2023

Drawing to Conceptualize Research, Reduce Implicit Bias, and Establish Researcher Positionality in the Graduate Classroom

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Within higher education, equity pedagogies are accomplished through changes to teaching—methods, programs, curricula, and accreditation—and changes to research—scope, focus, methods, and interdisciplinarity.¹ There is an increasing awareness of the need to diversify the ranks of the faculty to reflect the experiences, perceptions, and needs of the broader society, but, to accomplish this, a more diverse cohort of scholars must be trained at the graduate level.² The academy stands to benefit from the experiences, insights, and interests of these diverse individuals, but only if it moves to conceptualize and understand research as an act that has space to grow and change, reflecting a broader range of experiences and interests.³ In parallel, there is also a need for those with more privilege in higher education to embrace inclusivity by confronting their own implicit biases. In the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, the frame Authority Is Constructed and
Contextual stresses the need to teach researchers to “acknowledge biases that privilege some sources of authority over others, especially in terms of others’ worldviews, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural orientations.”

The qualitative practice of positionality in research offers significant promise as a method to incorporate these diverse voices and perspectives by allowing librarians and faculty to teach new researchers to see themselves, their backgrounds, and their lived experiences as valuable and present. Positionality has long been used to help scholars understand themselves in relation to their research participants. Librarians can also gain significant instructional value in considering positionality as a dialogue between the researcher and the existing body of literature and research practices in their field.

Through reflection, coupled with literature to ground our thinking, this chapter discusses the experiences of three librarians with the use of conceptual drawings about research processes as an equitable pedagogical practice. This drawing technique has pushed each of us to understand research in different ways and reflect on our own positionality as researchers and as teachers in the classroom. First, Kari D. Weaver considers how drawing research shapes an individual’s understanding of themselves as a scholar. Second, Alissa Droog reflects on the use of drawing to understand how research relates to our identities. Finally, Frances Brady connects drawing to further social justice discussions in the classroom. We conclude with instructional materials for others who may wish to adopt such a practice. We also acknowledge that all three of us identify as white, cisgender female librarians in a field where that is the norm. Through the interplay between communal reflection, existing literature, and lived experience, we address how drawing and discussing conceptions of research can support the growth and diversification of the next generation of scholars.

Researcher Positionality and Subjectivity: Acknowledging Diverse Voices with Kari D. Weaver

The idea of using drawing as a method for information literacy instruction is not one I ever intended to use with students at all, let alone graduate students. Over a decade ago, I first used it with some colleagues in a faculty professional development workshop. During brainstorming, the idea of having faculty draw and share their conceptions of research as a way to activate kinesthetic learning and transition
them from an expert mindset to that of a novice arose. Eager to try something new, we pushed forward incorporating a drawing activity into the workshop where we asked the faculty to “Draw what research looks like” and gave them an assortment of crayons and markers to complete the task. The activity was a success and helped faculty reconnect with the experience of not knowing what to do or exactly how to answer, and I later used it again working with undergraduate research methods courses in sociology when I moved to a new institution.

Four years ago, I transitioned from a regional campus of a large state university system in the United States to a large, research-intensive university in Canada. My new job was meant to build a teaching and learning culture within the library and on behalf of the library across campus. In this role, I was tasked with identifying partnerships across academic support units. There was particular interest in increasing services for graduate students, who were traditionally underserved by our programming, as the library had long emphasized in-person supports preferred by undergraduates and built programs reflective of the corresponding statistical data that indicated significant undergraduate use. Such an emphasis on services for in-person undergraduates was not unique at my campus and has been identified as a consistent barrier to graduate student support at other institutions. This experience corresponded with my own growth and development, as I completed work on a doctorate of education degree where I was trained in qualitative research methods. A significant portion of my qualitative research training centered on considering relationships between the researcher and participants, a defining characteristic of many qualitative methods. It is intensely focused on understanding who your research participants are, understanding what the power dynamics are between you and your research participants, and developing self-reflective practices that allow for critical reflection on your role, place, and experiences as a researcher. These practices, which in the field are called positionality and subjectivity, helped me grapple with my own feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy as a researcher. It also drove me to begin confronting my own implicit biases as an integrated component of both teaching and research. In turn, this changed how I discussed research with graduate students, allowing me to acknowledge where my expertise lies while also understanding that I would naturally lack lived experiences that could illuminate, invigorate, and advance research. Drawing to unearth the affective side of research allowed me to seamlessly integrate these ideas into my teaching. Adopting this pedagogy allowed me to honor individual lived experiences and discuss them as valid and crucial elements that support and enhance research.

The opportunity emerged to build a copresented workshop in collaboration with our campus Writing and Communication Centre on literature reviews for graduate students that would address a combination of research, writing tasks, and conventions for those in attendance. They would be at different points in their research, from just beginning to conceptualize questions to polishing writing style and citations, but
given both the STEM focus of my present institution and the continuing emphasis in many fields on training students in quantitative research methods, I knew most in attendance would never have considered their own backgrounds, experiences, and relationships as influencing their research itself. Furthermore, I needed a way to explicitly address the affective components of research and expose this institutional bias in a way that supported students, including students of color, in a thoughtful and sensitive manner as affect can be both positive and negative. Without these conversations, I have found students often become trapped in their own subjectivity. Thus, students often procrastinate due to a sense of inadequacy, feeling that they are the wrong person to engage in the intended research, or concerns that their own experiences are negatively biasing how they frame questions, analyze data, and engage with human subjects. For students to engage in meaningful research, I needed an approach that “maintains that the development of students’ capacity to pose thoughtful questions (as opposed to clear answers) is as important as their ability to locate, access, organize, evaluate, and apply information in the research process.”

In this need, I turned back to the drawing activity I had used so successfully with both faculty and undergraduates as a way to enter these conversations and incorporated both the drawing activity and discussions about how our own experiences, biases, and identities can influence the work we do as researchers. I coupled this with techniques for navigating these issues, including journaling or analytic memos, peer conversations, concept mapping, and note-taking practices. Through the use of this activity, I often hear from students that no one has ever taken the time to speak about how emotional and personal research is, and that gives voice to the affective dimension of research, which, in turn, helps them to persevere.

Personally, using drawing as a way to engage with students continues to expose my own assumptions as a teacher and scholar and pushes me to consider how my identity and privilege interact across areas of my life and work. As an educator, this activity has encouraged me to take more creative risks in the classroom, ranging from dramatic skits to having students write works likely to be challenged or banned. As a scholar, the use of this drawing activity continues to expose how my identity and experiences shape my research agenda and practice.

Identities in Research:
Deconstructing the Academy with Alissa Droog

I first encountered the “draw what research is” activity while observing Dr. Kari D. Weaver teach in a first-year experience classroom. I was a bit surprised to be drawing
with first-year students in a postsecondary classroom, but quickly realized the value of the activity when students were prompted to discuss the emotions associated with their drawing. Not only did it build rapport, but also students came together to acknowledge the challenges of research as a group. I was already aware that drawing helps to surface affective and unconscious thoughts, and so I began to incorporate the activity into my undergraduate and graduate classrooms to help tease out the affective component of research. I met Frances Brady after presenting this activity at the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI) Instruction Showcase. After discussions with Frances, I have started to dig deeper into the drawing activity, asking not just what emotions are associated with the drawings, but how our drawings of research are impacted by our various identities.

When I use this activity in the classroom, I always draw with my students. When it comes time to ask about how our drawings are impacted by our identities, I share whatever drawing I did during the activity. My drawing often shows a process of research and I share how it reflects Western conceptions of knowledge as linear and categorical, even though I know that research does not look like this. Then I turn it to the students. I state explicitly that these are vulnerable topics and that I do not expect anyone to share. I am always surprised by the overwhelming response from students who want to share and by the raw emotion and deep responses to this question.

Acknowledging emotions and identities in research often leads to conversations about how research is personal. In my experience, students often have a perception that research must be somewhat impersonal. As our experiences and identities in life impact the topics we are interested in, acknowledging why we are interested in a topic can help to home in on the research question. By having conversations that acknowledge the personal dimension of research, we give permission to graduate students to connect their research interests to their identities.

Some students respond to the question about their drawing of research and identities by reflecting on how they have never considered how their identities impact research and how important it is to acknowledge this. These responses are very important for developing graduate students in education to consider, especially as they plan to go out and do their own educational research. Although the activity alone is not sufficient to help students think through a framework for cultural and racial consciousness in their own research, this activity can be a starting point for some.

Students of different minority groups have responded to the question about their drawing and identities by discussing how they see their research as correcting past inequalities in their discipline. When this happens, the drawing activity allows for a critical discussion of what research is and of the academy itself. When students share what research is to them, we all encounter perceptions of research that may be different from our own. These conversations ask us to consider what research is and to see it as something that is growing and never neutral. As students share their
perceptions of research and challenge existing norms in the academy, the academy itself benefits from acknowledging and grappling with past inequalities that many new, diverse graduate students are keen to solve with their own research.

Drawing research has become my favorite technique to employ in the graduate classroom. It asks difficult questions, draws on our past experiences, and challenges us to reflect on our personal connections to research. Not only have students responded very positively to the activity, but my own understanding of how my positionality relates to research continues to grow through drawing.

Researchers as Social Justice Advocates: Confronting Implicit Biases with Frances Brady

Initially, I incorporated drawing in my lesson plans to enhance student retention of concepts, given the connection of drawing to memory. In 2020, I drew the concept of research during Alissa Droog’s presentation of her activity regarding affect during the CARLI Instruction Showcase. A few weeks later, George Floyd was murdered by Derek Chauvin, and protests erupted in response. As I engaged with anti-racism literature, I reflected on how my whiteness shapes my identity in ways often invisible to me. In reviewing my sketch of research within this light, I was disappointed by the biases implicit within it. I had depicted research as linear and individualistic. While individualism is not inherently a negative value, the unquestioned hegemony of White values (including individualism) allows those with more privilege to view their success as solely based on merit, denying how much support they received from others and ignoring how issues of systemic injustice personally benefit them. Additionally, I teach that research is iterative and collaborative, so my drawing demonstrated an internal dissonance.

Given how profoundly this dichotomy between my internalized and professed beliefs struck me, I included the activity in a workshop I facilitate for graduate-level peer teachers on teaching information literacy skills to first-year graduate students. To decrease their anxiety, I exposed my vulnerability by sharing how I drew research and what I learned from it. Peer teachers reviewed their drawings and considered how their positionality impacted their conception of research. The discussion was lively and rich as they articulated their surprise at how their drawings revealed their implicit biases about what research is and who researchers are. As they are passionate about social justice and engage in anti-racism work personally and professionally, they cognitively disagreed with what their drawings depicted. This discord between implicit biases and acknowledged beliefs created an opening for learning to ensue.
Bolstered by the successful discussion in the workshop, the peer teachers and I added the activity at the beginning of the lesson plan for all first-year graduate students. Although we expected these conversations to be uncomfortable, we hoped the drawing would help reveal some of students’ implicit biases about research to themselves. We were pleasantly surprised to find the honesty we brought to the sessions of our own perceptions of research modeled a small shift in the distribution of power in the classroom, as it moved away from us presenting at students and toward a model of equity between instructor and student.

Thus, this activity centers social justice through both the content and the process itself of the discussions. Social justice must inherently involve action, not simply theory, as it refers to the equitable distribution of resources. New graduate students often conceptualize research as separate from praxis. Since many Adler students are more interested in becoming practitioners than academics, they view research as irrelevant to their future work as clinicians. I teach students that what research is done, about whom, and by whom impacts what resources are provided to which communities; how mental health experts treat their clients; which treatments doctors select for their patients; and so on. Since Adler students are interested in how their intersecting identities shape their work as clinicians, the drawing activity pushes students to consider how their positionality may impact their choice of topic, population to study, and how they evaluate authority of authors and resources, which in turn will also impact the communities they serve. For example, research in both the medical and mental health fields has traditionally been done by White people and has focused on White populations, even when making claims regarding BIPOC people. Through visualizing research and the ensuing discussion, BIPOC students and faculty expressed surprise that this activity and discussion positioned them to see that they could shape not only what topics are researched, but also even impact the values that drive research.

Through scaffolded sessions I teach later in students’ programs, I reiterate the connection of research to social justice, so I do not suggest that I fully address this in a short activity. However, students’ visualization of their relationship to research primes them for later sessions, powerfully shaping how students conceptualize their dissertations and how they will later apply social justice as professionals.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Librarians who wish to try a version of this method with graduate students or with any other students should consider starting small by adding a drawing activity to an existing lesson or in a research consultation appointment until managing the
discussions around student affect and research biases becomes more comfortable. Different challenges may arise, depending on the student population. At Adler University, the greatest difficulty was ending the exciting conversations to move to other components, so we established clear limits on how long the discussion could continue. However, if students are reticent to share with the full class, placing them in pairs might elicit more conversation. If the method is used within a one-shot rather than within a librarian-taught credit course, we recommend allowing students to simply share at their comfort level, even if this means that many students might simply listen rather than expressing themselves. Individuals wishing to build drawing techniques into their instruction in a more substantial manner may consult the brief lesson plan in the appendix.

As indicated by our collective reflections, drawing activities hold significant promise as a pedagogical method to build equity and inclusivity into conversations around graduate student research. While we reflect on our use of the technique in graduate classrooms, Kari and Alissa have used it with other learner populations too. Additionally, such activities can be readily adapted to address different needs in varied contexts, ranging from positionality and subjectivity to bias and concerns of social justice. Librarians working with graduate students have the valuable opportunity to engage by helping burgeoning scholars conceptualize what research is and take ownership of their power as new voices in academia. Using drawing to help with these processes can more readily engender conversation that exposes those biases, systemic barriers, and lived experiences that hold the potential to remake what and how research is conducted.
Appendix: Drawing Research Activity

7–25-minute session either in a classroom or synchronously online

Activity Goals

- Librarians will be able to
  - assess students’ prior experiences with and affect toward research
  - create a participatory classroom culture through active learning

- Students will be able to
  - acknowledge the affective component of research
  - reflect on the ways their various identities shape their perceptions of research

Materials Needed

- In person: paper and writing utensils (instructor can have students use their own, or bring paper and colored pencils/crayons/etc.)
- Online: can be done via Zoom or other technology where students draw on their own

Directions

1. Draw the concept of research (1–2 minutes).
   - a. Assure students that this is not a test of artistic skills and that it will not be collected.
   - b. Provide the amount of time they will have.
   - c. Draw your concept of research along with students.

2. Discuss affect (1–2 minutes).
   - a. Ask students to look at their drawings and consider what emotions are there.
   - b. Mode
     - i. In person: this can be done in pairs.
     - ii. Online: this can be entered into the chat or through Padlet, etc.

3. Discuss positionality (5–20 minutes).
a. Share your drawing and explain how it represents your vision of research from the perspective of your own positionality.

b. Guiding questions can include
   i. How does your drawing connect to one or more of your identities?
   ii. Did you include yourself in your drawing?
   iii. Did you draw a researcher? If so, what does that person look like? If not, why not?

c. Depending on time, students can discuss in small groups or as a full class either in person or online.

Assessment

- Assessment for learning: Librarians learn students’ past experiences of and current feelings toward research.
- Assessment of learning: Gauge student understanding of the affective component of research and the impact of positionality on research through the class discussion.

Notes

10. Amy Catalano, "Patterns of Graduate Students’ Information Seeking Behavior: A Meta-syn-


**Bibliography**


