

“We Are Not All the Same”: Strengthening Teacher-Student Relationships through Online Classroom Dialogue

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Abstract: Seglem and Garcia look at how teachers and students can guide change from within classrooms by using digital tools to recontextualize the cultural experiences and relationships at the core of learning and growth in public schools. Whereas “classroom management” tends to be the focus for how new teachers must “control” kids, they focus their efforts to transform English teachers’ classrooms through utilizing online tools for humanizing purposes. Building on a study of their work with students and preservice teachers, the authors consider how reflection on the dynamics between these two groups and an evolution in building relationships in classrooms can better drive a revolution in the academic needs of students and the cultural awareness of teachers.

In the January 2016 issue of *English Journal*, Golden and Womack reminded us that the importance of relationships is often overlooked in these times of massive reform, particularly when working with minoritized youth. Through our work with preservice teachers, we strive to instill the importance of relationships within future teachers on a daily basis, emphasizing, as Golden and Womack urge, the importance of abandoning a deficit model of instruction. For Antero, this mission is personal because of the years he spent working with high school youth who dealt with inequitable schooling conditions on a daily basis. And for Robyn, who works with teacher candidates with little

experience working with youth of color, it can be a challenge to demonstrate how to foster relationships with students they see as having little in common with them. As former teachers, we *know* that teachers and students must lead organic change from within schools. Thus, we asked ourselves how we could we shift our teacher candidates from being enactors of the status quo to advocates for youth from all backgrounds and experiences. Realistically, we knew that, by ourselves, we could not accomplish this through one or two college courses. Yet, we also knew that if we could assist in the development of authentic relationships between white preservice teachers and youth of color, we could begin to plant the seeds of future advocacy.

This article looks at how teachers and students can guide change from within classrooms by recontextualizing the cultural experiences and relationships at the core of learning and growth in today's public schools. Whereas "classroom management" tends to be the focus for how new teachers must "control" kids, we focus our efforts to transform English teachers' classrooms through utilizing online tools for humanizing purposes. Building on a study of our work with high school students and preservice teachers, we consider how reflection on the dynamics between these two groups and an evolution in how we build relationships in classrooms can better drive a revolution in the academic needs of students and the cultural awareness of teachers.

Connecting Teachers and Hearing Students

As literacy educators, we began our work by examining the potential of media to connect two groups who lived thousands of miles apart. With a class of sophomores who attended school in the South Central Los Angeles high school, where Antero had previously taught, and a cohort of preservice teachers studying how to teach in suburban Central Illinois, we wanted to explore whether we could tap into the potential of the digital world to unite the two disparate groups, helping them to reflect upon their individual realities and construct an educational experience leading to a impactful shared reality. Acknowledging the *Discourse* in which classroom exchanges typically commence (Gee, 1990), we wanted both teachers and students to reflect critically on the

cultural role that language plays in defining the identities enacted in classrooms. Not simply making transparent the language practices necessary for participation in schools (Delpit, 1988), we wanted teachers to hear and validate the diverse “Englishes” that students fluidly speak (Seglem & Garcia, 2018; Kirkland, 2010).

Just as importantly, we recognized that language--both typed and spoken--evolves over time. The cultural practices imbued within how youth communicate online including uses of emojis, abbreviations, and creative deviations from “standard” English reflect the youth popular culture that is often too absent from our classrooms (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Alongside bringing in youth popular culture mindfully as to not simply appropriate youth-focused tools, our project was also focused on considering how the uses of technology can do more to “sustain” cultural identity within classrooms (Paris & Alim, 2014). While there are extensive studies on digital literacies within classrooms (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003), our emphasis was on exploring how high school students and teachers could use these tools to communicate and build relationships. Even as recent research by Turkle (2012, 2015) highlights how technology may be further isolating individuals and negatively affecting relationships, we wondered if these same tools could guide strengthened relationships and vibrant language practices within classrooms. In short, we believe that if high school students want to be understood and respected by teachers who may come from very different cultural backgrounds, learning how to communicate within the continually evolving textual spaces of online dialogue is an important first step.

Building Virtual Meeting Spaces

Pairing one to two high school students in South Central Los Angeles with one preservice teacher in Central Illinois, we had the two very distant (geographically and culturally) groups meet online weekly in chat rooms. Importantly, though the Los Angeles City Council officially renamed the area “South Los Angeles” more than a decade ago (Gold & Braxton, 2003), the students and local school community continued

to refer to the area as “South Central” because the historic identity of the space remained important. While students were able to receive one-on-one feedback on their writing and work within an English class, our larger goal was to open up space for the kinds of reflection, textual exploration, and relationship building that comes with groups meeting each other through tools different from those frequently used. Traditional teacher-student power relationships were no longer possible when high school students were driving conversation, doing so in the language practices they were comfortable with, and-- later --even conducting mock job interviews with the preservice teachers. Our revolution for learning and relationships in schools is built on recognizing the skills, expertise, and identities of the students in our classrooms.

Though we had more than a dozen different chat rooms running throughout the semester (approximately one for each preservice teacher), we are focusing on two of them to explore more deeply the textual exchanges that occurred. Looking at these two transcripts of conversations that transpired over the course of the Fall semester, we share several transcript exchanges to look at how language and identity intermix and shape relational understanding. In particular, we are interested in how the language practices within these chat rooms mediated identity and power relationships between the preservice teachers and high school students (Seglem & Garcia, 2018). Participants’ uses of intertextuality and digital language practices like emoticons facilitated nuanced persona building that affected the kinds of exchanges that occurred between youth and adults. Below we look at exchanges within our chat room transcripts as means for reflecting on academic learning, evolving what relationships can look like in classrooms, and fomenting a humanizing revolution.

Using Literature to Reflect Upon the Larger World

The first transcript we share demonstrates how the chat rooms built inroads for utilizing literature to reflect upon the world and the realities youth face on a daily basis. As was typically the case in each discussion, the high school students and the preservice teachers paid close attention to language practices--in this case on the choices made by

Alexie (1998) in his essay “Superman and Me.” Yet, while high schoolers Luis and Michael began the conversation focusing on Alexie’s essay, their discussion eventually evolved into a conversation that focused on the boys’ experiences in school. Through their reflection, they were able to share with Jill, their preservice teacher partner, their personal experiences of often not being heard in a school dominated by white teachers; the online environment created space for marginalized voices--those of youth and particularly youth of color--to be centered and understood:

Jill, Michael, & Luis, December 5

1. Luis: Hello. Good Morning. Today we are going to talk about the Biographical essay of Sherman Alexie.”Superman and Me.”
2. Jill: Very good, do you have thoughts to start our conversation about the essay?
3. Michael: cool..
4. Michael: “at the same time i was seeing the world in paragraphs”
5. Luis: What do You think or feel about that quote, Jill?
6. Jill: Could I ask which paragraph this quote came from?
7. Michael: the start of the 4th paragraph
8. Jill: I can see both sides... sometimes things come to us in a single thought, or paragraph and other times I feel like I see the world as a bunch of random words... what do you think on my thought?
9. Luis: I think that’s what Sherman Alexie thinks too.

The dynamics of this conversation are interesting. It is evident that the boys were

mimicking the language of school. In Turn 1, we see Luis address his “class” by stating the objective of the day, with Michael following up in Turn 4 by providing a specific reference to the text, highlighting the importance of using Alexie’s words to dig into the meaning of the essay. The two high school students shifted into language that mimics a teaching identity: “Today we are going to talk about” finds the students in the formal register that was beyond their typical banter with Jill. It is clear these youth have experienced this type of approach to instruction in the past, and Luis underscores their intent by explicitly asking Jill her opinion. His use of her first name is notable because they often address her more formally like they would a teacher, making the teacher persona even more evident in this dialogue. He furthers this persona by affirming Jill’s thoughts in Turn 9, responding to Jill’s request about their evaluation of her performance by stating “I think that’s what Sherman Alexie thinks too.” This layered approach to language highlights the unspoken, tacit knowledge these two high school students fluidly possess: they shift into traditionally authoritative language repertoires while also knowing how to usurp such practices when delivered by Jill. Conscious of the traditional scripts of schooling and varied language practices, Luis and Michael command the academic space in ways that traditional schooling often stifles.

Continuing the transcript from above, Jill, Michael, and Luis interrogate Alexie’s ideas about the paragraphs of the world, with Jill ultimately asking them to reflect on “What kind of actions or decisions in our lives make for a solid, flowing paragraph?” Luis responds: “Decisions that affect our life’s outcomes. School is one of them. College. Work. Stuff like that.” His answer prompts Jill to ask what they plan to do after high school, and Michael states he would likely go to work because he doubts he’d “last in college.” The excerpt that follows demonstrates why Michael feels this way:

Jill, Michael, & Luis Example 2, December 5 Continued

27. Jill: I think that you would do great in college!! You are always very insightful and contribute great thoughts in this class!

28. Michael: hehe thank you i can do good in every class but math ._. i haven't been learning much math since 7th grade i always have a teacher that can'
29. Michael: cant' control their class due to immaturity amongst kids
30. Jill: Your right, we are not all the same... how do the teachers at your school encourage you in your decisions?
31. Jill: Is that teacher not able to control their class because they have low expectations of you? Why are the kids immature in their class?
32. Michael: well the kids don't take the class seriously. students are always being sent out it just gets worst over time..
33. Jill: What do you think would solve the problem?
34. Jill: There was a time that a teacher told me that I was dumb and the only reason I was doing well in her class was because I work hard.
35. Michael: if people were to take the class seriously . I mean kids just mess around the teacher just allows it and doesn't do a thing to stop it
36. Jill: What do you do to help the situation and do your part to learn in class?
37. Michael: I don't do anything to disturb class because i actually want to learn due to not learning much math these last few years
38. Michael: Stay in my seat and I'm quiet
39. Jill: Your decision to learn will take you far... both of you make decisions which will help you in the future.

Within the partnership between Jill, Luis and Michael, Jill consistently projects the

most stable persona--that of teacher. Whether through rephrasing a question (“Can you be more specific with your personal anecdote”), redirecting the conversation (“tell me again, what is your position... and your 3 claims?”), or asking for clarification (What do you mean by “run tardy?”), Jill returns to more formal teacher practices throughout the partnership. At the same time, as Turn 27 indicates, Jill is obviously trying to build a relationship with Luis and Michael, and she appears to genuinely care about what they have to say. Noting an opportunity for a personal connection, Jill takes a break from the discussion over Alexie’s essay in order to affirm Michael as a student. Her willingness to do this suggests growth in their relationship because rather than staying on the task at hand, she seems to recognize the importance of connecting with her students and affirming their self-worth. In particular, as we look at this example in relation to the weeks of dialogue in which Jill tends to focus solely on the academic task at hand, the flexibility she exudes here is a significant shift from how she typically spoke with Michael and Luis. Jill ultimately invites the youth to reflect upon how the essay relates to their own lives, providing inroads to developing cultural understanding.

Evolving ELA Classrooms through New Language Practices

Reviewing the language choices in the online space above, we must consider how the kinds of words, phrases, and symbols that the youth utilize reflect how they perform characteristics of their identity. For example, Michael and Luis, making the unhappy-looking emoticon >.< speak informally. Their language is transgressive within the traditional space of schools. Likewise, *lol* engendered Jill into the youth-endorsed language practices, whether she wanted to participate in this language or not. It is important to recognize that such emoticons and abbreviations were initially a source of confusion for Jill. Throughout the semester, Jill did not type or send any emoticon or *lol*-like abbreviations, despite the fact that Michael and Luis used both in every single transcript. Neither the students or the future teacher seemed willing to concede the ground of their language practices for the dialogue.

Yet even within this exchange and the advice that followed--"Even when the situation is not how we would like it to be, we can learn from it"--Jill continues to adopt the formal language practices she associates with the *Discourse* (Gee, 1990) of teachers. Further she seems to accept Michael's assertion that the disruptive class was the fault of his peers, rather than the teacher's ability to manage the classroom. In affirming Michael's view, Jill misses out on an opportunity to engage in culturally responsive practices that explore how a mismatch between teachers' and students' experiences can result in situations such as the one described by Michael. In contrast, the following excerpt reveals the diversity of language practices with which Antoine and Vincent communicate while also identifying differences in beliefs and worldviews that arose during the holiday season. Precisely because of shared language practices, these exchanges highlight how different worldviews can be understood and negotiated between youth and adults.

Prior to the conversation below, Antoine explained that he is vegan, and they both noted how very different their Thanksgiving experiences were. From there, we can see how a willingness to move forward and laugh through their differences allows Antoine to sustain an environment for powerful exchange:

Antoine & Vincent, November 28

1. Antoine: what did you do on black friday?
2. Vincent: I WENT SHOPING
3. Antoine: does all caps mean you are yelling? why are you yelling at me? hahaha! where did you shop? what did you buy?
4. Vincent: ahaha no im not yelling at u tf?? aha its more like saying something in exciment i baught cloths
5. Antoine: what's "tf" mean? i did not go out on black friday. i was scared.
6. Vincent: aha it means the fuck lmfao (x scared of what?? O.o

7. Antoine: hahahaha!!! that's hilarious. i know what "lmfao" means. hahaha!
8. Antoine: i was scared of shopping.
9. Vincent: tf y r u scared of shoping?????? O.o thats not normal in my neighbor hood
10. Antoine: i just don't like consumerism. it scares me.
11. Vincent: what dose consumerism mean??

Unlike most classroom dialogue, both Antoine and Vincent slip comfortably between using acronyms, emoticons, and a lackadaisical approach to capitalization. In Turn 2, we can see the playful nature of Vincent capitalizing a sentence and how they both draw and explore the different intentions of capitalizing the statement. The *meaning* of textual "talk"--what could be naturally inferred in a face-to-face context--is instead discussed, clarified, and utilized for strengthening the relationship between the two chat room participants.

Antoine was humored by Marco's language choices. Rather than ignoring or questioning Marco's language, he declares that it was *hilarious* and often laughed digitally: *hahaha!* Building trust, Antoine encourages Vincent to comfortably explain the expletive-laden meaning behind the *tf* abbreviation. Accepting Vincent's cursing, lack of capitalization, use of abbreviations, emoticons, and exclamation and question marks, Antoine's engagement in the chat room highlights a willingness to understand difference that guides the new teacher's future practice. Even though Vincent and Antoine have markedly different experiences, their shared language practices offer a familiarity to learn and meaningfully dialogue.

In addition to making the space informal so that Antoine can inquire about *tf*, we also see Vincent asking about consumerism--a conversation that continues into a discussion of wealth, Marxism, and the interests of individuals that Vincent knows in the South Central community. A rich narrative emerges as a result of how textual changes in online space create familiarity even when these two participants are pretty different

otherwise: in addition to age, location, and ethnicity, the transcript highlights different ideological stances. With a foundation for exploring cultural meaning and identity in online spaces, relationships helped evolve the possibilities of learning and engagement within the classroom.

Revolutionizing Relationships through Talk and Reflection

Even though Jill did not share the same rapport with her students as Antoine did with Vincent, she still created a safe chat space for the boys to feel comfortable enough to interact playfully and faux-antagonistically. The shifts in power in the classroom evolved gradually across the semester. Looking at both of these groups--and the rest of the high school students and preservice teachers that they worked alongside--it is important to consider how the collective literacy efforts developed (in collaboration between student and adult in online spaces) was highlighting one way to consider revolutionizing the possibilities of English classrooms today: revolution through relationships.

Further, we must consider that these changes happened within the traditionally out-of-school digital space of virtual environments. In fact, had we not developed this virtualized school-based learning context, these relationships would not have been possible. For instance, consider how ideologically different Antoine and Vincent were in their dialogue. Antoine's ideology was quite different from Vincent's own perspective of the world. However, by having a conversation grounded in student-developed social language and shifting power dynamics in these spaces, these two individuals were able to build common understanding and support Vincent's academic growth. The chatroom also created a needed distance for some high school students to speak up within their partners; by not seeing their partners, high school students in this class gained the confidence to be heard.

Fairclough (1995) notes that power can be understood "both in terms of asymmetries between participants in discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed (and hence the shapes of texts) in particular sociocultural contexts" (pp. 1-2). Radically reinventing the possibilities of the

English classroom requires significantly understanding how existing power structures can be reshaped and renegotiated. Considering the needs of high school students in today's politically polarized society, we must question how technology in schools is fostering powerful learning and meaningful relationships. By realigning a more balanced approach to how students and teachers participate in and produce discourse and language within their classrooms, we see new English practices that more fully incorporate our students' humanity, dignity, and growing voices.

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