

Happy to Help: Reflections on Learning Advisors' Emotions

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Abstract

Studies have reported and acknowledged the important role and impact of affective factors, such as confidence and anxiety, in language teaching and learning. Emotional factors are among the major topics that emerge during an advising session, where learning advisors (LAs) foster advisees' reflections about themselves and their language learning. However, the emotional issues of LAs themselves have not been discussed extensively. Could LAs' emotions influence their effectiveness in supporting advisees? Identifying and acknowledging the emotions we experience as advisors may be one of the first steps toward helping advisees more effectively deal with their own emotions. Based on this premise, we, novice language learning advisors, considered it worthwhile to reflect on our experience during our early advising practice. The context of this study is the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies, where students have access to learning advising sessions as part of the SALC's services. The main focus of this article is to summarize our reflections on our emotional experiences during our first semester of working as learning advisors, with common themes that emerged throughout the introspection process. The present reflection aims to raise awareness of the LAs' emotions among the advising community, including colleagues, mentors and trainers. We hope our study will prompt other advisors to explore their own emotions as they relate to their own advising practice.

自信や不安などの情意要因は、言語教育および習得に影響を与える重大な要因であるということが認められている。言語学習のアドバイジングにおいても、感情に関する問題は、しばしば話題となるが、アドバイザーたち自身の感情についての議論はあまりなされていない。アドバイザーの感情が学生をサポートする能力に影響する可能性はあるのだろうか。学生たちが彼らの感情に効果的に対処できるよう補助するためには、まず我々自身が自ら経験する感情を特定し、向き合うことから始めるべきなのかもしれない。この考えに基づき、筆者たちは、自らの新米アドバイザーとしての経験について内省することに価値があると考えた。本稿の背景である神田外語大学のSelf-Access Learning Center (SALC) では、ラーニングアドバイザーとの一対一の面談の機会が提供されている。筆者たちは、アドバイザーとして勤める最初の一学期間の経験を振り返り、その中で出てきた主題をまとめる。本稿の目的は、アドバイザーのいる組織において彼らの感情的要因についての認知を深めること、そして、アドバイザーたち自らの感情についての内省を促すことである。

Keywords: learning advising, learning advisors, professional development, reflective practice, emotions

In April 2022, we (Emily, Christine, and Sina) started to work as learning advisors (LAs) in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS). Learning advisors are facilitators who help learners to activate learning reflective processes and offer opportunities for transformative learning through dialogue. Advising is usually conducted through one-to-one sessions between an advisor and an advisee (i.e., the learners we advise) or through an exchange of written comments. While the authors come from different professional backgrounds, we all had the opportunity to acquire theoretical knowledge and practice in the certification course that the Research Institute for Learner Autonomy Education provides. This course offered by KUIS, based on *Reflective dialogue: Advising in language learning* (Kato & Mynard, 2016), included advising strategies and tools to help advisees develop self-awareness, including their cognitive and emotional states.

After our first months as LAs and our first experiences with individual advising sessions with language learners, we began to discuss how we approached the advising dialogue. In those discussions, the most recurrent topic was the emotions we were experiencing in our new professional practice. The collective reflection on practice presented in the present article results from our new ability to identify and put into words what we are experiencing in our advising journey.

This article first offers a brief overview of the literature on emotions in education, including those of teachers and advisors, and the transition and discovery of new identities among novice advisors. In the second part of the article, we describe emotions that emerged in our advising practice due to certain factors. The final section presents possible extensions of this collective reflection.

Emotions in Advising Sessions

The importance of teachers' emotions has been explored in depth (Burić et al., 2017; Chen, 2019), but less is known about advisors' emotions. Research into teachers' emotional issues has found that their emotions can affect not only themselves (e.g., self-efficacy) but also their students (e.g., school satisfaction; Arens & Morin, 2016; Burić et al., 2020). However, emotions experienced in teaching do not necessarily resemble those in learning advising contexts, and their impact on the practice may also differ, as the process of becoming a learning advisor involves a shift in the perception of oneself and language learning. For example, Howard et al. (2019) wrote that a teacher reported her transformation into a "more constructive, positive, and intuitive person, both as a teacher and as a learning

advisor” (p. 7) after participating in an advisor training course, even though she had been frustrated in her teaching context due to the lack of opportunities to address students’ learning issues. Arias-Sais et al. (2019) discussed that the experiences that are unique to new learning advisors include developing a new identity and coming to recognize language learning as a path toward autonomy. The authors described a sense of letting go and beginning to trust the learner to take responsibility for their learning. This requires advisors to acknowledge their fears and be vulnerable as they uncover their unconscious beliefs and emotions, in turn allowing for true openness with the learner. On the other hand, conscious attempts to use certain advising skills or techniques during a conversation with a advisee may feel uncomfortable or unnatural for advisors in training (Brown, 2021; Yamamoto, 2018). Yamamoto (2018) described that becoming a learning advisor is full of discoveries and challenges and requires constant reflection on practice and beliefs, which can be an overwhelming, complicated, and multifaceted process.

Reflecting on their practice can help advisors to understand their identities and the qualities needed to be successful advisors. In a study conducted by Karaaslan et al. (2019), participants of an advisor-training course wrote reflections about one word that represented them as advisors at the end of the course, which included gentleness, courage, and compassion. Gentleness is needed when interacting with others to allow them to “relax, open up, and realize their full potential” (p. 336). Courage is needed to try something new or help the learner go down a new path. Compassion allows advisors to empathize with advisees and shift to see their perspective so they can feel less alone.

Advisors also need the support of colleagues as they navigate their professional lives. Tassinari (2017) described the importance of sharing “experiences and doubts [...] enthusiasm and struggle” (p. 227) as an advisor with colleagues at conferences. Advisors may feel frustrated by the limited feedback from advisees after a session. They may also feel misunderstood or unappreciated by teaching colleagues or their institution’s administration. There is, therefore, a need for “all of us to share experiences, offer mutual support, and establish networks” (Tassinari, 2017, p. 227). However, little research has been done on the emotions of learning advisors.

Based on this short literature review and the emotions we experienced during our early advising practice, we would like to contribute to the discussion and encourage other (novice) LAs, trainers, and mentors to further reflect on how emotional issues impact the practice of advising.

Collective Reflection of Factors That Influence Advisor Emotions

The emotions described in this section result from a collective effort to reflect on our experiences as novice LAs. In an attempt to organize emotions that are intricately intertwined, we formulated an A-to-Z list of words that represented our emotional states. After each of us individually listed as many emotions as possible, we grouped them into common themes. We realized through this collective reflection that we could not discuss our emotions without taking into account the factors that influenced them. The influential factors that the three of us commonly agreed on include attention, growth, certainty, understanding, and energy. We describe below how these factors have affected our emotions and how we have attempted to alleviate negative effects.

Attention

In an advising session, LAs need to pay close attention to the present moment, especially because we cannot always predict the next steps to follow, leading us to sometimes improvise the dynamic dialogue with our advisees. We three agree that the sessions we enjoyed and felt the most proud of happened when we were able to be attentively and calmly receptive to our advisees' stories with an open mind. We came to realize that advising does not simply mean listening to advisees or providing quick answers but facilitating advisees' empowerment and realizations about themselves and their learning process. This objective should be achieved by focusing on the ongoing flow of dialogue and constantly seeking opportunities to facilitate advisees' reflection through the use of various advising strategies. At first, this was difficult as we mentally referred back to our advisor training, deciding on the best strategy or advising tool. However, as time went by, we realized that our most effective tool was our full attention and focus.

An advisor's duties are not limited to one-on-one support of advisees but also being part of their whole autonomous learning process and context. This includes awareness of what activities are happening in each part of the SALC (e.g., learning communities, festivals) and involvement in ongoing projects to improve the SALC's relevance for advisees. We experienced that this level of awareness could be overwhelming, create a distraction from what needed to be prioritized, and to a certain point, affecting our workload and emotional balance. Nevertheless, as we got used to this environment, we found it very stimulating.

Growth

Professional and personal growth often go hand-in-hand, developing knowledge, attitudes, and actions, among other elements. In the first weeks, novice LAs acquire new skills and experiences to engage in advising dialogue with advisees. They continually test and

evaluate their ability to use such strategies. We experienced pride, joy, and satisfaction in observing a connection between our growing ability to better use strategies and learners' growing autonomy. Additionally, we all felt an increased sense of self-worth and self-confidence as we became more competent, especially as we were involved in different projects, were given further responsibilities, and felt we could help advisees in their learning process. This, in turn, made us feel excited and hopeful for the future.

On the other hand, we have also experienced stagnancy in our roles at times. Advising does not have clear, predetermined progress markers like teaching, such as the end of the unit or a midterm exam. We meet many advisees that we may never see again, making it difficult to feel a sense of progress. For this reason, we have felt restless, hopeless, and discouraged at times. We have navigated this issue by looking at the big picture and remembering that we are making a difference in advisees' lives even when it is not immediately apparent.

Certainty

Unlike a language classroom, advising sessions tend not to be structured in advance; therefore, the spoken or written dialogue is usually improvised. As every advisee has different goals and needs, we have often wondered if our questions, comments, or suggestions were helpful. We could feel more certain when the advisee mentioned that the session was satisfactory or when there were signs of an advisee's growth (e.g., realizing something and having a learning plan by the end of a session). On such occasions, we felt content about how the session went, and it helped build confidence in our advising skills and decisions.

On the other hand, lack of feedback from the advisees (e.g., silence) and lack of signs of their growth led to uncertainty. When having doubts about what actions we should take, including what advising strategies to use, what questions to ask, and how well the session was going, we felt anxious about failing to make appropriate decisions and providing meaningful guidance. Fortunately, we found several ways to cope with our uncertainties. When dealing with advisees, it was helpful to remember that advising is not about "us" but the advisees. In other words, we need not be concerned about how we are performing but rather focus on the advisees' needs and try our best to support them. Having opportunities to share experiences with other LAs has been another effective way to ease the negative emotions like fear of failure. It helped us realize that others had experienced similar emotions and reduced our feelings of incompetence.

Understanding

What is a learning advisor? What is the purpose of talking to an LA? The mission of LAs may be less intuitive than that of teachers. We experienced some colleagues and students misunderstanding our roles. More often than not, students think of advisors as advice givers, and some say they are hesitant to make a reservation with an advisor because they do not have clear learning problems to get advice on. Advisors may experience situations where the advisees' aims (e.g., practicing speaking) for the session do not match with the true purpose of advising, which may indicate that advisors' roles are not fully understood. We experienced feeling disappointed and demotivated as we came across such misinterpretations.

However, we also share the impression that some teachers and advisees understood our roles. Such moments were a real confidence booster and increased our feeling of belonging to a community and the connection with its members. We used two approaches to increase the sense of acceptance among the student and teacher communities and further engage them in our daily practice. Firstly, we tried to explicitly remind them of the intention of an advising session, and secondly, we implicitly engaged students and teachers in in-class or out-of-class reflection.

Energy

Advisors are humans and, therefore, experience varying energy levels throughout the day. Energy affects us both mentally and physically and is influenced by our workload, stressors, and daily habits like food, sleep, and exercise. High energy levels positively influence our emotions. We feel more optimistic about our jobs, work more efficiently, and become more creative. We also experience a greater capacity for compassion towards ourselves and others, including colleagues and advisees.

As new advisors, we experienced exhaustion frequently. We had to focus on applying newly learned advising skills while building relationships with advisees. We found that actively listening to learners sometimes caused emotional exhaustion (e.g., a sense of hopelessness) and even physical exhaustion (e.g., headaches). We also had to learn the rules and expectations of a new workplace while navigating relationships with colleagues. We had to process so much information and do a great deal of emotional labor, especially in the first weeks. This sometimes led us to feel discouraged, overwhelmed, and apathetic. What helped us was taking the time to talk to colleagues, writing about the way we felt in a diary, making sure we took breaks (e.g., going for a coffee or a walk), and avoiding back-to-back advising sessions.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although we acknowledge that this reflective review of the emotions of novice advisors only represents the personal experiences of three individuals working in the SALC at KUIS, we hope that it may represent a starting point for colleagues working in other contexts to think about their emotional journey, identify issues, and reflect on possible areas of improvement.

In the future, we want to learn more about the emotions of advisors in various contexts. We are interested to know whether other new advisors experience similar emotions as well as how these emotions may vary depending on personality types or environmental variables. This could also be expanded beyond the scope of learning advisors to advisors in general.

Because advising is fundamentally different from teaching, there is a need to further explore and understand the emotional experience of advisors. In the future, we (the authors) plan to develop a tool to help advisors better understand their emotions. At the time of this publication, this tool is under development. It will prompt advisors to explore the factors that affect their emotions. Deepening advisors' awareness of their own emotions could allow them to navigate their roles more effectively and with greater personal satisfaction.

Final Thoughts

While the emotions we encountered as new advisors were both positive and negative, we feel a strong sense of gratitude for the opportunity to be in this role. Our colleagues and mentors have helped us to navigate and bridge the gap between our training and the realities of advising. We are especially thankful to the learners who invite us to participate in their learning journeys. We can better reflect on and understand ourselves by seeing their reflection and progress. The process of becoming learning advisors has given us the chance to develop both as professionals and individuals.

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