

2021

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Recommended Citation

Padhye, Sanyogita S. (2021) "Slow Conversations: Facilitating Empathy and Nuance in Communication," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 10 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol10/iss2021/14>

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Slow Conversations: Facilitating Empathy and Nuance in Communication

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The earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic were a time of separation. We were sequestered within our individual homes, to our individual laptop screens, buried in our individual, hurried adaptation of our own lessons. March 2020 was a scramble; lesson plans changed with the wind, and I desperately missed the energy and laughter of my classroom. I missed the easy conversation of my eleventh graders: their brilliant insights, their thoughtful comments. I mourned lost opportunities for my twelfth graders: yearbook signatures, the joy of tossing caps. The physical markers of our time together had disappeared. Instead, I had fleeting moments of scheduled meetings when my students felt scattered and inaccessible; days flew by in constructing some semblance of a classroom, in ensuring that my students were simply well.

For many of us, it has continued to feel so. Venturing outside safely is no small feat; interactions are reduced to boxes within boxes. This isolation is amplified within our communities, the news, and our political climate. There is an atmosphere of frenetic fracturing and contention as we move forward after new elections. As we scramble to ensure that we are providing safety for teachers and students, it seems that direct conflict and apathy are modeled instead in the political dialogues we witness. We see a refusal to recognize the lived experiences of those marginalized in our society or even our own roles in perpetuating systemic inequities laid bare by this pandemic. There is a slow leeching of agency and a refusal to

recognize nuance and complexity of identity.

However, we cannot normalize this behavior for our students. Refusing to engage in the world's crises perpetuates voicelessness and silence. This is fastness, a refusal to pause and think, and the very opposite of the function of a classroom. Instead, the construction and content of classrooms must model community and communication, the antithesis of the fractures witnessed outside. They must be a place to slow down and process our place within the outside world as well as our contributions to a culture in which we are interdependent. Now more than ever, our texts and writing are necessary because they establish binding experiences and allow us to read and comprehend the world.

Here, the role of the English classroom is thrown into stark relief. While we weather the frenzy of the world outside, we have the opportunity to create a sense of community within the classroom. It has the unique power to reduce the isolation we feel elsewhere. More so than anything else, the pandemic has shifted the focus of our English classroom; our academic pursuits serve as a way to prepare students to engage empathetically in dialogue rather than languish in protected spheres that never intersect. Our study of texts, while bringing us an hour of solace in the study of unfamiliar words and worlds, also uncovers our ultimate purpose: to facilitate exchanges of ideas and perspectives that we hope our students will carry into their futures.

Thus, as English educators, the greatest adaptation of our work this year may not rest in just the adoption of new technologies. Instead, our greatest labor over the next years will be to adapt our lessons so that they consistently facilitate conversation, interaction, and nuance in thought. Our role as English teachers is amplified since we now face an even more urgent need to facilitate critical thinking and conversation that invites and recognizes a multiplicity of perspectives.

This perspective has shifted my construction of my curriculum. Instead of pursuing a relentless path toward “checking off” multiple texts, our focus has shifted to maintaining the key elements of communication and exchange from previous years. Rather than rushing immediately into the day’s business, I’ve learned to open my virtual classroom early, to converse about everything other than academics: my newly adopted cat (usually lurking on my desk); birthday celebrations; book recommendations; college applications; interviews. These simple exchanges allow the personal and the public to intersect beautifully. The students’ energy, as they talk about the “normal” and quotidian, flows into relaxation as they begin considering the day’s tasks. They process their reading and personal experiences through their journals. Previously, these were used less frequently; now, this reflection is routine, if simply as a moment to step back from the whirlwind of virtual schedules. As they write their way through those ten minutes, they demonstrate independent understanding of the concepts we study. They pause, recollect, reflect, feel confident.

My students then become teachers; lessons become conversations. They study Hamlet’s loss and bewilderment at his place

in the world, the intrusion of Facebook’s algorithms in their personal choices, the optimization of snacks they consume. This spectrum of subjects is purposefully chosen to break apart the complexities and issues of the society they will inherit. It also allows them to contemplate their own role and agency in these issues, knowing that it is not only acceptable, but necessary to feel confused, so that they can work through these needs. They record reflections, teaching me about issues meaningful to them. They close-read excerpts to classmates, guiding them through meditations upon themes, language, structure. Independent insights form the core of their experience. They determine and refine Socratic seminar questions, then meet groupmates to practice listening to and inviting their contributions, independently learning how to value and accept varied communication styles and perspectives. This has been painstaking but priceless: they collaboratively untangle the complexities of language and critical social problems, unveiling shifts in their own behavior and approach to the world, emerging with purpose and energy.

I hope that curriculum and construction will reflect respectful discussion and the act of truly listening: the deliberate absorption of alternate perspectives. It is from pausing and concentrating that our students grow. It is from slowness that we can learn to listen and think critically about the connections we share with others. It is by emphasizing attentiveness, choice, and collaboration that we can teach them to value nuance, acknowledge others’ and their own humanity, and encourage them to examine their contributions to an interconnected culture.