

**Learning from Pop Fiction:
The Benefits of Appreciative Advising in *The Hunger Games***

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According to Effie Trinket in *The Hunger Games* (Collins, 2008, p. 47):

...your mentor is your lifeline to the world in these Games. The one who advises you, lines up your sponsors, and dictates the presentation of any gifts. [Your mentor] can well be the difference between your life and your death.

Although this definition of a mentor is fitting for the dire situations of the tributes in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, for academic advisers it sounds extreme. After all, higher education professionals surely would not use the same definition for their roles in advising college students, but should they? Though professionals cannot typically claim a life and death responsibility for their students, they are critical players in helping students plan and execute their collegiate success plan. Perhaps, the mentors in *The Hunger Games* and mentors on college campuses aren't so different after all. Both connect students to resources and assist in the students' preparation for the future. Recognition of the similarities in the roles and responsibilities of a mentor provides a unique lens for examining our work as practitioners in higher education.

The purpose of this article is to track the consequences of *The Hunger Games*' fictional mentors' advising styles in order to illustrate the effectiveness of an Appreciative Advising approach and to suggest best practices for academic advisers and other higher education professionals in mentorship roles.

Brief Overview of *the Hunger Games*

In Stephanie Collins' fictional *Hunger Games* trilogy, Katniss Everdeen, an adolescent girl from an impoverished background, sacrificially volunteers for an annual countrywide fight to the death so that she can save her sister from mandatory participation. She and the other competitor from their district, Peeta, travel to the Capitol, where the Hunger Games will be held. During the week or so prior to the games, a mentor, Haymitch, and a stylist, Cinna, prepare Katniss for the spectacle and physicality of the Games.

For the purposes of this article, the plot should be understood metaphorically. Katniss can be seen as a student in crisis who must adjust to a new environment, develop and carry out a plan for success, and cope with many common college student struggles, such as homesickness, fear of failure, self-confidence, and management of emotions. Haymitch and Cinna help her with each of these things and gather helpful resources before and after she enters the arena, much like student affairs professionals help college students during times of transition. Katniss' relationships with her mentors, Haymitch and Cinna, form the basis of comparison for this article. In the following work, this article will present their respective advisory styles, with Haymitch employing a non-Appreciative approach, and Cinna representing the Appreciative Adviser.

Haymitch Abernathy: A Non-Appreciative Disaster

Every year, Haymitch mentors the two tributes, or competitors, from his area of the country. As a past victor in the Games, the gruesome memories of his time in the arena and the repeated murders of his mentees in the consequent years haunt Haymitch to no end. Though his behavior is understandable in light of his turbulent life, he nevertheless fails to be an Appreciative Adviser to Katniss and Peeta.

Haymitch Doesn't Disarm

In fact, Haymitch miserably fails. During his first encounters with the tributes, his lack of dedication to their wellbeing informs his interactions with them. His allegiance is to the alcohol that helps him forget, so he is usually either inebriated or voicing how he would rather be drinking. When not spiking his beverages, he displays far more interest in the lavish Capitol food than his terrified mentees. Instead of being welcomed into his company, Katniss and Peeta have to violently demand his attention with physical confrontation, including a scene in which Katniss slams a knife into a table between his resting fingers. Only after their insistence does he offer conditional support: "you don't interfere with my drinking, and I'll stay sober enough to help you" (Collins, 2008, p. 58). Despite this minute progress, the scene also establishes an antagonistic relationship between Haymitch and his tributes.

Haymitch Doesn't Discover or Design

Haymitch's strategy for guidance relies on strict instruction and command. He explicitly demands of Katniss: "you have to do exactly what I say" (Collins, 2008, p. 58). Katniss' input or exploration of her strengths is prohibited. Plans for how she will train, act in public or private, or prepare for the arena are mandated: "it's not open for discussion" (Collins, 2008, p. 92).

Haymitch Doesn't Dream or Deliver

Always keeping the probable reality of failure at the forefront of conversation, Haymitch banishes any dreams of Katniss surviving the Games. His plans are for the immediate, never for the future. This behavior in any adviser runs the risk of completely disengaging the student and instilling incredible self-doubt. His statements to her are unbelievably insulting: "you've got about as much charm as a dead slug," (Collins, 2008, p. 117) and "you were about as romantic as dirt" (Collins, 2008, p. 135). He even *gives up* when trying to prepare her for an interview after his attempts to craft a new persona for her fail rather than identifying and building upon her strengths.

Consequences of Haymitch's Advising Style

The aftermath of his advising style inhibits her preparation for the arena and could easily have doomed any mentee less extraordinarily motivated than Katniss. His motives and communication are never clear because the whole plan is never revealed to her. She guesses at his motivations for withholding resources in the arena, such as the instance in which he withholds food and medicine to encourage romance with Peeta. Though Haymitch acts in her

best interests, it would have been far more effective if the plan had been mutually developed and openly discussed.

His attitude toward Katniss makes her develop an antagonistic perspective towards Haymitch. She refers to his plans as “Haymitch’s stupid instruction” (Collins, 2008, p. 92) and repeatedly expresses frustration that results in communication breakdowns. Overall, his behavior creates cycles of distrust and dishonesty between them, not only in their first games together, but also throughout the entirety of the trilogy. For example, in the last book, Katniss says that she “lost all [her] sympathy for Haymitch when [she] realized how he had deceived [she and Peeta]” (Collins, 2010, p. 25).

Cinna, the Appreciative Advising Hero

Cinna is a fashion stylist assigned to dress and present Katniss to the public prior to the Games. Past images and behaviors of stylists inform Katniss’ expectations of an outrageous and self-centered stylist. However, Cinna contradicts her preconceived notions and exceeds his job duties, using an Appreciative Advising approach to mentor Katniss.

Cinna Disarms in their First Meeting

Instead of the grotesque “dyed, stenciled, and surgically altered” (Collins, 2008, p. 63) stylist that Katniss expects to meet, Cinna presents himself to her as supremely normal. Even his voice comforts her, as it is “somewhat lacking in the Capitol’s affectations” (Collins, 2008, p. 63) that Katniss so despises. His first order of business is to compliment her natural qualities and notice small details, like her elaborately braided hair. He exhibits the exemplary behaviors of the Disarm phase of Appreciative Advising: his calm demeanor, body language, presentation, and small talk put her at ease and build the foundations of a trusting relationship (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008).

Cinna Discovers her Natural Strengths and Helps her Design a Plan

Cinna allows her natural beauty, both inner and outer, shine through the glitz and glam of the Capitol. Much to the dismay of his design team, he insists on minimal makeup so that Katniss can look and feel like herself. After Haymitch gives up on prepping her for the interview, Cinna works within her strengths to help her develop a plan to get through it. He encourages her to be herself, because “no one can help but admire [her] spirit” (Collins, 2008, p. 121). By working past the negativity Haymitch instilled, Cinna gives her the basics to come up with a plan, or as Katniss puts it, “at least a straw to grasp at” (Collins, 2008, p. 122).

Cinna Doesn’t Let her Settle

Cinna realizes that the goal of keeping Katniss alive is not exactly a walk in the park. To keep her from becoming overwhelmed and giving up entirely, Cinna acknowledges the little victories along the way. For example, he intentionally takes her aside to congratulate her success in becoming “Katniss, the girl who was on fire” (Collins, 2008, p. 109), one facet of their plan for public support. Because he encourages her not to settle, she associates him with her overall goal, in part motivating herself by being unwilling to fall short of his high hopes. She highly

values their relationship and wants to uphold his expectations and dreams for her; she doesn't "like the idea of disappointing [him]" (Collins, 2008, p. 105).

Cinna Always Delivers

Perhaps the most powerful and moving part of Cinna's mentorship is his vigilance in delivering upon his promises and commitments to Katniss' success. When appropriate, he monitors her stability by noticing when she needs to be assured and comforted with a hug, embrace, or even a shared moment of silence. He never fails to use words of positivity and encouragement, words that resonate with Katniss far after the moment in which they are said. He builds a relationship of trust, asking her to "think of [him] as a friend" (Collins, 2008, p. 122) and never gives her reason to doubt his motives. She always knows that he is rooting for her, even telling her outright, "Remember this. I'm not allowed to bet, but if I could, my money would be on you...truly" (Collins, 2008, p. 146-7). Moments like this are numerous throughout the trilogy, resonating long after Cinna's departure from the series and marking his lasting positive influence on Katniss.

Consequences of Cinna's Advising Style

Cinna and Katniss' relationship develops based upon tenets of trust and strength-based inquiry. As Cinna values her unique personality and qualities, Katniss values his honesty and commitment. His mentorship allows her to enter the arena well prepared, and out of the traditional order of the Appreciative Advising cycle, allows her to dream of a brighter future. With Cinna's guidance, she slowly begins to believe in her own ability to succeed in the Games despite the constant negativity from Haymitch. Furthermore, their relationship remains strong even after the Games' conclusion because of the strong bond created through Appreciative Advising. In the beginning of the second book, *Catching Fire*, she says, "just the sight of him makes [her] feel more hopeful" (Collins, 2009, p. 38). The plan that Cinna and Katniss develop together fulfills its original goals of Katniss' victory. However, like any quality mentorship, the results don't stop there. Thanks in part to Cinna's positive influence on Katniss' self-worth, she becomes the leader of a revolutionary movement that frees the people from the Capitol's oppressive rule.

Discussion

Katniss lives, surviving under both of her advisers with their respective advisory styles. Why choose the Appreciative Advising approach? The quality of the Katniss and Cinna's relationship far exceeds that of her relationship with Haymitch. Her interactions with Haymitch take on a tone of grudging obligation rather than cautious optimism, even after the conclusion of the Games. In terms of higher education advisement, the ersatz case study suggests that Appreciative Advising contributes to more engaged and positive student interactions, with the students more committed to their goals. Each phase of the Appreciative Advising cycle [Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle] (Bloom et al., 2008) is incorporated into Cinna's approach to Katniss, creating a meaningful and successful journey for Katniss. The prolonged path of their mentor-mentee relationship also suggests the potential to create lasting

mentorships with students, far outside the mandatory pre-registration academic advising appointments. *The Hunger Games* illustrates the short- and long-term benefits of Appreciative Advising, creating a, albeit fictional, case study for higher education professionals to inform their own advising and mentoring roles.

References

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