

Chapter 53. “Reflexivity Memos” in Undergraduate Research-Based Writing: Opening Spaces to Value Students’ Experiences and Stories in Research

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“In high school, I was taught never to use the “I” in research papers.”

“Can I use my story in my paper?”

“Can I include my language in my research paper?”

These are a few of the questions first-year students often ask me as they embark on the first drafts of the research paper. Students often arrive to the classroom with the perception that “good” research-based writing should be written in “standard” English and void of first-person in order to remain “objective” as they “distance” themselves from the research topic. These questions are not limited to undergraduate student experiences; I also struggled with similar questions when writing my own dissertation. In responding to the above student questions, I wanted to share with students what I learned through my dissertation experience—explicitly engaging in on-going reflection of one’s researcher stance or positionality (i.e., thinking about the “I” in research) is indeed valuable throughout the research process, offering new insights to the research. This chapter introduces an assignment that was inspired by these conversations about the “I” in research, the “Reflexivity Memo,” an in-process writing exercise where one explores their researcher positionality. The memo is a scaffolded opportunity for students to explore the nuanced ways their lived experiences, language backgrounds and worldviews are what both affords them a particular way of seeing or approaching a research problem and/or complicates or limits their approach.

The assignment actively encourages students to explore how their embodied socialized practices shape their research stance, drawing on Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and reflexivity and “its evolution over time” (Bourdieu, 2004, p. 111) When students begin to reimagine their positionality through “one’s body [which] defines a point of location relative to others,” they begin to gain “a sense of where from which one can act through language” (Peter Vandenberg et al., 2006, p. 12). Through the practice of memo-ing, which takes the form of guided writing and composing practices, I encourage a positionality-as-practice approach to research and hopefully spark important conversations about what languages and modalities are privileged in the research, writing and publication processes.

Reflexive memos, thus, take a “free form” feel, creating space for diverse rhetorical crafts such as storytelling and the possible use of different languages.

In the following sections, I walk you through my steps of “teaching” positionality as a space for students to explore their identities and embodied stances that shape their research. Students, alongside all researchers and writers, bring with them a wealth of linguistic and cultural assets and experiences from their home communities that shape their researcher positionalities. This assignment, ideally implemented in the first few weeks of the research process, allows students to see their stories as valuable in an academic context.

Part I. Encouraging Vulnerability: Sharing Reflexive Moments with Students

I was angry at the literature for ignoring the language learning narratives of my parents and other Deaf people. I was angry with my parents for giving in to the medical and educational discourses that encouraged them to use voice and not signs with my hearing sisters and me in an effort to make sure we would “speak English properly.”

– *Excerpt from my reflexive memo weaved into my dissertation expressing frustration with the existing literature missing the second language learning narratives of my parents and with the monolingual, ableist societal structures that shaped my home language experiences (Johnson, 2015)*

Reflexive memo-writing exercises, adopted from writing practices in critical ethnography and counterstory, include an important element of vulnerability. If we ask our students to explore their identities and positionalities in a research conversation, so must we. Thus, my praxis begins by sharing my own story of navigating a reflexive stance in my multilingual and multimodal ethnographic dissertation research which explored deaf-hearing interactions in a preschool context as it intersected with my identity as an abled-bodied hearing person and CODA (Child of Deaf Adults).

I, too, remembered how it felt to enter a silent space: watch your parents’ hands move, feel the vibrations of a hand hitting a table or hear the sound of a laugh sharply breaking the silence.

– *Excerpt from a published article describing embodied connection with my interviewee, a hearing mother’s experience with her deaf child (Johnson, 2019, p. 19)*

To model the importance of researcher vulnerability in exploring positionality, I share excerpts from my published writing with students. In sharing these snippets alongside my experiences as a graduate student conducting field work and an extensive literature review for the first time, I discuss the affective ways my experiences growing up as a CODA shaped the questions I asked, how I engaged

on the margins of the articles I read and the ways my positionality as a hearing-able-bodied person shaped the relationships with the teachers, deaf children and hearing mothers in my research context. I also talk about how my research stance changed over time as I learned from the literature, from listening to my participants, and through the participant observations in the classroom. Alongside sharing positionality moments throughout my research, I share snippets from former student examples of reflexive memos which are produced in a range of genres and modalities to challenge the linearity of academic writing and to encourage students to see their own lived and embodied experiences and multilingual identities as shaping their research.

Part 2. Framing Reflexivity: Bridging Theory and Lived Experience

My first step in introducing this assignment is to unpack approaches to positionality in research with students. I first explain my own stance. Reflexive approaches in research publications continue to be, at times, limited to surface level acknowledgements of one's researcher stance, often taking the form of positionality statements in the methods section of publications. Reflexive interrogations in research are also often void of disability and linguistic underpinnings which may broaden avenues for diverse stories. A disability framework, for example, provides a valuable lens as it often centers the writer's embodied experience, dismissing the notion of critical distance. A framework of linguistic justice works towards dismantling hierarchies of languages and creates spaces for diverse linguistic repertoires. All in all, introducing these frameworks prompt some on-going questions I aim to engage students with: How does one's embodied experience shape one's positionality? How does one's multilingualism shape the writing and research process? How does the modality that one composes in offer different pathways to expressing one's stance? In my view, introducing an approach to teaching positionality that encompasses linguistic and disability lenses reiterates a pedagogical commitment of working towards access and inclusion and should be woven into the fabric of teaching writing, critical thinking, and research.

As a language learner of Japanese in my 8 years in Japan, I learned, albeit with much awkwardness and embarrassment, how to fit my habitus, my disposition and ways of being, into a Japanese context. I tried to understand the mismatch of my habitus in Japanese culture - a mismatch that was material, imagined and imposed all at once. Being trapped in the myth of the "native English speaker" at the same time I was reproducing it, and being critical of the hegemonic American-ness of English Education in Japan at the same time I was teaching it filled me with unsettling contradictions.

– Excerpt from my own reflexivity memo detailing my application of Bourdieu's notion of habitus to my experience

The second step in the framing the assignment on reflexivity is anchoring our discussion with theory. Theory, in this sense, is a window or camera lens, a way to make sense of your own lived experiences. While we start by defining habitus through Bourdieu's own words: "We carry a living memory pad" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 68) & "system of dispositions- a past that survives in the present" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82), we move to sharing personal examples to illustrate the concept of "habitus" in practice. In pairs, students are asked to reflect on their habitus and consider a time when their habitus felt fractured, creating a mismatch with their environment that allowed them to, more explicitly, see the ways they were socialized—through language, family and schooling. Through this low-stakes story-sharing activity anchored by an exploration of habitus, students thus begin the work of bridging their histories and languages' broader social structures. Understanding one's habitus thus cultivates an understanding of reflexive knowledge as a critical, aware, evaluative relationship of one's position in relation to others, situated in specific contexts and histories.

Part 3. Drafting the Reflexivity Memo: Exploring Researcher Positionality

While steps 1 and 2 frame the approach, step 3 involves drafting the memo. Memo-writing as a free-form style of writing is a common practice in research. Qualitative researchers use memo writing (also called observational, methodological and theoretical notes) to explore in-process research observations and questions. Pedagogically, the practice is valuable as a vehicle for critical thinking and writing allowing students to synthesize theory and their own lived experiences. I share the origins of this methodological tradition explicitly with students, as it sometimes is the first-time undergraduates are introduced to the practices involved in qualitative research, which are often, regrettably, sometimes framed as "less rigorous" or "anecdotal." I then review with students how we can think of our researcher positionality as the various identities or positionalities that shape 1) our research questions, 2) how we read the literature and 3) our engagement with research participants and 4) the biases and vantage point we bring to our research. While this is introduced as a writing exercise, opening up the writing process to other modalities and giving students additional time outside class to complete the assignment also offers different access points to one's reflexive moments.

Below I've outlined the student-facing directions/prompts for the assignment.

The Reflexivity Memo

Directions: Working from the free-write prompts below, compose a 300-500 reflexivity memo. While we will begin in class today, you may continue to work on it outside class. You may choose to shape your responses through stories or examples that grow from your experience, using the languages and languaging

of your choice. For example, you might recall a dialogue with a family member in a language other than English and prefer to retain the language or origin. Or you might mix two languages. Also, in the spirit of open and equal access—since oftentimes writing privileges the “visual” modality that presupposes a certain kind of writing body—you may craft a “memo” that uses another genre, medium, or modality¹.

Free write #1 (10 minutes)

Habitus. Consider your habitus. How has your home, school and community socialized you in specific ways?

Identities. How do your various identities, including your linguistic identity, intersect with the questions you ask in your research?

Your Research Question. What have you experienced that allows you to ask the questions you do? Influence the way you interpret the literature? Or the way you might question the literature (For example, what do you notice is missing from the literature? What narratives are NOT included?)

Your audience. Do you think this is important for your audience to understand your positionality? Why or why not?

Free write #2 (10 minutes)

Unique Vantage Points. What affordances are you offered by your positionality? What particular vantage point do you have that is unique from others?

Biases. Now think about how your positionality might present you with certain biases or limitations in exploring your research. Describe these limited stances or viewpoints you bring to your research. How will you work through these viewpoints in your writing and research?

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Following the in-class memo drafting, students break into small groups and share out 1-2 aspects of their positionality that shape their research. In the share out conversations, students collaboratively value each other’s connections between their histories and research. In conversations with peers, students may come to the realization that they are best positioned to ask the questions they do. Also, as they consider their habituses, they also start to notice different relationships of power vis a vis their positionality. For example, they notice how a specific privilege may shift relationships with participants and ways of seeing their data or reading the literature. They may notice the limitations of their viewpoints.

1. I initially developed this reflexivity assignment as a writing assignment in 2015. Much gratitude to my colleague, Lindsey Felt, for recent discussions around modality and giving me the inspiration to open up how students compose their final “memos”. During the pandemic, this was particularly well-received, as students leveraged different mediums and modalities to compose.

Part Four: A Student Example: Reflexivity through Multiple Languages

Un resumen de monolingüismo Inglés: A little girl stands at the stove, helping her abuelita roll enchiladas for dinner. She always cherishes this time where she feels truly connected to her grandma and her culture. Her cousin taps her on her shoulder, telling her in Spanish that he wants to play the card game UNO but doesn't know the rules. "¿Puedes explicarlos?" The girl's face turns bright red, and her heart starts pounding. "No, no puedo." A disappointed pause follows. "¿Por qué no sabes español?" her cousin asks. She looks down at her feet and repeats what she always says when asked this. "No sé."

– Excerpt from undergraduate student writer in her paper
 “¿Por Qué no Sabes Español?: Pressured Monolingualism
 and Its Impacts on Mexican Americans” (Uribe, 2021)

Gabriela, a student in my writing class who published her final research paper (excerpt above), began by exploring the stories that propelled her question, “How do parents make the decision of whether or not to raise their children as monolingual?” She follows, “The way I not only enter this conversation but add to it is through my positionality as a Mexican American college student who struggles with her personal ethnic identity. The little girl in the first story was me ...” The above is a small example that demonstrates how reflexive memo-ing becomes a starting point for sharing the stories that motivate our research, viewing our researcher stance as intertwined with an embodied, affective stance. The exercise also gives students room to creatively play with storytelling, languaging and genres to situate themselves in their research on their terms and through their languages. Opening up the language and rhetorical choices allows students to tell better stories.

In closing, I hope this assignment may inspire other instructors to think about ways to engage students around their positionality in research. Returning to the initial questions from first year students at the start of this chapter, here's how I answered:

Making the “I” or the story visible to your reader is a rhetorical and personal choice. Reflexivity memos will help you explore your connections, your embodied stance, your lived experiences and understand how they shape your research stance. Understanding these relationships through the memo process ultimately allows you to ask sharper questions and approach these questions with nuance. Your positionality and the embodied stance you bring to your research are uniquely yours. Take the time to understand how it shapes the process.

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