“I Don’t Like Her”: Uncomfortable Moments in Cross-Classroom Writing Exchanges

A cross-classroom writing project that I began in January 2017 in collaboration with a teacher at a school less than twenty-five miles from my school site in Columbus, Ohio, has prompted an unflattering, but important, self-reflection on who I am as an educator. In this article, I consider two rhetorical situations that made me question how to respond as the “adult in charge.” Both uncomfortable moments occurred during the first year of the project, and I did not handle them well. I revisit each moment to critique my practice, and I also describe what I changed in the second year of the project, now named Erase the Space. The 2018–19 school year marked the third year of Erase the Space, a powerful and potentially meaningful project. However, the work it involves is challenging and can be uncomfortable for students and teachers. It certainly has been for me. Three years in, I still oscillate between feeling like a trailblazer and feeling like a failure.

I hope that this reflection encourages other teachers to seek new discourse opportunities outside of the traditional classroom space for their students. I hope that it invites teachers and students to become more comfortable with discomfort, with challenge, and with the inevitable conflict that emerges when we encounter difference. Finally, I hope that teachers like me find the courage to admit when they fail—then reflect and try again.

THE PROJECT: ERASE THE SPACE

In early 2017, I met a teaching colleague for coffee. Derek Burtch and I are both graduate students at the Bread Loaf School of English and, as part of the Bread Loaf Teacher Network, we are asked to collaborate on a project during the school year. Earlier in the 2016–17 academic year, we unsuccessfully attempted a writing exchange between our Ohio classrooms and a third classroom in rural Kentucky. The exchange was predicated on the loose idea that we wanted our students to “see” a different America than the one they lived in; however, we did not have a clear purpose. Without a more substantial learning objective, the first exchange fell apart. Despite our initial failure, Derek and I found ourselves reenergized after the contentious election of 2016. Our two classrooms represented the disparate Americas every pundit and cultural critic was discussing on the news: suburban versus urban, wealthy versus working class, conservative versus liberal, and White versus not-White. Our students seemed to live in separate countries, separate Americas, despite living only miles apart (see Figure 1). So, we thought: What if we brought our students together, in writing and in person?

Several coffee meet-ups later, we had a plan. Drawing from Derek’s research for our graduate program on discourse and democracy (see his article “Erase the Space: Short Distance Writing Exchanges...” — continuation on next page).
and Public Discourse in the High School English Classroom” in the May 2018 issue of English Journal, we decided to update a pen pal model for the current social, political, and historical moment. We wanted to create an experience that solicited expertise from both groups of students and inspired collaboration, a feat that would be more achievable if students focused on their commonalities rather than their differences. The close proximity of our schools made it relatively easy to get students from the two classes together in person. We felt this step was essential as our students spend a significant amount of time interacting online in spaces known for frequent breakdowns in discourse and empathy. We reasoned that meeting a new person face-to-face, after corresponding all year, would inspire a different kind of dialogue and learning.

The students exchanged a written introduction and a questionnaire about their opinions on the city of Columbus in February 2017. After in-class readings on the history of school segregation and a discussion of school report card data in March, the students interacted with their exchange partners online via a Twitter chat monitored by Derek and me in April. Finally, the students met in person to create a poster and write a report in late May. Their

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Assignment was to develop an idea to bring disparate groups of young people from across the city together in an authentic way (see Figure 2).

After the students met in May 2017, Derek and I assigned informal reflective writing to determine whether repeating the writing exchange the following school year was worthwhile. In both classes, all fifty of the student participants responded that the exchange should be repeated for our incoming ninth graders. The written responses from both classrooms were enough to convince us to repeat the exchange. However, bringing two disparate groups of students together presented challenging moments. We needed to reflect on and revise our practice before we began again.

THE DILEMMA: TEACHER AS GATEKEEPER

Before I sent my students’ biographical introductions to be shared in Derek’s classroom, I helped them edit their work. I reminded students to capitalize, to use the correct forms of there/their/they’re, and to rework

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<th>Month</th>
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| February | Compose and exchange written introductions. Typed and exchanged via shared Google drive folder. | - Introduce yourself in a way that feels authentic to you.  
- Describe your community. What do outsiders say about your community? To what extent is “what they say” true or false? |
| February | Compose and exchange opinions on the city of Columbus and experiences as children living in the Columbus area. Typed and exchanged via a shared Google drive folder. | - How long have you lived in Columbus? Name three areas/neighborhoods where you spend most of your time.  
- How do you know if someone is “like” you? How do you know if someone is “unlike” you? How often are you given opportunities to interact with students who are “unlike” you? |
| March | Read article on school segregation; examine census map, school report cards, and median home prices in Columbus area; analyze trends. Completed separately in both classrooms. | - How does the city school district compare in size to the suburban school districts? Are comparisons between the two fair? Why or why not?  
- Where do you see school districts that boast true diversity (one racial subgroup does not dominate)? Why might that be? |
| April | Meet on Twitter, discuss findings and reactions to findings; brainstorm final project ideas. Students formed group messages using personal Twitter accounts or accounts made exclusively for project. Teachers included in all group messages. | - From your exchanged writing, what do you believe to have in common?  
- How can two kids live twenty miles apart and never meet? What forces/factors keep young people separate? |
| May | Meet in person at the library and create a poster and report. Field trip from 11:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m. during a school day. Busing paid by school budgets. | - Develop an idea that will bring young people from different communities across Columbus together in a way that encourages authentic interaction. |

FIGURE 2
The first year of the project included a progression of assignments.
awkward sentences. I pushed my students to expand paragraphs of interest and to elaborate on as-yet-underdeveloped thoughts. In short, I thought I was editing like most teachers do every day, all year, in their English classrooms. I was careful not to edit out my students’ voices. Or so I thought.

Proud of their work, I sent the files along, feeling that my students had represented themselves well. When I received Derek’s students’ work a few days later, I felt a little less self-satisfied. It was apparent he had not edited his students’ work, sending along ninth-grade writing clearly executed solely by ninth graders. Why, I thought, did I feel the need to edit my students’ writing?

NCTE’s position statement “What Anti-Racist Language Teachers Do” states that antiracist educators should “affirm students of color, multiple Englishes, multicultural practices, and identity expression” (Action Working Group). In the case of my students’ introductions, I did just the opposite. I asked my students to, literally, express themselves in a way that feels “authentic to them” and then I edited their work so that it closely resembled what I decided was high-quality work worthy of presentation. Instead of engaging my students in a conversation on audience and purpose and then editing collaboratively, I acted as the gatekeeper.

When we received Derek’s students’ pieces, I realized that I had also made some dangerous assumptions about his students. I believed that Derek’s students would organically produce writing that was superior to the writing in my own classroom. I edited in order to prove that my students could “speak/write/be more like middle-class White ones” rather than engaging in any critique of my own “White gaze . . . that sees, hears, and frames students of color . . . as marginal and deficient” (Paris and Alim 3). I never imagined that Derek’s students would send along clearly unpolished work, nor did I consider how I might need to handle my students’ immediate desire to critique spelling and grammatical errors in their suburban partners’ writing. Derek and I needed to decide whether we would edit students’ writing before exchanging pieces, and we needed a consistent message to share with our classes about our decision.

EDITING WRITING
To begin the 2017–18 school year, Derek and I both taught a lesson on a tool we created and dubbed the “Rhetorical Matrix” (see Figure 3). Before beginning any Erase the Space assignment, both classrooms “graphed” the rhetorical situation of the writing assignment on the axis of audience and tone/formality. Our second-cycle students determined that our initial written exchange piece was somewhat formal and situated somewhere close to the center on audience. Therefore, most chose to write in a slightly more formal manner to introduce themselves. After writing, students then decided if they wanted to submit their writing to their teachers for feedback. Written pieces were now “done” when the students said they were (or a reasonable deadline passed). Returning control of the written product to the students and removing myself as the gatekeeper felt like a step in the right direction.

All of my students this year asked for me to edit their pieces before sending, which may be problematic especially considering that not one of Derek’s students asked him to edit their pieces. If that trend
continues, we have another complex point to unpack and analyze as we adjust our practice again.

LINGERING DOUBTS
I shared this editing dilemma with colleagues at my school, all of whom held remarkably different opinions about my choice to edit. After discussing my misgivings with my department chair, she responded, “I know why you are uncomfortable. But also, what would have happened if you didn’t edit?”

I knew what she meant. For students and teachers, schools exist somewhere on a spectrum between “good school” and “bad school.” When I first introduce this project to my class, my students tell me in our initial discussion that their suburban partners go to “good schools” with “better teachers” and that they are “smarter” and “better prepared for college” than students at our school. They parrot this messaging, internalized from sources ranging from their neighbors to the local news to latest stereotype-laden Hollywood film set in the “inner city,” that our school pales in comparison to another school they cannot even locate on a map. Would unedited writing from my students be received the same way as unedited writing from our partner school? Definitely not. My students’ writing carries the weight of stereotype and prejudice. An unpolished piece is not simply a work in progress; it is an indictment of the student, the school, and the community.

It is dangerous to pretend as if my students do not know when and where to employ different languages, writing, and rhetorical moves to effect change (and, in some dire cases, protect their lives). I know that they have to prove what for others is assumed. This is where I often arrive frustrated when planning for this writing exchange. How do I prepare my students for the world as it is and simultaneously inspire them to change that world? And, as a White woman, am I even prepared to teach my students what they need?

THE DILEMMA: TEACHER AS LEARNER
Derek and I took our students’ introductions and matched students based on interests and attitude. Jimaya, my student, and Katie, his student, seemed like natural partners. Both are outspoken, confident, and interested in sports (student names are pseudonyms).

The excitement was palpable when my students received their partner’s introductions in early February 2017. When I walked by Jimaya, she was staring at the picture on Katie’s paper. In her photo, Katie is wearing her basketball uniform, squinting, and sticking out her tongue. Her hands are held in front of her, middle fingers curled in, with her other fingers extended. Depending on the viewer, the positioning of her hands could be interpreted as reminiscent of gang signs. I asked Jimaya what she was thinking.

“I don’t like her,” she said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t like her picture. If I sent that picture, everyone would say I was ghetto. So I don’t like that she sent it to me.”

To Katie, her picture might signify her personality and perhaps her interests. However, by Jimaya’s estimation, if she had chosen a similar picture, her picture would be interpreted as “ghetto.” Jimaya’s choice of such a picture, in combination with the signifiers of Blackness, of posturing, of a basketball jersey, and of particular hand placement, would reinforce a myth about Jimaya and her community.

In the moment, all I could think to say to Jimaya was, “That’s a really important observation. I would like to talk more about that.” Then I walked away. If I validated what Jimaya said about Katie, I thought that I would drive a wedge further into an empathetic relationship I was trying to foster. If I defended Katie, brushing off Jimaya’s real and valid feelings, I would be giving Katie the benefit of the doubt that is never extended to Jimaya and her classmates. Worse still, I would have been a White teacher defending a White child I did not even know. So, out of fear, I chose to say nothing at all.
PERFORMANCES IS NOT ABOUT POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND CULTURAL HYPERSensitivity. IT’S ABOUT ACKNOWLEDGING WHEN AND HOW A DOMINANT CULTURE MOCKS . . . ANOTHER CULTURE AS ONE-DIMENSIONAL.” IT WAS ALSO NOT JIMAYA’S RESPONSIBILITY TO CORRECT KATIE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THIS WRITING EXCHANGE—it was mine, as the adult, as the teacher, and as a White ally to JIMAYA.

After exchanging another written piece, Jimaya learned that Katie played on a travel basketball team. Katie also wrote that she felt she had “many opportunities to be around people who are different to her,” which Jimaya took to mean that she had a racially diverse travel basketball team. After chatting online in April, Jimaya told me that something Katie said in the group chat made her laugh and that Katie seemed more outgoing like her.

When they met at the library, they “clicked.” Both girls got along so well that they could barely make it through the presentation of their project without giggling at each other. If Jimaya’s only exposure to Katie had been through writing, I do not believe the relationship would have progressed. The real-time communication of the Twitter chat and the in-person meeting allowed the girls to recognize a shared sense of humor and confident attitude, traits that helped build an authentic relationship. Despite this happy outcome, I knew that I had mishandled Jimaya’s initial response to Katie.

In March 2018, over a year after the initial incident, I called Jimaya down to my classroom during my planning period. She and I have maintained a close relationship because of Erase the Space—she indicated that she wanted to help me facilitate the project with my new ninth graders, which I let her do in exchange for school internship hours. I asked if she would mind reading this article and giving me some feedback. I relied heavily on my writing to guide what I wanted to say to her because I was nervous. When we got to the part about me walking away from her in class, she looked at me and laughed. “You did walk away from me!” she said. “I remember that.” I took a moment to apologize. I said that I was

INTERROGATING IMAGERY

My students already have a nuanced understanding of how images perpetuate or disperse myths, perhaps more swiftly or easily than the written word. Teens use social media as a way to explore new identities, gain acceptance into dominant peer groups, or to attract attention (Herring and Kapidzic). Much of this online discourse on social media is dominated by imagery.

My first instinct in response to Jimaya was to design a lesson for my classroom to discuss the power (and danger) of images. We could investigate how personal photos posted online on social media accounts have been used, retroactively, to suggest that young people are involved in criminal activity and therefore “deserve” to be victims of police brutality and/or racial profiling. However, I realized that this approach was shortsighted. Jimaya did not need her White teacher to point out that images of Black and Brown bodies are already misrepresented and judged unfairly. She did not need me to remind her that children like her are rarely, if ever, given the benefit of the doubt and the luxury of making a youthful mistake online or in “real” life.

The purpose of our writing exchange is to bring together disparate groups of students who otherwise might never meet in person. It is one thing to discuss and critique White privilege in the abstract comfort of one’s classroom without many White students present. It is quite another thing to ask your students to deliberately engage and collaborate with White students who live in one of the wealthiest counties in the country.

I realized that my focus should have been on Katie, not Jimaya. In his article “‘Playing Black’ for Laughs,” Neal A. Lester discusses a “Toyota Swagger Wagon” commercial in which White parents adopt “exaggerated hand gestures, Ebonics, and slang” while in the car, but then “can shed their ‘thug’ image at any point. After all, they are middle-class and white and possess all the privileges that come with that.” Katie’s youth, class, and race allowed her to send an image into the world that will only be read as a joke; the same image, for Jimaya, would likely be taken seriously. It was on us, her teachers, to help Katie understand the effect of her image on Jimaya and the privileges she enjoys. As Lester states, “Critiquing these performances is not about political correctness and cultural hypersensitivity. It’s about acknowledging when and how a dominant culture mocks . . . another culture as one-dimensional.” It was also not Jimaya’s responsibility to correct Katie within the context of this writing exchange—it was mine, as the adult, as the teacher, and as a White ally to Jimaya.

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sorry that I let such an important learning moment get away from us and, if she was willing, I wanted to revisit it. I suggested that Katie, Derek, and I needed to deconstruct the moment and Jimaya nodded vigorously. I shared a plan: if it was OK with her, Derek would share Jimaya’s initial reaction to Katie’s photo with Katie. Then, we would all come together to talk about it. Jimaya agreed.

To prepare for the conversation between Katie and Jimaya, Derek had a discussion with Katie in his own classroom about Jimaya’s reaction to the picture. I asked Derek to emphasize to Katie that the goal of the conversation between the two girls was not to make Katie feel bad. Our job was to help both students come to a new understanding of the experience and to process the learning that they will carry into their adult lives. After her discussion with Derek, Katie agreed to the conversation, and we set a date for a few weeks later to meet.

We recorded the conversation so that we could review it as we processed the meeting together. They began by discussing the photo incident again:

**Jimaya:** I just felt like if I would have sent it, it would have been taken another way than when she sent it. Like, it was OK for her to send it, but if I had sent it, it would have been like, “Awww, I told y’all! She is kinda ghetto.” That’s all. I just felt like, if I couldn’t do it . . . [shrugs].

**Katie:** I just wasn’t really thinking. But hearing that you felt that way . . . really opened my eyes. Things that we do have different repercussions for different people. And it’s just completely weird to see something that could be funny . . . everyone thought it was funny . . . but it was weird to see how different it was [for you].

Katie’s response demonstrates an understanding that her photo and actions may be received differently than Jimaya’s, that they each are faced with “different repercussions.” At this point in the conversation, Jimaya added that she would have never sent that as a “first impression photo.” When I asked why, Jimaya responded:

Because we always get taught what people think about us. Like the stereotypes and stuff. So it’s like . . . I already know what people are going to say. It’s everywhere . . . on TV, in songs. They just stereotype us like we are gangbangers, like we on the block. They just are thinking we don’t care about our education, but we do.

Here, Jimaya echoes the stereotype weight that she and her classmates carry. When asked what kind of picture she would send as a first impression, Jimaya said, “Something plain. Like a school picture.” Then she struck an over-exaggerated school picture pose with a big, forced smile.

Later in the conversation, Jimaya shared how her opinion of Katie did not change until they met in person: “As soon as she, like, introduced herself, 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.” Despite multiple points of contact (written exchange, digital conversation), Jimaya’s reflection suggests that meeting in person was a critical component of the goal of building healthy cross-community discourse. The intangible qualities that draw us to one another cannot be fully realized until we are together in the same room.

**LINGERING DOUBTS**

The deep thinking and learning that we were able to achieve with Jimaya and Katie is unique. Both are self-assured and introspective in ways that are not typical of their same-age peers. They have both expressed an interest in staying involved in our writing exchange because it was personally meaningful to them. Their parents believe in the work and have signed multiple permission forms allowing them to continue working with us. Finally, this conversation was only fruitful because the girls established a strong personal connection. While most students will not reach this level of complexity and empathy through the exchange, we also know that moments like this are not possible unless we reach outside of our classrooms for authentic discourse opportunities. And yet . . .

When I share my work with other reflective educators who serve marginalized student populations, the first question I am asked is how I support and protect my students throughout the exchange. “How can you be sure,” a teacher friend asked me recently,
continuing education, reflection, and care for the students they lead. I trust my partner in this project but, as two White educators, we both know we have blind spots. This school year, I won a small grant through my school district to pay for diversity training by Mosaic Education Network for myself, Derek, and other teachers engaging in Erase the Space exchanges. We are also planning a focus group with parents from both school communities to review our curriculum and provide feedback on the process. It is not a perfect plan, but it is a start.

Each year of our writing exchange brings new challenges and moments of tension, more sleepless nights and long looks in the mirror. I know now, though, that engaging in meaningful work means that I am sometimes uncomfortable. I am uncomfortably between the theory I believe and the actual practice I sometimes employ. I am uncomfortably between the community that raised me and the community that I serve. And I am, forever, uncomfortably between the teacher I am and the teacher that I want to be.

WORKS CITED


“that our kids aren’t being used as vehicles for White students to learn? How do you make sure our kids are learning too?” In the video, both girls expressed that they learned a lesson through Erase the Space. Jimaya learned that initial impressions, while valid, do not always tell the full story. Katie learned about the power of first impressions and the reader’s/viewer’s interpretation. The difference, though, is that Katie was learning something that Jimaya already knows and has had to know for a long time. And, for Katie to learn her lesson, Jimaya had to give her a “second chance” and move forward with the exchange. Instead of protecting and empowering Jimaya, maybe I reinforced the injustice she pointed out from the beginning—that Katie gets to make mistakes, share careless photos, and hurt (intentionally or not) others, and then be forgiven.

MOVING FORWARD, IMPERFECTLY

Bringing together segregated groups of young people is tricky. The uncertainty and possibility of conflict inherent in the process would make it easy for me to convince myself that I am not up to the task. Yet if I truly desire to be an antiracist educator, I must have the courage to live in the tension. That means taking the tough conversations outside of the world of my four classroom walls and into the community. Teachers, particularly White teachers, must be antiracist educators in words and in action. If our school settings are not racially or economically diverse, we must find opportunities for students to interact authentically with people who are different and who might see the world differently. It is difficult, unpredictable, and can be uncomfortable. But how else will real change occur?

This is not to say that teachers, particularly White teachers, can engage in this work without