Erase the Space: Short Distance Writing Exchanges and Public Discourse in the High School English Classroom

The polarization in American culture illustrated in deteriorating public discourse has been front and center since the 2016 election season, but these tensions have been brewing longer. Writing exchanges between different schools can be part of the solution to the problems facing students.

The recent rise in civil violence in the United States is begging us to answer the wake-up call of the past decade. The violence at political rallies during the 2016 campaign, virulent rhetoric of comment threads on news websites claiming “fake news” regardless of factual basis, and, more recently, acts of domestic terror are all red flashing lights warning us that we are not addressing the issue at the core of our polarization: our democratic discourse is deteriorating and has pushed citizens to the point of living in separate realities next door to one another.

I believe a large portion of this problem relates to our lack of understanding of language and the rhetoric provided by various mediums of communication. The shouting matches on our major news programs model aggressive, non-reflexive discourse for young people. The fragmentation of the media through the web of online sources that offer differing viewpoints on the facts (or oftentimes, disparate facts) leave people unaware or unable to decipher what is truth and what is fiction. Apart from the scattering of facts, one of the major problems facing our public discourse is the failure to investigate how the medium of the Internet changes rhetorical situations while we, in the high school English classroom, operate mainly in the rhetorical situations provided through print.

The Internet—or the epithet I prefer: “The Largest Contact Zone in Human History”—is still thought of as a tool used for enhancing lesson plans dealing with print-based composition rather than its own method of symbolic exchange to be analyzed. The speed at which perspectives are exchanged online through forum websites such as Reddit or social media outlets such as Twitter and Instagram provide a high-speed rail system for human connection, but they also serve as support beams for echo chambers to reinforce closed-minded worldviews that breed polarization. When it comes down to it, everything in this contact zone is still language ready for analysis and comprehension. English classrooms across the country have the potential to be the incubators we need to repair our public discourse. Through traditional and innovative strategies, we can begin to rebuild our national conversation from the ground up, letting our students take the lead while guiding them along their journey toward the creation of new discourse norms and an understanding of the rhetorical situations in which they find themselves every day.

In Columbus, Ohio, a Bread Loaf Teacher Network (BLTN) colleague, Amelia Gordon, and I created a writing exchange program, Erase the Space, that addresses the major issues we see permeating public discourse in the United States. In a city ranked the 20th most segregated in the country, the issue of polarization is critical in our community, yet many are unaware of this issue. Columbus is also one of the most rapidly growing cities in the country, and this is where my research on public discourse in the high school English classroom intersected with our environment. We asked ourselves, “If our city is so concerned about getting ready for the expected population boom, why...
are we not seeing initiatives to reignite the idea of community and discourse to battle this polariza-
tion? What can we do to erase the space between young people?” There are plenty of new programs
meant to help the city ready itself for more inhabitants. Park and ride allows people to leave their car
at a park and bicycle to work. We are seeing road construction all over the Columbus metro area to
handle estimated increased traffic flow. Why are we not seeing a stronger initiative to help start conver-
sations in places where we so badly need them?

Seeking an answer to that question in the present cultural circumstance, we took the advice
from Judith Rodin and the Penn National Convention that “good public discourse evolves over
time, as citizens develop genuinely rich and more complex relationships with each other” (19). The
predicament of our deteriorating public discourse cannot be legislated away, nor should we want to do
that. The current social climate also poses the problem of what happens when the mindset of public
discourse as a breeding ground for scoring points or “clicks” becomes an ingrained belief system and
attitude adopted by future generations. We knew we needed to be in this for the long haul.

As we worked to make our program a reality, the idea for our writing exchange became a
commitment to hard work over time rather than a results-happy one-year narrative to share with
other teachers. This is something we are working to spread to schools in Columbus as we learn and
tweak our approach and execution through reflection and research. Our goal for Erase the Space is
to create a common experience for ninth graders around the city of Columbus with the hopes of
kickstarting conversations between people who may not have had those conversations otherwise,
igniting a discourse revolution in the city and the surrounding area.

**Introductions Are Key**

First, we had to start with our classes. My students from a wealthy suburban school (about 15 min-
utes outside of Columbus) started with writing introductions of themselves to their counterparts
at a Columbus City high school. The students in Amelia’s did the same, and before we knew it, both
groups were energized about the project, and we had our first tense situations to navigate with them.
To prevent these situations from arising, my colleague and I had to make sure that we were going
about this not only in a way that is conducive to productive discourse but also in a way that levelled
the playing field for everyone involved. There are social power dynamics that inherently taint the
potential relationships between students from our respective schools. These dynamics prompted us to
foster an environment where pure problem solving and critical thinking were necessary and where the
socially constructed forms of intelligence (grades, grammar, standardized tests) lost their grip. The
introductions revealed some of the dynamics we were anticipating.

One of my students sent a goofy picture of herself to her partner at Columbus South that was
not received well. Amelia’s student immediately said that she did not like the picture or her part-
ner. The student told Amelia that she did not like the picture because, if she had sent it, people would
call her “ghetto.” This experience reinforced what we had hypothesized: without the right framework
and environment for their discourse to thrive, the exchange could devolve into adversarial interaction.
We needed to be intentional with the language we used to describe their work, and most of all, we
knew they needed work to do together.
Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of contact zones played a large role in the way we structured the rest of our program. We had to identify the “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world” (34). What we found was that there are not many spaces where these cultures meet or clash, except for occasional (and accidental) online interactions. Apart from their segregation of social media friend groups, most of the students did not have a chance to cross each other’s paths for a contact zone to be created. Author and principal researcher at Microsoft danah boyd writes, “Although many teens connect to everyone they know on sites like Facebook, this doesn’t mean that they cross unspoken cultural boundaries. Communities where race is fraught maintain the same systems of segregation online and off” (155). If they are not interacting in online contact zones and have little chance of crossing paths in the physical world, how will these conversations start? Through their English classroom.

Schools are perfect contact zones where productive discourse habits can be formed and fostered. Through learning how to analyze rhetorical situations, applying them to writing, and engaging with an audience in multiple contact zones, students begin to understand productive discourse habits. Our focus for students through Erase the Space is to find common ground, stress the importance of deliberation and reflexivity, and ultimately how to conduct themselves as a participating communicant.

Before there can be work to do together, we have to find common ground. The Columbus metro area is something the students have in common, and the problem of segregation facing a growing city is a common problem that provided them work to do together. Once we knew where we were headed after their introductions, the groundwork had to be laid for the remainder of the exchange. Introducing yourself to someone new is one thing, but taking someone else’s perspective into account while brainstorming solutions to a problem such as segregation requires more deliberation and reflexivity. Writing to an audience about yourself places the writer in a completely different rhetorical situation than working together on a project incorporating multiple perspectives toward a solution.

The Rhetorical Situation

After their introductions, we work with students on understanding how to assess rhetorical situations provided by different mediums. They will have already interacted through letter writing, but soon they will be answering questions about Columbus in a Google Doc and chatting on Twitter about the segregation statistics in the research section of the project. Once again, our job is to equip them with the tools to understand how they should execute their writing and make the decision as to when their work is done and ready for the intended audience. To help them understand the impact of writing through different mediums, I have the students chart all of their media intake for a 24-hour period. This comes with varying results of different screen-included activities: YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Netflix. There are usually some print media scattered throughout their responses, but they start to realize how much time they spend locked into a screen, experiencing language through that medium. This revelation generally leads to introspective discussion on how these interactions may affect their thinking and analyzing how that might be happening.

Enter the rhetorical situation.

This is when I ask how their interactions on social media are different from their interactions with the novel we are reading (Fahrenheit 451). The connection between the two is not clear to them at first, but some key questions start to bring the concept of rhetorical situations into view for both mediums. Understanding the history and context around the rise of the novel gives them clarity on questions such as, Who is the audience? People who could read, generally in the country of publication. What is the purpose? There were usually some colonial intentions of defending a certain portrait of the world. Who are the authors? People who had the clout or money to get

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published. What tools can the author employ? Empathetic engagement with characters to convey meaning. What are the constraints of the novel? It's long. It takes up space. It takes a long time to finish one.

Then we start to ask these same questions about the media they spent the most time with. Who is the audience for a tweet, a snap, an Instagram post? What is the purpose? Who is the author? Maybe a bot. What tools can the author employ? The fun starts when students get to their analysis of the implications of hashtags, retweets, or likes. Once they start interrogating their situation, they begin to see the gears working behind just one tweet or Instagram post. The students can then start to put the pieces back together on their terms with an understanding of why and how they should be engaged in discourse as communicants in this setting, just as an author and reader of a novel would be engaged as communicants. Once an understanding of context is established in the group, we set to transferring their learning outside the classroom via the exchange. Now they are ready to communicate effectively and productively through different mediums.

The students participating in the exchange worked with Twitter as their second medium. This step-by-step process allows students to navigate their own learning with each other. When students work collaboratively to discover the intricacies of writing in different forms to a specific audience, they can begin to define the world around them and are ready to engage in problem solving outside the classroom because they know their thoughts matter. This is when we hit them with analysis. Before they get into their Twitter chat, they first need something to chat about. Each group member is assigned a census map of Columbus published in Business Insider, an article explaining the history of school and neighborhood segregation from City Lab, and the demographics data from every school system in the Columbus metro area. Each piece clarifies the picture of segregation in Columbus and readies the students to answer the questions: “How can two kids live 20 miles apart and never meet? What forces/factors keep young people separate?” This becomes the main focus for their Twitter chat. They are now informed on the subject, have deliberated about the concept before they engage in discussion, and are ready to exchange perspectives on their research and generate possible solutions to help stem the tide of segregation. While they are brainstorming initiatives or programs that can help people come together and start conversations between the outerbelt and the innerbelt of Columbus (I-270 separates the city from the suburbs like many major cities), they are engaging in those conversations that are necessary for change to happen.

Just because students spent time analyzing the rhetorical situation presented by different mediums of communication does not mean they were expert communicators across cultural boundaries. One of my students, in starting a conversation about spending the summer at their vacation home, slowed the momentum of their Twitter chat as common ground had not been established. Even language choice caused some fraught interactions as one of Amelia’s students explained his thought that the problem of segregation in Columbus is beyond solving, garnering a response from his exchange partner, “That’s a bad attitude.” Whether or not my student knew how much connotation that phrase carries didn’t matter; he said it and the atmosphere of the conversation changed. The rhetorical situation in which they were operating did not allow for tone of voice, facial expressions, eye contact. Online discourse served as a stand-in for personal discourse in a physical space, but it cannot replicate the experience of seeing the other person.

You Can’t Make Eye Contact over the Internet

For Erase the Space to have resonance with the students, a physical space for interaction is necessary. They can interact with their counterparts online and through writing introductions, but those rhetorical situations are only shadows of the one that presents itself when they are in the same room as their partners. Our next step in the exchange is to actually get these young people to meet each other and engage in one another’s humanity. This became the culminating step in our exchange where the students meet and create a collaborative solution to the problem of segregation in Columbus. By its nature, with young people generating the ideas, this is a ground-up, long-term solution to the problem. My students walked into the main
branch of the Columbus Public Library (most of them had never been there before) and their group members from Columbus City were already seated. A moment of anxiety followed us, but this was quickly replaced by timid conversations turning to laughter.

The success we saw in that conference room did not happen on its own. Passion exists in teenagers but is often stifled by circumstances or environment. We were, and remain, aware of the dynamics that play a role in collaborative efforts between teenagers of different backgrounds. That is why we took great pains to make sure both the circumstances and the environment of this exchange were conducive to collaboration rather than competition. We wanted this experience to give students from both schools an opportunity to grow in areas of their learning. For a lot of my students, humility and recognizing the dignity in other people was something necessary to come to terms with to become better learners. As one of my students noted in his post-exchange reflection, "If you take the time to understand the average life of someone else . . . then you can begin the process of transforming your own perspectives.” Amelia’s students showed a lack of confidence before the exchange, but their reflections showed an understanding that they could hang with anyone intellectually. These transformations were made possible through a neutral meeting site (the Columbus Public Library), circumstances (they needed each other to solve the problem), and careful language choice in the creation of the exchange. One of Amelia’s students summed up the process perfectly: “Most importantly it broke the stereotypes because after meeting each other, I think the stereotype is gone. After this exchange I made two new friends who are texting me right now!”

Watching our students laugh, converse, problem solve, and genuinely enjoy the company of each other was more the product of this exchange than their presentations. That is one key thing to keep in mind when working toward better public discourse and erasing the space between citizens: the process is the product. Conversations along the way pave inroads for the possibility of productive discourse. Engaging with someone different from us and understanding the motivations behind actions and words gives us depth of understanding when addressing the pressing issues begging us to confront them. Collaboration puts a human face on differing perspectives, and that connection is the key to drowning out the aggressive, vile rhetoric that currently poisons a large part of our public discourse. The first year of our exchange program is not going to end segregation in our city, but a commitment to productive public discourse can. To make that a reality, we recognize that this program will change from year to year as we uncover the complexity of simple interactions. One solution to unanticipated tension is to unpack perceptions and reactions to writing at the beginning of the exchange. Instead of exchanging, reading, and responding, we are putting a buffer between reading and responding. Before composing a response to their partner’s letter of introduction, students participating in the second year of our exchange will pull specific lines from the letter and respond to them with emojis. The students are given a choice of nine emojis ranging from categories of positive responses, confused responses, and negative responses. Students will then explain why they chose the emoji and, in doing so, will actively participate in analyzing the rhetoric of our evolving symbolic exchange. They also dig using emojis.

The aim of teaching discourse through collaborative learning (specifically through writing exchanges) is for the learned behavior and mindset to transfer into their other contact zones. When this transfer happens, we begin the healing of our national conversation. This is what our classrooms can be a vehicle for: expansion of ideas and student-created worldviews. The writing exchange model presented in this article gives students a taste of being a productive citizen as they are building a collective knowledge, including voices that may have been silenced otherwise, and understanding that their thoughts matter when they work toward a solution together. If students can understand that there is complexity behind the opinions and statements made in public discourse through forum websites, online comment boards, and anything disseminated through social media, they have a much better
The chance of understanding and engaging in a solution for the problem rather than piling on rhetoric that pushes communicants farther apart.

Teaching mindfulness for language through collaborative learning can direct attitudes of discourse in the direction of a communal effort to address problems through conversation rather than shaming your opponent and creating more distance between worldviews. Instead of chopping down the blighted forest, plant new seeds. Let us repopulate the forest of ideas and discourse with strong, resilient trees.

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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus explains to Scout that “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it” (36). Make this advice more literal by inviting students to imagine spending a day in someone else’s shoes in this writing activity. Students examine a variety of shoes and envision what the owner would look like, such as their appearance, actions, etc. They then write a narrative, telling the story of a day in the shoe owner’s life. This activity would tie in nicely with getting to know students from other communities. [http://bit.ly/1HirMjz](http://bit.ly/1HirMjz)

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The Conference on English Education is seeking the next editor for its journal *English Education*. The term of the present editor, Tara Star Johnson, will end in July 2020. Applicants for the editorship should be tenured (or have completed the tenure process with a reasonable certainty that tenure will be granted) and should have published in *English Education* or a national journal of similar quality.

Applicants should send a letter of application to be received no later than August 31, 2018. Letters should be accompanied by the applicant’s vita, one published writing sample (article or chapter), a one-page statement of the applicant’s vision for the future of the journal, and letter(s) specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant’s institution. Applicants are urged to consult with administrators on the question of time, resources, and other institutional support that may be required for the editorship of this journal.

Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to kaustin@ncte.org; please include “EE Editor Application” in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Publications Director, at the email address above, or call 217-328-3870, ext. 3619.

Finalists will be interviewed by the search committee at the NCTE Annual Convention in Houston in November 2018. The applicant appointed by the CEE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for their first issue to be published in October 2020. The appointment is for five years, nonrenewable.