

Chapter 27. “I Believe in the Future of Agriculture ... and Composition”: Abiding in Positional Differences through Educating Rural Students

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Fact #1: Roughly one in five grade students in America attend a rural public school.

Fact #2: Rural grade students who make it to college are more likely to drop out than their urban counterparts.

Fact #3: Those who don't drop out are often plagued with struggles due to knowledge gaps linked to lack of K-12 public-school resources.

These statements reflect a difficult truth: a student's background affects their life-long learning and orientation.

I myself am a rural student who later became a writing teacher in the city, though I admittedly had an advantage throughout my early education. Both parents completed graduate programs and taught me to love learning. I attended the local public high school in my East Texas town and from there went to a small religious college in the region and continued living a blissful life behind the “pine curtain.” However, I felt like I was living in a liminal space, caught in between the past I loved in ETX and the future I craved in academia. After all, it seemed bigger cities alone had the resources I needed. Would I ever feel at home in either place? Why were they so different?

While I'd become aware of the unique situations rural students experience while in high school, I did not understand them until I became a graduate student. My educational experience was marked by lack of access to stable internet, due to geographic location, low budgets at my Title I school system, and fewer school sponsored activities as a result of these wanting budgets. I now carry a longing to reconcile my love for the educational environment I grew up with to the academic privilege I have gained—for me and my students of similar backgrounds. This desire goes deeper than just understanding what rural students have experienced. Experience, to me, is passive; it is what has been done to me. My positionality, however, is an active force that affects how I perceive reality and the steps I take to control my own educational future.

To be proactive, I encourage my students to draw from their positionalities when deciding on project topics and lean into what has made them unique while learning tools for clear communication in my classroom. One of my favorite assignments I've given involves students considering where they grew up and who they are as a result. Some have told me afterward they felt heard in a different way than they had in writing classes before. It means a lot, as if I'm getting to see the fruits of the labor from all who poured into me blooming in my students.

I once thought I would see these results in what I myself produced in the academy. I operated under the assumption that who I became as a teacher and a student would be in spite of my background, not because of it. It is an honor to support my rural learners like I was supported and meet every student where they are. I get the privilege of teaching them how to utilize their pasts to create a powerful future.

To revisit my earlier questions, I do feel at home as a rural learner and academic but only because I realized I cannot live without either part. They weren't really different when I looked at them critically; both taught me to slow down and enjoy where I am and what I do. I am a rural academic—proudly. It is a joy to pass on this sentiment to my students.