

# Composing Proximity: Teaching Strategic Distance to High School Writers

*A university researcher  
and two teachers  
describe a writing  
approach that offers  
students more autonomy  
as they share information  
about their lives in  
the classroom.*

In November 2016, Jasmine, an eleventh-grade student, circulated a letter among her classmates (student names in this article are pseudonyms). Talk of the recent election had permeated their urban public high school, and many students expressed combinations of fear, anger, and numbness at the result. “As many of you know,” her letter began, “Donald J. Trump will be the next president of the United States, and I thought I’d let you know a couple of things.” Jasmine proceeded to offer affirmation for the diverse identities that comprised the school community. “To my classmates who are Hispanic, our family’s history matters, and our culture should not be judged, mocked, or disrespected . . . . To my classmates who are African American, your lives matter, and I appreciate all that you are. You are valuable and strong.” She continued, pronouncing similar assurances to those who were women, Muslim, LGBTQ, and students with disabilities. “I will play my part in making this classroom a safe environment,” the letter concluded, “I expect all of you to do the same.” At a time when the country’s worst xenophobic impulses were being emboldened in public discourse, Jasmine’s letter spoke to the need for classrooms to live up to the ideals she articulated and for students to see themselves meaningfully reflected in the curriculum.

But her letter also highlights a challenge. That she felt compelled to share such sentiments signals the precarity many students are experiencing in the current

political climate. School walls are permeable, and even the best efforts of teachers to create safe environments where young people can learn about and express themselves cannot fully insulate the classroom from the vulnerabilities produced outside of it. These vulnerabilities may inspire, in some students, a desire to stand up, speak out, or share their stories; but they may elicit, in others, a need for strategic or protective silence.

Because the ability and will to bring personal histories into school is unevenly distributed—empowering some, while leaving others feeling exposed—English teachers face the challenge of navigating this tension. Educators must take seriously students’ needs both for relevant curricula and for pedagogies that do not reproduce already existing vulnerability. In this article, we describe how two teachers worked to negotiate these competing needs, using literary perspective to support students in exploring identity while strategically selecting the distance from which they participate. We describe this as a process of “composing proximity,” which we illustrate through the design of an inquiry-driven unit.

**School walls are permeable, and even the best efforts of teachers to create safe environments where young people can learn about and express themselves cannot fully insulate the classroom from the vulnerabilities produced outside of it.**

## IDENTITY IN THE LITERACY CLASSROOM

The tension displayed in Jasmine's letter is reflected in broader discussions of literacy, identity, and schooling. Research has shown that literacy is not just a set of discrete skills that teachers transfer to students, but it is a social practice, inflected by cultural values that give it meaning and significance (Street). Many educators stress the importance of recognizing students' diverse histories not as deficits to be overcome but as assets that enrich the classroom and, therefore, deserve meaningful representation in the curriculum (Campano; Nieto). This stance is echoed in calls for "culturally responsive" (Ladson-Billings) or "culturally sustaining" (Paris) pedagogy—frameworks that center reading and writing as spaces for students to interrogate, interpret, and represent their worlds. Importantly, such intersections of literacy and identity are not simply add-ons to the substantive work of schools; they form a foundation from which students can read and write their ways into disciplinary learning or other forms of social engagement and action (Christensen; Moje et al.).

However, even as research reinforces the need for curricula that center identity, a parallel conversation has unfolded, raising concerns about how this integration occurs. While it would be comforting if all students entered our classrooms feeling supported and safe enough to openly share their histories, pretending this is, in fact, the case obscures the ways power and privilege allow some students to speak while inhibiting others. Even when teachers intentionally cultivate classrooms that are safe and inviting, such spaces are still embedded in a school system and society rife with inequity, and no purely egalitarian environment can exist in such contexts. For this reason, scholars caution that invitations for students to share their biographies can sometimes be detrimental. Barbara Kamler writes, "Calls for students to publicly reveal or even confess information about their lives and cultures in the presence of others—including teachers—can be not only voyeuristic, but dangerous" (40–41). Such modes of expression open students' personal lives to the scrutiny of peers, educators, or evaluative measures in ways that often feel

more invasive than empowering (Ellsworth). This danger is only compounded in a political moment when many students already feel targeted, outside the classroom, because of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or legal status.

Such tensions point to the need for educators to navigate between the promise of centering identity in the curriculum and the peril of reproducing vulnerability among those who experience marginalization. How might English teachers address these concerns as they design and teach lessons? What might such a stance look like in practice?

## SCHOOL CONTEXT

These questions are central to the work of Charlie and Sam, humanities teachers at an urban public high school in Philadelphia where Phil managed a longitudinal university–school research partnership. Their school emphasizes inquiry-driven, culturally relevant learning and aims to promote student autonomy and self-expression. Unlike other programs in the district with similar stated goals, it is also nonselective—any students who wish to attend are welcomed as valuable contributors, regardless of prior academic performance. Consequently, the student body makeup is more like a neighborhood school than a special-admit program: students come from primarily black and brown communities, qualify for free lunch, and some have had adverse experiences with trauma. Importantly, within the school, these histories are not positioned as impediments to learning but as locations that animate the rich ways students read and write about the world.

In this context, Charlie and Sam have brought the challenge of centering identity in the curriculum without reproducing vulnerability into their collaborative planning. They meet weekly to design inquiry-based lessons, often having frank discussions about how the curriculum can reflect students' histories without pressuring them to share more than they are comfortable revealing. What has emerged is an approach that invites students to make intentional choices about the distance from which they address matters of identity in the classroom. We refer to this approach here as "composing proximity," a phrase that denotes how

an author’s proximity to subject matter or audience is always *composed* through the selective withholding and disclosing of information. From such a perspective, we have found “composing proximity” serves both as an analytical tool for examining how other writers negotiate personal distance in their work as well as an authorial strategy for students to craft writing that does not leave them feeling exposed. In what follows, we illustrate this approach as it unfolded in one unit. We suggest that this technique not only allowed students to make choices about how much or little they shared, but it also opened a middle ground between fact and fiction that allowed them to experiment with forms of self-expression not always available in school-based writing.

## IDENTITY IN PERSPECTIVE

### DESIGNING THE UNIT

In organizing curricula to allow students to shape the proximity of their participation, Charlie and Sam worked with colleagues to create a unit on Identity and Perception focused on two guiding questions: What are the cultural messages that tell us “what we should be”? And what does it mean to form an identity that is authentic for oneself? More than asking students to read relevant materials and make text-to-self connections, the unit explored how identity operates in context—specifically, the role perspective plays in representing and interpreting individuals’ lived experiences. The inquiry culminated in students creating monologues, a genre that situates identity in the perspective of a speaker and gives writers choice in how they represent this point of view.

Charlie and Sam used a unit planning template they derived from the school’s design process, a model created to guide students through iterative stages of production: discover, define, design, develop, deliver

(see Figure 1). The template aligned parts of the unit with each stage: if the outcome of a unit involved students “delivering” a monologue, then the unit’s earlier phases must provide scaffolding to reach this goal. “Discover” activities frame a unit’s overarching inquiry, immersing students in its central tensions and questions. “Define” activities introduce or reinforce concepts and vocabulary needed to complete the final project. “Design” and “develop” activities involve drafting, prototyping, and soliciting feedback to refine the unit project. And “deliver” activities invite students to share their work with the class or public audiences. For each unit, teachers align these activities with relevant content standards. Earlier stages, for example, might support standards for vocabulary or literary analysis; later stages might align with standards for composition, revision, and public performance.

For the Identity and Perception unit, Charlie and Sam created “discover” activities that asked students to consider how intersecting identities are perceived or represented. Students viewed “The Lunch Date” (Davidson), a short film where a character’s initial perceptions of others unravel as she learns more about them. The class then reflected on their own experiences with misperception: when others made assumptions about them, or where their assumptions of others were challenged. Such discussions led to the unit’s “define” activities, which introduced vocabulary related to identity, perspective, oppression, and gender, as well as genre conventions of monologues. Teachers provided students with model monologues to read—some written by youth from the Philadelphia Young Playwrights and others from well-known dramatists, such as an excerpt from August Wilson’s *Fences*—and encouraged them to search for their own examples. Selecting among these models for deeper analysis, students considered how speakers composed



FIGURE 1.

The school’s five-stage design process leads students through iterative phases in their project-oriented learning.

proximity: how authors framed identity for an audience, what details they withheld or disclosed, and how perspective was used to create a scene.

**By channeling personal experiences through a character, Rose composed proximity to draw attention to everyday injustices that might otherwise go unaddressed.**

The unit (see Figure 2) provided a foundation from which students could connect their own experiences and interests to the curriculum while also exploring how authors composed proximity

in relation to sensitive but significant topics. Where some texts included personal narrations, others used dramatized voices or blended fact with fiction to convey their message.

**COMPOSING PERSPECTIVES**

As students began writing their monologues, they recognized these strategies as authorial moves available to them. One student, Rose, took a biographical approach, drawing on her experience as a Native

American who had grown up on a reservation but was now adjusting to life in a new city. Her monologue was delivered by a narrator, who Rose described as “a written version of me,” on her first day at a new school after facing invasive questions from a fictional classmate, Ashley. Rose’s narrator voices frustration with caricatures of indigenous communities that erase painful histories of colonization: “Ashley asked if I was ‘Indian.’ Words can’t describe how much I hate that unnecessary term. It’s a term that was made by Christopher Columbus when he thought he was in India, so his brain decided to call the people that lived there ‘Indians.’”

Later, the narrator reflects on Ashley’s misrepresentation of the relationship between reservations and the US government:

Ashley said . . . I’m lucky because I get everything for free. What does she mean, “how I get stuff for free?” . . . I have the same rights as anyone else in this school, but [they] see me as this savage from another country . . . Yes, I did live on the reservation because the colonists took my ancestral land and now we only live on a few hundred acres. That’s the only thing we get for “free”!

Rose’s monologue closes with a reflection on the challenges of breaking stereotypes, how they often persist despite efforts to dismantle them. The ambivalence of this ending speaks to the complex relationship between individual identities and their social contexts. Rose does not propose a tidy solution to the conflict in her monologue; instead, she leaves readers to wrestle with the enduring legacies of colonization on indigenous people. Her classmates were moved by this tension. After her end-of-unit presentation, Rose’s monologue prompted discussion among her peers about how their school community might be complicit in such marginalizing practices. By channeling personal experiences through a character, Rose composed proximity to draw attention to everyday injustices that might otherwise go unaddressed.

Not all students took this autobiographical approach. Some wrote at a more distant proximity, adopting perspectives different from their own. Dante was inspired to write from the perspective of a Muslim woman after learning about a friend’s uneasiness after the 2016 election. Because Dante was neither a Muslim nor a woman, Charlie conducted one-on-one

IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION UNIT ACTIVITIES	
<b>DISCOVER</b>	
	Video and Journal Response: “The Lunch Date”
	Vocabulary: Perception, Identity, Oppression, and Gender
	Historical and Current Examples: Perception, Identity, Oppression, and Gender
	Background and Vocabulary: Monologues
<b>DEFINE</b>	
	Monologue Analysis
	Creating Character, Conflict, and Audience
	Monologue Quick Draft
	Developing Setting and Plot Map
<b>DESIGN</b>	
	Monologue Exposition
	Monologue Rising Action and Climax
	Monologue Resolution
<b>DEVELOP</b>	
	Monologue First Draft
	Monologue Peer Revision
<b>DELIVER</b>	
	Monologue Best Draft
	Monologue Read-Aloud (optional)
	End of Unit Reflection

FIGURE 2. The unit included activities aligned with the phases outlined in the planning template.

conferences to discuss the ethics of writing from this perspective and to devise strategies for navigating the blurry lines between empathy and appropriation. To negotiate this tension, Dante interviewed peers who were Muslim women to learn more about their religious practices and experiences. He also studied articles, essays, and poetry written by Muslim women to determine what themes to include in his work. His monologue opened with a narrator describing how Islamophobia produced feelings of alienation, even in her own neighborhood: “I want to be able to walk around with my jilbab on and people not be afraid to walk on the same side of the block as me.” It is important to note that even with extensive research, Dante’s approach still carries a danger of essentializing others. Charlie and Sam found that addressing this danger explicitly with students opened critical discussions about how attempts to “see from another’s perspective” are always limited—and, therefore, must be approached with humility and a willingness to engage deeply with the voices and experiences of others. In an end-of-year reflection, Dante identified his monologue as the most challenging assignment he completed, but also the one that taught him the most.

The monologue assignment did not limit students to biography or fiction; it also opened space in the area between. Many students adopted perspectives where it was unclear how much or little of the monologue came from personal experience—an ambiguity that shielded them from the scrutiny of others. One student wrote from the perspective of a masculine-presenting nonbinary narrator as they wrestled with how to disclose their gender identity to a friend, Claire, while the two walked through a museum:

I’m going to be proud of who I am . . . It’s time to tell my closest friend about the biggest secret I’ve kept for the longest . . . [points to statue] “Okay Claire, you see this statue, right? I’m not her gender. I don’t have her features but I probably do act like her. I’m my own version of both genders. I don’t have to be exactly like everyone else.”

While not every effort to imagine others’ perspectives or blur fact and fiction was equally successful, even students’ provisional attempts provided opportunities to consider the plurality of ways “identities” are shaped and enacted. Through their

own compositions, conferences with teachers, and hearing others’ monologues, students became accustomed to using nuanced language for discussing the complexities of gender expression, sexual orientation, race, and religious liberty—resources that Charlie and Sam reinforced and built on in subsequent units on American Counter-Histories and Immigration. Through this process, students were also able to compose proximity to the subject matter, making strategic choices about if and how to share their personal histories without being pressured to do so as a condition of participation.

### REFLECTING ON PRACTICE

At the end of the unit, after students were given the option to perform their monologues for classmates if they wanted to, they reflected on their learning through a Google survey, addressing the challenges and key insights that emerged from their inquiry. Many described how composing proximity allowed them to write monologues that were personally meaningful, but often for different reasons. Some hinted they included personal details that went undetected by readers. As one student said, “I will remember from this unit that I did a monologue that I am truly proud of. No one will understand why I wrote this monologue.” Others were more open about how they integrated their biographies into the project. One described their process for the assignment, saying, “I reflected on my personal life”; another named the unit their favorite because “It gave me a chance to write my own story.” Even among those who adopted alternate personas, many articulated the significance of taking this stance. As one student said, “I showed empathy by being able to see things from another perspective.” Personal takeaways also punctuated their reflections: “I can always look at someone and listen before I judge them” and “Everyone’s gender is beautiful!”

At the end of the school year, as Phil was recording interviews with students about their experiences in the humanities course, many continued to reference the Identity and Perception unit as being particularly consequential. When asked why it was so resonant, one student attributed it to the flexibility that composing proximity affords: “It can be fiction. It can be real. It can be in the middle. So, I think everybody really enjoyed

that. You get to see different sides of everyone—inside their heads or characters’ heads.” Another suggested that playing with perspective opened discussions that aren’t always sanctioned in school assignments, about discrimination, gender fluidity, and intersectionality. “I like to talk about things that’s not talked about,” she said, and went on to explain how the unit provided space to have such discussions in a safe and accessible way. In her words, “It gave us a chance to talk about things that matter to us.”

### COMPOSING PROXIMITY IN THE CLASSROOM

While we have illustrated one unit where students were given space to compose proximity, this approach is not limited to units focused on identity or to the genre of monologues. Charlie and Sam have had success integrating similar activities into lessons centered on everything from online privacy to immigration and into projects ranging from poetry to argumentative essays. They have found two guidelines to be useful for supporting students in composing proximity across these contexts.

First, *students need to see themselves in the curriculum*. Even if they are not comfortable disclosing details of their own histories to peers and teachers, it is important that units include representations and perspectives that meaningfully reflect the diversity of the human experience. This might mean selecting texts with relatable characters or texts that allow students to grapple with real-world issues. But it also means structuring and modeling dialogue about difference in ways that do not essentialize or simplify the complexities of human identity. This might involve integrating perspectives that complicate representations of nondominant communities by illuminating intragroup diversity: for instance, not just reading a text with an LGBTQ narrator, but situating such artifacts in broader discussions of gender-expansiveness and its intersections with race, class, and religion. Such practices invite those who feel comfortable bringing their biographies into the classroom to do so, while affirming those who might choose alternate ways to engage.

Second, *students need multiple avenues for participation*. When possible, projects should be designed

to give students authorial discretion to determine the level of proximity fitting for the task and its audience. Beyond monologues, this might mean opening literary analysis or argumentative writing as spaces where students can take their own position or, if they are reticent to do so, to research and experiment with other perspectives. Charlie and Sam have seen students hesitant to share their impressions of novels and stories but who are eager to analyze the same texts by writing from the perspective of a character in the work. “Composing proximity” provides language for seeing such tendencies as a strategic writing practice—one that shields authors from feeling undue pressure to share details they would prefer to keep guarded, while facilitating intentional decision-making about how perspective can be adapted for particular audiences and rhetorical situations. These guidelines can help to support the development of identity-rich curricula while providing students with resources for shaping the contours of how they participate.

### CONCLUSION

In this article, we have articulated a notion of “composing proximity,” tracing its unfolding through the development of a curricular unit and mapping some implications for classroom practice. We conclude by emphasizing that while we have found this concept to be useful both as an analytic tool and writing strategy, it remains a provisional resource. The larger challenge of how to sustain learning environments that support students in safely sharing their identities and histories cannot be meaningfully addressed with discrete, one-off techniques. Simply declaring a space “safe” does not make it so. And dropping “culturally relevant” texts into the curriculum does not, by itself, alter the material conditions of schooling that allow some to feel uneasy or unwelcome. In the same way, “composing proximity” alone cannot ameliorate the kinds of vulnerability that Jasmine articulated in her postelection letter to her classmates. However, when viewed as one component in a repertoire of pedagogical practices, we have seen how generative the concept can be: not only equipping students with strategies for negotiating the nature of their participation, but also inviting educators to reflect on their assumptions about what meaningful engagement

and inclusive curricula look like—and to adapt their classrooms accordingly, to better support the equitable flourishing of their students. **EJ**

**WORKS CITED**

Campano, Gerald. *Immigrant Students and Literacy: Reading, Writing, Remembering*. Teachers College P, 2007.

Christensen, Linda. *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching about Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. Rethinking Schools, 2000.

Davidson, Adam, director. “The Lunch Date.” 1989, [www.filmsshort.com/short-film-pages/the-lunch-date-adam-davidson.html#.W\\_zaG-hKhaQ](http://www.filmsshort.com/short-film-pages/the-lunch-date-adam-davidson.html#.W_zaG-hKhaQ).

Ellsworth, Elizabeth. “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy.”

*Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 59, no. 3, 1989, pp. 297–324.

Kamler, Barbara. *Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy*. SUNY P, 2001.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria. “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.” *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1995, pp. 465–91.

Moje, Elizabeth Birr, et al. “Literacy and Identity: Examining the Metaphors in History and Contemporary Research.” *Reading Research Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2009, pp. 415–37.

Nieto, Sonia. *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities*. Teachers College P, 1999.

Paris, Django. “Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice.” *Educational Researcher*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2012, pp. 93–97.

Street, Brian. *Literacy in Theory and Practice*. Cambridge UP, 1984.



**T. PHILIP NICHOLS** is an assistant professor of education in the department of Curriculum and Instruction at Baylor University. He has been a member of NCTE since 2008. He can be reached at [phil\\_nichols@baylor.edu](mailto:phil_nichols@baylor.edu).



**CHARLIE MCGEEHAN** teaches humanities and is the union building representative at The U School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is a recipient of the 2018 Teaching Tolerance Excellence in Teaching Award. He can be reached at [cmcgeehan@uschool.org](mailto:cmcgeehan@uschool.org).



**SAMUEL REED III** is a founding humanities educator at The U School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He is a 2014 Black Male Engagement (BMe) Leader awardee and a member of the NCTE Black Caucus. He can be reached at [sreed@uschool.org](mailto:sreed@uschool.org).