

## Positionality Statement: Critical Vulnerability as Praxis (Part 1)

“We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience”: John Dewey.

I take this reflection with the realization that, for dialogic pedagogy, you are required to be self aware of how identity is loaded with power, restriction, and responsibility. Speaking from experience is not to point to self (e.g., to focus) but to see how I walk through academic spaces and what that moving means to my classroom. My critical vulnerability asks me to articulate the intersectional nature of my history, struggles and authority instead of presenting myself as a neutral educator (Flores, 2018; Simmonds, 2007).

Certain aspects of my identity have been interrogated in academia in a way that rendered power visible. My childhood was spent learning in Bangladesh in a lecture-centered system where questioning was almost never discussed. I served as a professional journalist for over 15 years before starting college as a doctoral student in the U.S. This turn underscored how academic environments depend on unwritten norms — confidence in impromptu talking, adaptability to other cultures, fluency with cultural references, technology tools. I felt a little different, with my accent, ignorance of informal expressions and a general lack of knowledge of American youth culture. I realized that language and culture fluency often represent a substitute for competence. Hesitation could also be seen as ignorance rather than thoughtful contemplation. Stepping through the maze of academia was thus a process of learning not only what content we were reading, but, more importantly, how to carry out that content — how to speak, convey authority, even, more fundamentally, how to read expectations. At the same time, I am learning to respect these norms, to have institutional authority as an educator. In this manner marginality and power are able to live together at the same time.

Other aspect of my identity inform my approach to teaching and provide sources of strength. As a product of journalism, which had taught me that storytelling and simplicity are essential for human understanding, that moral responsibility and social role of media play an important role. These are commitments that influence how I teach: I value the meaning, context, purpose of students more than my technical ability. Cross-culturally, I’ve grown in my attention to communicative dynamics for each person. I know that silence means caution: language processing; insecurity — not being engaged. Having learnt within new systems myself, I am more likely to approach my students with patience than judgment when they feel lost. My teaching was shaped by a number of personal experiences.

My first years teaching multimedia journalism at the University of Colorado Boulder saw me given the task of teaching digital production tools with little or no formality and a hands on perspective. I learned software while teaching software, which made me not very confident or at all. Some students, especially if they were already experts in the tools, questioned my skills or reacted to my accent. Others disengaged. Early evaluations of the course showcased these tensions, noting that I seemed unclear or defensive, but said certain students appreciated the storytelling focus. Those experiences also made it visible that power in the classroom is not only an institutional category, but is relational and performative, composed of confidence, fluency and perceived authority. And with time, these experiences also gave me important lessons about teaching.

My confidence grew and, so did my teaching after I made more of an effort to learn the technologies. I clarified what the directions were, opened up to more discussion, and adopted to a more supportive tone. I am also mindful that many of my students are also in work and also financial obligations, something that impacted how I perceived lateness or incomplete work.

Course assessments were improved, again emphasizing that teaching is the result of self-reflection and adjustment, not fixed ability. At the same time I struggle with teaching for all skill levels and with reacting to moments in which authority may be compromised thanks to accent or perceived difference. Acknowledging these obstacles are the aspects of practicing critical vulnerability.

According to Simmonds (2007), vulnerability in teaching is a moral position for learning as an ethical stance promoting development. In doing this, I view teaching as a relational practice that incorporates dynamics of power, identity, and ongoing learning. My experiences of uncertainty enable me to relate to students, but my position gives me authority too that, if unchecked, can stifle dialogue. Identification and self-aware awareness of these dynamics is key to fostering a classroom where dialogue is empowered, differences acknowledged, and learning seen as a communal endeavor.

### **References**

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