Challenges, paradigm shift and theoretical underpinnings of learning advising in higher education: The case of an Australian university in Singapore

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Abstract

Learning advisors are teaching professionals who play an important role in higher education. They exist in universities in order to help students achieve success in their studies and in their careers. However, learning advisors are faced with some key challenges. One issue is the seemingly vague and inferior position that they have in higher education. Another challenge includes the questions about where they belong and what key roles they perform. This paper responds to these challenges through the following propositions: (1) creating a unique and more nuanced understanding of learning advising by looking at an Australian university in Singapore, (2) making a stand that learning advisors constitute a duality of self or function, i.e., as an academic and as a professional, (3) explaining a paradigm shift in learning advising by embracing the humanistic and social constructivist ideologies, and (4) framing the role of learning advisors within key theoretical lenses that guide them in performing such roles in higher education. Examples of teaching practices are discussed by situating them within the key theoretical frameworks. This paper concludes that learning advisors are both academics (teachers) and professionals (e.g., learning resource developers) and teaching is at the core of what they do. Higher education institutions must become proactive in clarifying the misconceptions associated with learning advising and in breaking the labels associated with learning support that proliferate in the academe.

Introduction

Learning support is an integral part of higher education institutions in Australian universities, including some higher institutions in the US and the UK. Almost 75% of Australian universities have a dedicated learning centre or learning support system where a team of learning advisors provides guidance to students who are experiencing challenges in their academic studies (Association for Language and Learning [AALL], 2017) and who are at risk of attrition (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2017; Toh-Heng et al., 2019). A learning advisor is a teaching professional with relevant academic qualifications capable of bringing students from point 1 to point N of learning (Saludadez, 2014). The practice of providing learning support to students in Australian universities has but one aim: for students to be actively engaged in their own learning in order to achieve success in their academic studies in particular and in the real world in general.

In the Singapore campus of James Cook University (JCUS), mixed feelings permeate among students, academic staff and administrative staff about how they perceive the role of learning support. Some have questions that are left unanswered. Some are confused, while others have certain misconceptions about the type of assistance that learning advisors are meant to provide. It is important to answer those questions and eliminate those confusions and misconceptions by giving a clear, unique and nuanced definition of learning support in the context of JCUS as an institution of higher learning. It is also important to inform the community of higher education institutions about the paradigm shift that institutions of higher learning are undertaking, one of which is being carried out by the team of learning advisors in JCUS. The move from a functionalist-behaviourist paradigm to a humanistic and social constructivist paradigm is instrumental as it reminds advisors of JCUS to be mindful of their roles and the theoretical lenses that guide them in performing such roles in the university in order to contribute to the improvement of learning, teaching and student engagement.

Views about learning support in higher education

From a review of literature and reflection on experience, the concept of learning support appears to consist of blurred and overlapping lines in which many people in academia have but a vague understanding.

Some educational institutions define learning support as material or library resources. For instance, in many universities in Australia and the US, learning support is embedded in the university's library support system, appearing in the names "learning centre", "centre for writing and rhetoric", "learning and writing centre", "academic skills hub", "teaching and learning support", "student learning" or "learning hub" (James Cook University Australia, 2020; University of Melbourne, 2019; University of Western Australia, 2019; University of Minnesota, 2020; and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2020). It refers to materials or resources designed for students to achieve academic success by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning. These material resources can either be in print form or are accessible online (University of Carolina in Los Angeles, 2002). To enable learning, they must be fully integrated with instructional efforts such as being embedded in the library system, the students' subject outlines or within the digital learning environments that students navigate (University of California in Los Angeles, 2002; Association of American Publishers, 2016; James Cook University Australia, 2018).

Other institutions view learning support as social support and counselling for students who are adjusting and adapting to university life. This is a more inclusive view of learning support whereby not only academic support is a key component but also social adjustment, counselling and career guidance (Bates, 2014; School of the Arts Singapore, 2020; Curtin University in Singapore, 2019; The University of South Australia, 2020). Proponents of such inclusive support systems argue that students need assistance not only on academic issues but also on administrative or personal issues such as whether to repeat a course, delay an assignment due to personal problems, be given additional time during exams, or withdraw enrollment in a course due to emotional or mental health issues. This implies a therapeutic view of learning support (Bartram, 2009) that aims to ensure that students succeed academically while addressing personal, emotional or psychological problems (Bates, 2014; Lwehabura & Stilwell, 2008).

In some higher education contexts, learning support is defined specifically as the provision of academic help to students who are struggling in their subjects in the university. This is a more focused view of learning support whereby a strong presence of a team of learning and teaching experts pervade in the university with the goal to provide academic assistance to students and support the teaching faculty. Social support, career counselling and support on personal and mental health issues are undertaken in a separate capacity by other relevant departments in the university, e.g., by a Centre for Wellbeing or a Pschology Clinic. This view about learning support seems to fit with how learning advisors in JCUS operate and embody their roles. In JCUS, learning support generally refers to academic, learning and language skills support by dedicated learning support staff providing assistance in the form of face-to-face consultations, email, collaboration on cloud (e.g., OneDrive), and generic as well as contextualised workshops (Toh-Heng & Delante, 2019). It also includes assistance on statistical analysis, mathematics and research design. The staff providing these services in dedicated learning or study centres are referred to as learning advisors.

Challenges that learning support faces in higher education

In a global world, creating a team of professionals (e.g., a learning support group) as a way of embracing difference has become a business imperative rather than an option. As higher education institutions prepare their students for the complex world of work, their graduates' ability to effectively communicate and collaborate across cultures as evidence of learning has become essential for success. Difference is

a reality in the Singapore campus of James Cook University where students, academics, library staff, marketing staff and learning advisors from more than 50 nationalities work collaboratively in a dynamic learning environment. While this provides for a rich, exciting and inspiring experience, it is not without challenges (E. M. Fink, personal communication, December 2019). The next paragraphs discuss the challenges that learning advisors face in higher education.

One challenge that learning advisors are facing includes the perception that learning support is a seemingly inferior position in higher education. "I feel that I am a support teacher or relief teacher, not a language expert, despite my strong qualifications," shared one fellow learning advisor (C. Wong, personal communication, November 2019). Some believe that learning advisors are jack or jane of all trades. "It seems that they can do a bit of everything related to teaching and learning" shared another academic (J. Panchal, personal communication, April 2017). While being a jack/jane of all trades sounds promising, it conveys another meaning: that learning advisors are a cricket all-rounder essential to the team, but lacking the defined role of the bowler who takes wickets or the opening batsman who scores runs (*The Guardian*, 2017).

Another challenge pertains to the collective feeling that learning advisors share: the feeling of uncertainty or "neither-here-nor-there" phenomenon when it comes to understanding their position in the university. This phenomenon seems to enhance their having a lack of identity in higher education including a career progression that appears indeterminate or unclear (Murray & Glass, 2008; *The Guardian*, 2017). "Are we in the professional domain or are we in the academic domain? Where do we actually belong?" asked a learning development specialist from one higher education institute in Singapore during a symposium attended by learning advisors, learning development specialists and educators in Singapore (F. M. Lai, personal communication, November 2019). The undergirding notions of "academic" and "professional" that seem to push learning advisory from being recognised as not academic yet not accepted as professional are deliberated in an email discussion list for the UK education and research communities and in a learning support symposium facilitated by the Learning Centre of JCUS. In the UK email discussion, Foster (2011) of Nottingham Trent University's learning development team argued that learning advisors or learning development specialists cross both the academic and professional domains, therefore, arguing that they must belong to one domain is illogical. The same has been pointed out by the attendees of the symposium in JCUS.

The push and pull of whether learning advisors belong to the academic domain or the professional domain extends to the labels or identity categorisations that continue to emerge in higher education contexts. One of these categorisations pertain to the idea that learning advisors belong to a "third space" that is gaining steam in higher education institutions in the UK, US and Australia (Whitchurch, 2008). The third space is a contested space because individuals who operate in such a space possess academic credentials, undertake quasi-academic functions, work collaboratively in teams that deal with academic, research, policy or marketing initiatives, and have the capacity to progress towards taking academic management roles. Whitchurch (2008) argued that an identity called "blended professionals" is taking shape within the third space in which individuals falling within this category have dedicated appointments spanning professional, management and academic domains. These blended professionals are not only interpreting their given roles more actively, but are also moving laterally across boundaries contributing to the development and expansion of a third space between professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2008).

Murray and Glass (2008) support this contention by arguing that learning advisors are "border crossers" or "boundary crossers" in that they operate in a boundary between providing generic learning support and discipline-specific skills necessary for students to achieve academic success. They also exist in the boundary between performing academic responsibilities and undertaking administrative as well as professional roles, e.g., developing resource materials and conducting trainings with academics. Murray and Glass (2008) asserted that higher education institutions value the importance of learning support professionals as border crossers, however, some misconceptions remain about what they do and their impact on student learning. They postulated that in some higher education contexts, those learning support or learning development professionals are viewed as proof-readers, editors, reading tutors, relief teachers or staff offering support services to learners with disabilities, rather than academics with equally relevant qualifications capable of teaching.

The existence of these categorisations seems to expand the dichotomy between "us" and "them" or "support teachers" and "course teachers" (Orr & Blythman, 2006). Orr and Blythman (2006) mentioned that the role of study support or learning support teachers in helping and supporting students, to many subject content teachers, is "not teaching" (p. 5). This seems to undermine the capacity of learning support teachers to teach students. Content lecturers think that learning support teachers who are providing academic assistance to students (e.g., a workshop on writing an essay or basic grammar and sentence rules) is least of their concern. In some cases, learning support teachers are viewed as a "mop that does magic" on students' learning (Orr & Blythman, 2006). When students struggle to learn and fail, institutions would think that the mop has lost its magic.

In an article published by *The Guardian* (2017), an anonymous academic argued that those blended professionals who belong to the third space and are performing a "blended" or a "hybrid" role in universities are facing a significant dilemma in career progression. They appear to fall through the cracks in the hierarchy that determines career progression. Even if they straddle both academic and professional roles and have the right qualifications, their career progression appears to be blurred. "I am not concerned about this because I am already in my mid-50s; however, for young professionals who operate in this field, working in a flat structure might not be helping them progress in their careers" (H. L. Toh-Heng, personal communication, October 2018).

Nonetheless, the proliferation of these labels or categorisations (e.g., third space, blended professionals, border crossers, hybrid professionals, mop that does magic) does not stop learning advisors in asserting their position and in amplifying their voice in higher education. In JCUS, we are aware that these stereotypes and misconceptions will linger in higher education contexts. As a response, we advance a collective, strong and fundamental argument: that we continue to perform both academic and professional duties to contribute to students' success; and that we continue to improve our capacity to teach (e.g., conducting workshops on academic writing) and train (e.g., developing resource materials and facilitate staff development trainings) for students to accomplish learning and for academic staff to improve their pedagogical practices. This leads to the next section that describes the duality of the "self" of learning advisors.

A fundamental stand: learning advisors have a duality of self — academic and professional

In JCUS, learning advisors are guided by the following teaching principles: (1) respecting student diversity, (2) understanding students' conditions, capacities and cultures, (3) openness to ideas, imagination and creativity, (4) teaching students to grow rice rather than giving them a bowl of rice, and (5) collaborating with content lecturers to develop resource materials or conduct workshops that target students' skills and competencies. These suggest that learning advisors: (1) are teachers who have the power to influence and inspire students to achieve their full potential, and (2) are professionals who have the capacity to augment the expertise and technological know-how of academics in performing their job. This affirms that learning advisors constitute a duality of self – as an academic and as a professional. This duality of role is illustrated by Foster's (2011) model of learning development.
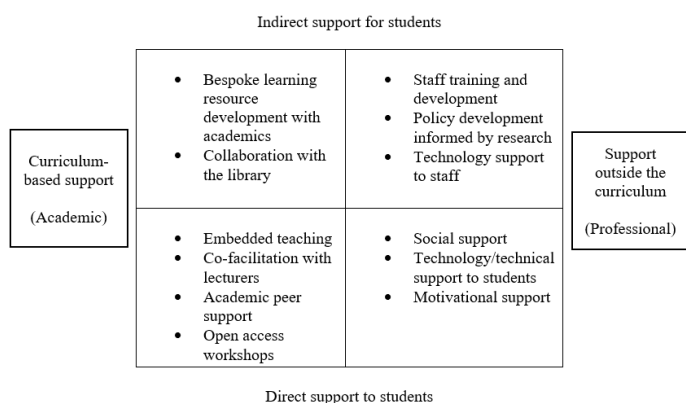

Figure 1. Mapping the academic and professional roles of learning advisors (adapted from Foster, 2011).

Figure 1 shows four quarters that allow learning advisors to map both their academic and professional functions. It illustrates the diverse nature of learning advisors crisscrossing both the academic and professional domains.

Academically speaking, learning advisors perform curriculum-support activities such as academic skills workshops and embedded teaching or guest lecturing in specific subjects. In performing these academic functions, we establish rapport with students and enable direct interaction with them. For instance, in April 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting schools, companies, businesses and lives worldwide, I had been requested to teach a subject that falls within my doctoral specialisation (i.e., contemporary business communication) that undergraduate business students undertake in JCUS. This is in addition to my learning advising role in the University. This illustrates my capacity to teach students enrolled in the degree programs, thus affirming my academic self.

Professionally speaking, learning advisors perform an array of professional duties for student development. One of these involve the production and development of learning resources that are designed to help academic staff and students improve their experiences. Examples of these resource materials include (1) an orientation guide for first year students entering the university, (2) an online learning guide that students can peruse due to the COVID-19 pandemic, or (3) a technology guide that helps teaching faculty to record videos and upload them into the online learning management system as part of their pedagogical materials. These examples illustrate the professional self of learning advisors, one that is outside the curriculum but is still focused in helping staff and students achieve their goals. Teaching and professional development are at the core of what learning advisors do. When I meet students face-to-face or in a workshop, I prepare myself to listen to their predicaments and I offer advice on improving their skills with the intention of bringing them from point 1 to point N of learning (Saludadez, 2014). I utilise learning resources to get their attention and engage them in dialogue. I do these as I am guided by those fundamental teaching principles that define teaching as an art, a strategic communication phenomenon, and a noble profession.

Pinning down the cross-disciplinary functions of learning advisors (see Figure 1) must help institutions of higher learning to dispel the stereotypes about learning advisors as third space navigators, border crossers, support teachers, relief teachers, non-academic professionals, tutors or people performing management roles. The real scenario in higher education shows that learning advisors possess both academic qualifications and professional trainings capable of student and staff development. They perform their work with full teaching capacity and a professional expertise that drives staff development, research initiatives and student success. They constitute a duality of self.

Reasons for the emergence of challenges on learning advising

Misconceptions about learning support in higher education as well as the perceived inferior position of learning advisors from course teachers can be brought by a few reasons.

Felt need. One of these reasons pertain to the "felt need" of a few people in the academe (e.g., heads of colleges or departments) about creating a learning support system in order to help students who are performing poorly in their disciplines. This felt need can be magnified by institutional

culture, i.e., the strong views and beliefs of a group in regard to the importance of establishing a learning support system in the university. An illustration of this felt need would be an Engineering faculty head asking for a dedicated learning support staff to help Engineering students who are experiencing difficulties in accomplishing their writing assignments. One of these tasks is to improve their technical and academic writing skills through embedded or standalone workshops, online teaching, face-to-face consultations and other means.

However, these felt needs become a challenge when only the views of a select few from within the internal work environment are heard. To overcome this challenge is to deliberate these felt needs prior to the hiring of people who would fill the position of learning support and any other relevant preponderances. This deliberation must answer questions such as: (1) Why are we creating this position in the university? (2) What are the implications of this to those people performing such role? Three points must be considered in this deliberation: (1) the perspective of the management and relevant staff wanting to establish learning support (internal), (2) the perspective of those who are performing the role (external), and (3) an anticipation about the future of learning advisors trying to accomplish the felt need. According to Wade (2009), anticipating the needs involves an identification of what needs to be done in order to move toward a specified future. In short, anticipatory needs are products of a present-to-future orientation; not present-to-past framework. Attention to the points above will help continue the discourse about why learning support is a necessary component in students' academic life. More importantly, it will help crystallise the crucial roles of learning advisors and deliberate human resource considerations including issues related to their professional development, promotion and career progression. Therefore, the views of those hired learning advisors matter in the continued dialogue pertaining to why a learning support system is necessary in higher education.

Framing. Another reason for the misconstrued constructs surrounding learning support can be attributed to framing theory. In communication situations, framing theory comprises a set of concepts and perspectives on how individuals or groups organise, perceive, and communicate about reality (Entman, 1993). Frames are abstractions that work to organise or structure a message. Framing theory suggests that the ways in which a concept (called "the frame") is presented to the audience influence the choices that the audience make about how to process that concept. This theory was introduced by Erving Goffman in 1974 who said that people interpret what is going on around their world through their primary framework comprising of the natural frame and the social frame. Natural frameworks identify events as physical occurrences happening naturally, while social frameworks view events as socially driven occurrences made possible by the whims, caprices, goals, and manipulations of social players (e.g., relevant people in the academe). Social frameworks greatly influence how an idea, concept or information is interpreted, processed, and communicated.

Manifest in thought, in interpersonal communication and in intercultural settings such as in multicultural universities, the ways in which learning support system is framed by the management and other relevant staff, departments or colleges influence the ways in which learning support staff enact their roles and create their professional identities. Framing theory thus allows them to shape and express their views about the concept of learning support and the roles and expectations of learning advisors. In many cases, how the views of these people about learning support are framed seems to misconstrue the roles and identities of learning advisors that are unique to their conditions. In other cases, such framing may propagate misconceptions related to learning support in general. For instance, a marketing professional who advises a student with anxiety disorder to seek help from a learning advisor conveys a misconstrued notion about the role of a learning advisor towards students. This happens due to a socially-framed (but wrong) perspective that learning advisors are counsellors, when in fact they are not. In general, counsellors deal with students' emotional and mental health issues; learning advisors, on the other hand, deal with academic issues and those related to professional development.

Hierarchy. Lastly, the hierarchical structure in the university system can be a reason for misconceptions about learning support to evolve. Course lecturers or content teachers, for instance, operate in a clear and established hierarchical structure which places them in a more advantaged position in terms of seeking professional development and promotion as well as striding a career path. However, for many learning advisors of learning centres in many universities, operating in an unclear hierarchical system (or a flat structure) puts them in vague waters such that seeking for promotion and establishing a career progression can be challenging. Having no clear structure can be a reason for others to question what they do and where they belong, thus, misconceptions can arise. For example, when one in-country representative brought a student to me, she had an understanding that, as a learning advisor, I can provide answers to students' assignment questions. In short, she thought that I am a tutor to students who are experiencing difficulties in their subjects. To correct that misconstrued notion of learning advising, I explained to her the crucial difference between a learning advisor and a tutor and providing students with answers versus discussing some strategies with students in answering short essay questions.

Nonetheless, learning support, as a unit, can grow organically and evolve continuously in universities. This evolution of who they are and what they do is possible not just with the passage of time but also with the increased consciousness and collective thinking among learning advisors about the reasons and meanings for their existence in the university. The existential question "Why am I here?" or "What is my purpose of being a learning advisor?" would be helpful in raising such consciousness and in shaping a collective thought. This illustrates how deep reflection of one's condition helps individuals in general to think about their purpose of living and enables learning advisors in particular to crystallise their profound roles and responsibilities in the university.

From learning support to learning advising: a shift to humanistic, multidisciplinary and social constructivist paradigms

With the continuous evolution of learning advising in higher education, along with the aim of dispelling misconceptions about it, the team of learning advisors in JCUS have exerted great efforts in reducing the use of the term "support" in their online media (e.g., webpage, BlackBoard organisation), internal LED posters, print collaterals and verbal messaging because the term "support" is perceived to stigmatise many students (Murray & Glass, 2008; Orr & Blythman, 2006; M. D. Thompson, personal communication, November 2019). Students tend to refuse to seek assistance from a learning advisor because they feel that they are being labelled as weak or that they possess learning deficiencies. As a team, we came up with a collective decision to eliminate the term "support" in our title and to use it sparingly, contextually and with care both in our online and offline documentations as well as in our interactions with students and staff.

With collective reflection and persistent interrogation of ourselves and our context, we have become decisive in moving away from the view that students have certain deficiencies, therefore, they need support to cope with academic demands and succeed. We are moving away from this deficit model of education which perceives students as individuals with a diminishing capacity to accomplish their learning goals and, therefore, fail (Bartram, 2009). This is a paradigm shift from the behaviourist and functionalist view of teaching, both of which view teaching as correcting students' behaviour and maintaining order in the classroom. In the functionalist and behaviourist paradigm, the teacher is considered the master in the classroom and his/her authority is necessary to control and form behaviour and maintain structure and order.

This paradigm shift is a move toward the humanistic model of education and the social constructivist worldview in education vis-à-vis the multidisciplinary nature of learning advising. This shift indicates a mindset change among learning advisors in JCU Singapore. This is a significant change as it influences the way we do things moving forward. This shift is a heuristic device that guides us in doing what we do. Being mindful of this paradigm shift makes a difference in embodying and enacting both our teaching roles and professional development functions.

Humanism. Influenced by the humanistic ideology of education, our pedagogical beliefs are shifted towards embracing the importance of helping students achieve their full potential by maintaining a nurturing teaching and learning culture and creating those conditions for students to explore their creativity, critical thinking, ability, curiosity and human agency (Holmes & McLean, as cited in Bartram, 2009; Davies, 1997; Robinson, 2006). With the humanistic model of education that guides our teaching practices, we are committed to the enhancement of holistic student development, well-being, and dignity as the main goal of human thought and action (Aloni, 2014). We believe that our students are unique individuals who have their own strengths, weaknesses and hidden talents waiting to be unleashed. We believe that they are capable of accomplishing their full potential. We believe that blaming them for their perceived incapacity and deficiency is incorrect and inhuman. Framed within the humanistic model of education, we believe that students must maintain a strong awareness of their identity and self-worth, of who they are and what they are capable of doing. We believe that students need to be actively engaged in their learning and be reflective of their learning practices and study habits for them to succeed. We believe that this active engagement in classroom interactions will allow them to freely express their ideas and be creative and critical in dealing with social, cultural and educational issues that matter to them. As we uphold the need to respect each other's differences, we take responsibility in taking the lead in establishing a common ground for us to resolve learning issues and promote equity in learning, freedom of expression, creativity and critical thinking (Craig, 1999; E. M. Fink, personal communication, February 2020).

Multidisciplinary approach. As learning advisors, we also embody a multidisciplinary approach in the things we do. We do not only teach students through opening specialised courses or workshops for them; we also serve as their learning consultants because we provide them with expert advice to improve their academic writing skills in particular (e.g., writing a critical essay in sociology) or their learning in general (e.g., how to keep motivated in college in order to complete a degree). In collaboration with lecturers, we also produce learning materials that are customised to students' needs. These come in varied forms such as short video clips (e.g., a short video about writing a literature review), or PPT or PDF materials about a customised workshop for a group of students (e.g., a PDF document that guides Psychology students in writing a laboratory report). We also work closely with student peer tutors with the aim of providing another layer of support to students in need, e.g., student peer tutors for statistics and accounting. We also embed micro-learning systems into modules and syllabi through collaboration with lecturers (e.g., periodic quizzes in the learning management system) in order to engage students and take ownership of their learning. We also conduct research that are relevant to teaching, learning and student engagement and we collaborate with lecturers in undertaking relevant research projects. One of our recent research collaborations investigated the factors that cause student attrition in the University followed by an action research that measured the effectiveness of an intervention program that aims to retain students by engaging them in online learning (Toh-Heng et al., 2019). In JCUS, it seems evident that we are wearing different hats illustrating that what we do is multidisciplinary.

Social constructivism. Lastly, we frame our teaching practices within the social constructivist paradigm of teaching. Social constructivism believes that individuals seek understanding of the world they live in by interrogating their subjective and multiple experiences and the subjective and multiple meanings that emerge from these experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These meanings are negotiated socially and historically and are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that are embedded in people's lives. In education, proponents of social constructivism focus on specific contexts in which students live and operate in order to understand their social, historical and cultural

backgrounds (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Particulary focused on social learning, Vygotsky's (1978) principle of constructivism asserts three major themes that include social interaction, the relevance of the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky's approach to learning development is constructivist because it emphasises the relevance and impact of social experiences on students' lives involving their family, school environment, community and society at large. Guided by social constructivisim, learning advisors in JCUS operate in a learner-centered and learner-directed classroom where students' subjective experiences matter. Our role is to facilitate and co-create learning (Saludadez, 2011), not to impose rules and regulations on students, and not to blame them for failing to accomplish their goals. We operate in a non-directive, non-dominating context where we listen to students' voices, help them master skills through encouragement and practice, and respond to their unique needs in order to promote interaction, collaboration and curiosity.
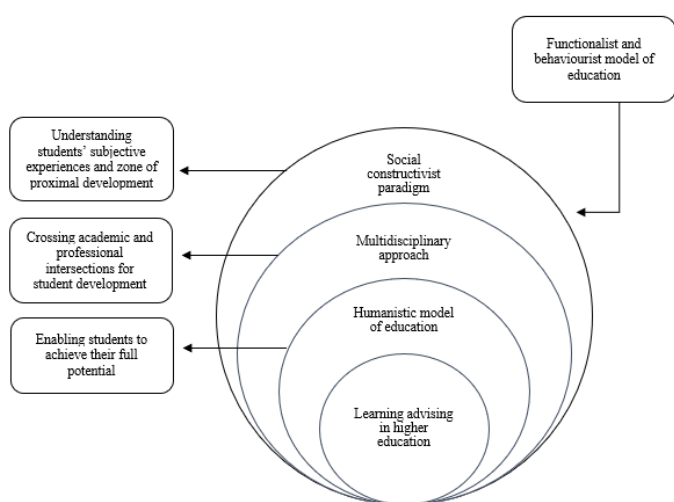

Figure 2. Paradigm shift of learning advising in higher education

To provide an example, when a student came to talk to me about why he keeps procrastinating, I did not act as a preacher to him. Rather, I listened to his stories to understand his context and behaviour. Instead of imposing my rules on learning, I advised him to do something based on my understanding of his reality, i.e., based on my honest opinion about his study and reading habits. When he said that he usually writes his assignments a few days prior to deadline, I explained to him the value of time management, in-depth reading, note-taking and personal analysis. His procrastination does not mean that he does not know anything. He showed a near-mastery of a few skills based on my assessment of a few essays he shared with me. To push him to his proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), I advised him to spend short periods of deep thinking about the literature he has reviewed, and write at least one paragraph using his own language and interpretation - a paragraph that is anchored in his main argument. I made a contention that if he makes this a practice, he may later realise that he is creating a unified whole – a complete essay that is coherent, organised and powerful. He came back to me one day to thank me for encouraging him to spend short periods of

deep analysis about his readings because it is working well for him. He also thanked me because such practice reduced his habit of procrastination.

Embodying the principles of humanism and social constructivism will enable us to perform our teaching role more effectively and help us to push students to create the best versions of themselves.

Learning advising: from "giving a bowl of rice" to "teaching how to grow rice"

With the paradigm shift in our thinking, our teaching practices and our overall philosophy, comes the challenge of whether or not our students can direct their own learning and be autonomous and self-reliant. Mindful of the humanistic and constructivist ideology of teaching, we enter into a collective deliberation as to when to tell ourselves to stop feeding our students with rice because we do not want them to develop dependency. The conversation below from Delante (2019, p. 12) illustrates how learning advisors can guide students towards initiative, self-reliance, self-regulation and learning autonomy.

Student: Teacher, I did not receive any feedback on my assignment I sent through email. Did you get it?

Teacher: It was the sixth assignment you sent to me this term. I think I spent a substantial amount of time giving feedback on your previous assignments. I explained that in my previous emails.

Student: But I think it is your job as a teacher, right? To give feedback to students' assignments.

Teacher: I think you're getting the wrong message. We want our students to learn from feedback whether it's face-to-face or in written form. I think you're asking too much, and it's unfair to other students.

Student: But isn't it your role to give feedback to students' assignments?

Teacher: I think you're not getting my point. I repeat, I've gone through five of your assignments already. It was an opportunity for you to learn some key skills to help you write this new assignment. I could feel that you are becoming dependent on me. Learning is not supposed to be that way.

In this dialogue, the teacher tells the student to learn from feedback and be self-directed. The teacher utilises explanation and appeal as his teaching strategies. Since the student appears to be insistent of his own view on teaching, the teacher offers him a logical view about learning by saying, "We want our students to learn from feedback whether it's face-to-face or in written form". He explains that the student must learn from previous feedback and be mindful of his mistakes in writing his future assignments. His intention is to inform the student that this is part of the learning process. The teacher also appeals to autonomous learning by telling

him, "I could feel that you are becoming dependent on me. Learning is not supposed to be that way".

Guided by the humanistic and constructivist ideologies in education, we believe that our students can do more and reach new heights when we teach them how to grow their own rice – a metaphorical representation of learning autonomy. Feeding them with rice every time they get hungry will have repercussions in their later life. One of which is that they may develop dependency in terms of making decisions for themselves and their own future.

The principle of teaching students "to grow rice" affirms one of the dual roles of learning advisors which reflects an important goal of teaching – to make students self-directed, autonomous and independent learners which is a step away from the funtionalist and behaviourist perspective of education. "Teaching students to grow rice" is a metaphor that reflects the principles of humanistic and constructivist manifesto in education and is driven by the multidisciplinarity or cross-disciplinarity of the functions that learning advisors undertake. These educational paradigms will be helpful for both academic and administrative staff in universities to reframe their throughts and conceptualisations about learning advisors in general. These educational paradigms serve as a guiding manifesto that remind academics in general that learning advisors do not belong to an inferior position in the university; they are rather equals because they have a similar capacity in helping students accomplish learning. They have a similar capacity to help students craft their success and their future because of their ability to teach and influence minds (as a teacher) as well as their ability to help academics develop their pedagogical skills (as a professional).

Theoretical frameworks undergirding the teaching role of learning advisors

In JCUS, the principles of humanism and social constructivism encouraged learning advisors to think deeper about their roles and functions in higher education. Humanism reminds us about viewing our students holistically, not in fragments. Social constructivism also reminds us about the subjective experiences and multiple identities of our students that merit openness, encouragement and understanding. Both paradigms encouraged us to speak to ourselves both as teachers and professionals. Both philosophies brought us to a discursive reflection which led us to pin down those theoretical frameworks that guide our teaching practices.
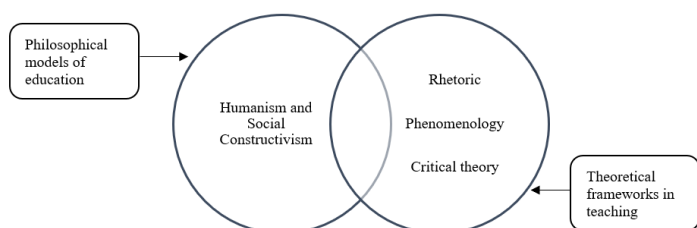

Figure 3. Relationship between the philosophical models of education and teaching frameworks

As a teacher, I contend that teaching is a discursive-communicative act. From a rhetorical point of view, I enter my classroom with the rhetorical intention to influence my students' thinking and alter their seemingly flawed perceptions about social, cultural or educational issues. I convey this intention by speaking my mind, using a compelling logic, listening to and interrogating my students' opinions, and building rapport with them through authentic and meaningful conversations. As teachers, we become successful in these intentions because we are strategic communicators in the classroom. We use the power of rhetoric to make and negotiate meaning. On the other hand, I am in constant dialogue with others around me and even with myself. I see to it that authentic and meaningful communication is in place through workshops, individual consultations, group conversations and introspection. I also invite students to think critically about issues that affect them. I ensure that students do not parrot what they read from books; rather, that they take a stand and make an informed judgment based on their interaction with texts. This way, their minds can be opened and their understanding expanded. Figure 3 illustrates the interrelationship between the humanistic and social constructivist paradigms and the theoretical frameworks that guide the teaching practices of learning advisors in JCUS.

It is important to theorise our teaching role as learning advisors because we perform a crucial function in higher education institutions – to help students accomplish learning and achieve success. Theorising our teaching role enables us to understand why we are doing what we are doing in a more profound and meaningful way. Therefore, reflecting on experience and interrogating our context led us to identify three key theoretical lenses in understanding our teaching role. These are: (1) the rhetorical lens, (2) the critical lens, and (3) the phenomenological lens.

I discuss each of these theoretical lenses below in conjunction to my personal circumstances in teaching and to my views as a communication educator influenced by Craig's (1999) traditions of communication theory.

The rhetorical lens

The study of rhetoric dates back to Ancient Greek sophists and runs through a long and varied history down to the present (Craig, 1999). Aristotle was a strong advocate of rhetoric. He even wrote a book about the power of rhetoric in public affairs. Aristotle argued that rhetoric is the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatsoever. A more modern view of rhetoric comes from Kenneth Burke (1945) who defines it as the primary force of human life. Burke (1945) asserted that in our daily conversations, we are driven by motive or intention (why) to accomplish our goals in communication and to build strong authentic relationships with others.

Guided by the rhetorical lens and with the influence of the humanistic and constructivist paradigms, I view teaching as the practical art of discourse with the intention to persuade and alter other people's views about an idea, topic or stand (Campbell et al., 2015; Craig, 1999). I define discourse in the

Foucauldian sense which refers to a system of possibilities for the creation of knowledge (as cited in Saludadez, 2014). This means that learning advisors, or teachers in general, are actively involved in creating discourse with their students and colleagues when they discuss learning issues or engage in meaningful conversations with them. Inherent in these conversations is to explore possibilities of achieving understanding, negotiating and making meanings and contributing to knowledge.

When I encounter problems in my interactions with students, I view these problems as social exigencies that can be resolved through the artful use of discourse to persuade my students to believe in what I believe in – my fundamental teaching principles anchored in humanism and social constructivism that resonate among teachers in general. This artful resolution requires collective deliberation and judgment among teachers (Craig, 1999). For instance, when students perceive us (teachers in general) as "givers" or "feeders" of knowledge, our collective judgment is to change this flawed perception in order to correct their thinking. We collectively make a decision to resolve this social exigency which illustrates the rhetorical power of teaching. This collective decision is to enable students to understand that learning happens when we engage in collaboration and co-creation of knowledge.

In my seven years of teaching in JCUS, many students have asked me to correct their grammar mistakes in their essays, literature reviews and reports. I consider this a social exigency in teaching. To resolve this flawed thinking, I tried to be consistent in telling students that correcting their grammar mistakes is not my role. Rather, making them aware of their grammar mistakes and helping them avoid those mistakes in the future by showing models of better writing and by reviewing basic grammar rules are my roles. Being explicit in explaining my roles to them served as my rhetorical strategy for students to understand my teaching philosophy.

Reflecting on this practical experience and other related experiences with my interactions with students, I realised that the way I advise and teach students consists of three rhetorical acts: telling (imperatives), explaining, and appealing (Delante, 2019). Telling or imperatives include a language of commands represented by modals that signify necessity or importance such as "must", "should", "need to" and "going to" (e.g., You must use appropriate vocabulary for this economics essay.). We tell students what to do because we know what is good for their learning and the reason behind our commands. Explaining, on the other hand, involves clarifying, elaborating and emphasising an idea, issue or argument that arises in the interaction. When I tell my students what to do and when I explain things to them, my intent is for them to learn to think about an idea, issue or argument and arrive at a basic understanding of such. Appealing, on the other hand, is a higher form of a rhetorical practice. It is a step away from a focus on the academic task (e.g., assignment as object) to a focus on one's capacity to learn (e.g., self as subject). I know that I am using appeals when I ask something or make a request by targeting my students' logic, emotions, attitudes and values. For example, I am appealing to my students' sense of autonomy when I say, "I think you need to work harder. I know that university

life is difficult, but this is about you and what you can do to have a meaningful journey in the university and achieve success. You must learn to direct your own sail."

I believe, learning advisors or teachers in general share these rhetorical acts. Collectively, we tell our students what to do, we explain things to them, and we appeal to their sense of reason, responsibility and autonomy because we want them to accomplish learning. If we experience a social exigency in our interaction with students such as a conflict of beliefs between how our students view teaching (e.g., teachers must provide us with knowledge) and how we view it (e.g., students must be actively engaged in the co-creation of knowledge), we perform these rhetorical acts because it is our role to alter our students' flawed perception about teaching and learning, to bring them from point 1 to point N of learning (Saludadez, 2014), and to open their minds by making them aware of the power of knowledge discovery and co-creation. Our rhetorical acts help us resolve the social exigencies that we experience in teaching.

The critical lens

Moving away from the sage-on-a-stage position, learning advisors perform the task of asking students those crucial questions that allow them to self-reflect, rather than keep feeding them with information or worse, thinking and writing for them. Discursive reflection is an important process in critical theory as it leads students to enhance their awareness about themselves and the world, and to discover their own strengths and power to achieve emancipation (Craig, 1999). As teachers, we utilise Socratic questioning (i.e., to clarify, to probe assumptions, to probe reason and evidence, to understand different viewpoints and perspectives, to probe implications and consequences and to question the question) because we want to raise the consciousness of our students about what they do and why they do what they do. Socratic questioning is reflective of critical theory.

As a teacher, I ask my students probing questions and implore them to learn and use the power of Socratic questioning because I want them to unmask those distorted reasons and question hegemonic ideology in the service of inequality, stereotyping, racism, patriarchy and injustice (Craig, 1999). Guided by the critical lens and informed by the humanistic and constructivist paradigms, I engage my students in discussions that enable them to articulate, to question, to comprehend and to reflect on those differing assumptions about how people view social issues related to gender, ethnicity, race, privilege, patriarchy, politics and power.

In one instance in my classroom, one female student came to me and confessed that she feels sad, weak and inferior because in her family, men rule, women follow. I saw it as a systematically distorted belief that serves patriarchal domination or masculinity, an ideology that still lingers in many cultures worldwide, particularly in the East. In response, I helped her realise that being in the university and pursuing a degree is an empowering and an emancipatory act. I reminded her that such an act of crafting her own journey in the university is her subtle way of resisting patriarchal ideology, promoting equality and embracing empowerment.

She was happy to have known that some people (including myself as her teacher) value her as a person, regardless of her gender and position in the socially-constructed hierarchy.

On a separate occasion, one male student with a physical disability came to me to discuss about how to deal with insecurities and anxieties. Not a psychologist by training, I offered him a piece of advice as a human being and a teacher with a wealth of experience. I was honest to tell him that almost every human being in the world has insecurities and anxieties. Having these means that we are human beings with various forms of imperfections – whether physically, socially and psychologically. However, having these insecurities and anxieties does not mean that we are incapable of achievement, fulfilment and empowerment. I told him, "A physical disability does not stop one from achieving his or her full potential as a human being". Also, I reminded him that "fears and anxieties can help us grow as human beings. They help us to be more mindful of ourselves and our capacity for compassion." He was happy with my advice.

To both of them, our conversations were insightful and eye opening, and I believe these types of conversations will help them raise consciousness about themselves, the society and the world. Guided by the critical lens in teaching and learning, I see myself as an instrument in raising awareness among students for them to fully appreciate who they are and what they are capable of doing, and deal with those distorted logics that pervade in society. Guided by the critical lens, I believe I can help my students reach their goals and achieve emancipation.

Table 1. How the Theoretical Lenses in Communication Theory View Teaching

Thereotical Lenses	View on Teaching
Rhetorical lens	Teaching is persuasion; teaching is a practical art of discourse
Critical lens	Teaching invites reflection and promotes awareness and emancipation
Phenomenological lens	Teaching is the experience of self in dialogue/interaction with Others

(Adapted from Craig, 1999).

The phenomenological lens

Another theoretical lens that is deeply embedded in my ways of doing as a teacher pertains to phenomenology. The tradition of phenomenology runs from the studies of Husserl to other famous thinkers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer and Carl Rogers (Craig, 1999). Guided by their principles of phenomenology and framed within the influence of humanistic and constructivist ideologies, I contend that, as a teacher, my ways of doing can be theorised as the experience of self in dialogue with Others. The phenomenological frame guides me to focus on my active consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, my own subjective point of view as a teacher. Therefore, I understand my role through my lived experiences guided by the question: What is the essence of teaching to me? Or, why am I teaching?

Central to the phenomenological framework is dialogue. In teaching and learning, teachers are involved in direct, unmediated dialogue with their students, with colleagues and with themselves. Through this, teachers and students can build rapport and authentic communication. This is made possible despite the presence of some difficult challenges such as the rise of advanced technology and computer games that seriously impede direct contact with students and pose a negative impact on teacher-student relationships.

However, a crucial problem arises when both parties (students and teachers) fail to sustain such rapport, genuine communication and authentic, supportive relationship through dialogue. To resolve this problem, we need to go back to the fundamental values that define who we are as teachers. In teaching, we must treat our students as persons, not as things. We must acknowledge that they have weaknesses and that they are facing difficult learning challenges. We must also acknowledge that they have unique strengths and abilities, not clean slates. We must respect their cultural differences and seek common ground. We must avoid creating those polarising and discriminating views about them, and we must learn to listen to them by promoting reciprocity and a non-dominating attitude in conversations (Craig, 1999).

To illustrate the phenomenological frame as one way of theorising my teaching role as a learning advisor, let me share a line of thought that kept haunting me for a decade now. This persistent self-questioning emerged as I succumbed into a series of deep reflection about my lived experiences as a teacher in a multicultural university in a foreign country. This abstraction helped me in answering the questions: What is the essence of my teaching role? What or who is the Other that is in dialogue with myself?

On the surface level, I am aware that I am in regular contact with students because they are the reason I was hired to do my teaching job in Singapore. I engage students in conversations because of essays that need feedback, literature reviews that need writing advice, business reports that require a basic understanding of report structures, or psychology theses that require an understanding of both qualitative and quantitative language and orientation. I consider them (students) as the immediate (human) Other in dialogue with myself.

Reflecting deeper, I encountered an underlying framework that represents the Other in dialogue with myself, in this case, an Other that emerged in nonhuman form. I realised that the Other can emerge in nonhuman form as explained by my doctoral supervisor (J. A. Saludadez, personal communication, June 2019) during our ad-hoc seminar in the Los Banos campus of the University of the Philippines Open University. At first, I thought that my persistent questioning about why I am doing what I'm doing was leading me to pay attention to my employment in a foreign country. I thought that the answer to why I'm doing what I'm doing is that I am in constant dialogue with Employment as the Other, that I should do my job well for my own security abroad, particularly my financial security. I realised that this is only surface level. In a deeper realm, I am doing what I'm doing not because I am employed to do so, and not because I badly need this employment in a foreign country and that

losing this job will lead me to unemployment, financial insecurity or depression. Rather, I am doing what I'm doing because of my passion to teach, to open the minds of my students, to alter their seemingly flawed perceptions about issues that matter to them, and to help them navigate the world and craft their own future. I realised that Passion is the deeper dimension of the nonhuman Other that is in constant dialogue with myself. And this has a profound link to my belief in humanistic and constructivist education and to my personal credo that teaching is a vocation and a noble profession, whoever we are, wherever we are, whoever we are teaching, and wherever we come from. Pinning down this deeper nonhuman Other helped me in answering the question: What is the essence of teaching?

Situating teaching practices within the three theoretical lenses

Table 2 shows how some of my teaching practices in teaching and learning can be positioned along the three theoretical lenses that guide me and my fellow teachers in performing our teaching roles. In doing this, we become more mindful of our roles and are circumspect of the theoretical positions we are taking in response to those unique challenges that we face in the classroom.

In a nutshell, teachers who would like to utilise debate as a pedagogical strategy in teaching can situate this practice within the rhetorical framework whereby the power of words and evidence matter in advancing an argument. When liberal thinking is encouraged in reasoning during class discussion, teachers can situate this practice within the critical lens whereby questioning or interrogation of one's opinions is encouraged in order to arrive at a more liberating or emancipating insight. For social learning activities (e.g., community immersion), teachers can position their pedagogy within the phenomenological frame in order to understand the interplay of identity and difference in cultivating authentic relationships through meaningful dialogues.

Conclusion

Learning advisors constitute a duality of self in higher education: as an academic (a teacher) and as a professional (e.g., creating learning resources and providing training to staff) (Foster, 2011). This duality of role helps in dispelling the stereotypes about learning advisors in general and affirms their crucial position in higher education. Crisscrossing the academic and professional domains which explains the multidisciplinary nature of their roles, learning advisors are tasked to help students accomplish learning, achieve success and optimise their full potential. Their crossing borders from the academic to the professional domains also benefits the teaching faculty of universities through staff training and development, technology enhancement and research collaborations that impact institutional policies and practice.

In JCUS, to establish our relevance to students and the University as a whole, we deem it important to embody a paradigmatic shift from the functionalist/instrumentalist

Table 2. Situating Teaching and Learning Practices within the Theoretical Lenses

Teaching and Learning Practice	Theoretical Lens	Rationale
Argumentation and debate	Rhetorical lens	Argumentation and debate is a teaching practice that invites students to use logical reasoning, empirical evidence and informed judgment. By using debate and argumentation as a teaching practice in classroom situations, decisions can be made based on who asserts a compelling judgment in conjunction to existing theories and principles, empirical evidence and expertise and who utilises the power of persuasion or strategic communication to assert a stand or advance an argument.

Debate and argumentation rests along the rhetorical lens because it appeals to rhetorical metadiscursive commonplaces such as the power of words in debate, argumentation as an artistic and creative channel of communication, the collective judgment amongst team members about a social, educational, moral or cultural issue, the dichotomy between fact and opinion, and the value of informed judgment (Craig, 1999). |
| Liberal thought | Critical lens | The liberalist approach to democratising and reconstructing education states that to overcome the increasing divide in education, along with a whole new set of inequalities that mirror or supplement modern divides of class, gender, race, and education, is to restructure education so that all students have equal access to new technologies and new literacies, so that education is democratized, and the very learning process and relations between student and teacher is rethought (Wells, 2008; McGinn, 1996). The liberal paradigm invites more interactive and participatory forms of education such as collaborative learning, online learning and an understanding of cyber culture. It practices no privileging one or the other, rather, it promotes equal access to educational resources and knowledge repositories. It cultivates subjectivities that seek fairness and justice, more harmonious social relations, and transformed relationships with other peoples and cultures (Limage, 2001).

These ideological assumptions of liberal thought in education move along the critical lens which appeals to the omnipresence of injustice and conflicts in society, the ways in which power and authority can overcome truth and reason, and the potential for discourse with others to produce a liberating insight. In order for social order to be based on genuine mutual understanding in opposition to strategic manipulation and oppressive conformity, it is necessary for teachers to invite students to articulate, question, and openly discuss their differing assumptions about the objective world, moral norms, and inner experience. For critical theorists, local practices and empirical outcomes of communication cannot be taken at face value but must be judged in light of reflexive analysis of the distortive effects of power and ideology in society (Craig, 1999). |
| Social learning | Phenomenological lens | Social learning (Bandura, 1963) posits that learning happens by observing others and by identifying that other people have unique differences from others as well. People's interaction with others affect the way they behave, and this enables them to create attitudes and values which can be biased towards other people. Social learning as an educational approach focuses on the value of lived experiences and dialogue. Learning through dialogue states that knowledge is created through transition, transformation and reflection on experience. Experience is the basis for people to create concepts which are then experimented and later pose an impact to decisions that people make (Kolb, 1984). Also, experience allows individuals to expand their awareness about themselves and to be mindful of the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour about other people they interact with.

This teaching practice is situated within the phenomenological lens of teaching whereby teaching as a communicative act is viewed as the experience of self and others in dialogue. It explains the interplay of identity and difference in cultivating authentic relationships. To derive meaning about teaching, teachers examine their day-to-day experiences through authentic dialogue with students and with themselves. As Craig (1999) posits, "As we experience other's expression towards us, we also directly experience and learn our commonalities and differences, not only the other as the other to me, but myself as other to the other as well." (p. 138) |

(deficit) and behaviourist (habit forming and behaviour control) models of education to the humanistic (holistic development) (Bartram, 2009) and social constructivist models of education (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). We deem it important to reduce, if not totally eliminate, the stigma that students experience when it comes to accomplishing learning by engaging them actively in meaningful conversations and creating those conditions that promote equality, equity, inner experience, curiosity, criticality, reflection and voice (Aloni, 2014; Craig, 1999). With the humanistic view of education, we believe that our students are not clean slates. They bring with them

unique abilities and creative talents into the teaching and learning situation that need to be unleashed. With the social constructivist paradigm, we believe that our students can learn through authentic and meaningful social interaction. Encouraging them to master necessary skills and learn from the more knowledgeable others through collaboration will make them emerge victorious in later life. In the same vein, helping them unleash their creativity and master relevant skills will enable them to achieve their full potential.

The shift to humanistic and social constructivist models of education helped us to become circumspect of the theoretical frameworks that drive our work with students – of what and why we are teaching them. We believe that these models are an anchor mooring our theoretical beliefs and practices in teaching. These include the rhetorical view, the critical view and the phenomenological view of teaching. The rhetorical view helps us to be mindful that teaching, as a rhetorical act, is a practical art of discourse. We view discourse from the Foucauldian sense which refers to a system of possibilities for the creation of knowledge. We embark on the use of our rhetorical acts in the classroom to help students accomplish learning. These rhetorical acts are driven by persuasion, language, logic and intention when working with students. The critical lens, on the other hand, reminds us about understanding teaching as a deeply reflective practice. Through discursive reflection, we become more mindful of our practices and we help our students raise their awareness, examine their conditions and question social issues such as inequality and injustice as ways to empower and emancipate themselves. Lastly, the phenomenological lens reminds us about the fact that teaching is an experience of self that is in constant dialogue with others. As teachers, we are in constant dialogue with our students and even with ourselves, including the nonhuman Other that we are deeply connected with such as our principles and the fundamental reasons we continue to teach, in this case, our Passion to make a difference in our students' lives.

Being conscious of the duality of our functions in the university, being mindful of our professional duties both for staff and student development, being circumspect of the paradigm shift that serves as our fuel toward learning accomplishment, being aware of our teaching practices (and remaining steadfast in situating these practices within the theoretical frameworks within which we view and embody our roles), and being reflective of our own situations in higher education, we will emerge victorious and invaluable in our students' learning experiences, their academic success and their careers in later life.

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