

Teaching Digital Feminist Research Methods: Polluted Digital Landscapes and Care-ful Pedagogies

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Abstract: This article explores how instructors can use interdependency, reflexivity, transparency, and unlearning when teaching digital research methods to encourage students to assess the larger context under which fake news, disinformation, and polluted rhetoric are occurring. Further, feminism's attention to emotions and affect offers students material ways of exploring the both the political and emotional polarization that is plaguing the United States at the current moment. This essay shares the author's own teaching experiences in a writing classroom and offers pedagogical approaches to teaching ethical digital feminist research methods.

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Introduction

After the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, scholarship on disinformation, misinformation, and fake news exploded in rhetoric and composition (Cloud; McComiskey; Skinnell). With journals like *Enculturation* publishing special issues on the subject, offering ways of meeting the chaos and toxicity online, it's clear the field feels a responsibility to address fake news. Much of the scholarship has focused on media and information literacy as key tools for mitigating the influence of disinformation and misinformation (Lockhart et al.). However, as more scholarship turns its attention to disinformation, misinformation, and fake news, it's become evident that these manipulative rhetorics have always existed and been used to further white supremacist, racist, ableist, and sexist claims (Boler and Davis; Kynard; Mejia et al.; Dolmage). Given the material and discursive power that disinformation and misinformation hold and the way that they reflect "a system working exactly as designed" to further capitalist and white supremacist aims, this article will explore how feminist methodologies offer one way of teaching students to traverse the "polluted landscape" of digital information (Phillips and Milner 6).

A growing concern in digital rhetorics over nefarious uses of technology and the weaponization of digital spaces highlights the importance of teaching students about the broader context behind disinformation and misinformation claims online (Ridolfo and Hart-Davidson). The saturation of disinformation and misinformation within public discourse across historical periods sug-

gests the need for pointed awareness of information disorder and material analysis of its broader context in the writing classroom (Mejia et al.). As manipulated and fabricated information, disinformation and misinformation represent what I refer to as polluted information throughout this article. Polluted information is information that has been manipulated, fabricated, or exaggerated in some way; this can be intentional or not. I use polluted information because it moves away from considerations of intention inherent in analyses of disinformation (fabricated information spread intentionally) and misinformation (fabricated information spread unknowingly), allowing students to focus more on the digital circulation and ethics of polluted information. Like many others in the field, I view this political and cultural time as a “rhetorical watershed moment in two ways: first, there has been a shift in the way that powerful people use unethical rhetoric to accomplish their goals; and second, there has been a shift in the way that public audiences consume unethical rhetoric” (McComiskey 3). Given that polluted information can be traced throughout history – especially as it has been used to disenfranchise marginalized peoples – Bruce McComiskey’s discussion of the shift highlights how digital rhetoric plays a role in the circulation of polluted information today, emphasizing the virality of disinformation and the ease of spreading misinformation on social media sites.

Over the last few semesters, I’ve taken time to hone and design an introductory research methods class taught in a writing department with an inquiry focus on disinformation and misinformation, creating activities to break down the process of engaging in feminist digital research. Hoping to draw students’ attention to the ways that polluted digital information intersects with larger ideological beliefs, I stressed the necessity of ecological approaches to research that accounted for messy processes and listening for gaps and silences. I asked students to engage in reflexive writing about their research and research process; I also asked students to interrogate their positionality and how it informed the kinds of biases and situated knowledge that informed their understanding of the world (Haraway). Most of all, to counter the neoliberal nihilistic energies circulating, I was intentional about centering care in the classroom through spatial design and the ways that I asked students to engage with information and material (Brown; Motta and Bennett). In what follows, I will provide examples of the ways that I used feminist research methods and methodologies to engage students in thinking about disinformation and misinformation.

In many ways, and as the vast scholarship about disinformation and misinformation suggests, writing studies is already primed to provide students with the tools necessary to navigate the polluted landscape of digital information (Carillo; Duffy; Lockhart et al.). There is also notable scholarship about how feminist methods and methodologies offer ways of teaching students to trek through contaminated and polluted rhetoric (Roher; Ringrose; Burke and Carolissen). This article explores how instructors can use interdependency, reflexivity, transparency, and unlearning when teaching digital research methods to encourage students to assess “the impact of the broader context within which objectionable phenomena such as ‘fake news’ are occurring” (Braidotti 57). Further, feminism’s attention to emotions and affect offers students material ways of exploring

the current “context of polarized emotionality and the crisis of truth characterizing current U.S. politics” (Boler and Davis 76). Informed by this scholarship, this piece explores pedagogical approaches to teaching ethical digital feminist research methods.

Polluted Information and Digital Ethics

While various terms such as disinformation, misinformation, fake news, post-truth, and malinformation have been used to frame the current false, misleading, manipulated, and fabricated rhetoric circulating online today, as noted above, I rely on the term polluted information to discuss manipulative rhetorics after Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner. Phillips and Milner argue that polluted information “allows us to...focus instead on how the pollution spreads, why it was allowed to spread, and what impact the pollution has both at the initial waste site and, later, downstream” (5). Shifting to a focus on polluted information creates space for students to think ecologically about how “the material conditions of which these social forces [polluted information] are a part can help to ‘explain why certain views, and not others, gain social currency’” (Mejia et al. 112). Considering how, why, and the impact of circulating polluted information creates space for students to acknowledge the various digital influences, like algorithms, within digital landscapes that shape the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation and allows for exploring and analyzing the ideologies and emotions undergirding and supporting the circulation of fake and misleading claims. It also encourages students to consider the deeply held beliefs and ideological frames that support various disinformation and misinformation campaigns while paying attention to the ways that this information is strategically conveyed through misleading and false claims tied to larger racist histories. For instance, I’ll often use anti-CRT (critical race theory) campaigns to demonstrate to students how the manipulative, misleading, and false information propagated about critical race theory is steeped in deep stories about white supremacist ideology, revisionist history, and anti-blackness that spreads through social media and influences education policy.

It’s imperative to approach digital polluted information through a nuanced perspective that acknowledges the root social narrative undergirding manipulative and misleading rhetoric; this nuanced perspective must note how emotions are tied to the deep stories people believe. Jason Vincent A. Cabañes uses Arlie Hochschild’s conception of “deep stories” to think through how digital polluted information propagates social narratives that dictate “the stories that people tell themselves about who they are, what values they hold, and, ultimately, what their place in society is” (437). Considering the intertwinement between deep stories and personal belief, deep stories evoke intense emotions that are easily manipulated by crafted rhetoric designed to shock and anger and are bolstered by algorithms and bots specifically designed to elicit emotional responses from users. As Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis note, while emotions have always played a pivotal role in politics and media, “there has been a shift in *awareness* of emotions as a determining factor,” especially regarding the ways digital technologies manipulate emotions (*italics in original* 75). Yet feminist rhetorical practices and ethics have always been aware of the role and centrality

of emotions in rhetoric, suggesting that feminist methods and methodologies are primed for navigating disinformation and misinformation.

Attention to the ideology and emotions behind polluted information, its circulation, and its material impact is important for understanding the broader influence and interdependent relationship between polluted information and its circulation across digital spaces. Stressing that a feminist ethic of care would acknowledge that people are more than digital data, recognize that data/claims require “attention to human meaning-making, context-specificity, inter/dependencies, temptations, as well as benefits and harms,” and contextualize one’s perspective as situated knowledge, a feminist ethic of care offers ways of contending with ecological understandings of disinformation and misinformation (franzke 70). Drawing on a history of scholarship about feminist ethics of care, “Feminist Research Ethics” in *IRE 3.0* makes a case for ethically engaging in digital research. The authors stress that an ethic of care centers on situated knowledge, relationality, reciprocity, and interdependency. Importantly, an ethic of care acknowledges a broader, interdependent context by analyzing digital research from an internal and external perspective as well as through the “relationships between the research project and the subject community that is involved” (franzke 69).

Feminist Methods and Digital Research

In what follows, I reflect on the overarching digital feminist ethics I emphasized in an introductory research methods class with an inquiry focused on disinformation and misinformation. This was the second course required in a two-part introductory writing class sequence. Through various assignments and lessons, I asked students to think seriously about disinformation, misinformation, and fake news in various genres and forms. The main assignment asked students to compose written and multimodal projects that they would include in a portfolio reflecting their research process. Students were asked to identify a conspiracy theory or piece of polluted information, compile and analyze sources connected to the polluted information, trace the circulation of information across various primary and secondary sources, and reflect on their research process. The portfolio assignment was meant to help students develop a comprehensive research process they could use during academic research and when confronted with information online. I encouraged students to view research as a messy and iterative process requiring transparency and reflection and emphasized the interdependent webs constellating various networks to circulate polluted information. While I’ll review some of the activities I created to teach students about digital feminist ethics through an ecological perspective, I want to take a moment to reflect on how feminist pedagogical approaches are central to teaching students in our current context. Given feminist pedagogy’s attention to countering neoliberal individualism (Stenberg) and imperial desires (Ahmed; Chatterjee and Maira), feminist pedagogy offers “a tool to understand and stop the violence while building toward a liberatory politics” (Rohrer 578). Feminist pedagogy’s attention to systems of oppression and its adherence to moving beyond traditional notions of objectivity and

authority demonstrate why it offers a way to contend with polluted information.

Teaching students about disinformation and misinformation using a feminist pedagogical approach opens space for students to think critically about knowledge production, interdependency, and emotions as valuable assets. Encouraging students to interrogate knowledge production and reflect on the pedagogical decisions structuring their education, feminist pedagogy attempts to renegotiate power dynamics in the classroom, giving students more autonomy and agency over their education. This is beneficial when teaching students about polluted information because it allows them to think critically about individualism, expertise, and power structures. Students can interrogate whose knowledge is deemed legitimate, disrupt notions about elitism, question institutional authority, and claim their own expertise and situated knowledges (hooks). Moreover, feminist pedagogy's attention to emotions in the classroom encourages students to consider the ways that emotions function as "part of what makes ideas adhere, generating investments and attachments that get recognized as positions and/or perspectives" (Micciche 6). This view of emotions as generative sites of inquiry motivates students to consider how emotions and situated knowledge influences the reception of polluted information. Drawing on the personal, students can grapple with the ways that emotions influence the ways they understand and grapple with knowledge. This is especially central to helping students navigate polluted information, given the ways deep stories are enveloped in larger interdependent webs marked by deep, emotionally charged beliefs.

Reflection

Feminism's commitment to the personal in research necessitates reflexive writing encouraging students to consider their identity, beliefs, and values in relation to their research. Heidi McKee and James Porter explain that feminist research methodologies must be critically reflexive "about one's own position, gender, and status," transparent about "making the process and constructed nature of research visible to multiple audiences," and flexible about making "adjustments in the project, to modify a project protocol as needed to make it more careful, reflexive, dialogic, and ethically rigorous" (155-156). These practices easily translate to conducting ethical digital feminist research, as evidenced by various articulations of feminist digital research that include feminist principles like reflexivity, interdependency, messy research, transparency, and an ethic of care.

Reflection plays a key role in negotiating disinformation and misinformation because it gives students the time to consider a broader context and perspective in addition to grappling with how their positionality and biases might influence their perception of certain claims. Incorporating reflective prompts and questions into research assignments and activities that asked stu-

dents to consider their research process and methods, I taught students about research processes using Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Jones Royster's idea of strategic contemplation. Kirsch and Royster argue that strategic contemplation encourages deliberately "taking the time, space, and resources to think about, through, and around work as an important meditative dimension of scholarly productivity" (21). Throughout the course, the reflective questions I posed asked students to consider their biases and how those perspectives may shape how they understand information. To encourage students to reflect on their research critically and to emphasize that "reflexivity [is] a process, [and not] an isolated event," I asked students to complete research journals (see Figure 1) as they engaged in in-depth research regarding the polluted information they identified (Gruwell 89). Pushing students to consider their positionality, bias, and process, I asked them to consider their emotional responses to polluted information and think critically about how they analyzed the information they viewed in their journals. As Judy Rohrer points out, "historicizing our locations and relations is antithetical to neoliberalism's flat pluralism and post-truth populism's singularly aggrieved (mostly white) victimhood" (585). By asking students to reflect on their emotional responses and thoughts throughout the research process, I hoped to illuminate how emotions and situated knowledge can shape the ways polluted information circulates.

Students affirmed that engaging in active writing about the process of research helped them to think more critically about the kinds of sources they were using and the deep stories circulating within and through their sources. Using research journals to trace process and emotional responses throughout proved generative for students who found themselves easily persuaded or manipulated by misleading polluted information. Students who found themselves convinced by polluted information identified moments where they were easily persuaded or manipulated and could dive deeper into the beliefs informing their responses as a result. This allowed students to interrogate their experiences and bias and consider how polluted information relies on emotions.

- 4 Research journals, organized in whatever way works for you. Submit them as one document entitled "Research Journal Unit Two"
 - These journals should combine all of the planning, data collection, reflection, and analysis you have done for your specific topic of inquiry throughout the unit. You should map the steps you took during your research and any reflective
-
- thoughts that came up during your research. Remember that emotional responses to research are valid and should be included in the research journal.
- Each journal should be about 100-200 words. These can be bullet point lists or summaries of your research. You should submit at least 4 research journals. They don't have to be fully fleshed out, formal writing pieces. But they should reflect your research process and reactions/emotional responses to information.

Figure 1. Research Journal Assignment Sheet Excerpt. Image description: a screenshot of a prompt given to students that

reads, “4 Research journals, organized in whatever way works for you. Submit them as one document entitled “Research Journal Unit Two”

- These journals should combine all of the planning, data collection, reflection, and analysis you have done for your specific topic of inquiry throughout the unit. You should map the steps you took during your research and any reflective thoughts that came up during your research. Remember that emotional responses to research are valid and should be included in the research journal. Each journal should be about 100-200 words. These can be bullet point lists or summaries of your research. You should submit at least 4 research journals. They don't have to be fully fleshed out, formal writing pieces. But they should reflect your research process and reactions/emotional responses to information.

One student even used this information to create a social media campaign countering polluted information on social media, using various sounds, filters, and effects on Tik Tok to compose a video that refuted a particular conspiracy.

Messy Research

Feminist methods and methodologies also embrace messy research, unlearning, and failure as key ways to navigate “seek[ing] knowledge in [a] social world where things are often elusive and multiple” (Luka et al. 28). When approaching research about polluted information, then, I encouraged and modeled for students messy research practices that required constant revision and citation mining, encouraging them to research across genre and medium (see Figure 2). I demonstrated various stages of the research process for students, actively reflecting and tracing research dead ends, ineffective keyword searches, and my emotional responses as I modeled. For instance, researching various primary sources circulating around the PizzaGate conspiracy theory offers generative sites of analysis for considering digital research with students. Given that PizzaGate is an older conspiracy, some original sites of analysis around the conspiracy have been removed from the internet. Language and social media rhetorics around the conspiracy have also changed and evolved, meaning that hashtags that once worked to identify conspiracy rhetorics around PizzaGate may no longer contain relevant information. Exploring the evolution of conspiracy rhetorics around PizzaGate emphasized for students how failure and dead ends in the research process can be used generatively. Ultimately, how I modeled the research process through conspiracies like PizzaGate encouraged students to recognize that digital research necessitates flexibility and an appreciation of picking apart messy threads that span temporal frames and public/private divides.

Digital spaces are constantly in flux—posts are deleted every minute, trending pages update by the second, and algorithms use your location to construct search results—so students must account for these intricacies and complexities as they research. Given the instability of digital research sites, I emphasized messiness over clarity with students to reflect the intricacies of digital research. I didn't want “students to imagine they must always be clear; [rather, I] want[ed]

them to imagine what is possible—and that they are possible” (Holmes and Wittman 35). To help students think deeply about their research engagement, I asked them to reflect on their research and writing process in their assigned research journals, where they analyzed and discussed their process and emotional responses to research. Afterwards, I designed an in-class activity providing space for students to intentionally reflect on their research and refine their practices as they re-searched based on failures they encountered, as reflected in the image to the right.

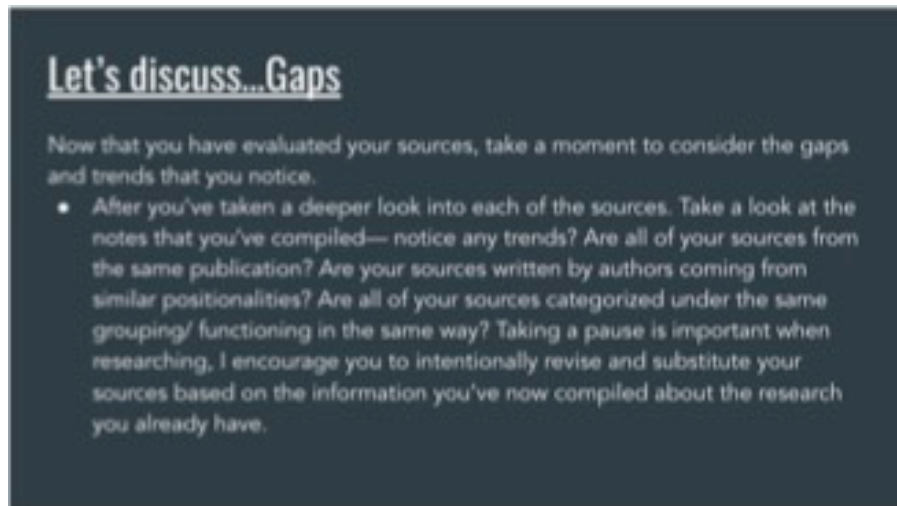


Figure 2. Activity Reflecting on Research Sources. Image description: a screenshot of a prompt given to students. It reads, “Let’s discuss...Gaps

Now that you have evaluated your sources, take a moment to consider the gaps and trends that you notice.

After you've taken a deeper look into each of the sources. Take a look at the notes that you've compiled—notice any trends? Are all of your sources from the same publication? Are your sources written by authors coming from similar positionalities? Are all of your sources categorized under the same grouping/functioning in the same way? Taking a pause is important when researching, I encourage you to intentionally revise and substitute your sources based on the information you've now compiled about the research you already have.”

Creating space and designing activities for students to reflect intentionally on their process encourages them to dive deeper and to “counter faith in a naive and transparent social world, to work with empirical material in a way that pays attention, simultaneously, to language, bodies, and material conditions, to present a mix of interpretations versus seeking consensus, both finding patterns and opening up closures, [and] to show the problems with all efforts to represent reality” (Lather 10). In turn, students are more attuned to listening to the gaps and silences that might exist in the research, allowing them to identify the broader context and pay attention to the harm caused by polluted information about marginalized communities that are often not given a dominant voice in digital spaces or research. In fact, many students discussed how intentionally paus-

ing and revising their research process and sources enabled them to dig more deeply into the materials they found and pushed them to consider their topic from different perspectives. Asking students to engage deeply with a localized and contextualized research process and methods creates ways for them to consider the specific material and discursive influences shaping particular digital claims, creating space for students to consider ideological truth claims that hold material power (see Figure 3).

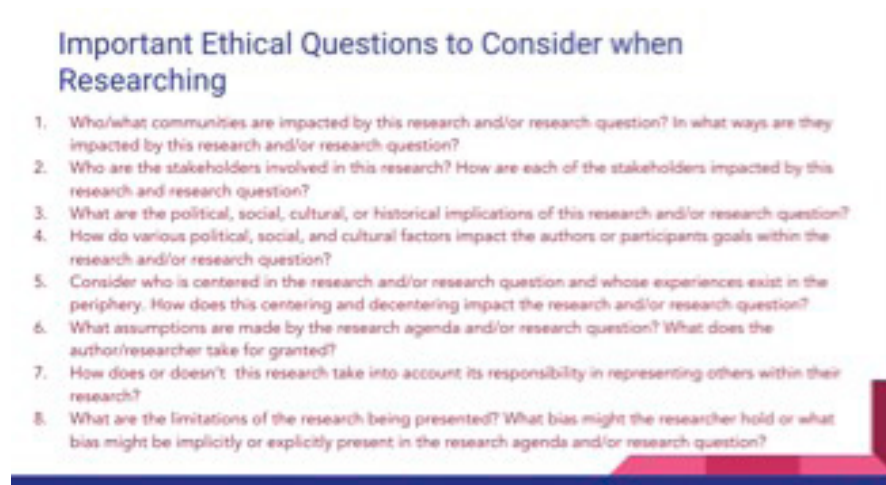


Figure 3. In-Process Ethical Research Questions to Employ. Image description: a screenshot of a prompt given to students. It reads:

Important Ethical Questions to Consider when Researching

1. Who/what communities are impacted by this research and/or research question? In what ways are they impacted by this research and/or research question?
2. Who are the stakeholders involved in this research? How are each of the stakeholders impacted by this research and research question?
3. What are the political, social, cultural, or historical implications for this research and/or research question? How do various political, social, and cultural factors impact the authors or participants goals within the research and/or research question?
4. Consider who is centered in the research and/or research question and whose experiences exist in the periphery. How does this centering and decentering impact the research and/or research question?
5. What assumptions are made by the research agenda and/or research question? What does the author/researcher take for granted?
6. How does or doesn't this research take into account its responsibility in representing others within their research?
7. What are the limitations of the research being presented? What bias might the researcher hold or what bias might be implicitly or explicitly present in the research agenda and/or research question?

This allows for contemplation of the ways that “lively— rather than simply [messy]— data,

involve[s] ongoing negotiations of power relations” (Luka et al. 32). This is especially generative for students considering disinformation and misinformation because it enables them to explore polluted information from different perspectives to understand its persuasive effect on different audiences better.

Situated Knowledge

Situated knowledge can help students gain an approach to digital research that considers a broader context of practices and interdependent networks that bolster polluted information. Situated knowledge is central to developing a feminist ethic of care when approaching internet research because it “insist[s] on the embodied nature of all vision and so reclaim[s] the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 581). Before asking students to engage in research, I encouraged them to consider their research stance and positionality and its role in their research process. Developing a research stance that considers the research process and ethical research practices emphasizes identity’s role when processing information. Asking students to pay attention to the situated knowledge shaping polluted information draws attention to “identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on” (Alcoff 148). Attention to situated knowledge and positionality is central to contending with disinformation and misinformation because it illuminates the ways that polluted information is contingent on deep beliefs held by individuals that hold material force and cause material harm (Hochschild).



Figure 4. Considering the Impact of Research Stance. Image description: a screenshot of a prompt given to students. It reads,

"Research Stance

Now that you've garnered a good understanding of the research process, ethical questions to consider when conducting research, your own research habits and evaluation methods, and crafted a collage to describe your research passions, it's time to develop a research stance. Your research stance is a statement that you abide by as you engage in any kind of research. From the posts you see on Instagram to the articles you're assigned in your courses, how do you intend to approach research through an ethical and ecological framework, in line with Phillips and Milner. As an example, my research stance might read something like the following: "When I conduct research I will intentionally seek out diverse perspectives, check my sources for accuracy, and consider who is impacted by my research. To enact these principles, I will read more than two sources on a topic, I will look at how an author's positionality/standpoint might impact the research agenda, and I will consider the larger sociopolitical and sociocultural impact the research may have."

In my class, I continually asked students to reflect on their positionality and situated knowledge; we engaged in various reflective and embodied writing assignments that asked students to consider their values and how their positionality may influence those values. I also encouraged students to think deeply about the kind of content they watch, read, and hear throughout the day, noting how that content influences their beliefs and knowledge. One of the first major assignments that students completed was a strategic reflection. The assignment asked students to think about their positionality and how their identity and experiences may influence their way of seeing the world. To prepare students to write their strategic reflection, I designed various lessons that defined positionality and standpoint while asking students to respond to reflective writing prompts about their lived experiences, identity, and values to better understand how they assess information. I framed this assignment through Milner and Phillips's conception of a "you are here" sticker that would enable students to more critically consider new information they encounter in light of the information and knowledge they already possess. I provided students with guided free write prompts, as reflected in the image provided, to help students build their "you are here" framework.

While drawing students' attention to how their emotions, positionality, and situated knowledge influence the interpretation of polluted information, I also discussed ecological considerations of interdependence with students. To do so, I incorporated a conversation around Sandra Harding's standpoint theory to reinforce ways of considering how students are positioned in the world and how that positioning "directly influences what's visible to that person, which in turn directly influences what they know" (Phillips and Milner 20). With this in mind, I asked students to consider what kinds of frames they hold based on their standpoint, paying particular attention to the ways race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability might influence the kinds of frames that students believe to be true. We then expanded the discussion to consider how systems of power and oppression play a role in constructing these frames, drawing attention to the broader material-discursive and historical frames that shape how disinformation and misinformation are interpreted and supported. This attention to broader context especially helps students to understand

how individual actors function within a larger interdependent web of networked human and more-than-human relationships.

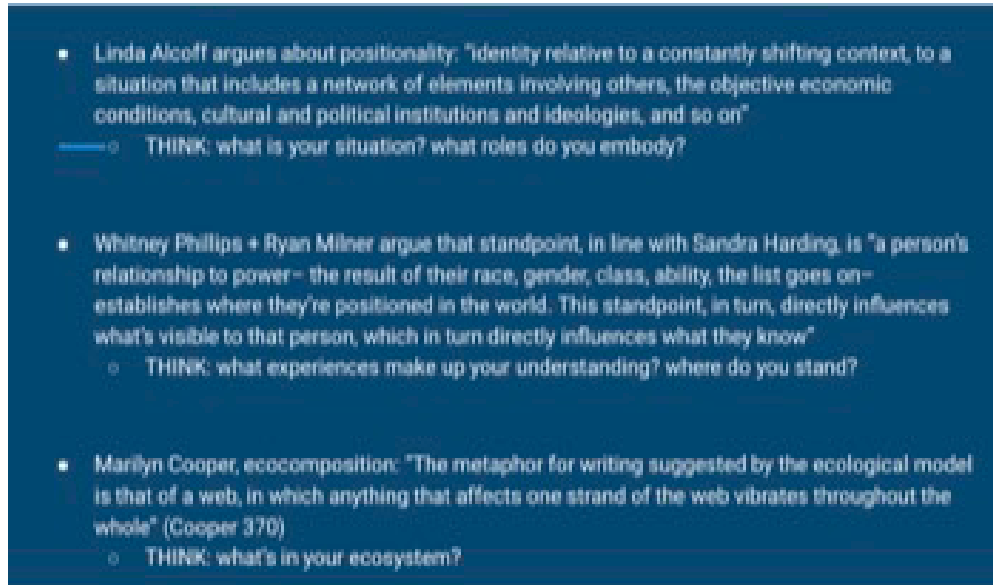


Figure 5. Scholarship & Questions to Guide Reflection on Positionality in Research. Image description: a screenshot of a prompt given to students. It reads:

Linda Alcoff argues about positionality: 'identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on'

THINK: what is your situation? what roles do you embody?

Whitney Phillips + Ryan Milner argues that standpoint, in line with Sandra Harding, is 'a person's relationship to power—the result of their race, gender, class, ability, the list goes on—establishes where they're positioned in the world. This standpoint, in turn, directly influences what's visible to that person, which in turn directly influences what they know'

THINK: what experiences make up your understanding? where do you stand?

Marilyn Cooper, ecocomposition: 'The metaphor for writing suggested by the ecological model is that of a web, in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole' (Cooper 370)

THINK: what's in your ecosystem?

Conclusion

Given polluted information's adherence to broader racial and capitalist histories, it's particularly important that students are taught to examine and analyze the material-discursive, human, and more-than-human influences that support disinformation and misinformation online. Through feminist methods and methodologies like teaching messy research, emphasizing reflective praxis throughout research, and valuing situated knowledge, writing instructors can contend with polluted information in ways that move beyond fact-checking and information literacy. Rather, attention to emotions and historical forces illuminates the intensity of polluted information online, where bots and algorithms bolster disinformation and misinformation. Teaching students about the broader context of polluted information and demonstrating the interdependent webs and relations en-

meshed in these claims helps them understand the harm disinformation and misinformation causes, especially to marginalized people. In turn, this encourages students to reflect critically on their everyday actions and online interactions, especially because feminist ethics of care highlight the necessity of reflecting on how individual actions operate in a larger ecosystem, stressing the importance of interdependency and reciprocity for students.

Future research on polluted information and feminist methods and methodologies might focus on how a feminist ethic of care can help to grapple with how bots and algorithms exacerbate and reinforce polluted information online. More work is also needed to determine how instructors might address far-right extremist views in the writing classroom as they navigate disinformation and misinformation. Feminist pedagogical theories on addressing differences in the classroom offer generative and potentially transformative theoretical frames for beginning some of this research.

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