CHAPTER 2

CREATING BRAVE SPACES

Community First

"We urgently need to bring to our communities the limitless capacity to love, serve, and create for and with each other."

—Grace Lee Boggs and Scott Kurashige

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

—Lilla Watson

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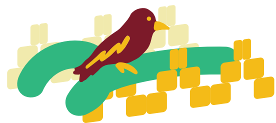

The minute I walked into Dr. DeVita Jones's classroom, I could feel joy, palpable and bursting. Dr. Jones's scholars were a bright and energetic group of second graders, and I felt fortunate to have the opportunity to observe her students explore the power of words during their daily writing workshop. I watched the way her students knew where to go, what to do, and how to read and write with agency and independence beyond what many might expect of most eight-year-olds.

My visit to Dr. Jones' classroom was one of several opportunities I had to observe my elementary colleagues and their young scholars at work and play. I learned a lot during my visits, but I was most impressed by their fearlessness—the way so many children approached their reading and writing with boundless joy: the way they called out and shared, crisscross-applesauce-seated, from the class carpet, the way they were willing to ask questions and guess answers, the way they listened and cheered for one another.

I had to wonder: did the teenagers sitting in my classroom feel this joy? I wasn't sure.

As a high school teacher, I spent many years focused on content, feeling the pressure of covering all the material, moving from text to text, checking off all the literary devices and themes along the way. But what I came to realize—and what my elementary colleagues beautifully reminded me—is that transformative learning doesn't happen via content. It happens through the relationships we build, on the first day and every day—relationships that encourage risk-taking and inspire joy, like the joy I saw on so many of Dr. Jones's young scholars.

Strong relationships don't just inspire joy in learning, either. Strong relationships are critical to creating a sense of belonging for each student in our classrooms. This sense of belonging is perhaps more critical now than ever. In April 2023, Vivek H. Murth, the Surgeon General of the United States, wrote in *The New York Times:*

> Loneliness and isolation hurt whole communities. Social disconnection is associated with reduced productivity in the workplace, worse performance in school, and diminished civic engagement. When we are less invested in one another, we are more susceptible to polarization and less able to pull together to face the challenges that we cannot solve alone—from climate change and gun violence to economic inequality and future pandemics. As it has built for decades, the epidemic of loneliness and isolation has fueled other problems that are killing us and threaten to rip our country apart.

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When students feel a sense of belonging, they not only feel more connected to each other but also to the conversations we're having in class, to the issues that matter to them. There's a shared understanding that they belong to the world, that the learning they're doing *matters* and has *purpose*.

THE THIRD TEACHER

One thing that elementary teachers know all too well is how much the physical space of the classroom matters. Every elementary classroom I've walked into—during my observations as a teacher and in visits to my own children's classrooms—make intentional use of the physical space. Thoughtful nooks for reading, bulletin boards that celebrate students' work, and classroom libraries filled with books that provide mirrors and windows into rich human experiences can make all the difference.

In their Critical Practices for Antibias Education, Learning for Justice reminds us that "when asking students to explore issues of personal and social identity, teachers must provide safe spaces where students are seen, valued, cared for and respected." Furthermore, teachers need to also pay attention to the way the physical space can be powerful: "Without saying a word, classrooms send messages about diversity, relationship building, communication and the roles of teachers and students."

Several years ago, when I was researching classroom design, I came across a wonderful book titled *The Third Teacher*, a collaborative work by OWP/P architects, VS Furniture, and Bruce Mau Design (2010). The authors—from three different global design firms—believe, as Montessorians and proponents of the Reggio Emilia approach do, that in any classroom there are three teachers. First, there is the teacher. Then other students. The environment is "the third teacher." Combining design principles with research in education, psychology, and cognitive science, the authors make an argument for the importance of the physical learning environment. What messages about teaching and learning do our students see when they walk into our classrooms? Desks arranged in separate rows tell students that working individually is what's valued. Desks arranged in groups tell students that working together is valued instead. And desks, whether in rows or groups that all face the teacher tell them who the most important person is in the room.

Or consider the one-size-fits-all message that identical desks and seats send—that even though some students may be bigger or smaller than others, or that some students learn better standing versus sitting—that everyone needs to learn the same way. We differentiate our instruction, but imagine how powerful differentiation could be if we differentiated our learning environment.

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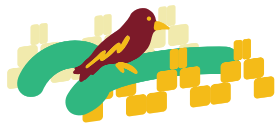

Try this. Enter your classroom as if you were a student. Even before students enter your room, what do they see? I wanted students to know that my classroom could be a safe place for each of them to learn, which is why I have had a sign on my door for more than a decade that read: "This classroom is a safe learning environment for all students regardless of ability, gender, ethnicity, race, religion, and sexual orientation." Now, I know that what matters more than any sign is what happens inside the classroom, but we know that words can be powerful. A sign like this not only tells students what they can expect, but I read that sign every day, too. It's a reminder to me that the first responsibility I have as a teacher is to provide a learning environment for my students where they know their identities will be respected. Related, several years ago, I visited Tampa Preparatory School and saw this sign outside a classroom window. I think it's important that kids

TEACHER PLEDGE

I WILL NOT BE PARTISAN
BUT I REFUSE TO BE
NEUTRAL.

I WILL SPEAK OUT FOR
UNDERSTANDING,
INCLUSION, AND
EQUITY.

I WILL FIGHT
HATRED AND INJUSTICE
WHEREEVER I SEE IT.

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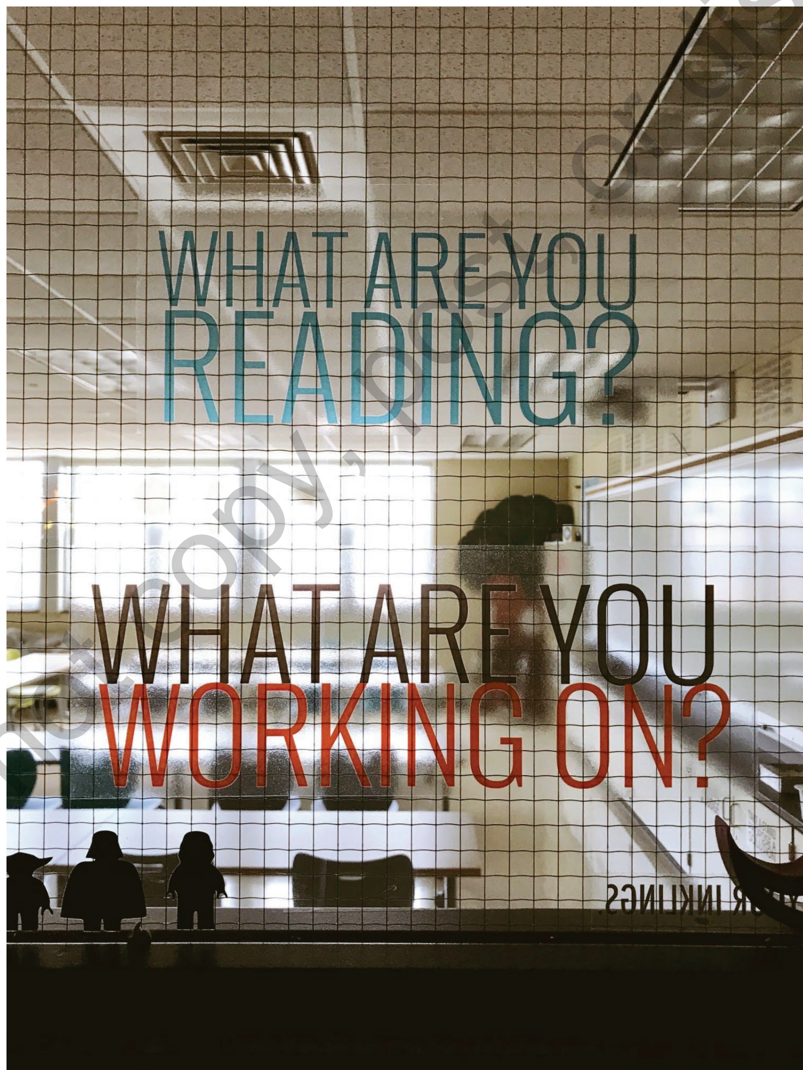
know what they can hold their teachers to and what I, as a teacher, need to remember in my role.

For almost twenty years, I had two questions posted on my classroom door that sent important messages about expectations: What are you reading? What are you working on? I also kept a dry-erase sign with "Mrs. Ebarvia is currently reading . . ." that I update during the year. My hope is that as students walk in and out of the classroom, or linger by the door before class starts, that they'll see these signs and begin to internalize their implicit messages of lifelong learning. Even though I no longer have this classroom, I still have a "What I'm Reading" sign outside my office. (Figure 2.1 shows photos of my classroom space.)



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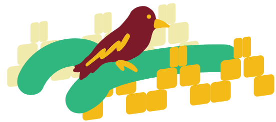

Once you enter your classroom, pause a moment to look around. When your students walk into your room, what is the first thing they notice? What's the big message? When students walked into my class, the first thing they noticed were books, books, and more books. Students knew that reading would be a priority in this classroom. My colleague next door had large block letters that spell out the word L-O-V-E. He wanted his space to be one that fosters a shared love of learning and community of people who care about each other. What do students see first or most prominently when they walk into your room?

FIGURE 2.1 MY CLASSROOM SPACE

The pictures here of my classroom reveal a space twenty years in the making. While I was fortunate to be in a district that recently invested in flexible seating, building a classroom community is more than the physical space. Over the years, I built my classroom library by shopping used bookstores, scrounging through library thrift sales, and applying for grants, adding a few books at a time. My hope is that when students walk into my room that this is a space in which we will read and learn from one another. The way the desks are arranged, the messages on the wall—these are *first* steps in creating a community space, but as you can see in the rest of this chapter, it's what we *do* in that space that ultimately matters.

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VULNERABLE AND BRAVE SPACES

No meaningful learning can happen if students don't feel welcome, safe, and seen in our classrooms. And because exploring our personal identities and biases is incredibly vulnerable work, building a sense of community is not just critical but *required*. As educator Silvas (2017) has pointed out:

> A classroom is an intricate web of delicate strands woven together. We've all experienced the highs and lows of students' emotions; for students to grow academically, their emotions have to fit just right to form a supportive and safe environment. All students have social, political, and cultural differences. As a teacher, this makes creating safe spaces even more challenging.

If for any reason you cannot make a commitment to being intentional about building community and taking the time to do so, I caution against proceeding with some of the ideas I share in this book, *especially those related to deep, personal identity work*. Asking students to engage in self-reflection related to any one of their identities—particularly regarding race, gender, social class, among others—*without* the safety net of a supportive community can do more harm than good. For some students, it can even be traumatic. Furthermore, students should never be asked to write or share anything personal that they are not comfortable writing or sharing. We must respect students as the narrators of their own stories. Their stories belong to them, not us, even if we might be a necessary audience. As Silvas (2018) also points out:

> As we read their writing, we must remain open and grounded. If students decide to share a traumatic or adverse experience, they are showing trust, and we must continue to develop that trust. There will be times their writing will remain private. On the other hand, students' safety and well-being are the top priorities. Teachers have a responsibility to take action and follow reporting protocols if students reveal something that puts their safety in jeopardy.

Notebooks as Sacred Spaces

Just as we scaffold our reading and writing instruction to meet students where they are, we can take the same approach with students regarding speaking and sharing in community. My students use writer's notebooks regularly, and many years ago, I made a rule to never collect or read these notebooks unless students voluntarily shared or I asked them first (which I have yet to ever do).

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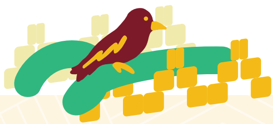

I have always preferred that when my students are in class that we have physical notebooks. We also start each class writing in our notebook, and it doesn't take long before students get into the habit of pulling out their notebooks and favorite pen when they get to class. I am not opposed to using digital notebooks, and I regularly used digital notebooks with students for taking notes specific to the content we were studying in class. However, for personal notebook writing that we use to start class, build community, and explore our identities, my students have always used physical notebooks. In this way, their physical notebooks offer a refuge from the distractions of the digital world. I've had many students over the years express gratitude for this small respite from technology. All that said, if a student has an accommodation or specific learning need that requires a digital notebook, I would never force that student to use pen and paper.

When we begin our writer's notebook work early in the year, I tell students that the purpose of their writer's notebook is to explore their own ideas in a safe and uninhibited way. "The writing you do in your notebook is a conversation you have with yourself," I tell them. "It is not my position to intrude on that conversation unless you invite me into it." I never grade their notebooks. I understand that this isn't the practice of all teachers, and teachers need to do what works best for their students. Some teachers might wonder how I know students are "on task" if I don't check their notebooks: I often write when they write, modeling and sharing my own notebook work as well. But, when I'm not writing with them, I'm walking around the room as they write, my eyes skimming lightly over the pages. There is no mistaking students who are engaged in writing, heads bent over in thought, pencils scratching the page.

I start the year with frequent, low-stakes writing and sharing, such as asking students to choose one word or one sentence to share. I offer students opportunities to share their writing in small groups. Although I hope I can push them to share what they've written, I let students know they can also give a summary instead. I often let students choose their seats, so that the possibility of students sitting with peers they might trust to listen is, while not guaranteed, a little more likely. I encourage students to share not just what they are comfortable sharing, but "just beyond." When we push ourselves just slightly over our comfort zone, sharing gets a little easier each time. See specific prompts for notebook work in Chapter 3.

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If you are a teacher who collects students' notebooks with their personal writing, take a moment to reflect on your motivation for doing so. What is your purpose for having students write personally in their notebooks in the first place? Does collecting it from them (for "points," for example) undermine this purpose? What message does this send? What are your assumptions about student learning and accountability?

Respecting Students' Personal Stories (and Boundaries)

That said, only students know what's "just beyond" their comfort zone, and it will be different each time depending on what we're writing. It's a delicate balance, encouraging students to share but also respecting their boundaries, yet if there is ever a choice to be made between one or the other, it is always the latter. We have tremendous power as educators, which is complicated not just by the power we have over a student's grades, but also by factors that may include gender, class, and race. As educator Flecha (2018) reminds us,

> a teacher's role as their students' primary audience is complicated by their systemic and often, racialized power over a student's life. We work in a profession dominated by white women teaching black and brown children. Believing that this does not impact what students choose to tell their teachers, how teachers hear students, and how teachers respond to students' words is intensely, insultingly, dangerously naive.

What makes this work particularly difficult is that we may never fully know the full impact of our power as teachers on students. Even though I argue that our students need to feel welcome, safe, and seen, the truth is that I'm not sure that I, or any teacher, can guarantee our students' emotional safety. Even the most seemingly innocuous topic might be a sensitive one. While we might then be tempted to stay away from bringing the personal into the classroom and stick to "content only," we know that this would be futile; after all, any discussion of literature or current events can be fraught with the personal.

Instead, what we can and must do is build habits of writing and self-reflection that our students can use to help them grapple with and clarify their thinking, especially during times they might feel most vulnerable. It's when our students feel vulnerable that we can help them lean into that vulnerability and be brave—in their reading, writing, and thinking.

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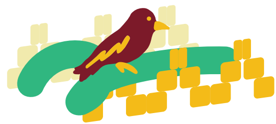

In 2018, the day after the Parkland High School mass shooting, the first and most important thing my students did in class that day was write in their notebooks. It was not a day to stick to the content; it was a day to write through their confusion, grief, and fear. And because students knew that their notebook pages could be the safe and brave space they needed, that's just what they did.

Read my reflection following the Parkland shooting tragedy.

Unfortunately, in the many tragedies and injustices students have witnessed—including the murder of George Floyd and the January 6 insurrection—our notebooks became the place where students could turn. In many ways, writing in our notebooks regularly became a type of preventative self-care routine that we could draw from when we needed it most.

For more guidance on teaching with a trauma-informed approach, consider Silvas's suggestions, summarized here:

1. **Class Declarations of Trust:** Create routines for listening and speaking that allow for a judgment-free community that allows students to be vulnerable on their own terms.
2. **Privacy and Security:** Respect student privacy while maintaining our role as professional, trusted, and mandated reporters.
3. **Choice:** Return power to students by allowing them as much choice as possible regarding how and when to write, respond, and share.

In addition, Figure 2.2 includes more considerations for trauma-informed practices as developed by Flecha.

FIGURE 2.2 TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING PRACTICES FOR PERSONAL NARRATIVES

DRAFTING (Generating Ideas)	PUBLISHING (Making Writing Public)
Prompting highly transitional children to quickly name people and places is daunting. • Tell students a day in advance that they will be brainstorming personal stories. • Try to center the classroom in your writing prompts. School is a common denominator among students. REVISION and EDITING When prompting narrative writing, we are not asking a student to relive an event once. Throughout revising and editing, students will experience that event again and again.	A child may be more comfortable sharing with you than with any of their classmates, let alone anyone outside of your classroom. Check in before . . . • Posting their writing on a bulletin board or online. • Sharing their writing with their families. • Asking them to read aloud. • Sharing with other teachers, administrators, or instructional coaches.

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BUILDING COMMUNITY ON THE FIRST AND EVERY DAY

We tend to think of community-building exercises as fun, get-to-know-you icebreakers we do for a few days at the beginning of each school year before we dive into "content." To be honest, this was my approach for many years. Instead, we need to think of community building as something we do every day: **every class period is an opportunity to strengthen the bonds between students—or weaken them.** While the strategies that follow are useful in building community at the start of the school year, they also become touchstones to facilitate continued learning for the rest of the year.

As you review these strategies, note that I do not necessarily do all of these within the first few days of school, but do try to use most of them within the first few weeks and revisit throughout the year.

"Getting to Know You" Name Tents

Nothing seems to start a relationship with students on the right foot more than just knowing their names; often students express surprise and smile a little wider when they see me make the effort. This was especially important when I taught ninth graders who were already panicked about navigating an unfamiliar space. It seems like such an obvious and simple thing to learn students' names—*and to pronounce them correctly*—but if there's anything worth prioritizing early in the year, it's this.

To get student names right, I have asked students to record themselves saying their name aloud using a simple app like FlipGrid or even using the audio recording feature in my school's learning management system. If I ever needed to check or double-check a pronunciation, especially a last name during parent-teacher conferences, I then had these recordings as reference. In addition, a link to these recordings can also be provided with a class list to make sure that substitute teachers had access to the correct pronunciation of student names. As someone whose former last name was Bagamasbad, I would have appreciated this extra care when a substitute teacher called my name out in class.

I've had students make name tents for years and they are still the easiest and fastest way for me to learn student names, which comes in handy when you're teaching 125 students a year. Using a folded 8 ½ · 11-inch paper, students write their names—first names or nicknames—in big letters so that I can read it from across the room. I also ask students to write their name on both sides of the name tent so I, and their peers, can see it from multiple angles. Students also draw three to five pictures or words on the name tent to tell me and their classmates a little something about them. Students keep their name tents up during class. Whenever I call on them, I make it a practice to say their name

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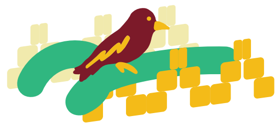

twice: once when I call on them and again when they are finished, and I thank them. I collect all name tents at the end of class. When students are writing in their notebooks at the start of class the next day, I use that time to individually match each student to their name tent.

Math teacher Sara Venderwerf helped me to take name tents a step further: following her lead, I include a chart like the one in Figure 2.3 inside the name tent. During the first week of school, I take two minutes at the end of each class for students to write down a note to me: an observation, question, small reflection, anything. I take them home each night and write a brief note back to each student (see Figure 2.4).

To be honest, I spend much of my prep periods that first week writing back to every student individually: even though my responses are usually no more than a sentence or two, responding to each student takes time, so I must prepare for all my classes ahead of time that week. It's been worth the payoff: I learn *so* much more about students and remember their names much more quickly than before I tried Sara's method. Then, after the first week of school, we move to end-of-the-week reflections in the form of Critical Incidents Questionnaires. (See page 84.)

FIGURE 2.3 "GETTING TO KNOW YOU" NAME TENTS

It's back-to-school time! At the end of each class this week, feel free to write me a brief note to let me know how things are going, if you have any questions, if you just want to share something about yourself or if there is just anything I should know.

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Student:	*Student:*	*Student:*	*Student:*	*Student:*
Teacher:	*Teacher:*	*Teacher:*	*Teacher:*	*Teacher:*

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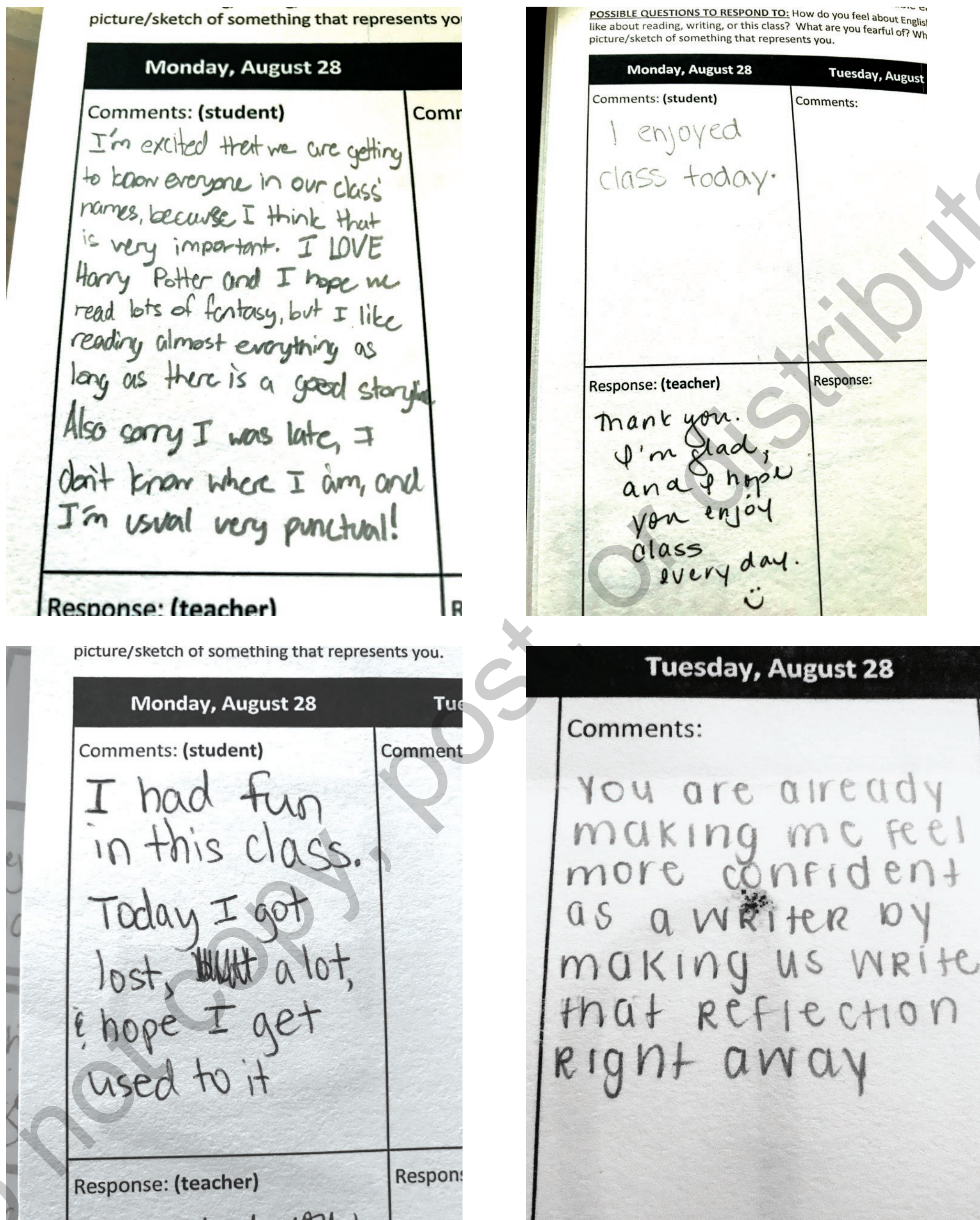
FIGURE 2.4 "GETTING TO KNOW YOU" NAME TENTS



Because of the open-ended nature of the prompt, students' responses to the name tents vary—but, in a way, that is exactly the point of the name tents. They provide a small opportunity for students to know their voices are heard in the opening days of school. Some students, like the one on the left, were open and revealed many interests over the course of the week, while others, like the one on the right, weren't sure what to say, which is okay, too. My hope is to open the doors in those opening days for students to share whatever they are willing.

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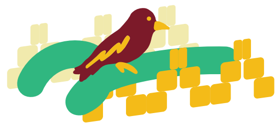

Interview Activity

A few years ago, I realized that many of my students still didn't know each other's names several months into the school year. So I made it a priority to make sure that students learned each other's names and a little bit about each other as quickly as possible from day one.

On the second or third day of school, I pass out a sheet with a long list of interview questions, enough for every student in the class. The questions, as you can see in Figure 2.5, vary from your typical ice breaker question—what's your favorite flavor of ice cream?—to deeper, more thought-provoking questions—why do you think people are mean to one another? And of course, these questions can and should be adapted to suit the needs of your own students.

Because it is the beginning of the school year, as we looked at earlier in this chapter, it's critical that our questions do not ask students to disclose overly personal information—or at the very least, that our questions are open-ended enough so that students can reveal as little or as much as they like in ways that feel safest for them. While we cannot know everything about our students, especially at the start of the year, consider your student population and community and use that knowledge to inform the questions you decide to use.

Many teachers also use similar "getting to know you" questions in surveys they ask students to complete at the beginning of the year. I did this as well, although I shifted to exchanging letters with students instead (see page XX). Although surveys for the teacher are generally more private than interactive activities like the identity inventory mentioned here, we still need to be sensitive about the questions we ask. Author of *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education*, Alex S. Venet has a very useful set of guidelines for teachers to consider before asking students to share personal information at the start of the year (or really, at any time of the year). Venet cautions against asking students for information that teachers are unprepared to handle. Instead, she recommends that instead of asking students to disclose what they wish teachers knew, we can ask students what they wish their teachers would *do*. Read more of Venet's suggestions at the QR code provided.

Read Alex Venet's "What I Wish Teachers Knew About 'What I Wish Teachers Knew'"

Next, I assign each student a number, which then corresponds to the interview question that they will be charged with asking all the other students in the class. I've found that it takes about as many minutes as students in the class—twenty minutes for a class of twenty to twenty-four students—for students to have enough time to interview each other. When they're finished, each student will have a data sheet comprised of every classmate's answer to their question.

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After students take a few minutes to look at their data, I ask them if they notice any surprising or notable patterns. Students share their findings with each other, either through whole group discussion or in small groups using a discussion protocol for turning and talking (see chapter 4, "Listening and Speaking: Critical Conversations").

For an extension of this activity, I have also asked students to create a visual representation of their data (Figure 2.6) which we can post and refer back to in later units (this is especially useful when we begin discussion of what it means to have an "American" identity when I teach American literature).

FIGURE 2.5 INTERVIEW ACTIVITY

1. If you were given a lifetime supply of one kind of food, what would it be?
2. What was your favorite TV show as a little kid?
3. What is one of your goals for the new school year?
4. If you could wake up tomorrow having gained a new ability or skill (not superhero), what would it be?
5. What is a movie you've seen (not necessarily in theaters)?
6. What is the last song you listened to?
7. What do you believe is the most important job in the world?
8. How do you spend a typical Saturday?
9. Who is a person that you know in real life that you admire and why?
10. If you were given the power, what is a new law that you would create for the country?
11. If you could add any class/subject to the school curriculum, what would it be?
12. What do you believe is the number one reason that people are mean to each other?
13. What is the most important quality that you look for in a friend?
14. What is an interesting or unique thing about your family?
15. What is a phobia of yours?
16. Do you identify with a culture or ethnic heritage, and if so, what?
17. If you could get everyone in the world to do one thing, what would it be?
18. If you could be any fictional character, who would you be?
19. What is something that you are really good at?
20. What is the first book you remember reading?
21. What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?
22. What is your dream vacation?
23. If you could live in any type of house, what would it be?
24. If you were going to donate money to a charity or cause, which one and why?
25. If you could live in any other historical time period, what would it be and why?
26. What is your favorite holiday and why?
27. What superhero would you most like to be and why?
28. If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
29. What is a word that has always sounded funny to you?
30. What is your favorite word?

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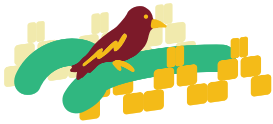
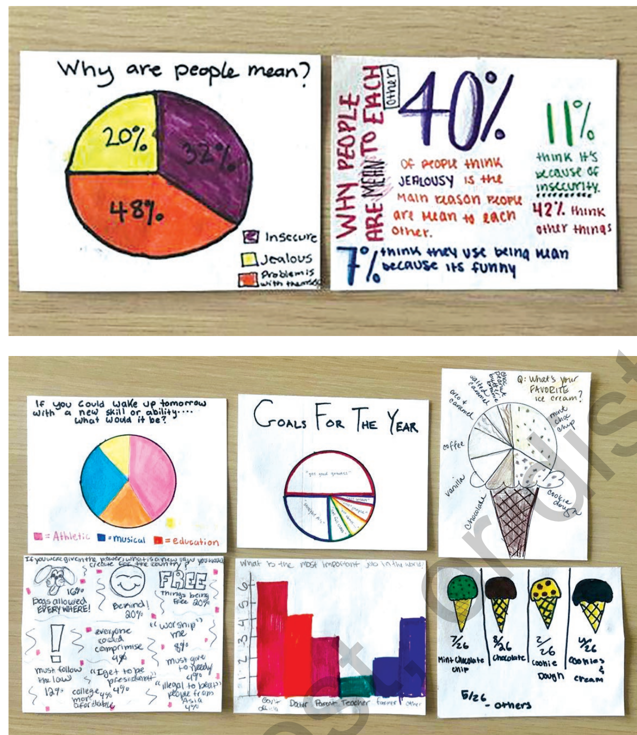


FIGURE 2.6 INTERVIEW ACTIVITY INFOGRAPHICS



Although this activity has already accomplished quite a bit—it's given each student a unique role and an opportunity to connect with every other student in the class—the key here is the *reflection* I ask students to engage in toward the end. Specifically, I ask students to reflect a little more deeply on what the information we've found might say about us as individuals and as a class. In this way, we're opening up discussions about identity and what it is that makes us who we are. Below are some of the questions I ask students to reflect upon in writing and discussion. These questions, especially the last one, can serve as the seeds for longer narrative writing later.

- Which questions do you feel best represent who you are as an individual person? Why?
- Which questions do you think least represent who you are? Why? What's the difference between these questions and the previous?
- What does this information about each other tell us? Can we draw any conclusions about us as individuals or as a class?

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- If we really wanted to get a sense of who we are as individuals or as a group, are there any questions that are missing? Which ones? What could they tell us about ourselves and each other?
- Choose a question that resonated with you. What memories or stories come to mind? Why might this story be important to you? How does this story help you to better understand yourself?

Interview Activity—Jenga Edition

I can't emphasize enough how critical it's been in my own classroom to give students time to get to know each other and opportunities to ask each other low-stakes but potentially meaningful questions. (This need for structured social interaction and play has become even more evident since the pandemic.)

Another way I use the interview questions from Figure 2.5 is by having students play Jenga in small groups of three to four students per group. Each Jenga piece corresponds to one of the interview questions (Figure 2.7); each time a student pulls a Jenga piece from the tower, they have to answer that question and then ask their teammates to do the same. While I tell students that the "competition" is to see which group can build the tallest tower within a time limit, I know that my goal is to have students get to know each other.

As with the previous interview activity, the most meaningful part of the process is in the *reflection* we do afterwards. This time, our reflection questions are focused on the team dynamic that emerged during the activity:

- How did it feel to play this game? Why?
- What made your team successful? Why?
- What challenges did your team have? How did you approach them?
- When did you feel most supported by your team? How did you support your team?
- What can we learn from this activity in terms of what we want from each other in our class this year?

In our debrief, students almost always comment on how good it felt to cheer each other on, and in turn, how good it felt to be supported by their classmates. Every time I've walked around the room, I see kids encouraging each other and celebrating when their teammate takes a turn without tipping over the Jenga tower. Because they often might not even notice that they're doing this, I make sure to notice and name this for students. One year, "be a builder" became a mantra in one of my classes, a shorthand for whenever students wanted to playfully remind each other to be supportive of each other.

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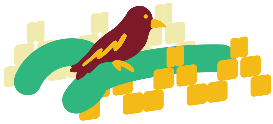
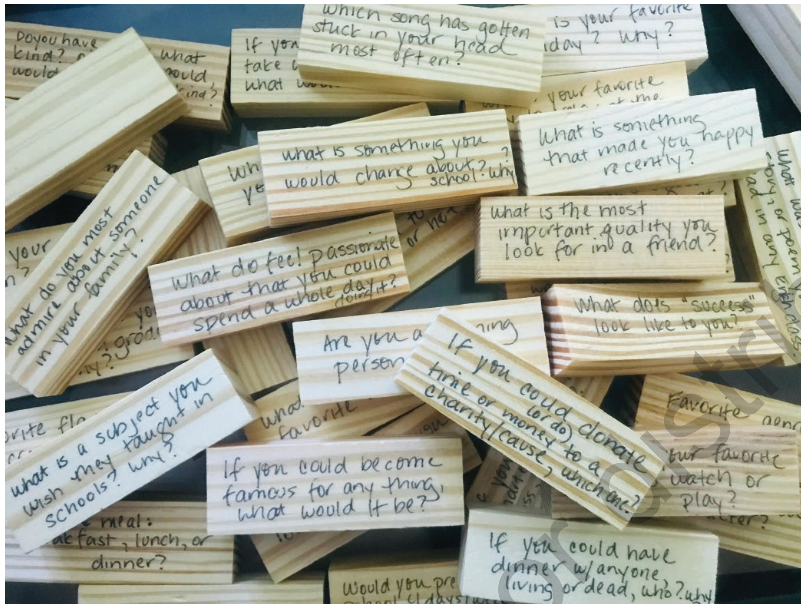


FIGURE 2.7 INTERVIEW ACTIVITY—JENGA EDITION



My first Jenga blocks are pictured here. Immediately after writing on two hundred blocks, I realized I could simply number the blocks and have the numbers correspond to a handout with numbered questions. In this way, I could easily adapt the activity for different sets of questions, as I did later with discussion questions about something we were studying or review questions related to a unit.

Shared Reading

As many elementary teachers know, a shared read-aloud can be an effective way to set a positive and welcoming tone in the beginning of the school year. For many years, the first shared read-aloud in my class was the course syllabus. I would pass out the copies of the syllabus and highlight the most important points, often to a room of blank or confused expressions staring back at me. This did little to set a positive and welcoming tone.

While it's no doubt important to establish expectations for the course, building a sense of community—finding ways to communicate to students that they are seen and valued—is perhaps the most important thing and, really, the only thing we need to do in those opening days. Reading off a list of rules on the opening day also sends students the message about whose voice is valued (the teacher's) and establishes a power dynamic that prioritizes what a teacher wants versus what students need. Consider the difference between a teacher reading a syllabus and teachers and students unpacking a shared reading: **the former tells students, *I will tell you what we will do* while the latter communicates, *Let's read and learn about something together.***

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Two shared texts that I've found particularly useful in my classroom are Clint Smith's TED Talk, "The Danger of Silence," and Dr. Margaret Wheatley's essay, "Willing to be Disturbed." Because we will likely discuss some contentious or controversial issues over the year, I begin with both of these texts as a way to remind students to keep an open mind when engaging critically in issues with multiple perspectives.

"The Danger of Silence"

In Smith's TED Talk, he outlines four core principles for students that he believes are necessary in today's world:

Watch Clint Smith's TED Talk, "The Danger of Silence"

1. Read critically.
2. Write consciously.
3. Speak clearly.
4. Tell your truth.

We watch the TED Talk in class and then discuss these principles. I ask students to write individually about what they think each of these principles mean. We then compile our ideas using sticky notes and large poster paper for each principle (Figure 2.8). After a gallery walk to view the posters, students return to their seats to write again; this time, I ask them to reflect on what they've read and to write a personal commitment to themselves about how they might abide by these principles. I also post these four principles on the wall in my classroom so that we can return to them throughout the year.

"Willing to be Disturbed"

In this essay, Dr. Wheatley argues that in order to foster a more civil discourse in our society, we need to start from the position of being open to being disturbed—in other words, to listen to the opinions of others with whom we disagree, even profoundly.

Read Margaret Wheatley's "Willing to be Disturbed"

Before we read the essay, I first ask students to consider the denotations and connotations of the word *disturbed*. We brainstorm synonyms, and as you might expect, most students conclude that the word is negative, especially in the contexts that are most familiar to them such as "disturbing the peace" or "mentally disturbed." We discuss how each of these instances prioritizes maintaining the status quo or what is considered "normal." I then ask students to consider contexts or situations that might need to be disturbed: When might the status quo be harmful? When is disturbing the peace necessary? Why?

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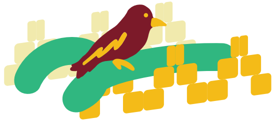

FIGURE 2.8 GUIDING PRINCIPLES FROM SHARED READING

Read critically.

Write Consciously.

Speak clearly.

Tell your truth.

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We then read aloud Dr. Wheatley's essay as a class, with every student reading one sentence at a time. This shared experience not only allows all student voices to be heard, but my hope is that by reading the words aloud, students may begin to internalize some of its key points. Students read it a second time quietly to themselves, this time marking the text for the lines that stood out to them as particularly powerful. Each student shares one line they found powerful so that we are able to hear what has resonated. Here are just a few of the lines that students often choose:

> Curiosity is what we need.
>
> We do need to acknowledge that their way of interpreting the world might be essential to our survival.
>
> When so many interpretations are available, I can't understand why we would be satisfied with superficial conversations where we pretend to agree with one another.
>
> But when I notice what surprises me, I'm able to see my own views more dearly, including my beliefs and assumptions.
>
> When I hear myself saying, "How could anyone believe something like that?" a light comes on for me to see my own beliefs.
>
> But the greatest benefit of all is that listening moves us closer.
>
> We can't be creative if we refuse to be confused.

The beauty of using a shared text like "Willing to be Disturbed" and "The Danger of Silence" is that they become touchstones that we can return to throughout the year. For example, when passions run high and discussions become heated about particular topics (which they sometimes will), I remind students of these texts and our shared understanding that we need to be "willing to be disturbed" if we are to "read critically, write consciously, speak clearly, and tell our truth."

Picture Books

I love using picture books, even with my oldest learners (who I found to love being read to!). One way I've used picture books is to retype the words from the book into a document and present the words without telling students that the words are from a picture book. Depending on the picture book, the words create a poem, but other times, the words create a short story. Students read and annotate, engaging with the meaning of the words first. Sometimes I'll ask students to draw a picture next to the words. Finally, after we've engaged with the words first, I reveal and read aloud the picture book (if you have enough

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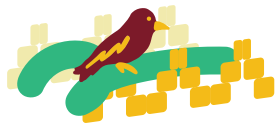

copies of the book, students can read the picture book to each other in small groups). Engaging with the picture book in this way allows students to put aside any biases they might have about picture books being for "little kids" and to encourage them to see the beauty in the art and complexity of the message found in such books.

Three picture books that work particularly well to build community and affirm students' identities, especially at the start of the school year, are listed in Figure 2.9. What's particularly beautiful about these picture books is that they each lend themselves to deeper layers of meaning for older students.

What other types of read-alouds can middle and high school teachers use? Consider the type of community you want to build in your classroom and the issues or content you'll discuss. What attitudes or dispositions will be necessary for students to be prepared to engage in those

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FIGURE 2.9 PICTURE BOOKS FOR SHARED READING AND COMMUNITY

TITLE AND AUTHOR	STRUCTURE/ GENRE OF PROSE	THEME(S)
Patchwork, written by Matt de la Peña and illustrated by Corinna Luyken	Poem	Affirmation of different identities; Recognition of all the possible ways that identities can shift, change, and grow over time; Difference between social and personal identities
Where Are You From? written by Yamile Saied Méndez and illustrated by Jaime Kim	Poem	Affirmation of complex cultural/racial identities and lived experiences; Family relationships; Opportunity to discuss microaggressions around a person's name and identity *This title would work very well in a text set alongside George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From," as well as Renee Watson's version, along with Gary R. Gray's picture book *I'm From*, illustrated by Oge Mora.
Your Name is a Song written by Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow and illustrated by Luisa Uribe	Short story	Family relationships; Microaggressions; Diversity of the history and cultural backgrounds of names and relationship to identity *This text would also pair well with Sandra Cisneros' short story, "My Name," from *A House on Mango Street*, as well as the spoken word poem, "Unforgettable" by Elizabeth Acevedo, Pages Matam, and George Yamazawa.

conversations? Is there a line of inquiry or essential question that drives the course you're teaching? Then find a brief text—something that can be unpacked during a single class period or two, such as a poem, video, or even a piece of art—that invites students to think about these ideas and their application to learning. I've often used the true story of a group of kids in southern Thailand, who worked together to create a football pitch in the midst of their floating village.

Video of the 1986 Thai Football Team who created their own pitch and made a difference for the community

Class Agreements

Even though class agreements seem to be more the domain of younger grades, the truth is that all kids, no matter the age, can benefit from learning in a community where our values, beliefs, and hopes for the class are explicitly shared. I follow up our shared reading

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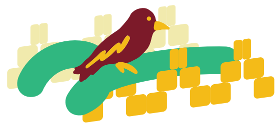

of "Willing to be Disturbed" and "The Danger of Silence" with a discussion of classroom community: what do we all need in order to be successful as a class? Below are some prompts I've used to get kids thinking and talking about what they want from and can contribute to our class community.

- In this class and in the world, I want to be a person who . . .
- In this class, I need others to . . .
- Mrs. Ebarvia can help me be successful by . . .
- To show others respect and kindness, I will . . .
- This year, I commit to . . .

I usually project the prompts one-by-one to the board and ask students to write their response to each prompt on a separate sticky note. I also take each prompt and copy them onto large chart paper and hang them around the room to create different "stations." After writing to each prompt at their desks, they post their sticky note onto the corresponding chart paper. I then assign groups of students to each station question where they read all the sticky notes. They discuss patterns in what they see and then report out to the class what they've learned.

In her book, *Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education*, Venet (2021) reminds us of one agreement—a nonnegotiable—that we should hold ourselves to as teachers: unconditional positive regard. Venet writes, "The message of unconditional positive regard is, 'I care about you. You have value. You don't have to do anything to prove it to me, and nothing's going to change my mind.'" While we might have deeply meaningful conversations about class agreements, none of this matters if we don't hold this basic agreement at the forefront of every interaction we have with our students. We can actively resist the capitalist equation that measures a person's worth by what they contribute to a society by telling students, every day, that they have value regardless of what they do or don't do, what they produce or don't produce—that they have value, intrinsically as a human being, full-stop and period.

This debriefing time is critical. We talk about what conditions in the classroom would be necessary to make sure that students make class productive for both themselves and others. Students' answers will vary from year to year, but in our debriefing, I also make sure that I point out a few key conditions that I think will also be critical for our class, especially when unpacking what it means "to show others respect and kindness." I borrowed and adapted these conditions from a Learning for Justice workshop I attended in 2018 and have found that while

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students' responses will reflect some of these, the specificity of this language helps clarify their thinking:

1. Use and receive "I" statements with respect.
2. Respect confidentiality.
3. Embrace messiness and kindness.
4. Practice accountability (intent v. impact)
5. Be aware of equity of voice (move up, move down)

In my experience, talking through the difference between intent and impact has been the most useful in terms of being able to return to this agreement later in the year when someone in class inevitably says something that might be negatively received, even if there was no ill intention. And so not only does this class agreements activity begin to build community, it also serves as a scaffold for the type of perspective work we will be doing the entire year. As you'll see in later chapters, students will return to similar protocols to unpack and discuss more controversial issues. Building in small but intentional opportunities to ask students to 1) reflect individually, 2) consider other perspectives, and 3) come to consensus is the foundation of creating a thoughtful and informed habit of thinking.

Show and Tell

"Show and Tell" has long been a staple among elementary classrooms, and so perhaps because of this, when I tell my high school students to bring in a meaningful object for our own class "show and tell," a tangible childlike joy erupts in the room.

My directions are simple: Bring in a meaningful object. Be prepared to share a story and tell us why this object is important to you. On "Show and Tell" day, students take no more than sixty seconds each to tell the class about their object. Although students will often complain that there isn't enough time to share, I tell students that the time limit is to ensure that all voices are heard during class and all students have equal time to share. Without the time limit, what often happens in situations like this is that some students will take several minutes to share while others say very little. Limiting the time also encourages students to focus on the most important details (a skill that will come in handy in their writing later in the year).

When everyone is finished, I then have students write down the names of all the students in the class in their notebooks and the object that they each brought in. In high school, I often find that students may not know the names of their peers, even several weeks or even months into the school year, even if they've been in the same class. Because it's

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critical to civil discourse that students know one another, experiences like this and simple acts like writing each other's names can be powerful steps in setting a foundation for real dialogue.

Together, learning each other's names and listening to the stories behind each other's objects helps to build community in ways that are often more powerful than I ever anticipated. Students often recall each other's objects and stories even several months later. Furthermore, this "Show and Tell" activity also leads into a longer piece of writing focused on their object as students unpack the reasons this object might carry so much personal significance for them. I have had students write about a family heirloom, their favorite pen, and a baseball. One of the most memorable essays a student shared in class described the collar their childhood dog had worn. Sometimes, these personal essays even become the foundation for students' college essays. But more than anything, these essays are an opportunity for students to share a small part of themselves in a concrete way. It's hard to be vulnerable and share what's inside to the outside world. But by focusing on just *one small thing,* we can begin.

Letter Writing

Although it seems obvious, we can't underestimate the value of getting to know our students. The first writing "assignment" I often give students is an invitation to write me a letter. I try to leave the instructions as open-ended as possible so that students can tell me anything that they feel comfortable sharing. That said, I also tell students to consider sharing with me anything that they think might be useful for me to know as their teacher: their attitudes and experiences with reading or writing, their past experiences in English class that may inform how I can best support their success this year.

I also write and read aloud my own letter to students (see Figure 2.10) so that I can model what being vulnerable might look and sound like. And yes, while these letters might serve as a writing sample, the value in them is in what they tell me about my students as individuals. I do not grade or evaluate these letters. If I am asking students to share with me who they are as a way to make them feel welcomed, safe, and seen, then taking points off for any reason can only be counterproductive. The purpose, I share with students, is for them to tell me about themselves, and with that in mind, a grade is neither necessary nor warranted.

Later in the year, we revisit letter writing as a wonderful tool to have students respond to texts and to reflect on their own identities and stances as readers and human beings (see Chapter 3).

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FIGURE 2.10 LETTER TO STUDENTS

August 31, 2018

Dear 10th graders,

One question that I often get from students is why I decided to become a teacher. I'm not sure, but I think kids ask this question because maybe you're at a place in your life where you're starting to wonder what you'll do with your own, what college you'll go to and what you might want to study. Why do people choose the careers they choose? How do people end up as teachers, accountants, doctors, businesspeople, sales workers?

My answer to the question is complicated. The truth is, I never thought I'd be a teacher. Growing up, I was intensely quiet and shy. When I was in kindergarten, I remember days that I would refuse to go to school and my mom had to drag me there. Later, and throughout school, I was the type of student who could go an entire year without saying a single word in class. I would have been horrified to have a teacher call on me and I rarely, if ever, volunteered to speak. That said, I was always engaged in class, and I loved listening to what other people had to say—but I could never get my own words right. So I made up for not speaking in class by doing all my work and making sure that my writing could convey in words what I couldn't in speech.

Things changed when I got to college, mostly because I forced myself to change. Being away from home for the first time was one of the most terrifying experiences I'd had. And because I knew how hard it was for me to speak up in class, I made a rule for myself: no matter how difficult, I was going to ask or answer a question within the first week of any class I was in. I realized that the longer I went without speaking, the harder it became to speak. I also sat close to the front so I couldn't disappear. I had to be deliberate and intentional about making myself change. Sometimes my questions would be something simple, like when an assignment was due. But eventually these easy questions made asking the harder ones a little more manageable.

And now, many years later, I stand in front of a room full of teenagers and talk all day. If you told my high school self that this is where I'd end up, I would have never believed you.

But I think the real reason I became a teacher is because I wanted to do something with my life that mattered.

My first career choice was to be a doctor, and that's what I had told my family and friends my entire life. I wanted to be a doctor because I thought it was the best thing I could be—the thing that would make my parents most proud. Because my parents emigrated here from the Philippines and made many sacrifices for me and my brother, I thought that being a doctor was a way to show them that their sacrifices were worth it because their daughter had "made" it. But in college I quickly realized that I didn't actually like science very much.

Then I took a class on the history of public schooling in the U.S. and I realized that one of the most powerful ways we can perhaps change society is through schools—it's in school that we develop different ways of thinking. When it's working at its best, school doesn't just prepare kids for the world; it prepares kids to change it. That's work that I wanted to do. And because English was my favorite subject—and I have always believed in the power of reading and writing—I became an English teacher.

When I'm not teaching, I'm spending time with my family. I have three boys, and as they grow up, I've come to appreciate how important it is to spend family time together because, like all of you, they will soon be out of the house and in the world. So while I love teaching, I have been making a more focused effort in recent years to have a better work-life balance so that I can spend time with my kids, my husband, and my parents, who are getting older each day, which reminds me that our time, too, is limited. With this in mind, I invite you, too, to think about your own relationships with your family and how you might make the most of your time with those you love. School and work are important, no doubt, but I really believe that the real meaning of life comes down to the people we choose to spend our time with.

Even if English isn't your favorite subject, I hope that over the next 180 days we can talk about things that matter, that we can approach every class with an open mind and just ask ourselves, what can we learn today? And if you take nothing else from this letter, remember this: I am someone here to help. I see you, I care, and if there's anything I can do to help, my door is open.

Happy reading,

Mrs. Ebarvia

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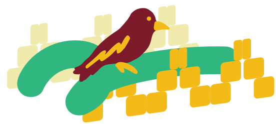

Critical Incidents Questionnaire (CIQ)

I began using Critical Incidents Questionnaires (CIQs) a few years ago after reading about them in Brookfield's (2012) *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions*. Essentially, a CIQ is a brief five-question instrument that Brookfield, a college professor, has used to get feedback from his students about their learning and his instruction. Although Brookfield collects feedback from the CIQ anonymously, I use the five questions as reflection questions for students at the end of each week. Using my district's online learning management system (Schoology), I set up a private discussion board for each of my students that only I and the student could view and comment on, posting the questions as the standing prompt for each week (Figure 2.11).

At the end of the week, students took five minutes to open up their discussion board and answer one of the five questions. I read all the responses over the course of the following week. It would be nearly impossible for me to respond to each of them more than about once a month. In this way, each student's discussion board serves as a record of their own learning and also allows me to communicate with each student in one place throughout the year.

FIGURE 2.11 CRITICAL INCIDENTS QUESTIONNAIRE (CIQ)

REFLECTION & DIALOGUE

How's it going?

"We do not learn from experience . . . we learn from *reflecting* on experience." - John Dewey

Please take a few minutes to reflect on your learning in English class and let me know how things are going. The goal of this space is to capture your thinking about yourself as a learner and thinker - and in what ways your thinking has changed over time depending on what we're doing in class as readers and writers.

Please answer at least one of the following questions (feel free to answer more than one) for your reflection. You are also welcome to add any additional thoughts, questions, etc.

- At what moment were you most **engaged** as a learner? Could you explain?
- At what moment were you most **distanced** as a learner? Why do you think that was the case?
- Think about what we (teacher & fellow classmates) did in the class this week. **What did someone do or say that you found most helpful? Why?**
- Think about what we (teacher & fellow classmates) did in the class this week. **What conversations or actions left you wondering or confused? Could you explain why?**
- In what ways do you think you **grew** this week as a **reader, writer, thinker**? What caused that growth? What did you read, write, think?

adapted from Stephen D. Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) @triciaebarvia

Adapted from Brookfield (2012)

For me, the feedback from the weekly CIQs allows me to adjust instruction as needed and gives me insight into how each student learns. That said, perhaps the most valuable part of the CIQ process is the way it asks students to reflect on their own learning. It's this metacognitive

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element that serves as an important building block for the deep self-reflection that will be needed when students are asked to tackle more difficult conversations throughout the year. In addition, when dealing with those more difficult topics, this reflection space gives students an opportunity to share what they might be thinking but are afraid to voice in class.

Notice and Appreciate (NAPs)

While a CIQ reflection is a way for teachers to get ongoing feedback on a one-on-one basis, NAPs (Notice and Appreciate) provide students with an opportunity to provide notes of affirmation to each other throughout the year. NAPs are simple: Students are asked to notice and appreciate something that a peer has done in class. In the examples in Figure 2.12, students submitted NAPs after reading their fellow classmates' weekly blog post entries. After collecting their NAPs in a Google form, I shared the affirmations in a digital form such as those seen here.

Making a habit of noticing and appreciating how others contribute to the classroom community and to each other's learning isn't just a "feel good" exercise, although even if it were, that alone is worth the effort. When students know that noticing and appreciating each other's contribution is a *norm* in how we treat one another, they build pro-social habits that strengthen their ability to form community connections and relationships.

FIGURE 2.12 NOTICE AND APPRECIATE (NAPS)

On Jen's "On Losing a Best Friend"

I really appreciate how raw the emotions she expressed in this piece. It was a very courageous thing to write about but the way that she wrote it in second person was very powerful. She captured the audience from the very beginning and the flow of the piece was just so well done. The word choice was astounding and I could really relate to the piece, as I'm sure many others have with going through a breakup. I am impressed by her bravery to come to terms with what happened and write about it—I could never do that.

(Continued)

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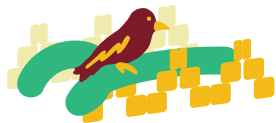

(Continued)

On Amy's "On Pledging Your Soul"

I found the post (all too) relatable, since I've been guilty of ignoring the pledge most days in homeroom and never really thought about it until now. Now, I don't think that not enthusiastically reciting the pledge every morning means you hate America, but maybe we should all pay more attention to what we take for granted everyday.

I also liked the way the beginning and ending were tied together around one experience.

A STRONG FOUNDATION

When my husband and I were looking for our first home, we looked at many older homes in our area since new construction was, to be honest, out of our price range. And as any homeowner knows, the older the home, the more TLC it often needs. One piece of advice we got from many of our friends and family was to look for a house that had "good bones"—in other words, a house that had structural integrity, one that had a strong foundation from which we could build and remodel as needed.

Students don't get to choose their teachers, but they do look to see if our classrooms have "good bones." The work we do as teachers to build a strong foundation based on trust, vulnerability, and bravery in our own classrooms can create a powerful space for them—a place for their learning to not only thrive, but also where their identities and the perspectives of all can be respected and honored.

My hope is that the community building activities we do at the start and throughout the year serve as the "good bones" that we need to rely on when our discussions don't go as planned, when disagreements about what we're reading and studying might get heated, when one of us doesn't show up as their best self that day. One day, as I was cleaning up the supply caddies I had stationed at each group of desks, I noticed that several caddies included little notes students had written for each other—and not just for each other, but for the students they knew who would be sitting in their desks the following class period (see Figure 2.13). While the notes might be dismissed as doodling, I knew these notes meant more than that.

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And it was a beautiful reminder that sometimes a community is built and rebuilt one post-it note at a time.

FIGURE 2.13 SMALL GIFTS MADE POSSIBLE BY COMMUNITY

Sometimes the best feedback that I can get about how students are feeling in my classroom space are in the notes they leave behind. Students began using the post-it notes in their supply bin to leave notes for students in other class periods. It's small, unexpected but genuine gestures of kindness like these that matter. However, while these unscripted moments of community are revealing, I must also always push myself to look for the moments in my classroom where this type of community is *not* happening—and that means working persistently to check in with students and build time for the types of reading, writing, and sharing that allow students to feel welcome and seen.

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How can we *get free* through **our identities?**

As we saw in Chapter 1, understanding how our own personal and social identities inform the way we navigate the world (and our classrooms) is critical in antibias education. The better we know ourselves—and where our biases reside and hide—the better equipped we are to practice a "liberatory consciousness," one that enables us "to live 'outside' the patterns of thought and behavior learned through the socialization process that helps to perpetuate oppressive system" (Love, 2018).

A first and critical step toward developing a liberatory consciousness is **awareness**, which Dr. Love describes as the "capacity to notice, to give attention to our daily lives, our language, our behaviors and even our thoughts. It means making the decision to live our lives from a waking position." As our students become more aware of their own identities and experiences, we can encourage them to move toward Dr. Love's next step, which is **analysis**, where students theorize and make sense of what they notice, why, and what can be done.

In the previous chapter, we looked at how authentic community is the foundation for relationship building and creates the brave space students need to engage with antibias work. In this chapter, we'll explore some experiences teachers can facilitate in our classrooms that raise students' capacity to become aware and analyze how the beautiful complexities (and sometimes messiness) of who they are can be liberating.

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