How Positionality Impacts Literacy at the College Level

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Abstract

Positionality is the common set of circumstances that leads to the development of identities that keep individuals insulated from others. The purpose of the study is to explore the following questions: How do students respond to addressing sociocultural facets that construct positionality? What are the common themes of college student literacy lives? And How can colleges and universities better understand student positionality and support their academic experiences? Data analysis was conducted of a human diversity cultural autobiography assignment designed to help students in the process of discovering their own positionality so they can be more understanding when assessing life situations. Data was coded derived from the questions and themes were created to capture the essence of the responses. Results indicate that students are able to identify sociocultural factors that may impact their positionality; however, in this data set most students failed to connect how those factors influenced the way they see the world. Consequently, adjusting instruction is necessary to assist students in making important connections to their positionality and actions. In order for faculty to assist students in this process, steps such as instituting a faculty mentoring program of first- and second-year college students must be taken. Additionally, providing faculty development for the use of differentiation strategies and to support faculty understanding of student diversity is vital.

1. Introduction

Due to the Cycle of Social Distance by Cartwright and Reeves [1], significant personal work must be undertaken to disrupt said cycle through meaningful engagement with DEI work. The Cycle of Social Distance adapted from Bucher's [2] work on positionality, is the common set of circumstances that leads to the development of identities that keep us "insulated" from those we, for any number of reasons, see as "outsiders." As Bucher [2] explains, the process is continuous and nonlinear, though it is discussed linearly for the purposes of this discussion.

Each person is born in a particular time, place, and body; these embodied and cultural experiences create our positionality, or universal perspective [3]. As with all perspectives, they are naturally bounded by a range of intrinsic and extrinsic elements. We can only see what we can see; we can only know what we can know. The Cultural Autobiography [4] assignment is specifically designed to walk students through the process of understanding their own positionality so that they can identify the "filters" they use when evaluating situations. Specifically, students create a Cultural Autobiography to explore the sociocultural factors that inform their own positioning [5].

2. Research Questions

The objective of this research is to identify themes in student cultural autobiographies that help answer the following questions:

i. How do students respond to addressing sociocultural facets that construct positionality?

ii. What are the common themes of college student literacy lives?

iii. How can colleges better understand college student positionality and support their academic experiences?

3. Research Procedures

The data collected for this study is derived from a human diversity core course that mainly freshman and sophomores take. Research procedures and data collection [6] are standard practice for the course and are collected for all human diversity students whether they participate in the study or not. The cultural autobiography is a course key assessment in which students must conduct research about various aspects of their lives, some of which is demographic, and then discuss how their personal information shapes how they see the world. The purpose of the assignment is to bring attention to how students' personal experiences shape their understanding of others in the hopes of increasing understanding and empathy for others. The complete instructions for the Cultural Autobiography assignment are provided in Appendix A.

4. Method

Archival documents from a core human diversity class mostly taken by male and female freshman and sophomores were analyzed. Fifty-nine cultural autobiographies were examined to determine the following: *How do students respond to addressing sociocultural facets that construct positionality?* and *What are the common themes of college student literacy lives?* Ultimately, this research was conducted to address the overarching question: *How can colleges better understand college student positionality and support their academic experiences?* Using the questions as a guide, documents were coded and categories created that were then collapsed into themes [7]. However, new codes were created to capture emergent data. Table 1 illustrates the codes that were used to analyze the documents.

Table 1. Coding Categories and Descriptions

Coding Categories	Indicators	Examples
Literacy experiences	Mentions of literacy history, learning/struggling to learn to read	Being read to, reading books as a child, when student learned to read
Literacy impacts	Mentions of how literacy has impacted self or view of others	Enjoying/dislike reading, reading/media influences decisions
Personal identity characteristics	Mentions of race, ethnicity, SES, religious preferences, etc.	Mentioning family or personal characteristics
Group/Subgroup influence	Mentions of how membership in the group or subgroup impacts the self	Going further than listing personal characteristics to how group membership influences our view of others around us; mention of dominate/non-dominate groups' influence
Broader Sociocultural connections	Mentions of how membership in the group or subgroup impacts the self's view of the world	Deeper discussion/connections to how group membership(s) influences one's world view

5. Findings

Students identified sociocultural factors that may impact their positionality; however, in this data set most students failed to connect how those factors influenced the way they see the world. Their analysis was somewhat superficial, and interestingly, students were very aware of the groups and subgroups in which they were a part but were unable to articulate the complex ways in which that influences their world view.

As data was analyzed, the researchers discovered much emphasis was placed on students' socioeconomic status, mainly income, class, and work ethic. Students focused on how they felt their class status (low, middle, high) didn't impact how they viewed others (e.g., looking down on those who are less fortunate) instead of addressing how their experiences may have contributed to this particular viewpoint. Students failed to discuss what factors contributed to this particular influence. In several instances students spoke about how their perceived place of privilege did not impact how they felt about others who were perceived as less privileged and how work ethic influenced theirs or their families' position rather than a discussion of why and how this viewpoint was formed.

Students discussed education in terms of family history and support. The main themes that emerged were that finances were more often an obstacle to education rather than parental or family support. Students indicated that extended family often made a huge difference in support and encouragement and although many family members had limited education, they were still supportive but sometimes lacked the knowledge of how to help.

Relatedly, common themes of college student literacy lives that emerged were that often parents who were uneducated or had little or no higher education were unable to provide the types of help students needed or were unable to locate support resources due to their lack of understanding of what interventions were needed. Parents wanted to be supportive but didn't know how to be supportive. In situations where tutoring might have been helpful, the extra money needed was an obstacle to seeking private help. In both education and literacy related themes, college educated parents had higher expectations in most cases and expected their children to attend college. Additionally, many students cited early literacy

experiences such as being read to or having reading difficulties in elementary school as influential literacy moments. Again, students discussed these instances but mostly failed to connect the literacy experiences to their impact on perspective.

Table 2. Sample of Themes and Illustrative Quotes

Themes	Illustrative Quote
Superficial connections of group/subgroup membership	*"Both of my parents are Caucasian. They had two children, myself, and my brother. As we got older, we both married Hispanics, (My husband's mother was Hispanic and his father was Caucasian). One thing that I noticed about how race effects people is this, when my first daughter was born. Her color was perfect You could also see that she had the lighter skin but the Hispanic skin too."*
Focus on SES and work ethic	*"Even though they did go thru a divorce school helped the entire family. My family has very strong work ethics."* *"My great grandparents were very lucky to live right inside of town and had running water. They also had a two-story home which was considered a luxury in some cases. I know how much they struggled and how far they came."* *"I believe that all people should work hard, no matter their social status."*
Students who had parents to both knew and had the skills to support their education are now supporting their kids' education - passing along the expectation	*"Both of my parents went to college and got degrees and they know both have jobs in the healthcare field. My parents placed a big emphasis on education in our household growing up.* *My parents continued to hold a high standard of achieving good grades while participating in extracurricular activities.*
Literacy	*Regarding my personal literacy I mentioned earlier on this essay I received the stimuli to read, and this habit was fostered by my parents and grandparents. It helped me to be more inquisitive and to learn more every day."* *My mom was a stay-at-home mom for a while and took a lot of time teaching us reading and writing. She would practice words with us and have educational games for us to play. I remember being way ahead of my classmates in kindergarten because I could count, knew my alphabet, and was pretty good at writing my letters. My stepchild turns three in August, and we all work together to help her with the alphabet, counting, and read to her every night."*
Students with parents who did not attend higher education (or some, high school) had lower expectations in general.	*"My parents both lacked in the education department in the beginning. Then my mother went on to complete her GED and cosmetology school. My father had a 7th grade education but was a highly intelligent man. My father emphasized the importance of education and good grades, but my mother did not. There was some value placed on reading and writing. We all did well in school*

	and that made my parents happy. There was no pressure to do well or in learning I feel that was the disadvantage that stemmed from my parents' lack of education. They were not taught the importance of education and they did not necessarily instill it in us. I have always had a passion for learning and that has benefited me in my journey. I would watch educational programs regularly…."
Education was supported in the home even though caregivers didn't know how and maybe didn't have much education themselves.	*My father didn't make it past middle school, but my mom did graduate high school even though she was pregnant with my older sister. I feel as if growing up since my mother had graduated high school, she believed that one of us would be in life to reach college and be the first in the family to do so. Since middle school I can remember my mother constantly telling me I was going to college and never did I focus on this until my Junior year of High School. This changed when I joined a college prep class known as AVID, this helped prepare and apply for college. This course helped bring those dreams to a reality where I've been at Midwestern since then. My family believes education is important but doesn't understand that this is a process…"*

6. Discussion

Increasingly important in our global society is the ability to see others' perspectives, and with this information, gain a better understanding of other individuals and their experiences. In order to do this one must be aware of one's own understanding and views of the world [7]. Through the process of gaining and understanding of positionality, individuals can identify the "filters" they use when evaluating situations [8].

Using a cultural autobiography research project, students researched many facets of their identity and were asked to discuss how those characteristics create filters and impact their view and create a positionality. This small study indicates that many college students seem unable or have difficulty meaningfully connecting socio-cultural factors to their positionality. Further, they have difficulty determining how that positionality impacts their view of the world.

Many students cited varied early literacy experiences such as reading difficulties that impacted them in later years. Students mentioned that parents who possessed little or no higher education were unable to provide the types of help they needed due to their lack of awareness of what interventions were appropriate or available. Students felt their parents wanted to be supportive but didn't know how. Students discussed these instances but were unable to connect the literacy experiences to their impact on perspective.

8. Conclusion

Among the other questions this study sought to explore, an overarching question of the research is How can colleges better understand college student positionality and support their academic experiences?

One step for colleges and universities to take is to develop a better understanding of college students' backgrounds. To do this, instituting a faculty mentoring program of first- and second-year college students is currently being piloted. As well, providing faculty development to support for avoiding grouping or assuming any college student has the same background and differentiating for student needs is critical. Another area to focus on includes offering information for parents on how to support their college students beyond financial support was emphasized in the data collected. Finally, colleges must work on finding ways to specifically develop connections between diversity factors and how students see the world.

7. References

[1] Cartwright, A. M. and Reeves, E. K. (2018) Everyday diversity: Developing cultural competency and information awareness. Cognella Academic Publishing.

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[4] Peebles, Marybeth. (n.d.). Cultural Autobiography Guidelines. http://w3.marietta.edu/~peeblesm/452%20cultural%20Autobiography%20guidelines.htm. (Access Date: 21 May 2022).

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[6] Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). Research design (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

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[8] Milner, H. R. (2007). Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working Through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen. Educational Researcher, 36(7), 388–400. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07309471

Appendix A

HD Portfolio Instructions and Template Cultural Autobiography

Explore and interrogate researcher positioning (adapted from materials by Marybeth Peebles, Marietta College) [3]:

To better understand researcher positioning, you will create a Cultural Autobiography that explores the sociocultural factors that inform your own positioning. There are many facets that contribute to our identity. All of us belong to many cultural groups and subgroups, and our identity is based on 1) the relation between us and the dominant group/subgroup, and 2) on the interaction among groups/subgroups. In your cultural autobiography, you must address many aspects of your identity. It is not enough merely to state, for example, that you are a White, Irish American, English-speaking male etc. or a second-generation Chinese American, multilingual female who was raised in a middle-class family etc. You must take each cultural group/subgroup one at a time and explain how your membership in a particular subgroup has helped to create the kind of person you are and is likely to influence the ways in which you perceive the world and those around you. Begin with the cultural group/subgroup that currently has the most impact on your identity and work down to the least influential group/subgroup. This should take some careful thinking. The cultural groups/subgroups below should be used to help you work through your cultural positioning.

Cultural Group/Subgroup
* = immutable
** = the dominant subcultures

A. Class (socioeconomic status)
   Underclass – below poverty level, homeless
   Working class - lower middle class, blue collar
   Middle class – white collar and low-level managerial / administrative **
   Upper middle class – professionals, high-level managerial / administrative
   Upper class – professionals, top-level managerial / administrative, inherited wealth and social status

B. Race *
   Caucasian (Whites) **
   African American (Blacks)
   American Indian, Eskimo
   Asian / Pacific Islander
   Hispanic
   Other

C. Ethnicity *
   Western European **
   Central / Eastern European
   Asian
   African
   Latino
   Other

D. Gender / sexual orientation *
   Male **
   Female
   Heterosexual **
   Homosexual
   Bisexual
   Transgender

E. Language
   Monolingual (English only) **
   Bilingual (English as primary language)
   ESL (English as a second language)
   Multilingual (fluent in more than two languages)

F. Religion
   Christianity – Protestantism **

Christianity – Catholicism
Christianity – Other (e.g. Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Christian Scientist)
Eastern Orthodox
Judaism
Islam
Buddhism
Hindu
Other

G. Exceptionality *
Non-disabled **
Physically disabled
Mentally challenged
Learning disabled
Gifted / talented

H. Age *
Infancy
Youth
Adolescence
Young adulthood **
Middle age

Aged (elderly)

I. Geography
Regional (e.g. Midwest, New England, Southwest, etc.)
Location (e.g. urban, suburban, rural)
Environmental (e.g. mountains, desert, coastal)

J. Family Education and Literacy
Parent(s) education
Was there an emphasis on education in your family?
What value was placed on education/learning to read and write?

L. Personal Literacy
What is your story about learning to read and write?
What are your strengths, and do you have any areas you are not comfortable with?
How have your literacy experiences shaped who you are and how you see the world?

Proposal

All 3 of these <u>MUST be directly related</u>. I suggest selecting something related to your major or career.		
Diversity Issue	Academic Analysis/Articles Topic	Field Work Proposal
Select a cultural aspect from your cultural autobiography to focus on. For example: class, race, education/literacy, etc.	Find 2 articles about your diversity issue (selected to the left). This is your topic. Each article should present a different perspective. You may use Google Scholar or our library.	Decide how you may observe your topic selected to the left of this proposal (you may do 100% of your observations virtually) • Ideas include YouTube, News Websites, any live or prerecorded feed, observing interactions in online forums, etc.

Argument Analysis

1. Think about the question you decided to focus on (option 1 or option 2).

2. Use your approved proposal to reference for your topic.

3. Look around and find 2 articles about this topic. Each article should present a different perspective. You may use Google Scholar or our library.

4. Write a 3–5 page (of content) paper discussing your topic and the different perspectives you read about.

Field Work

1. Think about the question you decided to focus on (option 1 or option 2).

2. Now decide how you may observe this topic (you may do 100% of your observations virtually)

   a. Ideas include YouTube, News Websites, any live or prerecorded feed, observing interactions in online forums, etc.

3. Use the Field Work template to log and summarize a total of 4 hours of virtual ethnographic field work.

Synthesis Paper

Use the data that you gathered from your field notes, along with your cultural autobiography and academic analysis, and synthesize your findings in a 5-7 (content) page APA style paper. Make sure you discuss your responsibility, if any, as a citizen. The cover, abstract, and references do not count as part of the 5-7 pages. Use the following headers:

- Introduction

- Cultural autobiography

- Academic Analysis

- Field Work

- Conclusion

- References