

Chapter 21. Who Tells Your Story: The Power of Counterstory and Conversations of Positionality in First-Year Writing

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Several years ago, after teaching at the university level for a while, I decided that I wanted to pursue my doctoral degree at Old Dominion University, so I spent the next year excitedly and expectantly prepping my materials for the application due date. I submitted my hard work by the deadline, proud of all the parts of me I put into it, and excitedly waited ... then I found out I was waitlisted.

A few weeks after that I was denied outright.

It was all at once a devastating and humiliating experience, for it fed right into the doubts that had been festering under my enthusiasm and anticipation of acceptance into the doctoral program. You see, I grew up as a young, Hispanic child in some of the poorest parts of the already low-income area that we reside in known as the Rio Grande Valley, which sits at the very bottom of Texas right along the border of Mexico from where most of my immediate relatives hailed. My family has a long history of members dropping out of school very early to be what are known as “migrant farmers”, those who would travel north during the picking season to work in the fields. As such, education was put on the back-burner for most of my family members, meaning that any type of advanced degree like the one I was trying to obtain was non-existent. After my rejection, my mind began to feed into those doubts again and started to ask itself: have you gone as far as you deserve to go? Who are you to think you’re good enough to get this type of degree anyway, when it’s never been done in our family before? Wouldn’t it be better for you to just stay in your lane?

It took a while to get those thoughts out of my head, and after a year of hard work to beef up my CV and better explain my scholarly pursuits, I reapplied and finally got in. I’ve been pursuing my doctoral degree ever since.

But all this to say that I’ve been the student who has been filled with doubts of my worthiness in occupying a space in academia; and because I now teach at the same institution I attended, I see students whose lives, identities, and stories very much mirror my own, with similar experiences of “less-than-perfect” journeys that led to my First Year Writing (FYW) courses. Journeys that have often been filled with people or practices that have told them that they just aren’t quite

welcome in academia in some form or fashion, whether that be a teacher that harshly criticized their writing or a state-mandated standardized test that labeled them as “not college-ready” and sent them to classes that are often labeled “remedial” or “developmental.”

Because of this, what I often hear from my students are apologies for not being “good” at writing or reading which saddens me deeply every time because then I often witness these feelings of inadequacy stymie their confidence and appreciation of their own voices despite proving their brilliance in class again and again. I began to wonder if there might be a way to help them to see that their doubts and fears do not come from their supposed inadequacies but rather from outside and often insidious forces in academia that imply that the “ideal” college student has to fit a certain type of identity to be worthy of the space.

The answer came when I took a doctoral course focused on social justice in pedagogy. It was there that I was introduced to a book called, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory (Studies in Writing and Rhetoric)* by writing scholar Aja Y. Martinez. In it, she talks about the concept of counterstory, which is a practice that seeks to disrupt the dominant narratives from the very privileged of our society by bringing back stories from marginalized groups back into center focus. It is a practice that is also deeply rooted in critical race theory, where counterstory can be used as a method to push the theory forward by bringing minoritized voices to the center of conversations in order to disrupt racial biases in society. It was an incredibly eye-opening concept and I was immediately drawn to the idea of using it to empower my own students through the notion of being able to share their own stories that are often underrepresented and underappreciated. It was my hope that I could bring these conversations about identity, positionality, and counterstory into my classroom so that students can begin to investigate their own complex thoughts and identities.

To that end, I decided to use the Rhetoric & Composition II (or ENGL 1302) course I teach, where we’re allowed to theme the course to our liking so long as we have students produce a portfolio and accomplish program outcomes, as a space to implement counterstory-themed projects for my students. They were sequenced as follows:

- A Counterstory Reflections Podcast, where students are asked to engage in a conversation about a counterstory-related topic of their choosing to demonstrate their understanding of the concept that has just been introduced to them
- A Counterstory Article, where students engage in research over a topic related to identity/positionality that is then aided by the use of counterstory and shared in a traditional research paper
- A Public Counterstory Remix Artifact, where students are asked to take conversations that they’ve had in their articles, make rhetorical decisions about the counterstory-related messages that they think need to be shared,

and then transform those conversations into a multimodal presentation that they then share with an audience of students in developmental writing classes that would have those students engage in the same conversations that my students have been having throughout the semester

- A Reflection Video, where students are asked to think back on what discoveries they have made about counterstory and its significance in their academic journeys

I have been running this themed course for about six semesters now and the myriad of topics and conversations students delve into have been remarkable and illuminating. Just to highlight a few, I had one student talk about the problematic practices of machismo, or a strong sense of pride based in masculinity, that permeates through his job as a car mechanic and car culture within the Hispanic community in general, which he notices often prevents his female relatives from being to participate. Another student talked about beauty standards related to skin tone and how it can lead to identity and cultural crises if one is made to feel like they are not an acceptable color to be identified as a certain race or ethnicity. Another addressed religion and culture and what problems may be caused when the two are so intertwined that if you don't identify as one you might be ostracized from the other.

All of these incredibly important conversations that these students explore were born from our conversations about counterstory and its ties to positionality, which we, as a class, approached as the way all the various parts of your identity shape how you see the world and how the world sees you. Students then pick one or multiple parts of their identity where they can identify an issue, and ultimately a line of inquiry, that they can explore and aid with the use of counterstories.

But beyond just a means of framing the goals of the work they produce for their portfolios, these conversations about identity, positionality, counterstory, and the rhetoric that shapes it all become so much more. I have seen them become revelations for many students who start to make sense of the concepts in relation to themselves and their own feelings about how they see the world and how the world also sees them. They begin to see how being aware of their own and other's positionalities helps them in recognizing problematic situations, how counterstory also sees identity as a catalyst for the ways various communities are treated and viewed, and how disrupting any of those ongoing narratives that perpetuate those damaging practices is so vital.

Throughout the semester, students work with these concepts, weaving them together to piece how they fit and what meaning they create for themselves and the larger conversations they are entering when creating their projects. And because they are now aware of the concept of positionality and how it situates them and their own stories in a variety of ways, I notice that they start to investigate not only the topics that they choose for their projects but also their own internalized feelings of uncertainty over their own self-worth. From the class

readings and their own research, they begin to question the origins of the practices that have instilled in them these doubts and start to scrutinize the systemic practices which lead to those feelings, which they then discover are rooted in racist or prejudiced practices that are still entrenched in parts of academia. They then see that those feelings come from far more complex places rather than from anything that would definitively prove that they are not “college-ready” as they were made to believe, and slowly but surely the hesitancy to add their voice to these conversations, both in class and globally through their research, starts to slough off of them to reveal the highly capable and valuable academic that they always deserved to feel like.

One of the most powerful ways I’ve seen all this come to fruition is when I introduce the concept of deficit-thinking, which we define as the assumption by instructors that they must focus on supposed student deficiencies or flaws that need fixing rather than the opposite where students are encouraged to believe in their own strengths that simply need to be fostered. Because of those deficit-thinking practices that instructors engage in, students are often made to only focus on those supposed deficiencies which only further feeds into those doubts about their academic worthiness. After grasping the concept, students start to share their own experiences, most of which shock their peers and myself, like the story of a student whose math teacher once told him that he expected to see him on the streets pretty soon because he definitely wasn’t going to succeed in school. After they come to realize deficit-thinking’s deeply problematic origins in inequitable and often racist educational practices through these egregious examples, they then dive deep into designing a presentation that addresses it through conversations that they feel that other university students need to hear in order to disrupt any negative beliefs they might hold about themselves as well. We then present those conversations to a public audience at a university-wide undergraduate research symposium where I’ve seen my students engage in conversations with other students they’ve never met over topics like problematic professor practices and where that stems from, how to overcome educational anxiety, the need for educational reform, just to name a few. All visitors they chat with leave the presentation incredibly impressed and my students return to class after the presentations expressing their surprise at how knowledgeable they felt about the topic and how proud they are of themselves for being able to share so passionately about their chosen topics.

So suddenly my students, who are often members of marginalized communities themselves (people of color, lower income, ESL speakers, neurodivergent, etc.), are having their stories being told in an academic space that they often would say doesn’t feel made for them, and through the work they produce and the conversations they have start to see their ideas and their voices have value and recognition. By the semester’s end when I take a look at their reflections, the proclamations of “I’m not good enough” that I had heard early in the semester aren’t expressed, and instead I see declarations of how much they feel they have

learned and accomplished and how proud they are of themselves after having proved to be more capable than they assumed they were before. One student, for example, even shared that at the beginning of the semester that she wasn't sure if she was going to be able to grasp such a seemingly difficult concept like counterstory but that by semester's end she surprised herself completely by not only understanding the idea but also caring about it enough to share her discoveries with her friends. It all seems to become a very healing process for them.

But, perhaps selfishly, it becomes a healing process for me, too. Right along with my students, I investigate my own positionality over and over and come to recognize both the privilege and complications that my position in the classroom has on shaping these spaces. On the one hand, to have such a similar history and, more often than not, ethnic identity as my students I think gives me great insight into their struggles because I have felt and continue to feel those same feelings of doubt about my academic worthiness, especially as I climb higher and higher up the academic ladder with my doctoral studies and see less and less people that match my own identity and familial history. I think it's because of these insights that I was able to get the notion to theme the course through a lens of a practice that positions me as an ally in their educational journey who only seeks to empower them rather than lord over them like other professors might be tempted to do with their own power.

On the other hand, famed author Audre Lorde once said, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"; but as a professor who is hired by the academic system to teach within it, the master's tools are mostly what I've been provided. The power dynamics of me as the professor, "in charge" of the class, and them as the students tasked with going along with my instructor are ingrained into the positionality of our labels and cannot be completely broken without dismantling the house which at the moment cannot be undone by one classroom or one teacher alone. As the roles have to stand, so too does the slight removal of my standing with the students to where we can never quite be on equal foot. By virtue of the various amounts of privilege I knew in my life (loving parents, free education thanks to my status as a low-income student, etc.) that got me to what some would call a very successful position, I wield the master's tools whether I want to or not.

So the question becomes how can positionality be recognized and used to help dismantle that master's house to as much of a degree as we can? I think the answer lies, first and foremost, in the recognition of positionality and the myriad of identities that make up the mosaic of ourselves as humans existing within this world. Then from there I think it is a matter of storytelling and deciding from which parts of your identity you would like to share stories from. Will it be the part of your identity that is privileged, that will gladly glom onto any semblance of power that society has designed itself around so that systemic practices will continue to suit you? Or will it be the parts of your positionality that recognize the need for change; the need to hear from the most vulnerable communities and push for change so that their stories can become better and happier ones over time?

I know that the answer for myself is that I intend to use the parts of my storied positionality that recognizes the need to continually fight for equality and justice. But beyond just recognizing, I hope my actions truly reflect that desire as well. That is why I should like to continue this work of counterstory and centering it around conversations of positionality with my students, not only because I have been where they stood but because I truly do believe that if students, especially Freshmen students, can engage in these conversations early, they can go forward with the confidence of knowing that their voices matter and that they truly belong in this academic space and beyond. And hopefully from there, they can start to create their own tools that will do the work of dismantling the master's house and rebuilding it with stories from all communities once and for all.