

The story we tell ourselves

Using self-compassion and reflection to drive advising outcomes

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Overview

- Power of narrative
- Narratives rooted in self-criticism
- Narratives rooted in self-compassion
- Rewriting the story



Inspiration for this presentation

The problem isn't the problem

Outcome vs. the story



What role does narrative play in advising?



Narrative in advising

- On the most basic level, advising is a conversation
- Transcript as a story
- Importance of context in advising – how do we get that context?
- Advisors as a general triage for a variety of issues
- Transformational and developmental advising requires reviewing and editing that story



**What role does narrative play in
your life?**



Narrative in life

- How we make sense of the world
- How we navigate relationships
- Provides context for our decision making





Self- criticism

**the act or an instance of critically
examining oneself**



Self-criticism

What are some ways you see students engage in self-criticism?



Self-criticism

What are some ways you engage in self-criticism?



Self-criticism

Disrupting self-criticism:

1. What is the criticism itself?
2. What evidence is there to validate that criticism? What evidence is there to invalidate that criticism?
3. If the criticism is valid, how can I rephrase this criticism to be more productive and compassionate? If the criticism is not valid, I give myself permission to dismiss the criticism.
4. Where is this criticism coming from (whether valid or not)?



Self-criticism

Disrupting self-criticism: Example 1

Student who often has trouble finishing out the semester due to mental health concerns contacts you to let you know they are withdrawing from all of their classes this semester. They are considering dropping out of college entirely.

What they say in the appointment: “I am withdrawing again. I can’t seem to get it together to make it to class. I don’t think college is right for me – I just can’t make myself go to class. I wish I was a better student and was more on top of things. I am sorry I wasted your time again with helping me plan classes.”



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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/compassion-matters/201305/4-ways-overcome-your-inner-critic>



Self-criticism

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1. What is the criticism itself? **You are saying you are not good enough to go to college. You are saying you don’t deserve to go to college. You are framing your mental health concerns as something you have control over or a choice.**
2. What evidence is there to validate that criticism? What evidence is there to invalidate that criticism? **To validate – you are not going to class. To invalidate – your mental health concerns are not something you have a choice in. You can choose to take care of yourself, but you can’t choose the state of your mental health. None of these things determine your worthiness to go to college.**



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Disrupting self-criticism: Example 1

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1. If the criticism is valid, how can I rephrase this criticism to be more productive and compassionate? If the criticism is not valid, I give myself permission to dismiss the criticism. **Give yourself permission to dismiss this criticism. You are making choices to care for yourself. You are here at this appointment talking to me about your options. You are engaging in your academics by taking action right now.**
2. Where is this criticism coming from (whether valid or not)? **It sounds like you are holding yourself to really high standards. If instead of navigating a mental health concern, you were navigating a physical health concern do you think you would be as hard on yourself?**



Self-criticism

Disrupting self-criticism: Example 2

Exhausted parent getting preschooler dressed in the morning to go to school. Preschooler wants a specific shirt after parent has just got them dressed and parent gets upset and raises their voice at their preschooler as now they are going to be late.

What the parent's inner critic says: "You are a bad parent for losing your temper. You have ruined your child's day by raising your voice. You never do anything right. Now you are going to be late and everyone is going to have a bad day."



Self-criticism

Disrupting self-criticism: Example 2

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Self-criticism

Disrupting self-criticism: Example 2

What the parent's inner critic says: "You are a bad parent for losing your temper. You have ruined your child's day by raising your voice. You never do anything right. Now you are going to be late and everyone is going to have a bad day."

1. What is the criticism itself? **Losing your temper makes you a bad parent. You are responsible for the happiness and punctuality of everyone in your home. Your attitude sets the tone for everyone and you have set a bad tone.**
2. What evidence is there to validate that criticism? What evidence is there to invalidate that criticism? **To validate – raising your voice is not setting a good example, you are transporting everyone so you are responsible for punctuality. To invalidate – you are not responsible for how others feel, your attitude can influence others but you are not ultimately responsible for the happiness of others**



Self-criticism

Disrupting self-criticism: Example 2

What the parent's inner critic says: "You are a bad parent for losing your temper. You have ruined your child's day by raising your voice. You never do anything right. Now you are going to be late and everyone is going to have a bad day."

1. If the criticism is valid, how can I rephrase this criticism to be more productive and compassionate? If the criticism is not valid, I give myself permission to dismiss the criticism. **You're tired and you are trying to be all things at once. You should model good communication for your child, but you are also allowed to feel frustrated and upset. Do you have an opportunity to process this with your child instead of just beating yourself up?**
2. Where is this criticism coming from (whether valid or not)? **It's coming from a place of love and care for your child and ultimately from the belief that you are responsible for everyone around you. You are, in fact, only responsible for your own actions and managing your own feelings.**





Self-compassion

Being warm and understanding toward ourselves



Self-compassion

What are some ways to help students engage in self-compassion?



Self-compassion

What are some ways to help yourself engage in self-compassion?



Self-compassion

Nurturing self-compassion

1. Talk to yourself the way you would talk to the person (or creature or idea) you love most in the world.
2. Assign value to the act of caring for yourself. How does it fit in with other values you have?
3. Identify circumstances that may trigger your inner-critic – how can you get ahead of those?



Self-compassion

Nurturing self-compassion : helpful approaches for working with students

1. Demonstrate compassion. Extend compassion to them and walk them through how they can extend that compassion to themselves.
2. Tell them the story that you are observing. Sharing their circumstances from an outside perspective can help them feel compassion for the subject of the story (them).
3. Give them permission/ask them to be kind to themselves. Remind them that they are deserving of the kindness and compassion and they have the power to provide it to themselves.



Self-compassion

Brainstorm probing questions or phrases you can share with students to help encourage self-compassion.



Self-compassion

Nurturing self-compassion : helpful approaches for working with yourself

1. Give yourself permission to care for yourself. Wilderness first aid/oxygen mask examples.
2. Ask yourself how you would respond to a friend in the same situation. Try to treat yourself that way.
3. Think about what you need in the moment. What does kindness look like to you in this moment?

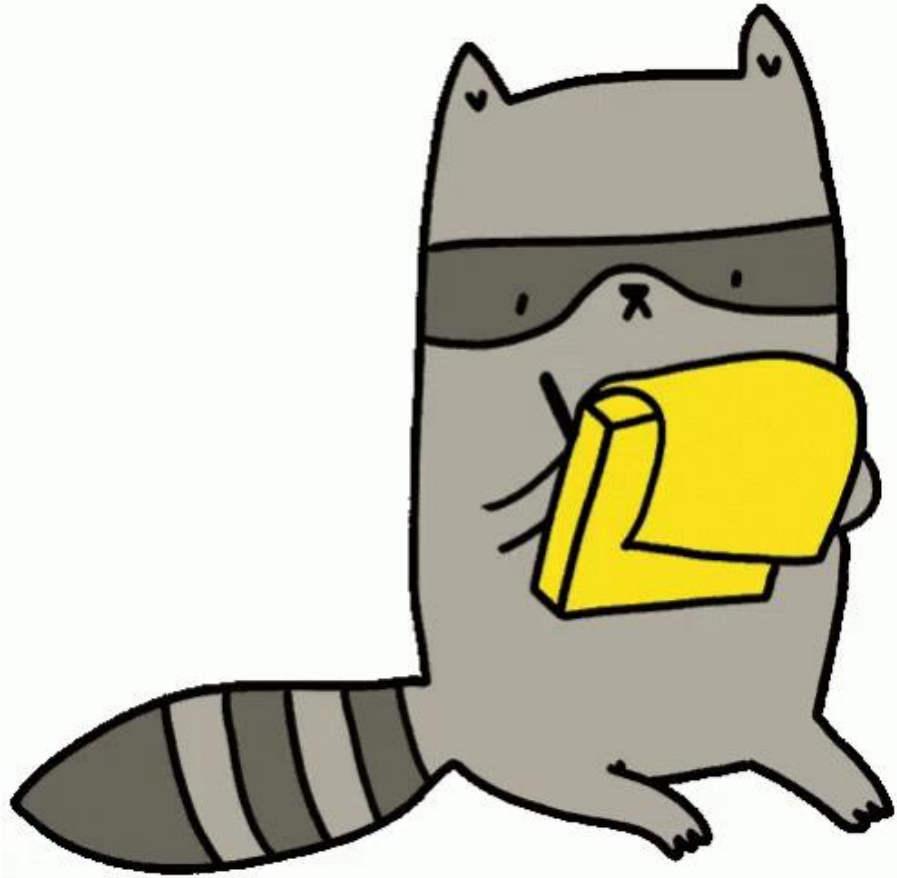


Self-compassion

Think of a time you showed yourself some compassion – what did that look like and how does that impact how you view that time?

Think of a time you didn't show yourself compassion, but wish you did – why didn't you show yourself compassion? How does that impact how you view that time?





Rewriting the story



Rewriting the story

Now, there's a cartoon that I think is a perfect example of what's really going on in these stories. The cartoon shows a prisoner shaking the bars, desperately trying to get out. But on the right and the left, it's open. No bars. The prisoner isn't in jail. That's most of us. We feel completely trapped, stuck in our emotional jail cells....

To write a new chapter is to venture into the unknown. It's to stare at a blank page. And as any writer will tell you, there's nothing more terrifying than a blank page. But here's the thing. Once we edit our story, the next chapter becomes much easier to write. We talk so much in our culture about getting to know ourselves. But part of getting to know yourself is to unknow yourself. To let go of the one version of the story you've been telling yourself so that you can live your life, and not the story that you've been telling yourself about your life. And that's how we walk around those bars.

- Lori Gottlieb, TED@DuPont



Rewriting the story

- What is the context? Specifically – what do I know about the narrator?
 - Are they a trustworthy narrator?
- Who are the characters?
- What is the moral or purpose of the story?



Rewriting the story – Example 1

Context - A and B student planning classes for next year. During global pandemic and all her classes are online.

Problem - Student is failing courses for the first time - she has 3 classes that she failed this semester and wants to change her plan for the next semester.



Rewriting the story – Example 1

What she is saying - I don't know why I wasn't more on top of things this semester. I used to be such a good student, but now I am failing these classes.

What I am hearing - I feel defined by these grades. I once saw myself as a good student, but now I don't. I see it as my fault that I wasn't successful in my online courses.



Rewriting the story – Example 1

My response - Let's focus on what you need to be successful in the Fall. Let's dive deeper on what posed the most challenge with the online classes. Were there other things going on in your life during this time? How did those things affect your experience?

Your grades do not define you. You never stopped being a good student. You are a good student. Even good students get Fs sometimes -- particularly during a global pandemic.

What I am hoping she hears - There are things within your control that you can make choices about in the future. You are not defined by your grades. Your grades do not determine the course of your life.



Rewriting the story – Example 2

Background - Myself. Advisor for 7 years. Working 10 or 11 hour days due to staff attrition and increasing expectations from students and the university.

Problem - I made an adding error in a student's audit and I told him he needed 5 more credits than he actually needed. Student was extremely angry/frustrated that I made this error and sent an aggressive email.



Rewriting the story – Example 2

What I am saying - I can't believe I made this mistake. I feel like I am making mistakes all the time now. Even though it hurt my feelings, the student is right to be mad at me.

What I am really saying - I see myself as someone who serves students. I don't make mistakes no matter how busy things get. My role is to provide perfect service all the time and I failed. This makes me feel like a failure across the board.



Rewriting the story – Example 2

My response - Presenting the case to a trusted colleague to see what their response is. Creating a role play in my mind, what if someone else on my team had done this exact thing? Would I consider them a failure? Am I responsible for how a student reacts to me or the actions they take?

What I try to takeaway - You are human and you are doing your best. You are not responsible for how others treat you or react to you. You are responsible for your own actions and for always doing your best. Remember that sometimes circumstances prevent you from doing THE BEST, but never prevent you from doing YOUR best in that moment.



Rewriting the story

Brainstorm some common life situations or advising situations where reframing the story would be helpful.

What are some common themes or topics you should be ready to edit/rewrite?



In conclusion...

- Stories have meaning and help us make sense of our lives and our academic journey
- In problem solving, often the most important takeaway is the narrative not the outcome.
- We can disrupt self-critical thoughts by analyzing the evidence and determining if that feedback serves us.
- Self-compassion can be cultivated by talking to ourselves as we would our dearest friend and we can and should encourage that act for ourselves and our students.
- We have the power to edit the stories we tell ourselves and our students – rewriting the story is empowering and helps us grow to know and unknow ourselves



To learn more

- **For exercises, more research and resources related to cultivating self-compassion**
 - <http://self-compassion.org>
- **For more information about Narrative Advising**
 - The Power of Story: Narrative Theory In Academic Advising by Peter Hagen
 - A Narrative Approach to Academic Advising: Helping Students Create Their Stories – a Webinar from Peter Hagen with NACADA - <https://youtu.be/bRyGU1hk3F0>
- **For more information about the utility of narrative in life**
 - How changing your story can change your life – a TED talk from Lori Gottlieb - https://www.ted.com/talks/lori_gottlieb_how_changing_your_story_can_change_your_life



Questions?

