



# The Power We Bring: Positionality and the First Steps of Learning

SUBMITTED BY **Rochelle Galeski**

**In the world of adult foundational learning, we often speak about creating safe spaces. Yet, how often do we push further into the concept of safe spaces that examine the deeper currents of power dynamics and positionality that shape those spaces?**

The power we carry as CALP staff is not neutral because our positionality carries weight, because social identities affect access, and inequities are often enforced when we ignore power. Positionality is a profoundly relational and political reality, which begins with an honest look at ourselves.

Positionality refers to the awareness and acknowledgment of how facilitators, coordinators, volunteers and learning advocates' social identity, background, power and lived experiences influence our relationships with learners and the learning environment.

In a community-based setting, positionality actively shapes how:

- safe learners feel
- much trust learners place in the programs we offer
- willing learners are to engage, especially if they've had negative past experiences with structured systems

In small communities, anonymity is rare. CALP staff are not just the face of the program; they often are the program. As a result, their history, affiliations and reputation will precede them. Learners often do not encounter a blank slate when they interact with a CALP; they enter an existing community dynamic shaped by memory, relationships and unspoken rules.

The theory of psychological safety described by Amy Edmondson in *The Fearless Organization* is whether an individual feels safe enough to be seen, to fail and to belong. Even so, psychological safety begins long before the learner is seen, is safe to fail and feels like they belong. A learner's first step is not into our spaces, it is into a relational web of power, reputation and history that you or a CALP holds. In many cases, that history includes past educational harm or exclusion. It also includes the lived experiences of CALP providers, many of whom carry their own stories of returning to learning, facing systemic barriers or navigating life in rural and marginalized communities. This

shared history can be a bridge, if acknowledged with humility or a barrier, if left unexplored. Psychological safety grows when facilitators not only recognize their positionality but also actively build trust through transparency, empathy and genuine respect.

This is why, to explore and further investigate our power and positionality, we ask ourselves hard but necessary questions: What does a learner see when they see me? Am I connected to systems or institutions that have caused harm? Do I hold identities or affiliations that may trigger distrust or discomfort? In communities where personal histories and reputations often speak louder than professional roles, the answers to these questions matter more than any intake form because intake and assessment are not neutral; they are relational.

Perceived reputation is not formed the moment someone becomes a CALP provider, it often lives in the community's memory, shaped by family name, past roles, social circles or affiliations, long before the first class is ever offered; it exists as a thread in the story of someone's life, woven through relationships and histories that learners may carry with them.

Whether we intend to or not, we carry identities that influence how learners experience our programs. In communities and all human relationships, we come to know that perception doesn't always equal truth. Sometimes what others believe about us isn't accurate and the stories people carry about us may not reflect who we truly are or the full journey we've taken. Even so, creating safety starts with the integrity and self-awareness we bring daily to our work and in our lives.

As Marie Battiste argues in *Decolonizing Education*, educators must interrogate how their roles and identities intersect with colonial and systemic power. Paulo Freire, too, reminds us in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that education is never neutral; it either reinforces power structures or works to dismantle them.



Our CALP aims to dismantle the rigid structures of traditional education by creating informal, welcoming spaces where learning feels accessible, relational and rooted in relevancy. This demands deep self-inquiry and institutional courage, a willingness to ask: Who isn't here and why? What barriers have we unintentionally upheld? Are we truly neutral? Should we be? Do we have the courage to step aside when we are not the right person to lead? To do this work well, we must get comfortable sitting with uncomfortable questions that challenge our assumptions, surface power dynamics and ask us to reflect honestly on how our presence shapes the learning space. As Brené Brown writes in *Dare to Lead*, "You can choose courage, or you can choose comfort. You cannot have both."

Safety then involves accountability, humility and shared leadership. It may look like bringing in community navigators, elders or cultural liaisons when our presence is not enough. It may involve co-leading with individuals who hold lived experience. It may mean creating anonymous feedback mechanisms, so learners can speak the truth without fear. It most certainly means making space for repair when we get it wrong because in this work, we will.

This self-inquiry and institutional courage ask that CALP organizations embed inquiry into their strategic plans, their team development and





their community partnerships. As David Peter Stroh argues in *Systems Thinking for Social Change*, meaningful transformation requires us to see our programs not in isolation, but as part of larger ecosystems of trust, power and healing.

As many of us know, foundational learning demands not only the growth of our programs but the transformation of ourselves. When we show up with humility and honesty by naming our power and working to share it, we create

the conditions where real learning can take root, not just for our learners, but for ourselves.

Literacy has strong roots in liberation from oppression. Just as learners find liberation in spaces where they are no longer defined by past failures, we too can be liberated from the stories we've carried, free to show up with humility, authenticity and the courage to grow alongside learners. We do this through self-inquiry and by sharing power in ways that honour both our role and learner agency. ♦

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# How to Power Map as a CALP Provider: 10 Practical Tips for Reflecting on Your Positionality

**Understanding your positionality is a strategic act of community accountability. Power mapping helps CALP providers reflect on the visible and invisible ways they carry power, authority and influence in a community.**

Here are ten steps to guide your self-inquiry:

## **Start with Your Story**

Begin by writing down how you arrived in your role. Consider your education, life experiences, affiliations and social identity. What aspects of your identity are visible to others, and which remain hidden?

## **Name Your Roles**

List the formal and informal roles you hold in the community, past and present. Have you worked in justice, child welfare, healthcare or education? Have you served on boards or faith-based organizations? These roles carry meaning, whether you intend them to or not.

## **Identify Your Circles of Influence**

Map out your professional and social connections. Who do you have direct access to? Who listens to you? Whose decisions do you influence (even informally)? Visualize your influence outward in circles.

## **Ask: Who Might See Me as Unsafe?**

This is hard, but essential. Think about which community members or groups might view you as part of a system that has caused harm. This might include people with lived experience in poverty, addiction, incarceration, racism or colonization.

## **Map Your Silences**

What topics do you avoid or feel unprepared to engage with? Where are you silent out of fear, discomfort or a desire to “stay neutral”? Power often hides in silence.

## **Scan for Missing Voices**

Look around your programs. Who isn't attending? Which community members are underrepresented or disengaged? Ask what barriers, relational, cultural or historical, might be contributing.

## **Examine How You're Perceived**

Ask for honest feedback. Invite a trusted peer or community member to share what others may see in you, your strengths and your blind spots. This takes courage, but it opens the door to trust.

## **Reflect on Your Defaults**

In moments of tension or discomfort, how do you lead? Do you retreat into policy? Assert authority? Stay quiet? Your default response under pressure often reveals where your internalized power sits.

## **Practice Stepping Back**

Power sharing means making space. Is there someone in your community better suited to lead certain conversations, an Elder, a youth leader, a cultural liaison? Be willing to step back and co-create.

## **Repeat Often, Not Once**

Power mapping is not a one-and-done activity. Revisit your map quarterly or during planning cycles. As your roles evolve, so will the way your power shows up in the room.

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