Chapter 15. From Positionality Statement to Motivating Positionality Story

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When I attended a small, private, liberal arts college as an undergraduate, none of my professors knew that I was a first-generation college student. They didn't know that I received the maximum, need-based Federal Pell Grant each year. No one knew that I had been home schooled by my parents—one Scottish permanent resident and one American citizen—in a small town in southern West Virginia, that I have a GED instead of a traditional high school diploma, or that I got my first job at 14 to start saving for school.

Despite what they didn't know, my professors had a variety of mostly positive assumptions about my educational background, odds at success, and prior knowledge. Those assumptions were informed by visible and invisible aspects of my identity: I am a white woman. I was born in the U.S. and English is my first language. People tell me I don't sound at all like a hillbilly.

Although my professors seemed to think it was only natural that I would attend and succeed in a predominantly white institution like theirs, I wasn't sure I belonged, and I had a lot of questions about how college worked. I also had plenty of assumptions of my own: I thought everyone else was better prepared and more confident than I was, and that they already understood how to succeed in college.

To earn my work-study funds, I took a second campus job as a writing center tutor and finally met other students who were as anxious, doubtful, and confused as I was. I also noticed that other students, especially Black, international, and other multilingual or multidialectal students, didn't seem to benefit from the same set of instructor assumptions that I did. In instructor feedback, I was told to edit more carefully. They were told their work was unreadable and that they should try harder or "get fixed" by visiting the writing center. I was deeply frustrated and confused by this. My own feelings of imposter syndrome made me wonder why faculty hadn't found out yet that I believed double-spacing meant pressing the spacebar twice between every word on a page. I couldn't understand why so many faculty didn't seem to recognize the incredible talent and bravery of students who pursued a college degree in a strange country thousands of miles away from home and in their second or even fourth language. And I didn't understand how so many highly trained experts seemed unable to read and understand their students' writing—writing that I, a novice, understood rather easily.

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My early experiences in the writing center impelled me to become a writing teacher-scholar, but it took me more than a decade to fully understand and articulate the origins of my vocation.

As a doctoral candidate, I felt stuck trying to figure out how (and frankly, why) to write a dissertation, a seemingly rigid and depersonalized academic genre. In my prospectus, I had written a mostly surface-level listing of my identities, privileges, and relationships to power. That *positionality statement* wasn't helping me, and it felt like a hollow exercise.

Late one evening, unable to compose anything "academic" at my computer, I instead made an audio recording that eventually became a longer version of the personal, narrative history I shared above that traced the throughline from my early educational experiences to my doctoral research interests in prior knowledge assumptions. Before telling myself my own story, I thought my dissertation topic emerged from general frustration during my candidacy exam reading; an annoyed sense that transfer scholarship needed to pay more attention to the identities and cultural repertoires that comprise part of students' prior knowledge. Somewhat ironically, I later realized that some of my frustrations stemmed from the need to more authentically recognize my own identities and cultural repertoires, too. Speaking and writing through, rather than about, my positionality story enabled me to see that my research interests were always deeply rooted in my experiences and upbringing. In fact, *needing* to begin my dissertation with oral storytelling is a clear marker of the Appalachian identity that I thought I needed to scrub away in order to succeed as an undergraduate and member of the academic community.

The rest of dissertation writing came more easily to me once I shared my positionality story with my advisor and committee, who embraced and invited more storytelling throughout the project. Interweaving stories (my own and participants'), data, traditional analysis, and personal reflections helped me with everything from managing project scope to generating the kinds of theoretical and practical interventions I ultimately want my academic work to produce.

Even beyond the dissertation, telling myself and others my positionality story as a personal history has expanded how I understand myself, find meaning in my work, and relate to my students and colleagues. I encourage the students I teach and advise to develop positionality stories as an ongoing narrative practice that connects their identities, experiences, prior knowledge, and communities to the questions they ask and the work they pursue.