Chapter 4. Storied Practices in Community-Engaged Work: Expanding Conceptions of Positionality

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In 2023, we were participating in a discussion about practices of and lessons learned with a group of other community-based researchers when Ann mentioned needing to be nimble and adaptable because of how quickly and unexpectedly change occurs. As we continued talking about how such dispositions align with community-engaged work, we began considering how dispositions, or habits of practice, intersect with positionality and also with research stance. We also began considering how attention to positionality, dispositions, and research stance, throughout all stages of a project, inform more inclusive, participatory, and ethical community-engaged work. In this chapter, we use our own experiences, along with stories from our years of engaging in this work, to consider the complex, layered nature of positionality.

It is not one experience that led to these perspectives; it is an accumulation of our own as well as those of others—and not just from one situation, but over time and from a range of privileges and perspectives, which, we have found, may come and go. What we seek to do in this chapter is explain these interconnected concepts and move them from being unique to our own experiences to being useful and portable for others. We offer brief definitions of each of the concepts and an exploration of their interconnectedness. We then share moments from our own experiences that we hope illuminate what an intentional and encompassing approach to positionality in community-engaged work, inclusive of dispositions and research stance, and the intersections among these, might look like.

Community-engaged work can occur in different locations and have many purposes and entry points. While research is often the primary purpose, in some situations it might be a secondary or not a purpose at all. In Ann's case, the initial purpose for YpsiWrites, the community writing resource she founded with colleagues, was to extend writing support into the community. Another purpose was to amplify the voices of community members. For many of us, adding capacity to the community is the goal.

It has been our experience that the communities in which we work are characterized by complex, ever-changing relationships that further complicate

positionality. In response to this complexity, scholars must assess, reflect on, enact commitments to, adapt, authentically show up in, and always be attentive and responsive to the many different stakeholders that make up the communities. Scholars must also be attentive to how they may influence and impact these communities.

Considering Positionality, Research Stance, and Dispositions with Intention

We have come to understand positionality, research stance, and disposition as intrinsically linked, working together to inform aspects of our practices and actions. If we tease them apart, we think of positionality as liminal—changing based on our relationships within and to the communities with which we work, and based on our identity, power, privilege, and expertise within the situation and moment. For us, research stance, while also dynamic, is less liminal because it is based on the methodological, ethical, and theoretical frameworks we rely on to guide our commitments and approaches to community work. For example, we both value inclusivity as an essential aspect to our work no matter the location or issue involved. While we are unlikely to disregard inclusivity over time, we may learn ways to be more inclusive, or how previous practices were not as inclusive as we hoped, and apply these new understandings to our commitment to inclusivity. Dispositions are habitual practices that inform our responses in situations. These may begin as aspirations but over time become deeply ingrained in how we react. For example, if we strive with practice, intention, and reflection throughout our work, to be flexible, open, and ready to adapt or pivot in a given moment, we are more likely to respond this way.

This more deliberate consideration of these concepts provides an opportunity to be more intentional. It allows us to foreground our awareness, authenticity, and attentiveness to a setting, along with our understanding and responsiveness. It also facilitates our honoring the diverse and multi-layered backgrounds and stories of everyone we meet and work with in communities.

Traditionally, we have addressed positionality when we write up our work. The questions we are urging ourselves and others to ask include, Are we actually thinking about positionality from the outset and throughout our work? And, How is our positionality experienced and enacted in each moment? Also, drawing on brown's *Emergent Strategy* (2017), How are we showing up, and how are we present in our work, not just to and within our fields, but to and within the communities in which we are working, and with the members of those communities? We also need to be clear about with and to whom our commitments lie (e.g., our communities, our universities, our profession, and/or our publications). We need to show up, be present, listen, and meet people where they are; we need to prioritize our communities and their members.

Our Own Positionality

We acknowledge our own positionality in writing this chapter. My (Michele's) work in communities began in graduate school where I taught community-based writing projects in courses and studied how publics participated in environmental decisions in their communities. It was here that I began thinking about my relationships to the communities in both settings—very much an outsider in the later but an insider in the former. When I shifted my research from observing public participation to engaging with publics in seeking social change, I became even more aware of how my relationships with community members informed the access I was given to community decisions.

My community-engaged classroom projects often overlapped with communities where I was already working in ways that complicated my positionality with my students and community partners as well as the university and with how I wrote up those projects. Ongoing work across multiple groups in my own town deepened and shifted my connections within the community.

My [Ann's] community-engaged work also began with client projects. After graduate school, I began exploring how they support student learning and what each group (students and clients) found meaningful about them. I did not think about my positionality until my IRB asked that a third party interview my students, pointing out that my authority as their instructor could influence their decisions to participate and their responses. I also became more mindful after graduate school of my positionality with clients, most of whom were former students or members of our local Society for Technical Communication chapter. Although I had formerly worked as a professional writer, I was now a professor and no longer a peer in the same way.

Over time, my involvement with communities changed—as did my interests. After I began directing our university's writing center, my focus shifted from studying workplace writing to working with and alongside organizations, groups, schools, and even individual community members to share and provide writing resources. This commitment to working with and alongside of and valuing the perspectives and voices of community members led me to an even greater consciousness of my positionality, especially in relation to my identity, privileges, and power.

As late-career faculty members at doctoral-granting universities, we now both have the privilege, without worrying about tenure or promotion, to do more of the slow work of establishing relationships and trust, building capacity, and committing to long-term projects that may not result in published research—a privilege we know many community-engaged researchers may not share. While we've noticed our positionality shift depending on our relationships with community partners, members of the communities with which we work, and students—and also in relation to our expertise with the issues within projects—our commitment to participatory, inclusive, intersectional approaches to joint inquiry and decision

making that adds capacity with and in communities has only deepened. These experiences have taught us more about the dispositions that allow us to do the work we hope to do with communities—the readiness to adapt and pivot (not just the ability to do so), the consciousness we strive for—to pause, for example, throughout the process to ask what harm we might be doing or what social, economic, or political realities we might be privileging over others. These experiences have also taught us to be receptive when community members, or others (Ann's IRB), point out privileges that we might not have recognized.

Stories

One story that I (Michele) believe highlights the intersection of positionality, research stance, and disposition involved working with a city council-appointed citizen group tasked with awarding microgrants from the city to fund neighborhood engagement projects that members of the neighborhoods themselves designed. The citizen group was concerned with being good stewards of the city's money to sustain the program, and to that end, developed a detailed grant application that unintentionally discouraged community members from completing the grant for their neighborhood engagement projects. In a moment of shared exigency, the citizen group recognized our *positionality* (our power and ability to change the complexity of the grant), our *research stance* in the form of our commitment to adding capacity to communities and our belief that the communities knew what they needed more than we did, and our *disposition* of adaptability to pivot *from* our focus on sustaining the citizen group itself and how the city would react to our grant revision *to* our commitment to support neighborhood engagement.

One application requested $1500 for a sign for a small park in the North End of the city that they believed would help restore the area as a family gathering place for the neighborhood. The citizen group initially hesitated, wondering if the funds might have a bigger impact on a project other than a sign. Again, we considered our *positionality*, but this time as individuals outside of this neighborhood. Our *research stance of participatory and inclusive practices* reminded us that residents in a neighborhood knew better than us what was best for their neighborhood. Our committee's disposition toward being open and flexible to this unexpected direction, and our goals of trust and empathy, prompted us to fund the request. Within a year, the city offered to paint a crosswalk from an elementary school to the park and to repair the playground equipment—quick, low-cost fixes that together resulted in a place the residents now frequently gather and that supported the kind of community building we sought but could not have anticipated if we had rigidly stuck to the letter of the application. Our decision also worked toward establishing trust and respect with the community.

My (Ann's) story that highlights the intersection of positionality, research stance, and disposition is the story of how a colleague and I founded Ypsi-Writes, the community writing resource that "support(s) writers in the Ypsilanti

community through writing-focused workshops, events, resources, and activities." The inspiration for YpsiWrites came from another university's community writing center, which operated out of a firehouse and library. We believed our own community would embrace a similar center. Regarding our *research stance*, we were committed, like Michele, to building and adding capacity to the community, especially in relation to writing. We also believed we had the *dispositions*, background and experience to make it work. My colleague, for example, had strong connections with area schools and teachers and had also been on the board of 826michigan (part of the National 826 Youth Writing network), which we enlisted as a collaborator since they were already providing writing support to Ypsilanti youth.

With 826 on board, we reached out to the leadership of the Ypsilanti District Library (YDL) with our idea of supporting teen and adult writers; we believed the library would be a perfect location for a community writing center. It was at this point that we became more aware of our *positionality* as white, female academics who were trying to create a writing resource in a diverse community. Our *dispositions* of adaptability, openness, and responsiveness became especially important; we realized that what we thought we could establish quickly needed greater thought and deliberation—and time for building relationships and trust. We also realized that, in addition to gaining the trust of our collaborators, we would need to earn the trust of and build relationships with community members.

Toward these ends, I started attending weekly meetings at a community center. At one meeting, a black male who directs two non-profits, Mentor2Youth and Fathers for Family, invited me to have coffee. We talked about how we got to where we are and the hopes and aspirations we had for our work. We also shared our stories and dreams, and we laughed about our challenges with parenting and teaching. Darryl helped me realize what we could all accomplish working together—and how embracing and celebrating our differences, rather than allowing them to become roadblocks, could lead us, individually and collectively, to greater success. Because of enduring relationships like these that we have cultivated now with both individuals and organizations, we have been able to create a vibrant community writing resource and to enact our stance of building coalitions that truly benefit the community.

Why and How We Tell These Stories

Stories like the ones we've shared, and our moments of attention to the complexities of positionality and to our research stance and dispositions, are generally left out of our write ups. Our hope is that sharing such moments might help other community-engaged scholars draw attention to similar moments, as well as embrace opportunities to reflect on their commitments and positionality in their work. These are moments when an awareness of our ethical and methodological

commitments; of our abilities, power, and privilege; and of our practices of adapting can remind us to be more inclusive, to add more capacity, to build coalitions, and to be respectful of the stories and lived experiences of those with whom we work. Drawing inspiration from Walton, Moore, and Jones (2019) and from brown (2017), especially in relation to coalition building and the need for adaptability, interdependence, and aligning our purposes with our values, we hope our write ups are coalition stories about the knowledge making, relationship-building, and change that can result from our work and inquiry.

Thinking and writing about our positionality is difficult. As a heuristic for a more deliberate and intentional approach to considering and writing about positionality—and to consider the intersections of positionality, research stance, and dispositions—we conclude by presenting questions we ourselves find useful to ask, not only as we begin but also as we carry out and write up our community-engaged projects. These include:

1. Why am I doing this work? What purposes do I hope to accomplish? Why am I doing this work with and/or within the community in which I'm doing it? What is my relationship with, and what do I see as my responsibilities to this community?

2. What ethical, methodological, theoretical, and ideological frameworks am I bringing to this work? Where and how did I acquire or develop those frameworks, and how do they connect to the community work I plan to or am doing?

3. In what ways are the frameworks I bring being challenged by the specific context? What dispositions do or might I practice to help me address these challenges?

4. What are my commitments within this context? To which commitment(s) will I give priority?

5. What are my identities? How would I describe myself, and how am I similar to and/or different from those in the community/ies in which I am working?

6. What is my relationship to the individuals with whom I am working? Are there multiple types of relationships within this group or multiple groups where my relationships differ?

7. What privilege or power do I have in relation to the community members, and how am I using that privilege and power? Am I using it in ways that are respectful and that support and align with, and do not usurp, the knowledge, expertise, and experience of community members? Further, am I bringing about positive change in consultation with those affected?

8. How might community participants perceive and experience my privilege, power, and positionality? How do I perceive and experience their positionality?

9. How do I work toward building authentic relationships with community partners that are grounded in trust and reciprocity, rather than being merely performative?

Conclusion

For as complex as positionality is, considering these intersections and dispositions can enable a more intentional and informed approach that is grounded in our principles and values as well as in multi-faceted reflection. This reflection, we contend, can contribute to coalition-building that is more participatory and action-oriented. Our own lived experiences also demonstrate the importance of inclusion, trust, and authenticity. These perspectives and frameworks, we believe, will ultimately lead us toward a more authentic, self-reflexive approach to community-engaged work.

References

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