Making Space for Myself While Making Space for My Students
by Shewonda Leger

How It Began
The summer before I started my Ph.D., I was struggling financially. The money my teaching assistantship awarded me wasn't enough to cover all my expenses. As the semester approached and my bills piled up, I was figuring out ways I could make money. I was starting to get nervous, till during a random conversation, a colleague asked me if I was interested in adjuncting at Davenport University. I applied.

I was offered to teach two classes there, which meant that, including my teaching assistantship at Michigan State, I would be teaching a total of three classes for the first time as a first-year Ph.D. student. Having never taught in a classroom setting before, I knew that this was going to be very challenging. My original intention taking on this responsibility was to make some extra cash. What I didn't know was how much I would grow as an instructor, and how much I would contribute and enhance to my students' intellectual experience.

No Classroom Teaching Experience
With no classroom teaching experience, seven days of orientation at Michigan State, one-day staff meeting at Davenport, and lesson plans for two days, I started teaching three courses: Composition and English, and Reading Application at Davenport, and First-Year Writing at Michigan State. At this point, I had an idea of what it meant to teach from the perspective of being a student myself, but I didn't know exactly what I was about to encounter as an instructor. I thought I could mimic some of the pedagogical performances that I've seen my college professors enact in the classroom from the perspective of being a student myself, which wasn't much to take from, since I didn't really understand why professors made the teaching choices they made.

Before attending Michigan State, I was used to classroom spaces that followed white intellectual traditions that weren't designed for bodies like mine. For the majority of my years as a college student, it was rare to find professors who looked like me or taught from texts that included narratives that I could relate to. Reflecting on my ten years of being a college student, I've only had three instructors that were women of color, one of whom I barely got to know as a senior in undergrad, and two in my Ph.D. program I am only now starting to build a relationship with. And, finally engaging in conversations of what it means to be a woman of color in academia. Here I was starting to teach for the first time as a Black woman, and I didn't have enough examples to draw from.

Moreover, I was also working for two institutions that viewed composition and teaching differently, while trying to develop my own teaching philosophies. At Davenport, I was not able to create my own syllabi. I was informed about the major writing assignments and grading systems, and I wasn't able to play around with the structure of these major assignments. Students were required to write three primary essays and a final research paper. After looking through the syllabi, I asked if I could replace one of the assignments with a digital project. I was told that I couldn't. It was disappointing, because during my MA experience, I had learned to value digital composing and held it up to the same standards as traditional writing and wanted to share that with my students. Therefore, I submitted a syllabus for Composition and English and for Reading Application at Davenport that didn't reflect the few pedagogical values that I believed in.

At Michigan State, however, I was able to integrate my own pedagogical values by writing and designing my own syllabus for First Year Writing. Even if there were five required writing projects set by the First Year Writing program, I had the freedom of choosing how I wanted to approach these projects and how

students would deliver them. With a combination of different expectations from two different institutions adding to the expectations I had for myself as an instructor, I had never been more confused in my life. Davenport had too much restriction, while I didn't know what to do with the freedom Michigan State had given me.

Creating an Open Learning Community

Besides teaching for the first time, I was also taking three graduate courses, including Composition Studies. As I engaged in discourse with my colleagues about the texts we were assigned in that course, I, like bell hooks explains about her own experience, "began to develop a blueprint for my own pedagogical practice" (6). I began to compare what I was reading to situations in my classroom and my experience as a student. I began to remember what it felt like when I sat in an undergraduate English literature course of thirty students, and I was the only Black body amongst white bodies being taught by a white male.

In my position as the leader of the classroom community, and being someone who has been oppressed as a Black student, I didn't want my students to experience the same restraints I had in the classroom. I had to step back and remember what I had read from other scholars. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks writes, "There must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community" (8). I wanted to influence the classroom dynamic, and encourage all my students to believe their work was worth contributing, but institutional rules like cover page requirements at Davenport limited the ways I wanted students to engage in assignments.

I had to construct my syllabus at Davenport from a given cover page that included a prewritten course description, learning outcomes, required texts, student responsibilities, requirements for major assignments, and a standardized grading scale. I was not allowed to revise or add my own content to these requirements, because I was told that all students had to be held up to the same standards in all sections and levels of composition courses. In my eyes, a three-page research paper limits the student's ability to produce, learn, and write deeply on a given topic, stopping students from exploring certain topics in depth. When I received the first essays at Davenport, I realized that students were more concerned about reaching the three-page limit than presenting an argument on the content they were writing about. They weren't engaging with a variety of outside scholarly sources because they didn't feel the need to when the assignment only required them to write three pages.

When I realized that I was allowing pedagogical boundaries and the standards of my supervisors to stop me from creating an open learning community for my students, a month into the semester, I asked my students at Davenport to write down what they would like to contribute to the classroom. What had their experiences in the class been like so far? What would they like to change or add to the course requirements and assignments? What would they like to add to the preexisting learning outcomes? It was crucial for me to engage in dialogue with my students to help me construct a community where they were welcomed. Using their responses, I went back and made changes to the syllabus and assignment requirements even if I wasn't allowed to.

Teaching, Learning, and Writing Through Digital Composing

Many of the students from Davenport expressed that they were tired of writing essays and didn't want to be in a writing class in their first reflection assignment. I felt powerless, because I was told that they could only submit traditional written essays. Or was I? If they couldn't turn in their final deliverables in other modes, why not have them learn from other modes of texts, such as film? For essay two, I asked

my Davenport composition class to pick a biography film. It could be a documentary or a film based on a true story. I asked them to watch that film and critically analyze how issues in the film they had chosen are currently present today, then use what they analyzed to write their next essay. To introduce this assignment, I had them watch Lee Daniel's *The Butler* and together we discussed race, social issues, discrimination, the civil rights movement, and other issues present in society and in the classroom today.

I took away the idea they had of this just being a boring writing class that they were forced to take, and transformed it into a place where they wanted to engage in discourse and contribute to the conversation. Many were amazed by how something that was composed for entertainment could be used for academic reasons. From this assignment I learned that it wasn't only about including digital composing in the classroom, but finding ways in which they could relate to certain topics.

Meanwhile, my students at Michigan State were trying to balance multiple modes of digital composing and traditional text. By engaging in these multiple modes, students would find which style of writing best suited their composing, cultural, and disciplinary practices. At first a few of them complained that they were not used to some of the composing processes I had asked them to engage in, one of which took the form of confessional videos. Instead of writing traditional reflective essays, they had to submit video confessions, including hashtags that summed up their overall experience with the assignment. Many expressed that it was a struggle to do their reflections in this mode.

Having them create video reflections, which included both positive and negative encounters, helped me analyze how my learning objectives influenced their own learning objectives for the assignment. I asked them, what I should change and the majority of them said not to change anything, because despite it being a challenge, learning these new forms of composing was helping them develop real life experiences, and they were still able to articulate their experiences in writing their assignments and growing as college students and writers. It was good to know that they trusted me to teach them about the writing process through different modes of composing. I wish I were brave enough to have broken the rules and had taken some of these assignments I did with my Michigan State students to my Davenport students.

From A Sista to A Sista
In a Skype conversation with activist and writer Carmen Kynard, she shared a story about how she was discouraged to use digital methods of teaching in her undergrad composition classroom. When her supervisor became aware of her teaching methods, she was told to stop. Da Man told her that the students with basic writing skills like her students didn't need to be engaging in digital work. Despite these instructions and allegations about her students' capabilities as writers, Kynard continued to use digital methods in her classroom. Her story illustrated how her classroom became an open learning community through digital spaces.

It was those words from Kynard that made me realize that moving forward, I have to disrupt pedagogical boundaries and stand up for my own pedagogical values. I want a classroom space where traditional pedagogical practices are interrogated and disrupted to meet the individual needs and creativity of each student. Da man assumed that the knowledge he wanted to offer—a knowledge that was built from white privileged perspectives—to students would empower them to be better scholars and to live more fully in the world beyond academia—And yet, Kynard proved otherwise through her successful digital teaching methods.

Teaching, Learning, and Writing Through Personal Narratives

Students step into the classroom with stories, but they overlook the value of those stories because they have often been overlooked by their previous educational systems. Yet how powerful can those stories make their writing! One of my goals as an instructor is to create a space where voices are heard and bodies are recognized through stories. I believe that if students become personally engaged in their writing, learning will not be a burden, but part of who they are naturally.

So, when I assigned my students at Davenport University a research paper that instructed them to write about a cause and effect in relation to social issues, I expected them to include themselves in their writing, but that wasn't the case. They were hesitant to include their own narratives. As a Haitian-American woman, I don't know how to separate my body from social issues, especially when white privilege labels me as an outsider. Therefore, I can't imagine writing a paper on social issues where I'm not fully engaged. My understanding of social issues is tied to my own experience of racism and sexism and that shows up in my writing. As a scholar and instructor interested in race, identity, and culture, I had to interrogate the fact that my students didn't want to or didn't know how to add their own stories to their papers.

When I asked my students in my Composition and English class at Davenport what they thought my expectations for their papers were, many of them thought that they were supposed to research a topic and present facts. This was another pedagogical boundary from grade school I had to disrupt. I told them if I wanted facts—that's what the Library Search Engine is for. I told them that what I wanted from them as writers was to put "self-first," and by self I mean their experiences of race, sexuality, gender, culture, and anything that contributes to their identity as writers and students. They looked at me confused and asked, "So you're saying it's okay to include ourselves in a research paper?" Pondering on the responses I got from the students in Composition and English, I made sure to bring up this conversation with students in my Reading Application and First Year Writing class.

Looking back at my freshman year I used to think the same thing. This experience is common in academia, especially for scholars of color who continue to feel the need to justify why storytelling is important in their academic work. Andrea Riley Mukavetz writes, "I was convinced that academic writing could not contain stories or sound like poetry. Or, maybe it had to do with how the institution values a certain set of knowledge practices. And when I did the work that I love, I found myself defending my work for no reason except my fear that I did not belong in academia" (Powell 390). As a freshman, I didn't include myself in my research papers because I felt the curriculum didn't make room for me.

When I was teaching my own freshmen, I made it clear to them that as a writer and instructor, I value personal narratives that contribute to intellectual growth rather than facts. I respect and use the work of other scholars of color to help me compose. I am particularly drawn to the work of those who have also built their research from real stories and personal experiences. I am not part of a generalized group placed under a label. I am not like the person next to me even if we are of the same race. It is our unique stories and experiences combined that disrupt racial issues and contribute toward changing oppression or controversial issues, or as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues in her TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," "Single stories create stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

So, for the final assignments, I had both my Davenport and Michigan State students watch "The Danger of a Single Story" before they started writing or composing their final assignments. By using this tactic, I wanted my students to understand that cultural knowledge and past experiences make learning

relevant and effective. When I received my Davenport students' final research papers at the end of the semester, there was a drastic change in their writing compared to the writing they had done earlier in the semester. They had learned to combine dialogue, different languages, and narratives in their writing.

On the other hand, the students at Michigan State weren't writing a final research paper, but composing video reflections. In these video reflections in groups of three, they were instructed to combine their video confessions, their remix project, and visuals they completed throughout the semester to digitally illustrate their experiences as individuals who had to interact in a first year writing class curriculum. As I watched their final videos, it reassured me that I had to make space for myself while making space for my students. Each video was different and demonstrated multiple perspectives to how my pedagogical values developed each student as writers. I was able to learn what students had difficulties with, what skills they brought to the classroom both digital and written, and most importantly what personal goals they accomplished as individuals in a shared space.

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