

Chapter 2

Seeing Each Other Ethically Online

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ABSTRACT

Users of digital media must learn how to read through the narratives that they consume online in order to avoid context collapse, which may cause deepening prejudice and bias. This chapter describes Erase the Space, a project that connects students from disparate communities in order to help them learn to read narratives with empathy.

The ethical duty of teachers in the digital age is to show the interconnectedness of printed and digital texts and how the lessons learned in the classroom translate to real lives online and in person. Teachers push for diverse reading lists and tweet #weneeddiversebooks because they hope—through narrative—they can teach their students to be better citizens and better people.

Students and teachers can develop deep empathy for literature's greatest characters through a thoughtful consideration of circumstances, background information, and discussion in class. This is and has been the teacher's tool to beget empathy in their students. However, in today's increasingly digital world, students are faced with more competing text than any generation before. Stable, stationary printed text is now (and perhaps always was) an incomplete tool.

WHEN TEXT MOVES

Imagine a teacher in an all-white high school decides to teach the *The Hate U Give* (2015) by Angie Thomas (or substitute any text or subject in any class that might invite tension into the classroom space). The teacher worries that,

due to their lack of experience with black peers, students will be unable to unpack the stereotypes and systemic racism explored in the novel. He supplements their reading with articles, maps, interviews, documentaries, and news clips in an attempt to fill in the gaps.

Even in an ideal classroom scenario—one where all students willingly read and engage in the content and openly investigate racist systems and white privilege—does that learning translate to their online and real-life experience? Does a white student's willingness to engage and empathize with fictional black characters translate to empathizing with real black people they see online and in real life (IRL)?

Discussing complex issues with fictional characters in the silos of the segregated education system isn't enough to bring empathy online and IRL. For students, online is real life—a place to examine the complex, competing narratives about others. Teachers have to move online and ask students to critically examine how they use social media. They must ask teens to investigate the narrative they create about themselves online—and what happens when their narrative reaches a new, unintended audience.

It is here that teachers can give speaking and listening standards due diligence and create pathways for students in a highly segregated country a chance to engage in empathy together. The processes that allow students to develop empathy for literary characters will help them develop empathy for the real people in their own lives.

FROM PRINT TO ONLINE SPACE

Moving from print to digital space requires students to be participants rather than consumers. Many students would be quick to say that they are more adept than most adults at participating and interacting with new modes of communication. However, most still fail to recognize just how much they are consuming rather than interacting with and analyzing.

Teens use social media as a way to explore new identities, gain acceptance into dominant peer groups, or to attract attention (Herring and Kapidzic 2015), suggesting that students see some separation between their online lives and their IRL identity. Despite having an empathetic filter *for themselves* to discern between online and IRL identities, adults and teens alike struggle to apply a similar filter *to others*. They know that their own daily lives are not perfect, but when it comes to others, they are quick to believe the ideal narrative created and curated via social media.

With guidance in critical analysis, teens may be able to critically analyze a highly stylized, highly filtered image of a peer if they understand their peer's real-world context and the audience for whom that teen is posting. This not only requires them to understand the context in which the photo was shared

but also the motivation behind the image. In other words, teens will be able to see through the image of a teen that looks like them, dresses like them, and performs for the same audience/context.

What happens, though, when teens encounter images of young people who look different and post and perform in different contexts? Context collapse. The image no longer makes sense to the viewer who is unable to critically analyze the image for truth and myth.

In *The Hate U Give*, Khalil performs online in a way that is acceptable and attractive in his specific contexts. His online presence suggests an identity that earns credibility in a specific context (some may argue that it also protects his life). However, Starr and other characters who know Khalil in real life may be able to analyze the complexities of this image. Khalil fronts as a “gangsta” but loves his family and Harry Potter.

However, a student like Hailey, someone outside of Khalil’s context, absorbs his “gangsta” image as fact because users within her context do not experiment with that particular identity. Even though Hailey and her friends (real and online) are also experimenting with different identities, they are unable to see that other teenagers are *also* experimenting, albeit in a different context and for a different audience.

The bottom line is that the Khalils and the Haileys are both performing online. However, they are performing for different audiences. When the audiences converge, the Khalils are not looking empathetically at the Haileys online and vice versa. In the case of misinterpretation between marginalized and dominant groups, there exists more than a lack of understanding. Context collapse causes image bias. Because Hailey cannot see through the image and imagine Khalil’s context, she relies on her own, dominant, narrative that further dehumanizes Khalil. He’s a caricature, a representation, a stereotype rather than a person.

Just as Benedict Anderson (1991) saw the novel as a technology to connect citizens under a nation, students have the potential to not only imagine each other through narratives, but they can begin imagining communities together in meaningful online discourse. The presence of a constantly evolving participatory culture involving many more narratives than one novel could possibly dream of encompassing shows that “people have the ability to see—and interact with—people who are radically different from them. This means that youth can be exposed to new ideas and new people, not just in the abstract but through direct interaction” (boyd, Ito, and Jenkins 2016, 41). Hailey can see *and* interact with Khalil without ever leaving her classroom!

But she needs to. So does he.

In order to analyze the images, the viewer must attempt to understand the context. They need real-world experience *in order to be able* to understand their digital life.

FROM ONLINE SPACE TO PHYSICAL SPACE

Teachers have access to students who want to connect with one another online and who have the means to do so through multiple devices. Given the paradigm shift caused by the onset of digital text, teachers also have a new ethical charge—to teach students how to empathize with each other and see each other across differences. The health of democracy depends on teaching equity and inclusion to collaborate with multiple perspectives.

So, what *does* a teacher do?

First, he finds a partner, another teacher he can meet with in-person to plan and share—someone who believes in the work but also teaches in a different context (racial, socioeconomic, political, geographic). They have their students exchange with one another in order to work collaboratively on an issue that affects both communities.

They engage in a project designed to connect the students and the communities—*Erase the Space* (<https://www.erasethespace.org/>). A successful exchange is built upon three principles: narrative control, work to do together, and an eventual in-person meeting in a shared space. Both teachers know that tension is inevitable but proceed, carefully, anyway.

Narrative Control

The first pedagogical move is to allow both students to have control of their own narrative. The partnership starts off with a letter to “introduce yourself in a way that feels authentic to you.” (See Figure 2.1.) Students may include a picture of themselves in their first letter or of something that represents who they are. With very little background on the other classroom, the letters from their partners are delivered to them. It is a physical paper. They can’t click out of it. *It exists*.

Even if students later find something in their partner’s online presence that runs counter to the narrative in the letter, they have already been exposed to their partner’s letter and can acknowledge the disconnect between the two narratives.

probably tell that I am a girl. Hopefully you are a girl, but if not, that is totally cool with me. I think I’m going to leave my race and what I look like out of this for now, so when we meet face to face, it will be cooler. I’m 14 now, and I turn 15 in early November. Ok now, let me just say that I can’t wait for you to respond and that I’m genuinely excited to meet you *and* build a great pen-pal relationship with you! I’m truly optimistic about the whole thing, and I hope this is an enjoyable experience for both me and you.

Figure 2.1 Excerpt from an introductory letter from one student to her partner at another school

After sitting with the narrative, students complete an “emoji response” to provide authentic feedback to the writer (See Figure 2.2.). This step addresses two major aspects that are key to the exchange. The reader has a chance to slowly participate in their partner’s narrative *and* respond to print with a digital language, bridging the gap between print and online cultures. The familiar, innocent emoji acts as a buffer for emotional tension. Students may be excited, confused, or offended by their partner’s writing, and the emoji serves as a common symbol, bridging the perception gap left by language.



<p>"I think I'm going to leave my race and what I look like out of this for now, so when we meet face to face, it will be cooler."</p>		<p>I felt "yassss queen" because I think it's super cool to leave what we look like (etc.) out of these letters so that we can learn to be friends and build a relationship just based off our personality and not our looks.</p>
<p>"....but as we get to know each other I will open up more."</p>		<p>I felt happy to hear this because I hope that we can build a relationship where you can be open and share your ideas.</p>

Figure 2.2 Emoji response to letter in Figure 1.2

Work to Do Together

Once a common symbol is used between partners, a bond is created, and that's when the teachers and students dive into a problem facing both communities. For example, they might explore the structural segregation of American cities (See Figure 2.3 for sample activity to support this kind of exploration.). This common problem presents another way to bond: work to do together.

In the separate classrooms, students receive the same articles, data, and resources on the shared topic. If the classrooms look at segregation, students may analyze school report cards of surrounding districts and average real estate prices. They might research the history of redlining and restrictive covenants in their respective neighborhoods. Students reflect as a class with their teacher on their findings, and then write a personal reflection. That reflection is shared with their partner in the other classroom, followed by another round of emoji responses.

3. Underneath the neighborhood name, draw a house with black or brown crayon/colored pencil. Inside of the house, put the median home price.
 - a. If the median home price is over \$250,000, shade in the house with a RED crayon/colored pencil. If the median home price is between \$150,000-\$249,000, shade in the house with a YELLOW crayon/colored pencil. If the median home price is under \$149,000, share in the house with a GREEN crayon/colored pencil.
 - b. Discuss: What do you notice? Do the more expensive home prices seem to be clustered in any particular area? Why do you think that is?
4. For each neighborhood, look up the school enrollment demographic information using the Ohio Department of Education Links below. For each school district, click "District Details." Under the first chart to the left labeled "Enrollment," hit "Data Table."
 - a. Record the Enrollment number of students (how many kids go to school in the district)?
 - b. List the top three racial subgroup percentages. DO NOT include "students with disabilities" or "economically disadvantaged."
 - c. Record the Chronic Absenteeism Rate. If you scroll down, you will see the number. This is the percentage of students who qualify as truant.

Figure 2.3 Excerpt from classroom activity on school report card data

Shared Space

Then, the teachers move where they should: online. The students create Slack accounts, a tool that mimics social media messaging (e.g., students can use emojis, gifs) but is school-friendly (e.g., teachers can see the chats, it links to Google accounts). This is a deliberate step in the exchange that places value in online communication and interaction but provides a model real-world discourse situation where parties affected by a social issue are provided equal space to discuss.

The Slack space is accessible; the medium is familiar. The conversation is planned for a time that works for both classrooms. The students are now in an equitable space and have the opportunity to experience how democratic discussions *should* occur. Together, students discuss their findings from the shared classroom activities (another common experience) and begin to brainstorm a solution to the shared problem (See Figure 2.4.). Students studying segregation might be tasked with creating a space/event that attracts students from disparate school districts and encourages authentic interaction.

2:06 PM Just like a day at the beach or a park maybe cleaning and food and games



2:07 PM

I think the park is a good idea. It's free and public



2:07 PM

Like a field trip from school?



2:08 PM

No like on the weekend maybe put a public announcement on social media and flyers



2:09 PM

I don't think all the kids at (our) school would like to go though

Or were you just talking about these two classes?

Figure 2.4 Screenshot of student conversations on Slack

Finally, the exchange ends where it must: at the source, face to face. Teachers should choose a shared space in the community. Like the online space, students should feel equal ownership (or lack of) in the space they will inhabit together for a few hours. They meet, eat, and collaborate on a solution to their common issue. Their solution must benefit both communities they represent; they need to listen and value each other's contributions to be successful.

This portion of the exchange is the closest teachers can get to simulating a true, idealized participatory culture where all voices are heard: You need me, I need you, and only together can we find a solution that benefits us all. Students present their ideas to the group at the end of the meeting day. While the projects are funny, inspiring examples of students trying to change the world they live in, the *process* of discoursing across difference *is* the product.

As one student reflected at the end of the experience,

What surprised me the most was how much he thought just like me and liked the same things I did as well as not like the same things I didn't. As the exchange went on, we began to bond as well as two kids separated all their lives.

This kind of understanding prevents context collapse.

LIVE IN THE TENSION

The exchange process may be painful at times for students and teachers. In the first year of an actual exchange that created the described model in this chapter, a textbook example of context collapse unfolded. Derek's student shared an image in her letter that she intended to be funny; however, Amelia's student interpreted it negatively. This context collapse led to initial tension for Amelia's student.

After conferencing, Amelia's student indicated that despite her initial dislike of her partner, she wanted to continue with the project (participation is always voluntary). In the next written assignment, exchanged a month later, the students discovered they shared a common passion for sports. Derek's student shared that she played basketball on a traveling team, which Amelia's student interpreted to mean that she had more experience with black people. Another month later, their digital conversation revealed a similar sense of humor and confidence (which was why their teachers matched them together in the first place).

When they met in May, five months after the initial incident, the remaining tension seemed to disappear. Derek and Amelia struggled to keep the two from laughing through their entire presentation. Both students asked explicitly to stay involved in the project over the next school year and continued communicating via text and social media over the summer.

Over one year after the initial incident, Derek and Amelia asked the students to sit together and reflect upon the progression of their relationship. Amelia's student reflected:

As soon as she, like, introduced herself [in person], I was like, "Oh, I was totally wrong. She's actually cool." And when we started to work on the project, I was like, "We actually have a lot of things in common . . . she is really cool." So I had to change my mindset.

Instead of running from the tension, or trying to explain it away, allowing the students to sit with and work through moments of misunderstanding leads to

an authentic, empathetic understanding later on. A situation that could have ignited a Twitter war in an instant became a slow friendship over a year.

These types of conversations and reflections rarely happen on their own. Teachers will have to help guide students through the tension and live in it themselves. A conversation between two students who are rarely in the same room, let alone the same public space, will yield tough moments for teachers to navigate in the present. Teaching students to listen, learn, and think before speaking is an ethical necessity for young people to form healthy discourse habits in multiple rhetorical situations, especially in the digital space.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of one exchange project, a participant wrote, "I hope we can be more than just kids in the inner and outer city who were put in a program together. It can be more than that. . . . We could all be friends and make Ohio history or our own little history." Seeing each other ethically online means students are no longer imagining the other person. They are imagining the community they can create together.

Yet, in order to understand and empathize with students who are different from them, young people need real-world context in which to ground their analysis. That's where teachers leverage technology to connect classrooms in meaningful democratic discourse. Sharing narratives through print, online, and in-person creates the context and new opportunity for empathy. Teachers need to make space in the classroom for students to analyze and interrogate the way in which they craft a personal narrative on the Internet and the way they consume the narratives of young people online.

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