency among the students since the advisors provide the information and assistance that the students require, instead of allowing them to think critically and discover how to navigate the challenges they encounter. It is within this context that Paulo Freire's praxis as an approach to advising was considered in an effort to enhance this critical service.

Interrogating Advising Models

The two common advising models are the traditional prescriptive model and the developmental model. The prescriptive model is the oldest and perhaps the most popular approach to advising. Traditionally in the Caribbean, as far back as the 1990s, academic advising was used to assist failing students, students with learning challenges, differently-abled students, students with behavioural problems and poorly performing students. The role of the advisor as the authority and expert was to reform or rehabilitate the student. As a result, there was a stigma attached and some students who were struggling academically rejected advising in order to avoid labelling. Crookston (1994) noted that the prescriptive advisor is viewed as judgmental and sees students as irresponsible, immature, needing close supervision and incapable of making sound decisions (p. 7). With time, however, academic advising has become more inclusive and now represents a whole school approach to guide students by providing general information about course selection, registration, completing programme requirements, ticking the box of tasks and requirements in switching programmes, choosing electives, dropping classes or withdrawing for the semester.

Traditionally with the prescriptive model, the lecturer or advisor is viewed as the authority and the fountain of knowledge and there is some degree of control, monitoring and supervision by the advisor to ensure that the student complies with the advice provided. The prescriptive approach is similar to the authoritarian teaching practices in which the teachers provide instruction and the students regurgitate the information to achieve academic success. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1970) described the Banking Theory of education in which the teacher "pours" knowledge into the students, whom they perceive to be devoid of knowledge. This theory purports that the students are dependent on their teachers for knowledge and their success is determined by their compliance with the information provided. This Banking model represents a popular approach to academic advising, especially where teachers are involved in individual advising (Dillan & Fisher, 2000).

Conversely, the developmental model is characterized by an interpersonal relationship between the advisor and the student in which the advisor facilitates the growth and development of the student by enabling them to discover their full potential. The advisor encourages the student to develop competencies such as decision making and problem-solving skills to deal with difficult situations. There is mutual trust between the advisor and the student as they negotiate the space in the treatment of issues. Crookston (1994) noted that the developmental approach facilitates the student's rational processes, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioural awareness, problem-solving, decision-making and evaluation skills (p. 5). He contends that some advising functions overlap with teaching functions and these functions are based on a negotiated agreement between the student and the teacher, so that there is the holistic development of the student. Lowenstein (2005), however, rejects Crookston's notion of advising as a form of teaching, and questions what the developmental advisor is really teaching. He further claims that Crookston failed to distinguish teaching from the other activities conducted in educational institutions.

Faculty as Advisors

The issue of the faculty's perception of their role as advisors is another important factor in determining how advising is done. Allen and Smith (2008) conducted a study which examined the aspects of the advising process that faculty advisors viewed as their responsibility. They found that faculty identified the following: providing accurate information about academic requirements; making links to the student's career goals; referring students to academic resources; and aligning courses with academic interests and goals. The findings, however, revealed that the faculty advisors did not view it as their responsibility to connect general education requirements to career goals or refer students to non-academic campus resources. Hart-Baldrige's (2020) study, which examined how faculty advisors perceived advising at a teaching-focused university, found that they viewed their most important responsibilities as follows: (a) ensuring that students completed the graduation requirements; (b) facilitating graduate school and career exploration; (c) teaching students how to navigate systems; (d) empowering students towards learner autonomy.

Some faculty, however, believe that their role is primarily to teach and therefore view academic advising as an added burden for which they receive no additional compensation. According to Hemwall and Trachte (1999), the concept of development in advising makes faculty defensive because it calls into question their expertise as advisors. These authors cited Crockett (1982) and Gordon (1994) who posit that since developmental advising

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focuses on the development of the whole student, then there is good reason to be concerned about the performance of the faculty advisors.

Challenges of Academic Advising

While there are tremendous benefits to be gained from academic advising, there are inherent challenges for both the teachers and the students with the implementation of the various models. In some instances, students are non-compliant, while others complain that the advising system does not address their needs. There are students who would seek counsel from their peers instead of their advisors or would only seek assistance from the advisors when they experience difficulties progressing or navigating the space. Some of the problems requiring advising stem from the students' failure to read the information provided in the sequence sheets, bulletins or programme prospectus before selecting courses.

Some of the issues raised against faculty advisors are their unavailability and inaccessibility, their lack of knowledge pertaining to the programme requirements and their aloofness with their students. This supports previous research by Vianden and Smith (2011), Grites (1994), Cuevas et al. (2015). Dillon and Fisher (2000) noted that some faculty members are unaware of course changes and course sequencing in some programmes. Zhang et al. (2019) note that many teachers are over-burdened with other responsibilities, and they have little time to prepare for advising. Hart-Baldrige (2004), in a study of faculty advisors in a teaching-focused university, found that some felt that they had heavy workloads and advising was not considered in determining their rank and tenure. Noreen Powers and Russell Wartalski (2021) focused on advising adult learners and found three factors that were important for effective advising: cultivating trust, comprehensive communication and clear programme documents. These are important elements within the Caribbean context. But, in addition to these factors, it has been observed that adult learners' value social support, the presence of the advisor to discuss issues, academic support, the accuracy of the information, the brevity of written information, a central repository or source of information and efficient service.

Advising as Praxis

Paulo Freire's philosophy of praxis refers to the process in which people critically reflect on their circumstances and confront the issues by acting to improve or change their situation. Central to Freire's concept of praxis is the notion of consciousness or conscientization which, according to Blackwood (1987), is a three-part process of awakening or deepening awareness of socio-political reality and of having the capacity to transform that reality. Mayo

(2020) noted that “there can be no praxis without consciousness because praxis is the dialectical unity of consciousness and practice and reflection and action” (p. 457). Orlowski (2019) clarifies this further, noting that “praxis is the embodiment of students using their new-found knowledge and political consciousness to employ agency and challenge the sources and structures of oppression” (p. 38).

In applying praxis to advising, Hemwall and Trachte (1999) noted that if advising is to be considered as a form of praxis, it must be situated within the context of liberal learning where students would develop the capacity for critical reflection (p.116). This new approach to advising based on praxis should facilitate the advisor’s engagement with the students in dialogue about their studies, life and the impact of global issues so that the advising sessions can stimulate critical thinking, create awareness and engender the student’s intellectual growth and transformation.

To adopt a philosophy of academic advising in higher education that is based on praxis requires an intentional approach to the social construction and development of a more critically conscious student. Mayo (2020) contends that praxis constitutes the means and understanding of the social relationships involved and it helps people to identify possibilities that such awareness offers in fostering a climate of radical social change. Advising, like education, is not a value-neutral activity; it is rather a political act which transcends the values of the institution through the very process. As Hemwall and Trachte (1999) state, the goal of transformation through praxis allows academic advising to be consistent with the mission of the university. The mission of this faith-based institution is to transform ordinary students into extraordinary servants of God to humanity. Through the process of praxis, using the key elements, namely, dialogue, critical reflection, critical consciousness and action, the student can experience this transformation. Freire (1970) noted that true dialogue requires great love and faith in humanity, as well as hope and humility.

The big question is, how is this advising as praxis achieved? Wijngaard (2019) offers a possible explanation through Boyer’s (1990) perspective of the scholarship of advising in which praxis is a process of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Boyer (1990) noted that these four areas are not distinct and should be integrated, applied and the knowledge transferred in order for scholarship to reach its full potential. The advisor is therefore expected to challenge the students to discover and think critically about the issues that they are questioning, while engaging in introspection for self-discovery and empowerment. Miller and Brickman (2004) explained that learning strategies and

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motivation improve when students can see the relevance of what they do, and that enhances their ability to relate short term goals to long term ambitions and personal values.

This notion of advising as praxis translates to the empowerment and transformation of students within the context of the Christo-centric, values-based education that this university is known for. Our multi-dimensional approach to teaching and learning embraces intellectual curiosity, cultural diversity, moral integrity and spiritual nurture. The application of the Freirian praxis to academic advising in a Christian higher education institution is the point of departure of this study because it shows the scope and versatility of the concept beyond the proposed political and revolutionary objectives. Given the established process of advising at this institution, the system of academic advising will be critically examined within the context of the liberatory model of advising as praxis.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study embraced a postcolonial philosophy which found its base in Paulo Freire's Participatory Action Research. The postcolonial approach is most appropriate for this study because, as Young (2003) asserts, postcolonialism names politics and a philosophy of activism that contest the existing disparities in our world and continues the anti-colonial struggles in a new way. The postcolonial philosophy upturns the existing systems and practices and opposes systemic structures which serve to control and manipulate human thought and behaviour in order to achieve a specific outcome. It also provides the space to advance Freire's liberatory praxis as an approach to academic advising.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Given the nature of this study, it was important to use a liberating research design which would allow for the engagement of the various stakeholders in the research process in order to get a better understanding of the issues, while confronting the problems experienced by the various groups. Several previous studies, such as those by Hilliger et al. (2020), Museus and Ravello (2010), Harris (2018) Alvarado and Olson (2020), Swecker et al. (2013), Hart-Baldrige (2004), Allen and Smith (2008) have utilized quantitative approaches since they sought to generalize about the trends in academic advising. Zhang et al. (2019) note that most of the research in academic advising tends to be myopic in scope and quantitative in methodology. This study departs from that trend since it is exploratory and is intended to find solutions to the current advising issues through praxis, so that the services provided to the students can be significantly improved.

The Participatory Action Research design as articulated by Freire is a methodological design which allows for the participation of the community of interest from the onset of the research. According to Freire (1970), knowledge is a social construction created by all participants including the researcher. Therefore, the participants would be the best persons to identify and define the issue and then together as co-constructors, both researchers and participants would actively engage in data gathering through dialogue to resolve the issue and advance social change. Hall (2005) noted that participatory research is a proposal for action that focuses on the transformed understanding of the creation of knowledge among the people engaged in the research process. This point is further reinforced by Orłowski (2019) who cites the work of Baum et al. (2006) who noted that at the heart of participatory action research is a collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake in order to understand and improve the situations that they experience.

Glassman and Erdem (2014) noted that Participatory Action Research uses Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, which they unpacked as fluid, diverse and confrontational in an iterative process that requires constant reflection and dialogue to facilitate negotiations by the stakeholders and researchers. Therefore, the Participatory Action Research design was the most appropriate design for this study.

DATA COLLECTION

In this Participatory Action Research, a focus group discussion was held, comprising eight students drawn from various schools in order to understand their experiences and the problems faced with the current advising system at the university. A request was made by the executive student body for a meeting to discuss issues of academic advising with a view to finding solutions to the problems that students were experiencing. The participants, two men and six women all between 20-28 years old, included local and international students. The process was participatory in the sense that the students discussed their challenges with the current advising process and made recommendations about how it could be improved. The approach is representative of praxis because as Glassman and Erden (2014) note, praxis opens doors for the masses to criticize, problematize and claim their condition, which will eventually enable them to overcome it. The students controlled the discussion since they had requested the meeting and the few questions posed to them related to how the advising process could be made more effective and how they could be empowered by the process to take greater responsibility for their learning. They provided suggestions for the enhancement of the advising system that they would want to see implemented. The focus group discussion lasted for an hour.

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In-depth interviews were also conducted with the faculty from the various schools who are also expected to serve as advisors to the junior and senior students of the university. Some of the questions posed to the faculty addressed the role and purpose of advising, the current system of advising, process and effectiveness, model, cultures, critical thinking and learner autonomy. Finally, a focus group discussion was conducted with the professional advisors of the Student Advising Centre and similar questions were posed to them.

The focus group discussions and the in-depth interviews were conducted via zoom (and recorded), given the Covid-19 restrictions. The faculty selected for the interviews included department chairs and faculty with more than five years of experience in the school. Requests were sent to the various schools for faculty representatives to participate in the interviews via zoom and those persons who responded favourably to the request were later contacted and sent a zoom link. The interviews were approximately 30 to 45 minutes long, depending on the depth of the responses.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analysed through the use of Nvivo 12 software which aided the organization and management of the data. The transcripts of the interviews and focus group discussions were typed and cleaned and then broad categories were developed. This was later divided into subcategories and then the final themes were developed based on the recurrence and consistency of ideas. The following themes emerged from the data:

- Fostering learner autonomy
- Disrupting culture of dependency
- Teaching/Training students to think critically
- Integration of technology
- Re-defining faculty advising
- Transformational experience

The data informing the students' perspective was gathered through a focus group discussion with some of the university students and the themes arising from the discussion were, *lack of information, inconsistency, inaccessibility to the advisors, and a culture of silence.*

The Students' Perspective

The findings revealed that the current system of academic advising at the university was satisfactory. However, there were some deficiencies at some levels, particularly at the level of the schools. The students began with commendations for the advisors and acknowledged the work of the Student Advisement Centre in guiding them through their programmes. Some students spoke of the ease with which they were able to navigate the process because of the zoom sessions with the advisors and the support that the advisors provided throughout the pandemic. They noted, however, that there were areas of the general advising system that needed improvement, especially after the second year. These are captured under the following themes.

Lack of Information

Based on the discussion, it was clear that many of the students lacked a basic understanding of the academic systems and processes. Some expressed confusion and frustration about processing a change of programme, selecting courses when they transfer from another campus and understanding when to do prerequisites.

Stud3XX: "I didn't know there was a prerequisite and I didn't say, 'I have done this, what should I do'? And now that I have to delay for a whole year while everybody gets to graduate this year and I can't".

While the information was available in the bulletin, a number of the students were reportedly not reading these documents, and others chose not to seek the counsel of advisors, as some participants revealed in the discussion about their experience.

Stud2XX: "Like for me, I was under the wrong bulletin and I was not getting the courses that I needed and nobody told me anything, but I didn't have an advisor at the time."

Stud4XX: "Sometimes we as students really don't read. Sometimes when you see a lot of information, lots of words, you think like, I'd rather not. I think that people would rather go to the internet and type in a question like in google and get the information." The notion of students not reading or seeking advising supports the existing literature, and this is not merely a problem for the Caribbean; this is a global issue."

Inconsistency.

There appeared to be a disconnect in advising between the Student Advisement Centre (SAC) and the schools. Some students contended that the lecturers in the schools would advise them about some programme requirements and then advisors at the SAC would give them a different kind of advice and so there was conflicting information.

Stud5XX: “I was advised by the SAC and then my Chair told me to drop the course because I should be doing another course and I dropped it and added another one and then when I tried to add the other course the Advisor in the SAC told me that I was not supposed to add that course, and that is frustrating.”

This problem was experienced by some students who transferred from other campuses to the Main Campus. There are instances, however, when students would have variations in their programme guides depending on their qualifications on entry, transfer credits, or changes in the bulletin the year when they matriculated.

Stud1XX: “Although we have the check sheets of when to do what courses, sometimes the courses are not offered and so we have to choose other courses.” There are also issues pertaining to changes within the bulletin as programmes are updated; therefore, the question of information dissemination arises.”

Inaccessibility of Advisors

Some students contended that access to faculty advisors is another issue. Among the students in the discussion, most acknowledged that the advisors at the SAC were always helpful to them, but after they were transferred to the faculty advisors within the schools, advising became problematic.

Stud2XX: “I don’t even know who is my advisor; nobody mentioned it. After I transferred to the Main Campus, they treated me like a first-year student, but I was a third-year student, so I didn’t go to the Advisement Centre.”

Within the schools, students are only sent to an advisor if there is a problem, but there is no structured system of advising within the schools like that which exists at the SAC.

Stud6XX: “Sometimes you try to reach your advisor and you wouldn’t even get a response. You only have the name of the person; but they never met with you, so essentially you don’t have an advisor.” The issue of inaccessibility of advisors must be viewed within the context that the Advisors at the SAC are full-time professional advisors. Within the schools, however, the faculty advisors are full-time faculty who must take appointments to meet with students and this may not always be possible because of their teaching responsibilities.”

Culture of Silence

It was observed that students were reluctant to ask questions even when they were unclear about the academic processes. Some indicated that they would learn from their peers or other students who had completed the courses, but they would prefer to use the technology to get information.

Stud4XX: “You know the era that we are living in is more like video tutorials with someone explaining something like Youtube, so it’s better to have someone explaining the information on video than to be forced to read the documents.” There is a pervasive culture of silence among students when it pertains to questioning and seeking clarification on issues.”

Stud5XX: “Generally, I don’t question my lecturers because they are the authority and I assume that they know what they are doing; so, if they tell me to take this course or fill this form, I would do it.”

Some fear embarrassment in asking questions in group settings and would prefer to speak with the faculty advisors in a one-on-one setting. In some instances, when they are directed to sources of information and the information is difficult to understand, the students are embarrassed to seek further information from their lecturers.

Stud7XX: “Sometimes you know you don’t want to ask a stupid question because the advisor would know if you’re doing the work if you ask certain questions, so you want to keep a certain image.”

The Advisors' Perspective

There was the general agreement that the Advisors at the SAC provided a critical service in orienting and guiding the freshmen students and reducing the incidence of error during registration when they enter the university. The SAC focuses on the first two years of school because that is critical to the retention of the student population as well as students' developing a sense of belonging to the institution. The SAC emphasizes social support, academic support and critical support in all areas (spiritual, developmental, psychological) in order to facilitate the academic success of the student. In addition to providing an academic orientation to university life, the SAC offers a standardized process for course selection and registration and allows for a smooth transition from high school or college to university life. The challenge is to determine how the model of advising as praxis can be implemented in this institution and what are the key elements of praxis which must be incorporated into the process in order to foster learner autonomy.

Disrupting the Culture of Dependency

The prescriptive nature of the registration process does not allow the freshmen students the freedom to explore and be creative. An outline is provided for them and there is a check sheet for them to complete the registration process under the supervision of the advisors.

FaD01: "Students should be given the information from the beginning so that they can track their progress. If we empower them to take responsibility for the information that we provide, then we can hold them accountable if they do otherwise." The SAC advisors are attentive to the needs of the freshmen students and engage in some degree of "hand holding" in order to ensure that the students have a wonderful educational experience, and some believe that this level of support has created a culture of dependency. To disrupt this culture of dependency, there must be a shift in responsibility in the advising process from the advisors to the students."

FaD08: "I think that once we explain the course sequencing sheet to them in a detailed manner and if they jump the sequencing and add courses of

their choice, then they are allowed to pay the consequences for their actions because then it's their responsibility."

The support provided at the SAC is reflective of the educational philosophy of the university, which aims to provide the holistic development of the student through the development of the head, the heart and the hand. Therefore, the academic advisors at the SAC disagreed with the notion of dependency on the basis of the positive feedback received on the service they provide.

SaC01: "The students are so appreciative that we go beyond academics. We pray for them, get counselling sessions for them and when they have financial issues, we provide them with resources to get a job on campus." They contend that they enable the students to develop close ties to the university and they enhance the retention rates by the level of support and the quality of advising that they provide. "

Re-Defining the Role of Faculty Advisors

The role of faculty as advisors is somewhat nebulous, especially with the establishment of the SAC. Some faculty contend that their teaching load does not allow for the extra responsibilities of advising, while others believe that the SAC should be responsible for the total advising.

FaD04: "Faculty needs to become more independent and not view advising as something shared, and they also have to be responsible and proactive in getting things done."

In the current system, some schools have assigned advisors by year groups and in other schools, each faculty member is an advisor and therefore should assist the students whenever their assistance is sought.

FaD05: "As advisors within our schools, we will have to play our roles to do justice to the entire process and to become knowledgeable because if we don't know, we will misguide our students." Advising within the schools is done on demand and therefore students are not required to meet with their advisors twice a term as is practised at the SAC. This

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creates a gap within the system. So, there is the need for a more structured approach to advising within the schools.”

The data has shown that only some faculty are involved in academic advising since there is an unsystematic approach to advising across the schools.

FaD04: “Some faculty are advising students and they are not sure; and they tell the student, *Yes, you can do this*, but they haven’t verified what is correct and this is how poor advising occurs.”

Integration of Technology

The use of technology is now essential in advising since we have had to digitize our services as a result of Covid-19. Advising is currently done online through the use of Zoom by the advisors in the SAC and students schedule appointments online to meet with their advisors.

FaD05: “We need to utilize the virtual platforms and place information for the students like instant messaging.” But, beyond the pandemic, there is the need for technological integration so that various aspects of advising can be done within the Student Management System.”

FaD07: “We need a checkpoint in our system which must be able to flag a student immediately after two years and they must have completed an advising process before they can proceed to the next level. We already establish holds to prevent them from selecting some courses, and we can incorporate the use of pop-ups and animations to provide reminders and critical information.”

FaD06: “We can prepare videos for each programme, outlining basic information that they will need. I’m thinking of tutorials with people talking and arrows pointing them to complete specific tasks.”

Fostering Learner Autonomy and Agency.

In fostering learning autonomy, the lecturers will have to change their approach to teaching and advising so that the students can adjust their modes of learning.

FaD01: “Faculty should see themselves as counsellors and coaches who challenge the students and the students can challenge us and we encourage them on.” Based on the culture of dependency that was discussed earlier, the students’ expectations are that the advisors will resolve their issues.”

FaD04: “When the students begin to encounter problems, they behave as though the world is coming to an end. We will have to train them to be problem solvers, to be more resilient.” As a result of this approach to catering to students’ needs and reducing the level of their frustration while increasing student satisfaction, the students regurgitate what is taught to them without contributing to the advancement of the knowledge shared with new ideas.”

In response to the question regarding the ways in which advisors can foster learner autonomy, the lecturers recommended a major shift from the current approach.

FaD03: “We can have what is called ‘advising self-help’ and here the students can demonstrate that they can do this and that and it can be applied to the advising process.”

FaD02: “Students have to be encouraged to take initiatives and set goals for themselves.” They also identified some of the challenges in dealing with millennials.”

FaD07: “Students want to know how they can benefit; it’s about WIIFM –What’s in it for me? If we can engage them to show them how they can benefit and grow, then they will engage.”

Teaching and Training Students to Think.

As an educator, I have observed that many of the students in this era look for shortcuts by listening to YouTube videos and other sources of information on the Internet. This practice was evident in the discussion with the students when their stated preference for gaining information was videos and podcasts. The question about ways to promote critical thinking among our students was posed to faculty.

- FaD05:** “I think we have to teach them to think, to create critical thinkers. It’s about teaching them problem-solving skills, giving them simulations and case studies and forcing them to think.” In training and teaching the students to think, however, the advisors will have to facilitate the innovative approaches to get them to veer away from the common prescriptive approach in which they ask the questions and are given the answers.”
- FaD06:** “We can ask them to do reflexivity on what they have done and their journey and ask them questions where they have to think, create and apply what they have learnt.”
- FaD07:** “We have to present scenarios and simulations where they can deal with real-life situations and resolve the issues through different approaches and perspectives.”

Transformational Experience

The transformational experience is the culmination of the student’s journey, where they can evaluate how the educational advising experience would have transformed their lives, as the university’s mission statement declares. The advising experience is intended to provide the motivation, inspiration, encouragement, moral reinforcement and academic support to facilitate the student’s transformation.

- FaD08:** “I think that through advising we would have to teach them how to give of their best and to perform at their highest level of success.”
- SaC03:** I tell my students when I am advising them that I want them to think about how they learn, to discover what is their learning style and then they can work on that to achieve good grades and aid their transformation.”

It is that awareness that will cause students to reflect on their purpose and plans through critical thinking and the empowerment derived from taking responsibility for their learning.

As critical thinkers, the students will be able to exercise leadership and agency to make impactful decisions when confronted with issues.

FaD07: It's about taking a holistic approach and introducing them to a wider knowledge base while going the distance to do extra as advisors, to care, to do more, in sticking to our values and our beliefs and teaching them of the love of Christ to make them extraordinary and this goes beyond the classroom."

FaD04: I see transformation as reflecting our core values through our advising. I see those basic things as big things because students build trust in you when you are consistent in what you say, when your "yes" is "yes" and your "no" is "no"; so I see transformation as visual and personal in the way you live."

Transformation is critical to the philosophy and purpose of the university. The mission of the university is to transform ordinary citizens into extraordinary citizens of God to humanity. The overall goal of teaching and advising by praxis is to fulfil that mission of transformation. For the most part, the approach to transformation is based on the epistemological slant, through the integration of faith and learning in curriculum development and education delivery.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the current system of advising provided by the university has created expectations where the students view the provision of this information as a critical part of the support service and this shapes their holistic educational experience. The integrative approach and the nurturing style of advising provided through the SAC are reflective of the goal and purpose for which the Centre was established. Therefore, the proposed system of advising as praxis is antithetical to the current system and can be viewed as a radical shift in student advising.

As was highlighted in the findings, the current system of advising has created a culture of dependency in which the students privilege a position of beneficence. Therefore, they are not empowered to engage in the discovery or exploratory processes of information gathering and knowledge acquisition outside of their programme of study, to navigate and resolve the academic challenges they experience. Within this culture of dependency is the sub-culture of silence in which the students avoid questioning or challenging their teachers or advisors

because of fear and uncertainty in framing and verbalizing their position. Freire (1970) referred to the culture of silence in his writings as a form of oppression in which the students, as well as the poor people within the society, lack the confidence to question and to speak out against the atrocities within the society. He further showed how this is reinforced by the education system which is based on the Banking theory of knowledge as was discussed earlier. Therefore, a model of advising as praxis would facilitate dialogue between students and lecturers and create the space for engagement and critical thinking. As Puroway (2016) notes, questioning stimulates critical dialogue, and this dialogue is necessary for conscientization through continuous reflection and action. This calls for greater critical self-reflection in which students and faculty can consciously examine practices and experiences within academic advising.

Critical consciousness emerges out of the process of conscientization, in which there are different states of consciousness, such as intransitivity and naïve transitivity. According to Puroway (2016), individuals gain critical consciousness when they realize their own increased capacity for dialogue and agency. Mustakova-Possardt (1998) aptly describes critical consciousness as the product of interaction between motivation and evolving structures of thought in which each component continuously shapes the other. But, more importantly, all these elements must come together for the transformative action to occur. Mayo (2020) notes that action isolated from reflection is tantamount to mindless activism. and reflection that is divorced from action constitutes empty theorizing. But, together these elements constitute praxis in an interdependent dialectical relationship. These key elements of praxis will be actualized in advising through Boyer's (1990) notion of scholarship, using the process of discovery, integration, application and teaching. Therefore, through a "praxis model" of advising, the students can be empowered to navigate the system on their own and advisors can focus on mentoring and coaching them.

The rationale for advocating a praxis approach to advising was informed by the need to develop critical thinkers and autonomous learners who will be socially conscious and morally grounded in order to bring about change. As Freire (1970) noted, dialogue cannot exist in the absence of critical thinking. Therefore, in developing a culture of empowerment in higher education institutions, students must be critical thinkers in order to apply the theoretical knowledge gained to practical situations. The findings indicate that the students will have to be trained to think critically because of the colonizing nature of education in the Caribbean.

A praxis-based advising system will require the restructuring of the advising system and process to create a model that embraces the ethos and mission of the institution. Central to this restructuring of the advising system is the purpose and structure of the advising process to engender this socially conscious and empowered student.

Moving from a system of advising which fosters dependency, the challenge will be to develop a system which engenders learner autonomy. While the advisors can encourage students to take responsibility for their learning, learner autonomy requires the students to engage in self-reflection and motivation. The key elements of praxis – dialogue, critical reflection, critical consciousness and action – are also critical for learner autonomy to be realized. According to McCombs (1994), the one-to-one dialogic format also fosters a sense of personal agency in constructing thoughts in managing motivation and learning. In this sense, the role of the advisor is to question and stimulate discussion in order to bring the students to that stage of consciousness and action. Yamashita (2015) referred to the effective use of strategies such as scaffolding, journaling, reflective questioning, and the creation of a safe space for students to openly express their views and feelings during the advising process in order to foster learner autonomy. In the praxis approach to advising, these elements – learner autonomy, student empowerment and transformation – are all interdependent.

The integration of technology in advising is critical to the advising process. This point was highlighted by both the students and the faculty advisors. Given the level of technology diffusion and the integration of technology in teaching and learning, there has been a shift in the way students learn in this post-pandemic era. Therefore, training will be necessary to integrate technology into the advising process to build capacity among the faculty and advisors for effective advising. As Lowenstein (2003) purports, advising is a locus of learning, not a service that directs students to a place where they can learn. Therefore, the nature and structure of the advising process would have to be reframed and restructured and the roles of the advisors would have to be re-formulated in order to create a more praxis-based advising system which goes beyond academics and prepares the students for the world.

CONCLUSION

This study looked at the ways in which a higher education institution can incorporate the key elements of praxis in academic advising and how they can be employed to enhance learner autonomy. The data showed that advising as praxis is not only possible but necessary within the context of the English-speaking Caribbean.

Academic Advising as Praxis in Higher Education

The examination of the current advising system of the university under discussion exposed the fissures within the system that are antithetical to the mission of the institution. With the application of postcolonial theory through advising as praxis, however, the current culture of dependency can be disrupted and the space created to foster student empowerment and transformation. This notion of advising as praxis provides a more effective system of advising in which the advisors serve as coaches and mentors by motivating, encouraging, inspiring and providing moral reinforcement to students for their academic growth and progress and is more likely to result in a transformational experience for the students.

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