Chapter 54. Teaching Tolerance, Teaching Positionality

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I am a white, straight, cisgendered woman of average height. I am (temporarily) able-bodied, married, educated. I am the second biological daughter of a white cisgendered man and a white cisgendered woman, both of whom were born in the Midwest region of the United States where they raised my sister and me. From an early age, I perceived myself as different—at school, in extracurriculars I begged to join and later quit, and most painfully, in my family of origin. I learned to keep this feeling to myself because I was conditioned to do so while exposed to multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences. I was not always successful at managing what was happening between my ears without upsetting my family's capricious dynamic. I used the only strategies I could muster: controlling my behaviors and ignoring my internal cues.

While the social identity categories (SIC) I possess that influence how others perceive me are "inside" American culture's heteronormative standards (i.e., my ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, and physical ability). My invisible disabilities, which affect my entire life, make me feel "othered." If I am tolerated at all it is because I make fun of myself to ease others' tension at my presence and I upkeep a socially accepted, culturally desired feminine appearance. The former is a consequence of my hyperalertness and low self-esteem: in being the first to say something self-deprecating I think I can stave off criticism and (my own and others') discomfort; the latter is a consequence of my multi-decade battle with eating disorders, patriarchy, and misogyny, which are, of course, indelibly intertwined. I personally but rarely publicly identify as disabled because, as a master's student, I was instructed to fear the reception of this positionality, given the consequences it elicited. I fear what having admitted to it here could do to my contingent appointments for a profession that requires me to be "of sound mind" to influence "young minds." But simultaneously, I aim to live Audre Lorde's (1984/2007) contention that "To refuse to be conscious of what we are feeling at any time, however comfortable that might seem, is to deny a large part of the experience, and to allow ourselves to be reduced to the pornographic, the abused, and the absurd" (p. 59).

Inspired by Lorde's philosophy and transparent positionality—and the vow I made myself on my 40th birthday to never again abandon myself—the aspect of my positionality I identify with most strongly is as an outsider, which makes me hyper-aware of how positionality stories are received—a topic rarely explored in the academic literature. Being an outsider and spotlighting missing/hidden considerations—or as members of my chosen family fondly refer to it "saying the

quiet part out loud," is a strength I bring to teaching and hopefully this chapter. But as I have experienced, it is not always tolerated.

Tolerance, for others and myself, is my greatest hope because I have felt others' intolerance for me, fueled by ableism, sexism, capitalism, and fatphobia, which affect everyone in society—some more than others. I teach positionality because I see it as one small but important effort I can make to teach tolerance and empathy for difference. After all, education is activism; what happens in the classroom can foster revolution.

I have been teaching at the postsecondary level for 15 years; for the last fourI have taught a positionality module in online, asynchronous courses I created as a lecturer at multiple universities of differing types (i.e., for-profit, research), for undergraduate and graduate courses ranging in topics from research methods to scholarly writing to Veterans Studies. By sharing my pedagogy, I contend that awareness of one's positionality affords us mindfulness (i.e., curiosity) and allows ourselves and others (those who read our positionality statements) to play the believing game (Elbow, 2008), which can be defined as finding value in an unpopular or foreign idea via a sophisticated method I'll reduce to the cliche (sorry) "walking a mile in someone's shoes." The goal of these efforts is, for me, to promote equal rights for all by first producing the seeds of tolerance in ourselves and others.

Positionality Module

I teach fully asynchronous online courses (a consequence/benefit of my disabilities) through the university's learning management system (e.g., Canvas), which organizes course content by modules. For a 10-week term, students are assigned one module per week (plus a final "exam"). The positionality module falls sometime after week one and before midterms to best equip students with mindfulness and tolerance for the rest of the term as they explore ideas, people, and cultures different from theirs. While the module is the first and most explicit instruction on positionality, other modules and assigned media reinforce and extend (though not shared herein) the concentrated examination of the specific positionality module, to keep content in mind and encourage continued application and reexamination. Course modules are comprised of four components:

1. An overview page that introduces the module sections (list items 2-4), learning objectives, and rationale;
2. A lecture video page for lecture videos I make and videos I retrieve from YouTube or elsewhere;
3. An assigned media page with details, links, and/or PDFs students are instructed to cite in assignments; and
4. A graded discussion board assignment where students write a longer initial post engaging with the assigned media/lectures, and two or more responses to peers' posts.

Module Items

Module Overview Page. I identify the module's goal by explaining how it relates to the main purpose of the course, depending on the course topic and level. While I have taught a positionality module in graduate-level research methods courses, I only teach undergraduate-level courses in Veterans Studies now. Thus, all the information below is for an undergraduate-level course. Because I perceive what undergraduate students do as research, though less intense than at the graduate level, I stress to students the importance of identifying their positionality as they research the course topic. I use this rationale to explain the module's goal and how it relates to the rest of the course:

> The purpose of identifying and stating one's positionality, comprised of various, intersecting SICs (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.), is akin to passing the binoculars or letting someone else look through the microscope, where the lenses used to view the vista or specimen are SICs. A positionality statement aims to identify how one's SICs intersect to influence one's lived experience and resulting worldviews. Considering another's positionality/worldview requires curiosity and the suspension of judgment, in turn, we receive the gift of perspective.

Learning Outcomes. The following five learning outcomes orient students to the module and assignment: (a) Recall the meaning of foundational course terms: social identity/ SICs, intersectionality, and positionality; (b) Categorize oneself (and others) using SICs; (c) Apply social identity (SI) theory and intersectionality to oneself and others; (d) Recognize the human impulses of stereotyping, prejudice, and tribalism; and (e) describe your positionality.

Lectures. I rely on two lectures to help define terms and elucidate the learning outcomes. To explain intersectionality, a three-minute video by *The Advocate* (2018; LGBTQ magazine) succinctly introduces and reinforces important course elements (curiosity, tolerance, respect, listening, diversity) including but not limited to its main claim: "Understanding intersectionality can make us more empathetic and more equal" (2:24-2:27).

A 14-minute lecture I created on social identity theory (SIT) and intersectionality reinforces and expands on ideas from *The Advocate* (2018). I also include examples from popular media, but I double down on stereotypes and prejudice. In my experience, students' "knowing" comes from widely reinforced nonfiction and fictional media based on stereotypes and misinformation; thus, the positionality module aims to encourage students to make new connections with unexamined ideologies/tropes they hold. I explain how and why people stereotype others and how stereotypes, while grounded in observation, prevent us from understanding others and being understood by others. When students grasp the commonality and danger of stereotypes (i.e., prejudice, tribalism), they may see

others they perceive as different with more nuance than stereotypes allow. Simultaneously, they intuit the desire for others to see them beyond stereotypes related to the SICs they possess. Dredging up the ubiquity and danger of stereotypes is important to my main goal of teaching tolerance and equal rights for all. It is also because research, both experimental and experiential, shows that people regularly respond to the voices of those they perceive as different by parroting common, media-produced tropes as a way of trying to understand, and this "understanding" prevents us from authentically learning about others.

Assigned Media. As an outspoken advocate for Universal Design for Learning (UDL, i.e., using variety and options for engagement to enhance accessibility and eliminate obstacles) in teaching and research, I offer multiple forms of engagement and representation through multimedia, which simultaneously allow for many voices, many views on a topic, further reinforcing my main goal of tolerance.

Songs. (a) Joni Mitchell's "Both sides, now"; (b) Beyoncé's "Formation."
Photography. Devin Mitchell's Veteran Vision Project.
Journal Articles. For graduate students: Grohowski (2017), Holmes (2020), and Naples (2003). For both undergraduate and graduate students: Jacobson and Mustafa's (2019) "Social identity map" (see also Worksheet section below).

Example Statements. I provide positionality statements written by previous students (shared with permission) that demonstrate self-reflexivity, a range of viewpoints, and avoid instantiating the status quo. I learned to use my students' statements over found examples (i.e., Duval et al., 2021) after observing how provided statements inspire the scope of students' statements.

Worksheet/Activities for Prewriting. Guided by the three principles of UDL (engagement, representation, and action and expression), I use a combination of activities from online resources to help students write positionality statements. Importantly, I ask students to engage with these activities (i.e., worksheets) but make these activities optional (though highly encouraged); I do not require students to submit this work to me because it can elicit personal self-exploration. My hyperawareness of reception, based on my lived experience in an outside of classrooms, informs me that some students may fear how their personal, raw, unpolished details could be received; and therefore, that they may not want to share so intimately with me—especially considering inherent power dynamics in the student-teacher relationship and the timing of this assignment, which in my classes is early in the academic term, before we have had much of a chance to connect. I do, however, hope they explore the nuances of their positionalities on their own, which I believe these worksheets inspire; thus, I explain to them in a lecture how the activities facilitate the crafting of a positionality statement. I also model my process (in a lecture and sharing my work) by completing the worksheets to develop my own positionality statement.

I draw most heavily on the Program on Intergroup Relations and Spectrum Center's (PIRSC; 2024a) two-page "Social identity wheel handout." Although

there are no explicit instructions on the handout itself, how one completes the handout is fairly intuitive. Page one depicts a wheel segmented by 11 SICs. In the center of the wheel are five questions asking the reader to consider the identities they possess that are top of mind (to themselves and others) as well as those that are of little concern (to themselves and others).

Jacobson and Mustafa's (2019) "social identity map," while similar to PIRSC's (2024a) wheel, encourages a drilling down to specifics that first-time writers of positionality stories (i.e., my students) have reported being of most help. Perhaps the authors' map is helpful to students because it facilitates introspection and the compilation of evidence via students' lived experiences. In reviewing students' statements who also share a completed map, and in completing it on my own, I can attest to it fostering nuance due to its three-tiered feature (see Figure 54.1 below). Indeed, completing the map is akin to creating an outline for a position- ality statement that may be very helpful for some writers/students.

Assignment. As previously stated, students participate in a graded discussion board assignment each module (week). I elected to have students share their state- ments publicly in the discussion space after testing other submission methods. In doing so I witnessed that when students posted their statements to the group (I share one too), everyone witnessed the diverse, potentially infinite possibilities of how a statement could be written; students also intuitively offered feedback, almost like peer review or a writing workshop. Often, students made connections with their own positionalities or asked respectful questions about a classmate's. I hope that having students share their statements in the group encourages tolerance.
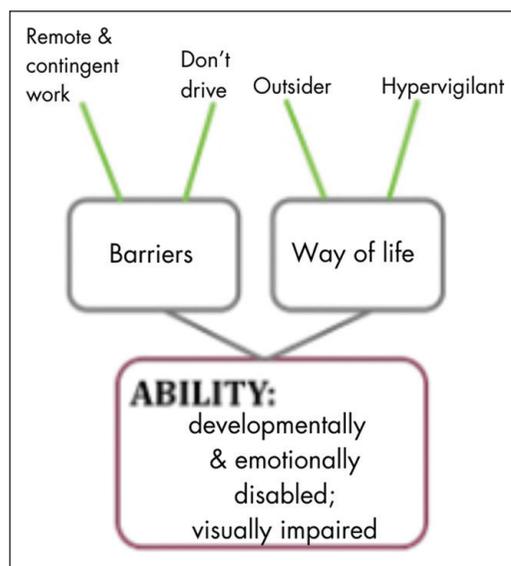
Figure 54.1. A segment of Jacobson & Mustafa's (2019)
map applying an aspect of my positionality

My instructions ask writers to *acknowledge,* in 300 words or more, *the social group identities/categories they possess (racial, religious, etc.) that may impact their studies [of course topic]. Identify personal preferences, strengths, or limitations (such as beliefs and previous experiences) that could influence your understanding of [course topic]. Your statement should also address strategies you may use as a consequence of these limits and identify strengths you bring to our studies given your background/identities.*

I have adapted the instructions several times, most importantly by asking students to identify strengths that their positionality provides after reading too many statements coming from a scarcity or deficit model and knowing instead, the important work a teacher can do to remind students to self-advocate, recognize their agency, and identify their inherent assets.

I also invite students to opt out of this assignment if it challenges their beliefs. Because of the nuances of the online, asynchronous "classroom," students do not have to alert me of their decision, they simply do not complete the assignment. I practice tolerance and neutrality by not prying, and they respect my pedagogy and their peers' learning experience by opting out of the activities and discussion. This approach may smell to some as ignorance (or something worse) rather than tolerance, but I see it as a live-and-let-live practice of tolerance. Due to my grading practices, students can miss two of the 10 discussions without it negatively affecting their grade (I also give a lot of extra credit).

Conclusion

I have revealed my positionality, sharing how, as a person with invisible disabilities, I identify as an outsider, which benefits how I see the world and teach students in online asynchronous courses on a range of topics that include a module on positionality statements. I have shared materials for a module I hope other instructors can use with ease and enjoyment. I have also spotlighted the importance of reception to positionality statements. Additionally, I hope I encouraged readers to consider tolerance in discussions of positionality statements, including but not limited to intolerance or resistance to receiving and sharing statements. As I have learned, we must tolerate students' decision to opt of out the assignment due to their beliefs if we truly believe, as I do, in equal rights for all, and in making space for all parts of all people, rather than allowing some parts and people while exiling other parts and people when the allure of fear compels us. To combat such fear, I trust in the power of sharing and tolerating differences to cultivate our shared humanity.

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