

Facilitating the Writer Habitus: Critical-Consciousness Raising in the First-Year Writing Classroom

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Research Question: How do we utilize educational spaces to address social problems? How can the practice of writing be used to raise critical consciousness? How can we use cross-disciplinary strategies to enrich student learning?

ABSTRACT

The microcosm of the writing classroom can be a suitable analog for modern society in the context of addressing real problems with a critical eye, and modern society demands attention be given to the deconstruction and resolution of social problems. Writing is a practice that enables people to think critically about any given topic, so it appears practically irresponsible to not dedicate any attention to real-world issues in intimate communities of critical discourse like writing classrooms. Genres that engage writers' habitus like sociological autobiography are key to unlocking a critical-consciousness, furthering the development of solutions to social problems that extend far outside of any classroom. This project illustrates how sociological autobiography is effective in both meeting the existing goals of a first-year writing program, being the development of communication and critical thinking skills, and cultivating a critical-consciousness in students through writing practices. This is accomplished through critical reflection and collaborative learning, which exposes students to a different way of thinking about the social problems that affect them. The purpose of this is to have students understand their positionality and to then critically examine how that positionality has contributed to the experiences they have had in life, allowing for reflection on how they have been affected by—or contributed to—larger structures of power in their lives. In fostering critical-consciousness, students develop a better understanding of their habitus that they can then take with them after they leave the writing classroom.

“Habitus brings together social class and learned behavior, the body and the material, and habits and practices. [...] Habitus is an attempt to theorize the social as a process, as actively present [including] the analysis of class differences” (Reynolds). In my own terms, it is the collective body of individual experiences a person draws upon to navigate their reality. It is influenced by many factors such as race, class, and location, and those factors also work to influence one another. Habitus can further be specialized to experiences that influence particular identities, hence the conceptualization of writer habitus—a body of experience writers draw from in order to guide their writing style and interests.



Sociological Autobiography

- Personal Narrative
- Social Location
- Positionality

Sociological Imagination: Consciousness of individual self within an ever-influential society. Seeing the intersection between personal biography and social history (C. Wright Mills qtd. in Kebede).

First-Year/College Writing Classes: Developing students' critical thinking and communication skills through writing, which is ultimately useful in promoting success in the rest of their educations.

Narrative Writing: Demystifies academic writing for students over-standardized by high school writing, and they ask students to focus on the most important factor in critical thinking: themselves. The personal writing genre carries a unique advantage compared to the other genres because all of the information a student needs to critically engage with the most emotional or life-changing events that have affected their lives is already within their memory and imagination.

Collaborative Learning: Dialogic modes that work to engage students more thoughtfully in an educational context (Bruffee).

Sociological autobiography asks students to situate their experiences in the socio-cultural and socio-historical contexts of those experiences. In a similar fashion to how literacy narratives force writers to consider how important circumstances and events influenced their life from that moment in time onward, this assignment forces them to examine their positionality in those moments and analyze if and/or how that positionality contributed to that experience.

Critical Consciousness

- Critical Thinking
- Empathy
- Awareness

Social Change

- Activism
- Collaboration
- Compassion

Bibliography

Kebede, Alem. "Practicing Sociological Imagination through Writing Sociological Autobiography." *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 37, October 2009, pp. 353-68.
Madden, Meredith. "Social Class Dialogues and the Fostering of Class Consciousness." *Equity & Excellence in Education*, vol. 48, no. 4, October 2015, pp. 571-88.
Reynolds, Nedra. "Chapter 2: Reading Landscapes and Walking the Streets." *Geographies of Writing: Inhabiting Places and Encountering Difference*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2004, pp. 47-77.
Trautner N. Mary and Elizabeth Borland. "Using Sociological Imagination to Teach about Academic Integrity." *Teaching Sociology*, vol. 41, October 2013, pp. 377-88.

Sociological Autobiography: 100 points

This assignment asks you to identify yourself using sociological imagination. What does this mean? Think about the following questions: How do your roles affect the way you view society? How do your roles affect where you locate yourself in society? Do the communities that you are a part of affect the way you view the rest of the world? As you write, do not include information you are not comfortable discussing with your peers.

This assignment is broken up into 4 parts: a pre-writing, the rough draft, the final draft, and a reflection. After the pre-writing, you will write an essay that thoughtfully addresses the question: **how does your positionality—the statuses you hold in society—affect the experiences you have?**

Pre-Writing: 15 points

For each of the following, list at least 5:

- statuses you occupy, both past and present (student, younger sister, volunteer, etc.).
- statuses and labels that you have used to identify yourself (middle-class, heterosexual, Latinx, etc.).
- statuses and labels that others have used to identify you (they may be similar to ones you use yourself).
- statuses and labels you have used to identify others (prejudicially or otherwise).
- of the most significant, memorable, life-changing events you have experienced (These can be ongoing, momentary, single instances, repeated instances, and so on)

Then, think critically about how those events may have been influenced by those statuses that you have identified. Do this in any way you like, so long as it is written down.

Rough Draft & Peer Feedback: 20 points

1 week before the final draft is due, you will work in groups of 3, and each group member will peer review both of their partners' papers and give feedback in the form of comments, reactions, and points where they want to know more. Pay attention to and make note of how different statuses and labels from your own affected experiences.

Essay (4-6 pages): 50 points

Physical copies of the draft should be handed in at the beginning of class on the due date, as well as posted on BlackBoard before class. Include your Pre-Writing material and peer-reviewed drafts with the printed copies.

Post-Writing Reflection (1 page): 15 points

After handing in the final draft of the essay, we will use the last 30 minutes of class to write a reflection of the assignment. Was it a positive experience to think about these experiences in a different context? Did you have trouble identifying how your roles and statuses played into your experiences? After doing your peer review, did you have a better understanding of how you may have located others' positionality? Has this assignment affected your perspective on labeling? Did you come to any realizations about your own background?

You will not be graded based on the number of examples you discuss, nor on the "quality" of the experience you discuss. Your grade is determined by the thoughtfulness of your discussion and how you identify moments where and why your positionality influenced or did not influence crucial moments of your life. The goal of this assignment is critical thinking, not to judge what someone has or has not experienced.