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Fostering “brave spaces” for exploring perceptions of marginalized groups through reflexive writing

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Courses: Intercultural Communication, Interracial Communication, Gender Communication, Interpersonal Communication.

Objectives: Students will (1) identify how positionalities shape perception, and (2) practice reflexive writing to understand and analyze experiences related to privilege and oppression.

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Introduction and rationale

In a New York deli, a man shouts at Latino employees, “You’re in America now ... speak English” (Karimi & Levenson, 2018). A man walks into a New Zealand mosque, shooting indiscriminately at worshipers while broadcasting his tirade on Facebook Live (Flynn, 2019). A nine-year-old boy in Denver commits suicide after being bullied for being gay (Kacala, 2018). While this is the world students see in the media, classroom discussions of power and oppression remain difficult. As Chen and Lawless (2018) explain, “talking about historically marginalized and/or socially stigmatized group identities can feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or risky partly because such conversations directly challenge the status quo and partly because we lack pedagogical tools to address and adequately navigate complex emotions” (p. 376). Privileged students may have difficulty acknowledging their unearned advantages, complicity with oppression, and potentially problematic world views (Arao & Clemens, 2013). For marginalized students, discussing oppression often proves to be “a profoundly unsafe activity” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 140). Risk and discomfort are inevitable in discussions of inequality, and instructors have a responsibility to create spaces that support authentic, structured conversation.

Recognizing the impossibility of classroom safety, Arao and Clemens (2013) suggest a rhetorical shift from “safe spaces” to “brave spaces.” Whereas safe spaces refer to contexts wherein students can feel comfortable sharing opinions (Arao & Clemens, 2013), “brave space” communicates the courage needed to engage challenging subjects.¹ Safe spaces have historically been designed to provide marginalized students a forum to share their experiences with or find solace from systemic inequality. In contrast, brave spaces involve marginalized and privileged populations; they emphasize support and personal growth but clarify that learning about injustice is difficult and requires courage (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Moreover, brave spaces simultaneously challenge the unjust burden placed on marginalized students to educate others while recognizing that for more privileged students, “a

course addressing issues of social inequality may be the first time they considered their identities or the consequences for them” (Verduzco-Baker, 2018, p. 588).

We argue that reflexive personal narrative writing can create a brave space for students to assess and modify their perceptions and experiences of power and oppression. Reflexive writing involves a consideration of how identity shapes experience, perception, and decision making toward the goal of gaining greater self-awareness and questioning the seemingly objective nature of perception (Sutherland, 2016). This practice can offer students a forum for examining how power and oppression manifest in interpersonal contexts. The assignment described here asks students to unpack and question their interactions with members of a marginalized population.

The activity

This assignment works best in courses that heavily explore power and oppression (e.g. Interracial Communication, Gender and Communication, and Intercultural Communication). Instructors should familiarize students with the process of perception (particularly as it relates to stereotyping and prejudice) and reflexive writing. The process of perception is discussed in most intro-level interpersonal communication textbooks, and shows the ways in which our perceptions of the world are inevitably limited and thus flawed (McCornack & Morrison, 2019). As a supplement or substitute, instructors can show a short video entitled “Brain Tricks: This is How Your Brain Works” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiTz2i4VHFw>). This video illustrates the limitations of perception. To relate this video to bias and stereotyping, we recommend assigning as homework six short videos on implicit bias; all are available on YouTube under BruinX’s “Implicit Bias Video Series.”² The series explains perception as it relates to implicit bias and stereotyping to show the consequences of these processes for marginalized groups.

To teach students reflexive writing, instructors can have students read and discuss a reflexive writing paper and follow to practice the process themselves. An excellent reading is Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” Students can read this brief essay and discuss its use of reflexive writing. The instructor can assign questions such as: How does McIntosh’s whiteness shape her perception of the way the world works? Why is confronting white privilege difficult? Why was it important for McIntosh to *write down* her realizations about white privilege? Students can then practice reflexive writing on their own by considering a privilege they have (e.g. cis-gender, white, heterosexual, able bodied, male, financially stable, etc.) and writing about a specific experience their privilege has likely affected. Offer students examples of experiences affected by privilege (e.g. college admissions, navigating to class, showing public affection for a romantic partner without fear, trusting that police officers will protect one’s safety). Remind students of the flawed nature of perception and the inevitability of implicit bias as they work on their reflexive writing.

The assignment itself involves three components: a review of the student’s social location(s), a review of a marginalized population, and a final paper accompanied by an informal presentation. This scaffolding allows for feedback. Further, having the instructor be the sole audience of the earlier papers promotes the authentic introspection necessary for confronting biases. The final segment requires students to share their work with peers, which requires more vulnerability.

The first segment is a three- to five-page review of the student's own social location(s). Students should reflect upon their identity in at least three of these areas: sexuality, race, gender, religion, class, nationality, and ability. Students begin with a paragraph reviewing these identities and their perceived significance to their daily lives. Next, students spend one to two paragraphs on each identity and speculate how these identities have shaped their perceptions of those with differing identities. We encourage instructors to clarify this assignment as a brave space to emphasize the discomfort and courage necessary for productive introspection.

This second paper is a three- to five-page review of a marginalized group of which the student is *not* a member. Students should have past interactions with this population and plan to continue interaction in the future. Instructors should define "marginalized." Following Cook (2012), we define marginalized groups as those that have been and continue to be dehumanized and excluded from mainstream society politically, socially, and/or economically on the basis of race, class, gender, religion, sexuality, ability, and/or nationality. A discussion of privilege and power should accompany this definition; as Chen and Simmons (2015) note, instructors must attend to the hegemonic factors (e.g. white supremacy) that give rise to oppression. This decreases the likelihood of students inaccurately claiming a dominant identity is marginalized.

This second paper begins with an explanation of why the population was selected. Next, students recall their earliest knowledge of the group and where/how they acquired this knowledge (e.g. media); they follow to describe their earliest recalled interactions with a group member. Students should attempt to analyze their past perceptions of the group and speculate how their perception was/is shaped by their social locations and is thus limited. The paper should conclude with a speculation as to how the student could improve their perceptions, avoid generalizing characteristics to an entire marginalized group and/or reducing members of the group to victims of oppression, and ultimately engage in the rigorous, ongoing work of questioning stereotypes and correcting prejudices.

The final paper is a five- to seven-page culmination and extension of the above papers. Here, students consider how they could acquire greater awareness of their social location (s) and perceptions as they relate to structural inequality. We recommend the following structure:

- An introductory paragraph identifying the student's social identities and the marginalized group.
- A section of two to three paragraphs drawing upon the first paper that involves a background on the student's positionalities. Students should explain how/why their positionalities have shaped their perceptions.
- A section of two to three paragraphs that draws upon the second paper by reviewing a specific marginalized group and the student's perceptions of this group across time. Students should connect this section to the above.
- A section of three to four paragraphs that looks to the present and future toward the goal of improving perception and thus mitigating personal contributions to oppression.

We recommend dedicating a class to having students share their work. This should count toward a small portion the grade, but students should earn full credit if they are prepared with a brief summary.

The assignment is worth 30% of the course grade: 8% for paper one, 10% for paper two, and 12% for the third (presentation 2%). Each segment is evaluated on quality and integration of outside sources and key concepts (e.g. perception) and clarity of writing. We offer detailed rubrics to ensure students understand the evaluation process.

Debriefing and appraisal

The papers typically show increased awareness of causes of harmful attitudes (e.g. exposure to media bias) and partial solutions to challenging flawed perceptions (e.g. increasing knowledge through personal interaction). It is not uncommon for students who wrote about one group to then infer lessons for overcoming harmful attitudes about other groups.

Students have stated that the assignment strengthens their understanding of social justice and offers a forum for critical introspection and cultural awareness. One student explained:

[The assignment] was the first time I really looked at my upbringing and what it has contributed to how I view myself in the world today. Being white, working class, and growing up in a predominantly white area, I never had to think about race, and it was something that was never really talked about in my home.

Others have expressed pride for engaging difficult issues and increasing self-awareness. One student claimed the assignment offered a space to “stop and think about how I can help negate some of the inequality that I contribute to.” Students thus affirm that the assignment promotes bravery and greater awareness of their identities and perceptions as they relate to social marginalization.

This assignment is limited in that students are prone to positivity bias; they might see themselves as having undergone significant change when perceptual shifts were minor. It is difficult to discern whether students’ stories are honest. Yet, we maintain that reflexive writing promotes continued self-analysis in the context of a culture fraught with power and oppression.

Notes

1. For a history of brave spaces, see Arao and Clemens (2013).
2. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQGlgohunVw&list=PLWG_vsmMJ2clEeGKVyrOIKLOYrjFnVKqa&index=2.

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