

Positionality - Start from where you are and what you know

Introduction

Why me?

Have you ever considered how your unique life journey is deeply connected to how you learn and, ultimately, how you teach and engage in SoTL scholarship?

We all bring our own experiences and views into our scholarship, which affects how we and others see things. Teaching and learning scholarship, being both individual and social, are closely tied to how we see ourselves, impacting the way we interact with others and the world around us. Being self-reflexive about our journey and examining our assumptions is a courageous and vulnerable process that will create space for more inclusive and equitable educational practices.

So, let's tackle this challenge together! Let's engage with our positionalities and celebrate our diverse identities.

What is positionality?

In SoTL, our positionality is pivotal. Positionality involves an increasing awareness that our backgrounds, experiences, and identities as educators can profoundly influence our teaching methods, scholarship, and students' learning and experiences. For example, positionality may shape the pedagogical landscape, our academic culture, and inform classroom power dynamics. Consciously considering positionality allows educators to discern and mitigate potential biases, thus enhancing the quality of instruction for all students, regardless of their background.

Instructions

The following resources are provided to help you get started in self-reflection and critical thinking around how positionality influences your teaching and scholarship. Use your responses as a starting point to make informed adjustments to your teaching and scholarship practices, and to contribute to broader conversations on effective and inclusive

pedagogy. As you explore the resources, keep in mind the following components that contribute to your positionality:

- **Background:** Your lived experiences and personal beliefs influence your teaching and scholarship approach. Consider your educational and cultural backgrounds and reflect on how you entered your current role and how your philosophical-ethical views shape your interactions.
- **Biases, Assumptions, and Stereotypes:** Consider your students' backgrounds, abilities, and learning styles and reflect on whether your assumptions are evidence-based or rooted in stereotypes. Challenge biases by incorporating students' voices into your curricular-pedagogical and scholarship practices is critical to co-create inclusive scholarship.
- **Intersectionality:** The privileges or oppressions associated with multiple overlapping social factors such as race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ability, ethnicity, and language. This awareness is particularly relevant for scholars and educators, guiding their role in shaping and disseminating knowledge, underscoring the importance of recognizing and navigating the complexities of individual and collective identities. You can visit the [EDI Data Hub](#) to learn more about diversity at UCalgary.

1. Positionality Worksheets

The following resources are designed to guide you through exploring the social factors that shape your perspective and influence how you interpret the world around you. Completing and reflecting on your responses will enhance your self-awareness and provide a foundation for recognizing how your positionality impacts your interactions, perceptions, and role in various teaching-learning and scholarship contexts. When exploring the resources, keep in mind the overlapping social factors mentioned above, as they will help you map out your social identity.

1. **Social Identity Map:** Scholars Danielle Jacobson and Nida Mustafa from the University of Toronto, introduce a positionality map and examples of how to use it. Scroll to pages 3 and 4 to engage with this tool.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1609406919870075>
2. **Positionality Worksheet:** The Taylor Institute developed a guide to help you reflect on your social identity and map out your positionality.
<https://taylorinstitute.ucalgary.ca/sites/default/files/teams/1/EDI-Module-Pause-and-Reflect-Positionality-Worksheet.pdf>

Additional Resources:

To learn more, [A Guide for Busy Educators](#), articulates reflexivity, positionality, and critical thinking from a scholarship perspective. You can engage with the activities included multiple times throughout your SoTL work.

Remember: Positionality is an iterative process as it involves an ongoing and dynamic process of self-reflection and awareness. As individuals engage in research, their positionality, shaped by personal experiences, beliefs, and social contexts, evolves over time. The iterative nature of positionality acknowledges that perspectives are not fixed; rather, they are subject to continuous re-evaluation and refinement. This iterative process allows researchers to recognize and adapt to the changing nature of their own identities and the socio-cultural landscape, ensuring a nuanced understanding of how their positionality influences the research process. By embracing iteration, researchers can navigate the complexities of their situatedness with greater depth and responsiveness, contributing to more reflexive and enriched scholarly inquiry.

2. Ethics and Positionality

Positionality and ethics are closely connected and necessary to engage in SoTL. When we talk about positionality, ethical considerations involve being open about where we're coming from, recognizing any biases we might have, and making an effort to be fair and inclusive in our scholarship and discussions. When we combine an awareness of positionality with ethical thinking, we can have more responsible and respectful conversations, design more equitable and inclusive studies, and make decisions that contribute to a fair and just society.

Building an ethical framework in SoTL requires you and your study team to be critically self-reflexive and cognizant of the participants' positionalities so that issues of representation, reliability and validity are addressed collaboratively. An ethical framework informs your research design and how you carry out your work, and make adjustments as the study unfolds. An ethical framework applies to all teaching and scholarship activities.

To engage with the ethical dimension of your positionality regarding your research efforts requires asking yourself several important questions:

- What ethical principles guide your research?
- How do ethical issues enter into your selection of a research problem?
- How do ethical issues affect how you conduct your research—your study's design, sampling procedure, etc.?

- What responsibility do you have toward your research subjects? For example, do you have their informed consent to participate in your project?
- What ethical issues/dilemmas might come into play in deciding what research findings you publish?
- Will your research directly benefit those who participated in the study?

While an ethical framework can also help prepare an ethics application, ethics should be considered for all projects regardless of whether your work is exempt or needs ethics review.

Activity: Reflexive Journaling

Reflexive journaling can significantly facilitate engaging with positionality and the ethics of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by fostering self-awareness, critical reflection, and a heightened sense of responsibility. As educators document their teaching experiences, methodologies, and outcomes, they are prompted to examine the ethical dimensions inherent in their instructional practices.

This introspective approach allows educators to recognize potential biases, power dynamics, and ethical dilemmas within the teaching and learning environment, particularly the dilemmas about having a dual role: principal investigator and teacher. Moreover, reflexive journaling encourages continuous self-assessment and a commitment to ongoing improvement, which are fundamental aspects of ethical conduct in SoTL.

By regularly reflecting on their pedagogical choices, educators can better navigate ethical challenges, make informed decisions, and contribute to a culture of transparency and integrity within the academic community.

Before starting your journaling, you may want to explore the following resources: [How do you write reflexively?](#) and [Examples of types of reflexive writing](#)

Reflexive journaling is a personalized process, acknowledging that individuals learn and grow in distinct ways. Whether focusing on positive outcomes or challenging situations, this template provides prompts to guide reflection. Adapt the template to your needs.

Here are three **reflexive practice templates** to help you get started:

Free-flow writing and Themes

| What, When, Who, How? | Event, Topic, Theme |
|--|---|
| <p>Briefly describe the event, topic, or situation under reflection. Reflect without grammar or style constraints.</p> | <p>After free-flow writing, re-read your text and highlight or write on the side of your paper any words, events, and issues that stood out to you. These are key focal issues pointing at themes worth revising and reflecting on further. A combination of ethical, pedagogical, and methodological dimensions are probably embedded in these issues.</p> |

Feelings, Emotions and Randomness

| On point, Positive | Challenges, Difficulties, and Randomness |
|--|--|
| <p>Expand your entry by focusing now on how you felt, paying close attention to those moments where things were 'on-point,' going as expected (e.g., students were engaged, and everything seemed to work out).</p> <p>Include your perceptions of how other individuals were feeling and whether your feeling of positiveness was reciprocal.</p> | <p>Now write about those moments when challenges emerged, where things felt random and unexpected.</p> |

Critical Thinking

| Looking back | Looking forward |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assess your satisfaction with how you navigated the situation. ● Reflect on effective collaborations if there were other individuals involved. ● Consider the adequacy of support received/provided. ● If in a group, evaluate group satisfaction and teamwork effectiveness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify potential changes for a similar future event. ● Write down lessons learned and their impact on your practice. ● Connect learning/teaching to students' enhanced experiences. ● Extract insights for team, colleagues, policies, or systems. |