

Scholarship is Not Neutral: Using Positionality Statements for Source Evaluation

Overview

Beginning college students often make assumptions that scholarly sources are inherently bias-free. Students may also hold the belief that if they find a source through a library database, it is automatically a useful and neutral viewpoint on a topic. These mindsets can limit students' motivation to apply evaluation strategies beyond establishing credibility based on the author's credentials.

This lesson plan introduces the concept of positionality statements to help students understand that scholars do not leave their identities and life experiences behind when they conduct research. Students practice a new way to evaluate and understand the perspective—and limitations—that scholars bring to their research.

The lesson plan is designed for first-year composition courses in which students are asked to develop a research topic based on their interests or experiences. It could be adapted for upper-level undergraduate courses in the social sciences.

Learning Outcomes

- Define positionality statements and describe how scholars use them to explore the impact of their identities on their research.
- Use a positionality statement to evaluate the perspective and limitations a researcher brings to a topic.

Lesson Plan

Introduction

- When introducing yourself to the class, consider using the language of a positionality statement to share your background as a teaching librarian.
- Summarize class goals/learning outcomes: Today we will practice strategies for evaluating peer-reviewed sources in order to use them effectively in your research project.

Warm-up

- (10 mins) Give small groups of students an example peer-reviewed journal article. Prompt students to scan the source and discuss which aspects contribute to the source's credibility and which aspects make them question its credibility. Have groups share their ideas with the class.
 - As groups share, be sure to highlight what they say about authors' credentials or credibility.
- (2 mins) Transition: Authors of peer-reviewed sources are scholars who have spent decades studying and researching in their field, so they hold a great deal of expertise. It's easy to get a little intimidated by that, and it's really common to assume that since these sources are researched and written by experts, they are completely neutral and bias-free. But scholars are people too! Their identity and background influence what they choose to research and how they approach it. Your groups did a good job of identifying the credibility of the authors based on their academic credentials. Now we're going to practice a strategy for a deeper evaluation of the perspective scholars bring to their research.

Mini Lecture: Positionality Statements

- (5-7 mins) Use [slides](#) to introduce the concept of a positionality statement.
- Optional: Choose one video example of a positionality statement to share.
 - Susana Muñoz (Sage Research Methods, <https://methods.sagepub.com/video/challenges-and-strategies-for-researching-undocumented-populations>, play 1:32-2:41)
 - Crystal Steltenpohl (Youtube, <https://youtu.be/RkwXHxfvVd8?t=364>, play 6:04-7:25)
 - Undergraduate student example (YouTube, <https://youtu.be/GpclVzGYhVs?t=222>, play 3:42-4:30)

Activity/Discussion: Examining a Positionality Statement

- (5 min) Individually or in small groups, give students an example article that includes a positionality statement and prompt them to read the abstract and positionality statement (see example articles below; some correspond to the videos above).
- (15-20 min) Have students reflect on the following questions. To make the activity shorter, you could assign questions to different groups.
 - Based on what you can tell from the article abstract and author positionality statement(s):
 - Which aspects of their identity and background do the authors identify as important to their research? How do they describe their background impacting their research?
 - What biases related to this research might the authors hold?
 - How do you think the authors' background impacts their relationship to their research subjects (the people whose experiences they are studying)?
 - If you were using this source in your research paper, how could the positionality statement be useful for you as a writer?
- (10 min) Have students/groups share their ideas with the class. Wrap up the discussion by summarizing how students can evaluate the perspective a researcher brings to a topic even if they don't include a positionality statement.

Individual Reflection (Optional)

- If there is time and students are currently working on a research project, consider having students respond to reflection questions about their own positionality.
- Let students know that they do not have to disclose aspects of identity that they do not wish to share.
- Optional reflection questions:
 - Why did you choose your research topic? How is it connected to your life experiences or aspects of your identity?
 - Based on your experiences related to your topic, what potential biases might you bring to your research? How do you think awareness of potential biases can help you as a researcher?

Example Articles with Positionality Statements

Steltenpohl, C. N., Reed, J., & Keys, C.B.(2018). Do others understand us? Fighting game community member perceptions of others' views of the FGC. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 9(1), 1- 21. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/cgvpw>

- Mausz, J., Donnelly, E. A., Moll, S., Harms, S., & McConnell, M. (2022). Role identity, dissonance, and distress among paramedics. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(4), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042115>
- Muñoz, S. M., & Vigil, D. (2018). Interrogating racist nativist microaggressions and campus climate: How undocumented and DACA college students experience institutional legal violence in Colorado. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 11(4), 451–466. <https://doi-org.udel.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/dhe0000078>

Additional Reading about Positionality Statements

- Brown, B. (2022, February 28). *Positionality, intersectionality, and privilege in health professions education and research*. Maine medical center institute for teaching excellence. <https://www.mitemmc.org/monthly-tips/positionality-intersectionality-and-privilege-in-health-professions-education-research/>
- Enns-Kananen, J. (2020, July 8). *Coming to terms with ourselves in our research*. Language on the move. <https://www.languageonthemove.com/coming-to-terms-with-ourselves-in-our-research/>
- Holmes, A. G. D. (2020). Researcher positionality—A consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research—A new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8(4), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v8i4.3232>
- Robinson, O., & Wilson, A. (2022). A note on reflexivity and positionality. In *Practicing and presenting social research*. Pressbooks. <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/undergradresearch/chapter/1-2-a-note-on-reflexivity-and-positionality/>

