

POSITION PAPER

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**Why is Positioning Yourself Important?**

Written by  
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## Why is Positioning Yourself Important?

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Before introducing an Indigenous literary work to a class for the first time, you may want to take some time to explore with your students the benefits of positioning yourself and engaging in a process of self-reflection. In Cree scholar and filmmaker Tasha Hubbard's words, "I have students who have expectations when they take my class that they're going to learn all about Indigenous people. [Instead], at the beginning of the class, I will [tell them] that they're in this space to basically turn their gaze towards themselves. Because so much of the time Indigenous people are the object of a gaze... There's all sorts of things embedded within that gaze" [CBC Arts 01:25:05]. The challenge is to find ways to transform settler feelings of defensiveness or guilt into the position of an ally.

Across Canada, the integration of Indigenous knowledges and literatures in courses and curricula is becoming commonplace. However, many non-Indigenous teachers feel uncomfortable and unprepared to engage with and teach Indigenous ways of knowing and literature. While working with teachers and teacher candidates, scholar and educator Susan D. Dion (Lenape/Potawatami) asks them to reflect on their relationship to Aboriginal people in Canada. In her article "Disrupting molded images," Dion explains how this discussion often goes:

Teachers respond with comments that go something like "Oh I know nothing, I have no friends who are Aboriginal, I didn't grow up near a reserve, I didn't learn anything in school, I know very little or I know nothing at all about Native people". One way or another, teachers, like many Canadians, claim the position of "perfect stranger" to Aboriginal people (331).

Dion further argues that in many institutions it continues to be acceptable for non-Indigenous educators to claim the position of "perfect stranger" to Indigenous people. She asks how this came to be acceptable (or appealing) and how educators can disrupt it.

I argue that it [the position of "perfect stranger"] is not an uncomplicated position. It is informed simultaneously by what teachers know, what they do not know, and what they refuse to know. It is, for many, a response to recognising that what they know is premised on a range of experiences with stereotypical representations (331).

Many educators and students will read these quotations by Dion and see themselves reflected in her statements. To be fair, how can teachers teach about Indigenous people and literatures if they have never learned about them, or from them? Knowing that one is not alone in the position of "perfect stranger" may be the encouragement needed to step out of one's comfort zone and recognize the problematic nature of consciously remaining a "perfect stranger."

### *How to (re)position oneself away from the position of "perfect stranger"*

To (re)position oneself is the first step to connecting what is being studied to one's own experiences, which promotes empathy and understanding rather than judgement. In their introduction to *Read, Listen, Tell*, co-editors, Sophie McCall, Deanna Reder, Dave Gaertner, and Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill explain more about this practice. They write,

Centring Indigenous scholarship and intellectual traditions also means following good protocol and locating oneself, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, in relation to a text. Before you begin reading, ask yourself: Who am I, how have my experiences shaped what I know, and what do I need to learn? As co-editors, we ourselves have asked these questions, and you can read our answers in “About the Editors” near the back of the book (383-385). Reading and interpreting varies enormously depending on how much background information and knowledge you as a reader bring to the page. We do not read from a so-called neutral, omniscient perspective from which we can understand everything; instead, we read from particular positions that can include both insights and blind-spots, positions that change as we learn more about a particular context or consider the perspectives of others. Embedded in the notion of positionality is the recognition that we are interconnected with those around us. How we establish relationships with one another, and how we might share rather than impose knowledges across cultures, languages, and social spaces, is shaped by our positionality (4).

While academia and scholarship often celebrate remaining scientific and unbiased, scholars of Indigenous studies are striking new ground, arguing that in fact all information and knowledge is positioned and thus contains a certain bias. Additionally, so-called ‘facts’ or ‘research’ within academia and scholarship have often been used to further discriminate or marginalize Indigenous people.

When one accepts that all knowledge is positioned, it does not negate that there are still facts and truths. Instead, it puts into question how scholars and researchers package and position their facts and truths, which we must learn to read critically. This skill should assist educators and students in identifying and destabilizing any “alternative facts,” should they arise.

Dr. Deanna Reder explains how positioning oneself is particularly relevant in the case of Indigenous studies. In her introduction to the first section of *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures*, she writes,

While in standard literary analysis discussion of one’s position is rarely identified and discussed, it is, I suggest, a necessity in Indigenous Studies, a corrective for the fixation on Aboriginal identity that is already examined keenly, regularly discussed, legislated, regulated, questioned, dismissed, debated, and defended, typically in response to questions from a member of the public or from a querying public institution. The act of identifying one’s position undermines the object/subject dichotomy and makes visible the lines of relationship that affect one’s perspective. Assumed in this declaration of position is the notion that there is more of a benefit to recognizing our relations to one another than striking a so-called “unbiased” pose (21).

Positioning yourself acknowledges how and why you have become “invested” or “interested” in a given subject. The economic metaphors are intentional. If a non-Indigenous person believes they have the right to examine, research, and analyse the cultures and histories of Indigenous people, should they not have to demonstrate that they know something about their own culture? Should they not have to explain what they believe they are bringing to the table?

### *An example of positioning: Dr. Deanna Reder*

As mentioned above, each of the co-editors of *Read, Listen, Tell* engaged in the exercise of positioning themselves in the “About the Editors” section of their work (383-385). I have chosen the example of Dr. Deanna Reder to present her positioning as a Métis scholar. She writes,

When Deanna Reder was a child, she explained to others that she was part Cree, since that is the language her mother spoke, part German, since that was the language her father spoke, and part English, since this was the language they spoke together. It was only as she grew that she realized that her mother’s family was a mix of Métis and Status Cree people from LaRonge, Saskatchewan, that her father’s family had arrived in Beausejour, Manitoba after the First World War from Poland and Russia, and that both preferred that she speak English. Because her mother only went to grade nine and her father to grade six, her love of school and of English literature was hard to explain, even to herself. It was only when she stumbled on Indigenous writers in the early 1990s that she understood how important it was to read stories with contexts that reflected the experiences of her family. As she began teaching she saw that same recognition and validation among her Indigenous students, when reading, hearing, and discussing Indigenous stories. Likewise, she saw the same transformative reactions by non-Indigenous students who were provoked to reconsider what they understand to be the history of Canada. Her hope is that this reader will help teachers and all readers in this challenging work (384).

### **ACTIVITY DETAILS**

1. Read the information above as a class.
2. It is useful to begin by reflecting on your knowledge about Indigenous people. Do you consider yourself a “perfect stranger” as presented by Dion? Are you Indigenous or do you have some personal connection and experience with Indigenous people and communities? What have you learned about Indigenous people in school? How much of your knowledge about Indigenous people is based on popular culture (film, legends, TV, etc.)? How much of your knowledge is based in common stereotypes or tropes? How much do you know because of people in your family?
3. Give students a chance to reflect on their answers and discuss.

*Note: Be prepared with ideas about how to discuss possibly harmful stereotypes that could come up in this discussion.*

4. As suggested by the co-editors of *Read, Listen, Tell*, ask students to write a paragraph about who they are and where they come from. To begin to (re)position themselves ask: “who am I, how have my experiences shaped what I know, and what do I need to learn?” (McCall, 4). Use Dr. Deanna Reder’s positioning statement above as a model.
5. Students may not know the answers to the questions above. Encourage them to speak with their family members and bring back their answers next class.

6. It may also be useful as a teacher to do this activity yourself, to self-reflect and to model it for your students.

### **Other options:**

- Read the chapter “Disrupting molded images” from Susan D. Dion’s book, *Braiding Histories: Learning from Aboriginal Peoples’ Experiences and Perspectives* (UBC Press, 2009) as a class to further understand and discuss her notion of the “perfect stranger.”

### **SOURCES**

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