Renovating the Personal
Positionality Stories in the Global Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Our sequence of exercises represents a version of an essay we often assign our students in the Expository Writing Program (EWP) at New York University. Borrowing the concept of "the positionality story" from Christina V. Cedillo and Phil Bratta (2019), we advocate for reconceptualizing the personal (writing about personal experience) as the positional (confronting the social, cultural, and linguistic factors that shape and differentiate one's personal experience from another's). While drawing on the personal to embolden a student's voice, motivate probing analytic work, and create innovative writing communities has been a long standing practice of ours, the move to the positional is a new approach that, we find, helps today's NYU students become more rhetorically and culturally "attuned" to our globally and linguistically inclusive institutional writing environment (see Leonard, 2014).

We designed the assignment and exercises below (what we call "The Positionality Progression") in AY 2022-2023 as we pivoted entirely back from the twilight of the Zoom world to authentic, in-person teaching after the pandemic. In this specific context, we especially wanted to address the culture shock and dislocation that many of our students—especially multilingual international students and American students from first-generation or underrepresented backgrounds—were feeling as they stepped into the university writing classroom while returning to in-person learning on the first day of college. The shock and dislocation our students experience generally comes in many forms (the pressure to write in Standard Academic English or SAE; imposter syndrome accompanied by self-perceptions of unpreparedness and deficit; discomfort about unfamiliar pedagogical or rhetorical practices or with the predominantly white legacy of higher education), and, whatever the cause, the result is often similar: a sense of disbelonging, the feeling of being an outsider. In turn, when students feel unwelcome or unfamiliar with being in the college writing classroom, they lose confidence in their abilities, resulting in a lackluster engagement with and analysis of texts. Thus, especially after the pandemic, rather than ignore such distress, we attempted to draw on the feeling of being an outsider as a way to nurture deeper analytical work and build more inclusive writing communities.

The general goal of this sequence is to allow students the freedom to brainstorm, reflect, and experiment via scaffolded exercises that invite a variety of approaches to the assignment before writing a final essay. The more specific goal is to encourage students to analyze a text about bias and cultural belonging through the lens of their personal experience and positionality (i.e., the various contexts, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc., that shape and inform one's sense of self). The selection of professional texts is open to the instructor's choice and preferences, although we recommend assigning short personal essays where diverse authors engage with bias and their shifting sense of cultural belonging.

Using the personal to teach more probing analytic writing and cultivate student voice and belonging is nothing new. Our field has a long history—from Peter Elbow to Ira Shor and many others—of encouraging students to tell stories drawn from their experiences as a way to cultivate student voice, agency, and belonging (Cedillo & Bratta, 2019, p. 217). Further, from Gloria Anzaldua to Jacqueline Jones Royster to Felicia Rose Chavez in her recent text *The Anti-Racist*

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Writing Workshop (2021), the value of listening to and honoring stories from students of all backgrounds and experiences remains central to anti-racist research and inclusive writing pedagogy. Likewise, in the program where we've taught for the past twenty years, many of our colleagues have long believed that one of the most effective ways to ease students into university writing and provoke them to undertake more motivated and probing analytical work is to allow them to mine and reflect on their experiences. Our prompt below, for example, evolves from an EWP unit that was once called "The Deepening Essay," in which students closely read a complex professional essay, come to clear understanding and thorough articulation of its main idea and/or argument, and take some aspect of that idea as a focus for their own essay, attempting to extend (or *deepen*) its meaning through the lens of personal experience. For many years, this unit came first in the shared curriculum for the foundational course. In some form, many EWP faculty still teach this unit first in EWP's foundational course today, *Writing as Inquiry*, believing that it introduces students to the fundamental work onto which more advanced practices will be scaffolded.

Yet, just as NYU has transformed—its brand wasn't always as global as it is now—our approach has also evolved. Today in Washington Square, which is just one of three degree-granting NYU global campuses, international students make up more than one-fifth of every incoming class, and among students identifying as American citizens in the class of 2025, 19% self-identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 22% as Caucasian/White, 17% as Hispanic/Latino, 8% as African American/Black, and 10% as Other/Not Indicated ("NYU Facts," n.d.). In this highly diverse context, we have aspired to cultivate a more fully inclusive approach—one where considering the problem of belonging and the value of exploring one's positionality are central to our renovated pedagogy.

We borrow the concept of a "positionality story" from Christina V. Cedillo and Phil Bratta's essay "Relating Our Experiences: The Practice of Positionality Stories in Student-Centered Pedagogy" (2019), where they distinguish it from the more common, "uncritical use of [personal] stor[ies] in educational settings" (p. 218). A positionality story, they argue, specifically emphasizes "that meaning is constructed through interaction and in context; in other words, meaning is relational and must be understood as such lest we make assumptions about where students are coming from and what they need" (p. 218). Whereas the personal may simply mean relaying an experience, the positional asks students to account for the layers of their identity as they unpack their experiences in specifically situated contexts. Since positionality stories take on their "meaning" only when writers carefully situate their experiences in intersectional contexts (cultural, educational, familial, racial, etc.), Cedillo and Bratta argue—and we agree—that a pedagogy that values the telling of such stories can help students to learn how to challenge dominant narratives. As they put it, "Particularly for students whose backgrounds do not reflect traditional notions of academic identity, positionality stories may offer a way to self-position within the classroom and academia as a whole" (p. 219). EWP's recently updated webpage states that our mission now includes helping all students to "develop their understanding of writing as a situated practice" and "expand their awareness of their own distinct writing voices in relationship to their classroom community of writers" (Expository Writing Program, n.d.). It's in this specific context, then, that we advocate for reconceptualizing the personal (writing about an experience) as the positional (accounting for the social, political, cultural, and linguistic factors that shape one's experience) as a crucial strategy for cultivating student belonging and motivating them to undertake more rigorous analytic work.

As teachers, we know students need to feel seen, heard, and valued to get comfortable showing up as themselves in their writing. Thus, we work concertedly to foster an inclusive class-

room space—one where students who initially hesitate or choose not to disclose aspects of their identities often come to feel safer taking such a risk[1]. Foremost, as Chavez insists in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop* (2021), we aim to institute a practice of generous, inclusive listening among our students, because we want to establish a classroom context where it feels safe to be brave, take risks, and share stories. In such a writing classroom, Chavez writes:

> We invest in one another as complex individuals. We confront the voices in our heads that tell us our stories are unimportant. We honor the sidelined narratives of people of color, women, queer, differently abled, and gender-nonconforming artists. We listen to one another's writing, read aloud in workshop, ever conscious of our body language. We ask questions with the intent to understand instead of retort. . . . And we adhere to the author's agenda during feedback sessions. It requires self-discipline to be sure, but cultivating listening. . . makes us better writers. (pp. 18-19)

While cultivating generous, anti-racist listening among our students, we also try to model pedagogically a kind of vulnerability and honesty about our own—and others'—positionalities and experiences. Cedillo and Bratta (2019) write of how they tell positionality stories from their experience that "highlight the tensions accompanying their own difficult processes of academic acculturation and invite students to confront and contextualize the often-unquestioned norms that bolster their feelings of 'dis-belonging' " (p. 216). More specifically, Cedillo, who identifies as "Chicana," explains how, when teaching a first-year composition course with primarily Hispanic students, she noticed they were struggling to adapt to the conventions of academic writing. She then decided to share the following with her class: "despite being an outstanding student in [high] school and an L1 (English as a first language) speaker, things had changed for me when I entered college. Suddenly, my writing never seemed to fit some arbitrary standard that I did not feel privy to . . . . I felt a pressure to prove myself without knowing what I was trying to prove" (p. 223). Phil Bratta, who identifies as "white working class male," tells an analogous story of when he decided to speak with his students about his dad's expectation that he would go into a trade rather than attend a traditional four-year college and how it affected his confidence and sense of belonging when he was a student (p. 228). Though it can feel risky to disclose stories of one's positionality as a faculty member teaching a class, Cedillo and Bratta advocate that at times we do take this risk in order to destabilize our authority and, in the process, start to "destabilize many of the dominant narratives with which students from marginalized communities must contend as they enter academia" (p. 219). However, because we identify as white, male, middle class, straight, and cis, we usually position ourselves more as allies than models, taking deliberate care so that our students might come to trust that we won't assume anything about their experiences from ours. Still, even then, we sometimes insert personal narratives into our discussions with our students that gesture to our past challenges, such as admitting why we got Cs in several of our undergraduate classes despite considering ourselves talented, or disclosing our childhood challenges with dyslexia when we struggle to spell something on the board.

In addition, we turn to diverse professional essays, student essays from a collection called *Mercer Street* (EWP's annually-published anthology of exemplary first-year writing), and student drafts-in-progress from our classes to encourage the value of writing about and interrogating our various positionalities. Take the professional essays from the assignment below, for instance. All three, Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013), Cathy Park Hong (2020), and Zadie Smith (2014), are writers of color who describe urban places—a Manhattan deli, Los Angeles' Koreatown, and NYC's Soho district, respectively—where they ostensibly should feel like they belong. However,

in each case, the author's sense of belonging is compromised and complicated by their experience of their positionality and the biases they contend with in different contexts. Coates, for example, is troubled by an incident at his local deli where an employee is guilty of racially profiling and falsely accusing a famous black actor of shoplifting. His interrogation of his mixed feelings in response to the incident evolves into a cogent, motivated analysis of the history of "invisible racism" that often accompanies white denial, including the excuses that are often made for the "good people" who perpetuate racist bias. Similarly, Hong and Smith also reckon with their complicated positions in the context of their experiences of cultural biases, language, urban spaces, and writing.

As Exercise 1 below suggests, we focus some class discussions on the moments where Coates, Park Hong, and Smith show up as embodied analysts and thinkers about their positionalities in their writing. During these discussions, we listen for the moments when our students start to speak out from their positions as part of their analysis, and we ask students to listen for and value what they hear others say about their experiences. Because we want students in the classroom to start feeling more comfortable speaking authentically, we also create various low-stakes opportunities for students to share and listen to each other's responses: in small groups, via anonymous surveys, in shared Google Docs, and through reading randomized excerpts of student work. For example, we might ask students to read one another's work in three ways: first, highlight moments where their peers are representing their selected writer's evidence and ideas; then, highlight (in a different color) moments where their peers seem to be expressing their own thinking and positions in response to the selected writer's ideas; finally, reflect on the difference between the two highlighted moments and what this difference reveals about their peer's positionality, perspective, and voice. We also often prompt students via the series of questions in Exercise 2 below and other moments of freewriting to critically unpack different aspects of their constructed selves, pushing them to see through the cracks in their own and others' veneers.

We approach this work carefully and in so many different, layered ways because we've found that many students arrive in our classes thinking that their voices and experiences will not be valued in their university writing. Whether it's because they learned too well the rules of timed AP writing or because of a deeper sense of being new or an imposter, many students are surprised when they discover that we really want to listen to their stories and views, and really want them to listen to one another. Having been taught that writing is either academic or personal, formal or informal, and believing that expository writing is different from creative writing (it's academic and formal, according to their pre-conceptions), many will leave out themselves—their feelings, experiences, identities, and voices—when asked to analyze a text unless they are encouraged to do otherwise. This problem of silencing one's feelings, languages, experiences, and identities when one is called on to write analytically at college is compounded, as Chavez reminds us, for many students of color by their everyday experiences of being silenced in predominantly white institutions. It's compounded for queer students by heteronormative, cis-gendered assumptions, and for differently abled people by ableism. On top of this, today's NYU first-year students, in their responses to the annual CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) Freshman Survey, frequently reveal themselves to be less confident in their "abilities to take risks" than in any other self-assessment of their academic abilities (writing, math, artistic, etc.) and attitudinal qualities (drive to achieve, creativity, etc.) (*NYU CIRP Freshman Survey*, 2020; *NYU CIRP Freshman Survey*, 2021).

Further, we also work with published student writing from previous years to help new students become more attuned to the kind of embodied analytic writing we value. We might show them, for example, Brooke Nguyen's "Taking Up Space" published in *Mercer Street* (2021/2022),

where she writes keenly about feeling embarrassed in second grade eating a lunch of "the leftover bò lúc lắc and phở áp chảo [her] grandmother packed." To "hide every trace of [her] parents' culture" and blend in, she begins to eat Lunchables, despite "secretly despis[ing] the cold array of bland carbs and mushy toppings." The Lunchables story, she admits, "is one that many Asian Americans recognize instantly," but she uses it as a lens to understand and unpack the "feelings of alienation" and "shame" that Hong describes in "Bad English" when hearing her Korean mother "speak to a white person" with an accent like "a crush of piano keys" (Hong, 2020, as cited in Nguyen, 2021/2022). We may also pair our reading of Nguyen's essay with Ashley Kang's "The Audacity to Hate" published in *Mercer Street* (2022/2023). At the opposite end of the spectrum, Kang writes with brutal honesty about the final step—the citizenship interview—in her family's uncomfortable experience of becoming naturalized American citizens. Condemning the entire process as inauthentic and performative, she draws on experience to extend James Baldwin's interrogation of American myths in "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American" (1959) and build her critique of the overwrought immigrant narrative she's felt forced to play, writing: "I am tired of reading about immigrants. I am tired of reading about our Lunchables sob stories and rickety-boat ancestral tales" (2022/2023). Taken together, these writers craft positionality stories that, although very different in tone and feeling, allow them both to claim ownership over their thinking as part of their textual analysis. Many other published examples in our program's magazine of student writing accomplish similar outcomes. When students in our classes see and unpack these moments in the published work of diverse, risk-taking peers from previous years, they become more "attuned" to the rhetorical and cultural "writing environments" of our classes (see Leonard, 2014).

At the same time, while *Mercer Street* examples are useful to model risk-taking, voice, and the writer's thinking "presence," these essays are also polished pieces that may seem out of reach. Thus, while listening to our students read their work in class and while commenting on our students' early exercises, we search for moments where we see students tapping into a voice and insight that may feel "messy" but is also a place of potential. Sometimes, we'll hear them start to cultivate their voices through the very act of writing about how they have felt silenced. Other students may admit that they are feeling a shift in their consciousness as they realize that their stories and voices have authentic value, and we'll encourage them to include these meta-reflections in their essays. Still other students will start to articulate a self-reflexive insight about the complications of their position but then stop, and we will remind them how important such insights are to finding their voice, interrogating their and others' assumptions, and being heard.

When students, like the one Bill (William) worked with in a recent section of *Writing as Inquiry*, realize that their stories and voices have authentic value in the global writing classroom, it can shift their rhetorical consciousness and, as William B. Lalicker observes in his article on teaching translingual writing courses, cause them to want to "influence the rhetorical acts and rhetorical consciousness of their [fellow students]" (2017, p. 51). In her positionality essay,[2] Isa, the eldest daughter of two undocumented Mexican parents from a post-industrial city in the Northeast, grappled with Karla Cornejo Villavicencio's essay "Ground Zero." In this professional essay, Villavicencio tells a counter-story to the prevailing narrative of 9/11 tragedy and patriotism. She traces the mistreatment undocumented workers went through during and after they were hired to clean up Ground Zero. Gathering together and recounting the stories of various workers who labored in the wreckage without protective gear and subsequently were forced into the shadows and silenced because of mainstream narratives about illegal immigrants, preventing them from receiving health benefits when they became sick, Villavicencio exposes the hidden truth of the US economy that both relies on people of undocumented status

to do dirty work and stigmatizes them, rendering their contributions invisible.

After analyzing the text and recounting her own parents' analogous story and experiences, Isa reflects in her essay on what analyzing this text and thinking about her positionality means to her.

> To be honest, I found it a little astonishing to find a text like one written by Villavicencio in this course. I thought the "diversity and inclusion" was a front to get more students to view this university and want to attend it. Or how a PWI [Predominantly White Institution] may be seen as more inclusive and can gain more funds for being "saviors" to the people of color [....] As I further break down Villavincencio's text, it doesn't become any easier to read these stories. I wonder if anyone else is in the same boat as me. I very much hope that those who don't have to wonder about these things can see the truth behind Villavicencio's text. I mainly hope that the people in my class come to terms that this essay isn't just another immigrant sob story but real human suffering.

As Isa writes to figure out what she believes, she uses her experience to motivate and deepen her critical analysis of Villavicencio's complex text; her analytic writing grows increasingly trenchant because of her willingness to reflect on her stake in its subject. In similar ways to how Villavicencio and the other model texts challenge cultural assumptions to arrive at more complicated understandings of belonging and disbelonging, Isa too finds her footing as an authentic thinker when she embraces—rather than silences—her positionality in her writing. We see this accomplishment most clearly as she reconsiders her suspicion that NYU's talking point about "diversity and inclusion" is merely "a front to get more students to view this university and want to attend it." Just as importantly, however, when she goes on to wonder if her peers, by "see[ing] the truth behind Villavicencio's text," might in turn become more attuned to a genuinely inclusive narrative about "real human suffering," she ventures to hope that her position will also be acknowledged as something more than just another "immigrant sob story."

While this work remains difficult, and not all of our students are as brave as Isa was, we have found that this approach to renovating the personal—reframing it as the positional—motivates many students today to want to show up and be heard in their university writing. Indeed, as our students learn to lean into and unpack the complications of their positions, others join them, and they start to develop both individually and collectively that elusive quality of ethos in their writing that Nicole Wallack calls the "presence" (2017). While articulating where a writer's distinctive presence might arise from in their writing, Wallack borrows from Peter Elbow to note that "presence often 'correlates with places where the text has a hole or crack or disjuncture' " (Elbow, 1994, as cited in Wallack, 2017, p. 31). This is why, despite the challenges, we encourage students to slow down and notice where their initial writing breaks down so as to continue wrestling with "complication, confusion, false starts, and contradiction" they've begun to sort through (Wallack, 2017, p. 31). As teachers, our primary aim is to encourage our students to develop in their work the " 'important dimension[s] of perception or thinking or feeling [that were] formerly kept out' " (Elbow, 1994, as cited in Wallack, 2017, p. 31)—namely their own embodied and distinctive analysis and reflections. Our Positionality Progression, the associated readings, and our pedagogy all aim to encourage students to confront moments of tension or misalignment because, it is in these moments, that they may start to find voices and take a step toward claiming their presence—and position—in their work.

ASSIGNMENT
The Positionality Progression (in three stages)

Exercise 1: Representing and Analyzing a Moment of Change

Read Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Good, Racist People," Cathy Park Hong, "Bad English," and Zadie Smith, "Find Your Beach." Then, select the text that speaks to you—that reaches inside and somehow resonates with your feelings and thinking. You will work with this text for our first unit.

As you reread it, look for a moment when the writer describes, analyzes, and reflects on an experience or situation in the city that changed how they understood and saw themselves—whether as an insider, an outsider, or somehow as a little of both.

Finally, write 2 paragraphs representing and analyzing this chosen moment. After introducing the reader to the text with a bit of summary, context, and particular detail, slow down, represent, and analyze this textual moment for a reader who has not read the essay. Zoom in especially on several passages where the writer considers how a change comes over how they feel in this neighborhood or place. Where and how does the writer interrogate their complex feelings about feeling like an insider or outsider? Where and how do they consider their blind spots and biases and those of others? As you analyze and start to reflect on these passages, what strikes you as significant, thought-provoking, and why? Try to suggest what you see that others might not consider in passing. Yet, don't worry very much: this is just a start. **Total: 1-2 pages, double-spaced, typed.**

Exercise 2: Interrogating Your Positionality, Core Myths, and Relations

Take a moment to do a brief self-inventory by considering the following. More specifically, choose **three questions** below to respond to (whichever ones you're most intrigued by), **writing one or two paragraphs per question**. *NOTE: This writing is just for you. No one else will be reading it. However, you will be asked to discuss your insights with a smaller group in our class.*

- When writing, it's common to use the universal pronoun "we" to make universal claims. But when you say "we," whom are you actually imagining? What is your "we"? Meaning, what communities/places do you consider yourself to be a part of? Try to name 3 to 5 different kinds of communities.
- If you had to compare your own life story to a myth, a story from a popular song, or a character in a film, what would it be and why? What does that myth/character capture about yourself? What does it miss or preclude?
- Reflect on an experience when you've felt like an outsider among others in some familiar or new place (at home, in your travels, here at NYU). Tell the story. What was it about the mindset/values of others that made you feel this way? What questions about your values arose?
- Reflect on an experience when you felt like an insider among others in some familiar or new place. Tell the story. What was it that made you feel this way?
- Consider your various affiliations (class or status, linguistic, race or ethnicity, gender and sexuality, culture or nation, etc.). In what ways do you believe these values/identities/communities shape your engagement with the text you chose and analyzed in Exercise 1? In what ways are they influencing your participation so far in the classroom or social conversations at NYU? Describe an experience when your sense of self enhanced your understanding of classroom content or

our engagement with others. Now, describe a time when your sense of self has impeded your understanding of classroom content or your engagement with others.

In-class work: Writing prompt: Which questions did you choose to answer and why? What are the most surprising insights that came out of this work? How might you frame this insight as a question that could motivate the writing of an essay?

Ask students to discuss in groups and then share with the class.

Exercise 3: Writing a Scene from Experience

As you think further about your work in Exercise 1 and your self-inventory from Exercise 2, brainstorm and write down 2-3 specific *memories from your own experience that feel connected* to a problem or tension considered in your primary text.

Then, select and write one of these memories from your personal experience as *a scene* (or represent your experience in a place). This is *non-fiction, drawn from your experience and not made-up*.

A scene from experience (a story of your experience or your sense of place in the world) amounts to a brief, single moment when something happened. Your scene should suggest a tension and change that you experienced, one that feels related, conceptually, to the idea or question your chosen writer considers and takes account of your own positionality (how your experience takes on meaning in context and in relation to others). Your primary work, however, is descriptive/representational, not reflective: set up your scene vividly and slow down to describe closely the moment that you want your readers *to see*, sharing details to evoke its *emotional power*. You need not explain the relationship between the scene or your experience in a place and the idea or question of your primary text. Just show us the scene with attention to particular detail (show don't tell). **Total: 1 to 2 pages, double-spaced, typed**.

Essay Draft: Bias and Cultural Belonging: A Deepening Essay

Our work thus far has focused on two things: 1) A close reading of a text that confronts questions of bias and the complications of cultural belonging; and 2) A close reading of yourself that confronts questions of bias and the complications of cultural belonging. Now, it's time to put these two strands in conversation with each other in an essay that attempts to answer a question that came out of your prewriting. More specifically, you are to deepen a primary idea from your chosen text through the lens of your own positionality story. Remember: this is just a draft. Don't worry about constructing a perfect beginning, middle, and end. Allow yourself to brainstorm, take a risk, and experiment. Your basic aim is threefold: to introduce us to evidence from your chosen text that raises a motivating question; to represent and analyze important moments in your chosen text as a means of illuminating the idea/insights that come out of the writer's investigation of that question; and to deepen/extend our understanding of this idea and its implications by considering related evidence from your own experience. **Total: 3 to 4 pages, double-spaced, typed.**

Notes

[1] Although we co-designed this assignment sequence, we do not co-teach; these reflections stem from teaching our own sections of the same course.

[2] Isa is a pseudonym, and her essay is unpublished work. She has given us written permission to cite from her work.

Supplementary Material

For supplementary material accompanying this paper, including a PDF facsimile of the assignment description formatted as the author(s) presented it to students, please visit https://doi.org/10.31719/pjaw.v9i2.246.

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