

From Compliance to Connection

The assignment-redesign workflow, run start to finish on one real assignment.

Prepared by Daniel Umana · A worked demonstration using a fictional student

This document runs Positionality Memo #2 through the full redesign workflow: name the skill, gather the student's context, revise the assignment, and build the rubric. To make each step concrete, it follows one fictional doctoral student. Self-Determination Theory frames the goal. When an assignment meets a student's needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, it earns genuine effort rather than a shortcut (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Routing that work through a student's own experience also draws on culturally responsive teaching, which finds the brain learns best when new material connects to what a learner already knows (Hammond, 2015).



The student: Marcus Reyes (fictional)

Eight years in one mid-sized urban district. Three years as a middle school humanities teacher, then five as an assistant principal at a Title I middle school, where he ran the discipline process. Now a doctoral student in this program.

0 Before: the original assignment

The starting point, exactly as written.

ORIGINAL · VERBATIM

Positionality Memos: Policy/Practice. This will be your 2nd “Positionality Memo” you will write during this course that will focus on specific aspects of the researcher’s background, bias and personal experiences in various educational contexts. These memos will be a 1-page (single-spaced, Times New Roman 12-point font, Microsoft WORD) and can be written in first person. The memos will anchor in reflecting on aspects of oneself that might impact the direction and interpretation of the data within a research study.

Memo #2 (Inequitable Policies and Practices). Students will make connections to their experience with policy and practices within their role in different educational school systems based on their current inquiry. While critical memories from K-12 can be integrated, this main reflection will be on how educational philosophy and theory translates into practice based on various experiences facilitating these policies and practices. This could include experiences with NCLB or practices such as small group instruction. Students will choose practices and policies that pique their interest and could be possible systems to disrupt with the Dissertation of Practice. Submit Word doc to canvas.

1 Name what the assignment teaches

Every assignment teaches a skill underneath its topic. Naming it lets the assignment be personalized without losing its purpose.

OBJECTIVE 1

Reflexive awareness

Identify how your own background and role shape the way you interpret research data.

OBJECTIVE 2

Theory-to-practice analysis

Examine how a policy’s stated intent compares with what actually happens when it is carried out.

OBJECTIVE 3

Inquiry development

Surface a specific policy worth disrupting in the Dissertation of Practice.

These three objectives stay fixed for every student. Only the policy each student examines changes.

2 Gather the student's context

The instructor collects four short answers, once. The questions reach professional experience without asking for anything deeply personal. Below are Marcus's answers.

Q1 Which educational systems and roles have you worked in?

MARCUS REYES

Eight years in one mid-sized urban district. Three years as a middle school humanities teacher, then five as an assistant principal at a Title I middle school. As AP, the discipline process was mine to run.

Q2 Which policy or practice from that work do you keep coming back to, and why?

MARCUS REYES

Our district's tiered, progressive discipline policy. It was written to reduce suspensions. I ran it, and the same students, mostly Black and Latino boys, still ended up suspended. I keep coming back to it because I signed those forms.

Q3 What is your current research inquiry?

MARCUS REYES

Why progressive discipline reforms still produce racially disproportionate suspensions, and what school-level practice actually drives that gap.

Q4 What in your background makes this policy personal, and how might that shape how you read data about it?

MARCUS REYES

I was a student who got referred constantly. Then I became the administrator writing the referrals. I do not come to discipline data as a neutral observer. I am quick to distrust numbers that look too clean.

These same four questions go to every student. Their answers are the raw material the next step works from.

3 Revise the assignment

The three objectives, now routed through Marcus's own experience. The cognitive demand is identical to every other student's. The entry point is his.

AFTER · THE ASSIGNMENT MARCUS RECEIVES

Positionality Memo #2: Inequitable Policies and Practices

Why this memo

Every researcher reads their data through who they are. This memo turns your professional experience into reflexive research awareness, a habit your dissertation will depend on. The policy you carried is a research asset. It is part of why you can see what others cannot.

Your focus

You named your district's tiered discipline policy, and the fact that you ran that process as an assistant principal. Write a one-page memo, first person, on that policy.

Reflect on four questions

1. **The practice.** Describe the tiered discipline policy and your role administering it.
2. **Theory against reality.** The policy was written to reduce suspensions through graduated, supportive steps. Where did what you saw diverge from that intent?
3. **Your position.** You have been both a frequently referred student and the administrator signing referrals. How does standing on both sides shape what you will trust, or distrust, in discipline data?
4. **Looking forward.** Your inquiry asks why progressive discipline still produces disproportionate suspensions. Is this the system you will disrupt in your Dissertation of Practice?

What a strong memo does

It names something specific. It is honest about tension, including discomfort. It connects your experience to how you would interpret data. A model memo is posted.

Before you submit

Trade memos with one peer and answer one question for each other: where do you see this person's position shaping what they notice?

What changed: same one-page length, same first-person form, same three objectives. Added: a stated purpose, a named focus, four guiding questions, clear criteria, and a peer step. Each addition was built from Marcus's answers.

HOW HIS ANSWERS WERE USED

MARCUS'S ANSWER	WHAT IT SHAPED IN THE REVISED ASSIGNMENT
A1. Teacher, then assistant principal who ran the discipline process.	Set the focus on a policy he personally administered, and named his AP role in Question 1. <i>Supports competence: a concrete, reachable starting point.</i>
A2. The tiered discipline policy he ran and signed off on.	Became the named policy for the whole memo, and the intent-against-reality framing in Question 2. <i>Supports autonomy: the work centers on what he already cares about.</i>
A3. Inquiry into why reforms still produce disproportionate suspensions.	Became Question 4, linking the memo directly to his Dissertation of Practice.
A4. A formerly referred student who became the enforcer.	Became Question 3, which names his dual position rather than asking about positionality in the abstract. <i>Supports relatedness: the reflection lands somewhere real.</i>

4 Build the rubric

One rubric grades every student's memo, whatever policy they chose. It scores the three objectives, not the topic. Marcus's memo on discipline and another student's memo on language placement are held to the same standard.

CRITERION	DEVELOPING	PROFICIENT	STRONG
Reflexive awareness	Positionality is described in general terms.	Names specific background and role, and links them to interpretation.	Traces precisely how specific experiences will shape what the researcher trusts, sees, and misses.
Theory-to-practice analysis	Describes the policy; intent and reality are not clearly separated.	Identifies a clear gap between the policy's intent and its practice.	Explains the gap with specific evidence from directly facilitating the policy.
Inquiry development	A policy interest is mentioned.	Names a policy worth disrupting, with a reason.	Frames a focused, viable direction for the Dissertation of Practice.

Four steps, one assignment. The objectives and the rigor never moved. Marcus received an assignment built from his own experience, and a rubric that still measures the same skill. An assignment a student has a real reason to do is an assignment they will do themselves.

REFERENCES

- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2017). *Self-determination theory: Basic psychological needs in motivation, development, and wellness*. Guilford Press.