

HOW DOES YOUR POSITIONALITY BIAS YOUR EPISTEMOLOGY?

by David Takacs

How does your positionality bias your epistemology? I've been asking this question to students, weaving it as a theme throughout my courses. Of course, a resounding chorus of bafflement greets the initial question. What I'm asking is: How does who you are shape what you know about the world? I think this is one of the most important questions one can ask during an undergraduate education, and a student's search for answers may open up new possibilities for understanding her connections to the world. As a reflective practitioner of the teaching profession, I constantly grapple with these questions, as well.

Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of your own perspective—to be able to identify assumptions that you take as universal truths but which, instead, have been crafted by your own unique identity and experiences in the world. We live much of our lives in our own heads, in a reconfirming dialogue with ourselves. Even when we discuss crucial issues with others, much of the dialogue is not dialogue: it is monologue where we work to convince others to understand us or to adopt our view.

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Simply acknowledging that one's views are not inevitable—that one's positionality can bias one's epistemology—is itself a leap for many people, one that can help make us more open to the world's possibilities. When we develop the skill of understanding how we know what we know, we acquire a key to lifelong learning. When we teach this skill, we help students sample the rigors and delights of the examined life. When we ask students to learn to think for themselves and to understand themselves as thinkers—rather than telling them what to think and have them

recite it back—we help foster habits of introspection, analysis, and open, joyous communication.

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Unfortunately, many students come to college without some of the skills they need to succeed in academic work. In California, the richest state in the richest country the world has ever known, we skulk in the bottom fifth among states in per capita spending on education. The state system has shortchanged many students who live in poorer school

districts. Crammed into overcrowded classrooms, led by underpaid teachers who labor in crumbling infrastructure, many students do not get the quality education they deserve. To compound this misfortune, some college administrators and professors view these students—often poor, often minority, sometimes bilingual—as “deficits.” These students pose problems for our teaching; we have to spend lots of money to “compensate” for their “deficiencies.”

Asking students to think about how their positionality biases their epistemology helps us live an assets model of multiculturalism in our classrooms. For example, we can see speaking English as a second language as a deficit. Or, we can focus on an ESL student's assets: she is bilingual, a facile language learner who has much to teach about bridging cultures. As a simultaneous insider and outsider, she can help native English speakers see things they might have missed about their own language and culture, about their own positions in the world.

By respecting the unique life experiences that each student brings into the classroom—by asserting that the broadest possible set of experiences is crucial to help each of us understand the topic at hand as completely as possible—we empower all students as knowledge makers. We allow each student to assert individualized knowledge that contributes to a collective understanding. Rather than “tolerating” difference, we move to respect difference, as difference helps us understand our own world-

view— and thus the world itself—better. From respect, we move to celebration, as we come to cherish how diverse perspectives enable us to experience the world more richly and come to know ourselves more deeply.

Connecting positionality to epistemology simultaneously empowers and disempowers individual expertise in the classroom. Students are empowered because they recognize that they have unique claims to knowledge that others can not deny. Only I have lived my life; only you have lived yours. This encourages me to listen to you and you to me, as we each have a unique perspective. This is not a lapse into navel gazing solipsism. Rather, if this experience works well, we are led into doubts about the “correctness” of our own position, as we come to learn that our views may be constrained by the limits of our own experiences.

Recognizing this, we are more willing, eager, or obliged to talk with others, as we realize we make assumptions based on our own positionality, and that this must bias how we view the world. Only by listening to others can I become aware of the conceptual shackles imposed by my own identity and experiences. The feminist scholar Sandra Harding promotes “strong objectivity”¹: Through recognizing and analyzing the cultures in which we are positioned, and that therefore cannot help but mold our worldviews, we take steps to become more aware and even more objective. We come to know the world more fully by knowing how we know the world.

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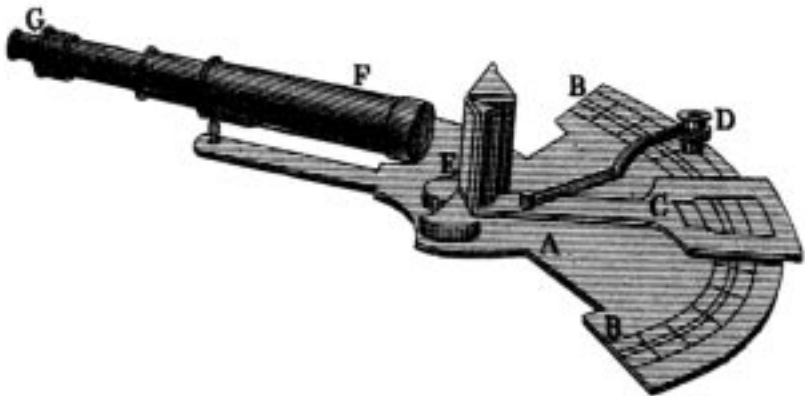
Each year at California State University Monterey Bay, in an environmental justice course I teach, I ask students to write about and talk about how their positionality biases their epistemology. In one example of how this approach helps promote awareness, one student found that she:

can't understand how materialism can outweigh the value of life. There's no reason why families should have to struggle for survival or fight to live in a sustainable environment; we all are human beings and have the right to be treated with respect and consideration. We cannot allow greed, ambition, power or money to drive our world to a slow end.

Her views on what constitutes justice were shaped by what she had seen and experienced:

I grew up in Mexico where money is all that matters, where being poor means living in unbearable conditions. I have seen some of the well-educated people abuse poor communities and their environment due to their lack of wealth. Such communities are left alone without hope of improving their living conditions, knowing that neither the government or the people with power will ever care to provide some kind of assistance. These same communities live in substandard housing where they lack a potable water system, electricity, and a proper sewage system. . . . Some houses are built with wood and bricks hammered together and with plastic glued as windows, so if it rains they have leaks and flooding are easy to occur. Most of the people living in these communities just dig a hole into the ground and make it into a bathroom. They wash their clothes in the river closest to them or they have their children bring buckets of water from some well that most likely is not safe to drink. Flies and other insects are everywhere spreading diseases, because there is trash and stagnant water throughout the community. Children playing outside are constantly getting parasites into their system and infections on their skin. These poor communities are also denied health care because they can't afford it, so they send their children to school sick and without energy to learn.

Cassel's classmates incorporated her views on justice into their own developing theories, because she drew her expertise from the concrete richness of what she had experienced as a young Mexican woman. This experience had meaning for her classmates because they realized their own views on justice were shaped by an incomplete relationship with the world.



At the same time, Cassel learned from her classmates' positionalities. Last semester, a student described knowing hunger as an army wife raising three kids on less than sustainable wages; from this, she knew that the nation did not necessarily honor its commitment to those in the armed services in a just way.

Several white students have grappled with this question: Their parents started out poor but managed to make it through sheer hard work. If they could do it, why can't everyone? But the question does not just remain rhetorical because another student can tell a different story: perhaps it had something to do with the color of their parents' skin? Some students who had hit hard times and pulled out of it share those experiences with the class, so the class may understand how the "system" sometimes undermines justice; others use their own experiences to show that anyone can, in fact, pull themselves out of bad circumstances.

The point is that these students undergo an intensive workshop in understanding how their experiences and identities shape what they know about the world, and, using this experience, they teach their classmates, so that their classmates come to see their fellow students—fellow community members—as sources of valued expertise.

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Knowledge does not arrive unmediated from the world; rather, knowledge gets constructed by interaction between the questioner and the world. We might label this epistemological stance constrained relativism, or perhaps constructivist realism. When we encourage examination of our own knowledge formation processes, we develop habits of informed skepticism—of questioning the authority of all knowledge sources, including ourselves. But skepticism can easily segue into cynicism or apathy when faced with a relativistic world where truth is not always apparent and easy to grasp. I work hard to avoid fostering these habits of cynicism and apathy. Rather, I put forth a classroom model where students explore and exchange their unique knowledge perspectives, we may all come to more deeply rooted, deeply reflective, shared understandings of the world. We become more connected to that world, and to each other, and feel that communally, we can act upon that world to change it for the better.

To foster these connections, we must teach how to listen, that fundamental and overlooked skill. At CSUMB, we teach "cooperative argu-

mentation." It's not an oxymoron; rather, in our classrooms we argue towards consensus rather than towards winning. When you truly listen, you listen to understand, not to judge or triumph. When all are experts, because their knowledge comes in part through life experience, all can learn—but only if you listen. Rather than convincing others of the inevitability of your position, when you listen to others' perspectives, you may question your assumptions and lower the barriers to be able to reach consensus.

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In all my classes, we do consensus building listening exercises. For the second day of Environmental Justice class, students read Garrett Hardin's "Lifeboat Ethics."² It's a litmus test. Hardin's classic, controversial essay argues that people in wealthy countries float on a resource-rich lifeboat. While we might want to share those resources with poorer countries, to do so would mean we swamp the lifeboat, and everyone drowns. It's a potent

metaphor that serves as a focal point to which we return throughout the semester, especially as we continually delve into assumptions Hardin makes about the world, and explore how his positionality might bias his epistemology. (In fact, the first and last thought pieces students write are about this essay.)

I ask the students who tends to agree, who tends to disagree, and who can go both ways with Hardin's thesis. Students break into groups with representatives from each point of view. Their task: Each student in a group takes two minutes to explain why they do or do not agree with Hardin: What life experiences do they bring that lead them to their position on Hardin's thesis? When each person has taken their turn, they ask respectful questions of each other, all in an attempt to come to some consensus statement on Hardin, something to which they all can assent.

Rather than trying to convince a fellow student of the correctness of his own position, a student must listen to how others' life experiences lead them in different directions in the world. The student must take these experiences in and accept them as valid if he is to work successfully with his peers to reach consensus. So, from the beginning of the class, students are connecting positionality to epistemology, learning to listen to understand, as others do the same, and using what they hear to question their own positionality and epistemological claims.

By encouraging an assets model of multiculturalism through an

appreciation of positionality and epistemology, we encourage a nuanced, scholarly, personal exploration of the racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and the other “isms” that roil society and can roil our classrooms if we delve into these topics insensitively.

When we explore these issues in the context of academic subject matter, and we tie our explorations to students’ lived experiences, we can limn them in a less judgmental, less charged way. Everyone’s perspective is valued; “bias” is seen as a resource that can help us each understand our positions in society, can help us gain some perspective on the assumptions we may blindly hold about each other.

Since positionality is the multiple, unique experiences that situate each of us, no one student’s perspective is privileged. Rather, all are privileged, and therefore all are empowered to speak: the students from minority as well as majority cultures can help teach each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Each student confronts his

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or her empowerment or disempowerment, privilege or lack thereof, and no implicit or explicit judgment is leveled against them. No one student comes to embody the despised oppressor, and no one student comes to embody the embattled oppressed. Rather, we encourage a scholarly contemplation and personal appreciation of all perspectives in a less politically loaded, less judgmental context.

In this way, it is increasingly likely that students who would otherwise be marginalized will be heard, and less likely they will be heard defensively. In my experience, if anger ensues, it is not likely to be directed at others in the class; rather, it gets channeled towards the forces of society that lead to oppression—and hence that anger is more likely to result in deeper understanding, and, I hope, informed action in the world.

Examining the connections between positionality and epistemology is a fundamental part of a praxis pedagogy that my colleague Gerald Shenk and I are developing at California State University Monterey Bay. In our classes, we ask students to work through a cycle of praxis. First, we ask them to name their own values, assumptions, and passions. They then examine these values through study in the disciplines we teach, through discussions with classmates, and through constant consideration of how their positionality is biasing the epistemological claims they make. They then take intentional action in the community, either

through a service learning experience, or through a political project.

The Political Project, developed by my colleagues at CSUMB, first asks students to define what counts as “politics” for them. They then choose a community group with whom they work to change the world in some way in consonance with their values: they do politics. As I write this, our semester is only a few weeks old, but students in our co-taught Social and Environmental History of California course are embarking on their political projects.

We help the students to articulate, justify, and embody values they find meaningful without imposing our values on them.

They’re helping organic farmers market to the campus community; starting a new social action ‘zine; raising funds so an elementary school class can visit a planetarium; constructing middle school curricula on reproductive health; organizing ecological restoration projects in local creeks; educating their soccer team about the presidential candidates’ positions; trying to convince the city of Santa Cruz to build artificial surf reefs; and devising a plan to promote

carpooling between student housing and campus.

Throughout the semester, and in their concluding papers, students report on how their values have changed and reexamine the positionality and the epistemological claims about the world they now make. Through this process, we help prepare students to become ethical, effective, self-aware members of their chosen communities—be they family, social, neighborhood, political, spiritual, or even ecological communities. We help them articulate, justify, and embody values they find meaningful without imposing our values on them. And we help them to understand where those values come from, what values others hold, and how one can both assert one’s own values while respecting those of others.

Asking students to study how their own positionality biases their epistemology furthers the program of a liberatory pedagogy. Like Paolo Freire, I want to work with students to mutually achieve “emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality.”³ Like bell hooks, I believe that students “want knowledge that is meaningful. Asking students to connect positionality and epistemology works to achieve bell hooks’ desire that we help students acquire “ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply.”⁴ Rather than the teacher acting as sole holder of expertise to make meaning of material for the students, the teacher starts from where the students are. When students con-

nect positionality to epistemology, we find out where they are because we ask them! We start from a position of respect for the student, and we start from the position that students ought to respect each other's positions. We foster the belief that students should be comfortable their own expertise so that they respect themselves as authorities.

When the teacher lectures at his students, his students can only see themselves as passive recipients of knowledge. Students are not empowered to make knowledge themselves, and they are not encouraged to see their fellow students as respected sources of knowledge. Nor are they empowered to use knowledge they've created to change the world.

Those who would challenge the powerful in society face strong backlash. Witness, for example, crusades against affirmative action, bilingual education, gay rights. By highlighting alternate claims to power, those who advocate for the marginalized highlight the structures that keep dominant positionality as seeming inevitable.

By naming the ideologies that are not inevitable or divinely ordained, we can look for points at which to intervene so that power and privilege may become more equitably distributed. Asking students to understand how positionality biases epistemology and how those with certain kinds of positions arrogate power can be part of an educational agenda aimed towards promoting greater social justice.⁵

As my students gnaw on how positionality biases epistemology, so do I. It's an ongoing project, peeling away the layers of my own knowledge, attempting the arduous task of seeing outside of my own position, of trying to gain a foothold from which to look at me. How do I know I'm making assumptions about the world if the world only reinforces those assumptions?

I began asking these questions at an early age, when I realized I was gay. I was a self-aware adolescent, and I developed a minor obsession with examining how the world teaches us that heterosexuality and its norms are the natural, inevitable way to be. It's imperceptible because of its banal omnipresence: it surrounds us through friends, family, advertising, politicians, culture makers—all the forces that shape our worldviews and self opinions, that shape our epistemological grasp on the planet around us. And it's insidious because those for whom the norms work

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don't ever need to even be aware that they fall subject to these norms. If you're heterosexual, you're not obliged to think about the norms and how they're shaped because the norms work for you, and nearly every signal you receive reinforces those norms.

When I point out assumptions those who are heterosexual make because of their heterosexuality, even my most liberated straight friends sometimes recoil because they hadn't realized they had anything to question. Their simple displays of public affection aren't potentially life

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threatening; they don't risk being barred from a hospital room should their loved one become ill. No one ever challenged the norms that have always enveloped them.

"Norms" are called norms for a reason. You have to first be aware that your positionality might bias your epistemology before you can conceive of a more equitable world, before you can listen to understand, before you can admit other voices and other ways of knowing the world around you. And you

have no choice but to continuously examine these connections if you want a fair, pluralistic society and an enlightened, expansive view of the planet around you—and this should be a major part of what education is about.

It took an embarrassingly long time before I realized how oblivious I was to my own positionality. As a white male, for example, I never had to examine my white privilege or male privilege—I had never even heard of these terms. No one challenged me to examine my privilege, and I didn't need to challenge my privileges because my privileges worked for me. I don't worry about walking alone at night; I'm not stopped on the highway because of the color of my skin.

I now take it as part of my work—not just as professor, but as a member of diverse communities—to keep examining my assumptions about the world. And as a professor, I constantly examine power relations to be aware that my positionality as the Ph.D. holder and grade giver can lead me to abuse my power in the classroom unless I am vigilant. Because of the power I hold in the classroom, my assumptions are less likely to be challenged. Things I believe are true—about the world beyond the classroom, the subject matters I teach, the students with whom I interact—may or may not be a reflection of my own identity and experiences. It's only by keeping an attitude of mindfulness, a willingness to be

vulnerable, and a constantly engaged critical consciousness that I can move and change. Only then can I really listen to what my students say. Rather than tying what they say into the latticework of my own beliefs, I can start to hear them on their own terms, to conceive of different paradigms, to judge views that may differ from my own as valid or consistent or worth subscribing to or switching to. I even am currently considering whether my own positionality leads me to focus on the connection between positionality and epistemology in ways that might not be appropriate or constructive in the classroom!

It's an admittedly unscientific sample, but I have found that my male science students have the most trouble connecting positionality to epistemology. I ask students to write a *Theory of Environmental Justice* that uses scholarly investigation, service learning experiences, and positionality as evidence.

Last semester, four male students came to me with the same problem.


They couldn't insert a section on how their positionality biases their epistemology because they couldn't figure out where it fits: "It interrupts the flow." As they explained it, they are not comfortable with the possibility of the subjectivity of knowledge. They've been taught that truths are discovered irrespective of the discoverer's identity. They see themselves as unbiased conduits for reporting objectively derived facts, and are not comfortable presenting themselves as knowledge makers whose own lives count as factual evidence about the world.

Their multiple privileges have made it more difficult to understand how their positions are positions. Women, on the other hand, have thus far tended to feel liberated when allowed to show how, for example, their experiences in the world shape their views on justice.

You can help students connect positionality to epistemology in any academic discipline. My courses are offered in our science department, although they are about ethics, justice, and history. But any science student can study how scientific knowledge is constructed and how the scientific process works if she examines how what a scientist knows—or how what "science" knows—is shaped by the positionality of the scientist, and the positionalities of those who have been scientists. They can examine why certain questions get asked and answered, examine how values shape observation. Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*⁶ and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy's *The Woman Who Never Evolved*⁷ offer accessible

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examples of how the positionality of scientists has shaped the knowledge they've produced. These books can help students envision how a more self-reflective science, where its practitioners ask themselves how who they are shapes what they know, can lead to more balanced, accurate knowledge about the world.

No matter where they live or work, students will interact daily with people with different perspectives, whose positionalities bias their worldviews in profoundly different ways. Education can have no more crucial function than helping students to function most productively and joyously in their communities. This means learning to listen with open minds and hearts, learning to respect different ways of knowing the world borne of different identities and experiences, and learning to examine and re-examine one's own worldviews. These skills also seem requisite for the reflective practitioner of the teaching craft. When we constantly engage to understand how our positionality biases our epistemology, we greet the world with respect, interact with others to explore and cherish their differences, and live life with a fuller sense of self as part of a web of community. 

ENDNOTES

- 1 Harding, Sandra, "After the Neutrality Ideal: Science, Politics, and 'Strong Objectivity,'" *Social Research* 59, 1992: 567-87.
- 2 Hardin, Garrett, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor," *Psychology Today* September 1974: 38-43, 124-126.
- 3 Freire, Paolo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum Publishing, New York, 1997: 62.
- 4 hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, Routledge, New York, 1994: 19,22.
- 5 A recent, accessible, and delightful work that helps students understand what this might mean: Brechin, Gray, *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999.
- 6 Gould, Stephen Jay, *The Mismeasure of Man*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1981.
- 7 One could teach a whole note on positionality and epistemology in primatology. Among other sources: Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer, *The Woman That Never Evolved*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999; Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1999; Haraway, Donna J., *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, New York, Routledge, 1989; Altmann, Jeanne, *Baboon Mothers and Infants*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1980; Small, Meredith, *Female Choices: Sexual Behavior of Female Primates*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993.