

Chapter 43. A Case for Causing a Little Trouble: Developing Queer Positionality Through Disciplinary Homemaking

Molly Ryan
VIRGINIA TECH

In a 2024 talk given at Virginia Tech University, Michael J. Faris described, quite beautifully, the process of learning a discipline as congruent, or parallel, to learning to become queer. It was a moment I found myself almost unable to scribble quickly enough in my notebook, I was so struck by the analogy. It was as though he'd peeked into my brain and laid my positionality within the field of writing studies bare.

Matriculating to writing studies was, simply put, an experience of becoming queer. This is not to say I was not *very* queer already, but my queerness, in my mind, lived in a radically different lifeworld from that of my professional persona. It was not so much that, prior to entering graduate school, I did not see queerness as a part of a professional life—rather, I did not, or perhaps chose not, to see how queerness was inextricably entwined with who *I* was as a researcher, a learning scholar, a teacher, a student. In short, I was in a strange situation of heavy-handed, unintentional, subconscious self-rejection. This denial was so engrained, and had created such a separatist viewpoint in my psyche, that unlearning this gap and rebuilding the bridge between my positionalities was a caterpillar-esque mode of transformation, shedding one form for a radically different new imagining of self.

As I entered graduate school, the field of writing studies was not necessarily blinking brightly to me. In reality, coming from a Student Affairs background, I was uncertain of where exactly I would end up in the mapping of English studies. It was during my first semester of my master's degree, when I inadvertently wandered into a PhD-level rhetorical theory seminar, that I simultaneously stumbled over the threshold of the Wonderland of writing studies as a field. From that first day, I suddenly felt as though I'd stepped into a technicolor world that was completely new to me but somehow has been waiting for me all along. So too, the field of writing studies embodied its own unique queerness, existing in somewhat of a disciplinary liminal space, transformational, fluid, and organically tractile. There was no truer realization of this fieldly queerness, in my experience, than the first-year writing classroom, which operates as the nomadic, chameleonic, conventionally rejected and independently joyful offshoot of English as a disciplinary moniker.

I felt *seen* by writing and rhetoric, welcomed by a cosmology of theoretical and literal disciplinary elders into a home built for me. And thus, my positionality

evolved from its caterpillar body, into a bright, flaming, gay butterfly. What I did not predict, however, is that this transformation, this ownership of a queer body in a queer field, would draw attention—and, to some extent, come with the label of troublemaker. Some felt I was much too bold. Others that my approach unsettled the powers that be. Still more that the risks I took were too great.

Troublemaking as positionality involves taking bold possession of self. Showing up wholly and bravely. Burning bright, even if the light unsettles others. Queerness is difference, but it is also embodiment of that difference: and that, in my experience, is what unsettles the conventional and the normative. Queerness as positionality is teaching with radical empathy and care, stating dauntlessly, whether explicitly or implicitly, that you are no subordinate to normativity. It is bold worldbuilding, even if that world must be burned first.

I'm a troublemaker. I'm proud of that label. And so to you, reader, I say: don't be afraid to make good trouble. Challenge the system. Be brave.