

# Demystifying the “Safe Space”

How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom



BY MATTHEW R. KAY

The first, and ultimately most important, magical concept to be demystified is the *safe space*. Among progressive educators, no goal is more holy. In each classroom, students are to feel comfortable enough with their various identities to be honest, open, and vulnerable. Conveniently alliterative, the term *safe space* captures our best dreams of what classrooms can be: havens; calm harbors; shelter from our students' stormy home lives, neighborhood violence, or school drama. The dream is so powerful that naming it has become a staple of our introductory spiel.

“My name is Mr. Kay, and I want you to consider this classroom a *safe space*.”

This assertion is offered with a magician's *Voilà!*—*I have said it, therefore it is so*. And with these magic words, bullies are tamed and introverts peek from their shells. We are suddenly ready to lead conversations about sensitive topics, because our students are magically now eager to take risks. If, over the course of the year, they forget our first-day pronouncement, we eagerly remind them: *Remember, everyone, this is a safe space*.

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In order to nurture hard conversations about race, first we must commit to *building* conversational safe spaces, not merely *declaring* them. The foundation of such spaces is listening. When facilitating professional development sessions, I often ask teachers to describe a moment when they felt truly listened to. How did they know that the listening was authentic? *Eye contact, patience, engagement, focus*. How did that moment make them feel? *Valued, important, safe*.

Without prompting, colleagues often share moments when they were not listened to, and how it made them feel. *Ignored, unimportant, unsafe*. It stands to reason, then, that we should create a culture of *listening*—an act that can be broken into discrete, practicable, and measurable skills.

This is the first of many times in my book, *Not Light, but Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*, from which this article is excerpted, where I offer an approach that is by no means a panacea. Teachers, as some of the most creative people on earth, can create listening activities that fit their own style and pedagogical vision. I share only what has worked for me, hoping simply to shift the *safe space* conversation from the realm of magical thinking to a more practical skills-based approach.

Before I do so, however, there is one key understanding: students and teachers might spend their entire lives learning how to listen. It is one of our hardest self-improvement missions, and can be the most costly—ask family and relationship counselors. We must understand this, and orient our approach to student discipline accordingly. Students learning how to listen to one another might show the same symptoms of those who are “being bad.” But when we manage both issues equally, we scuttle students' opportunities to develop key listening skills. We can no more punish our way into a conversational

safe space than we can conjure one from thin air—so we must instruct where we used to admonish, encourage where we used to excoriate, and carefully track what we used to ignore.

In my classroom, the conversational safe space is established with three discussion guidelines: listen patiently, listen actively, and police your voice. After their introduction, each is practiced explicitly over the first few weeks—a period of time that I like to think of as a conversational “training camp.” This camp works as an extended norming that I reference for the rest of the year.

### Listen Patiently

The more we care about a topic of conversation, the more we rush to speak. The less we care, the less we feel obligated to pay attention to conversational partners who do. In both instances, we often fail to show others that we are listening patiently to them. This display is important, as people cannot access your brain to measure your level of focus. Social cues are necessary to show people they have our attention.

Practicing this skill requires a shift. Normally, after a teacher calls on a student to speak, we give most of our attention to the respondent. We shift our attention away only when someone else calls out, or behaves in some way that we deem disrespectful. But to help students listen patiently, we must invest considerable focus on the students who are *not* speaking. And in doing so, offer some rules: First, *hands should not be raised while someone is still talking*. When a teacher calls on one student to speak, the rest of the hands in the room have to go down. Any student who does otherwise is communicating to everyone in the room that they don’t care about the person who is still talking. That raised (and sometimes waving) arm is saying, “I wish you would *shut up!* I have my own thing to say!” This behavior sparks an unnecessary rush for respondents, causing them to speak as if trying to squeeze comments in under the wire, before their teacher dumps them for the other raised hands.

Second, listening patiently means that students should never be interrupted. This is not new. Many teachers have variations of “one voice at a time.” The problem is that too many of us frame the rule as more disciplinary necessity than skill development. Students who have an impulse to interrupt each other care deeply

about what is being discussed—this is a win! Calling out signals impatience, not meanness. Something in the student’s brain is boiling, and the lid couldn’t hold it, but students must be taught that (1) their big *eureka* might be influenced by what is currently being said, and (2) patient listening is transactional—and when they speak, they will want their classmates to keep the lid on too. (This is more difficult when students come from environments that define safety as *students are quiet*. Dialogic classrooms offer so much new stimuli that it’s easy to get wired. Also, students might not trust that they’ll ever get a turn, so they try to squeeze their points in before the teacher shuts down the conversation.) We don’t interrupt for any reason, including affirmations and agreements, both of which still have the unintended effect of drawing focus from the speaker.

Beyond these nonnegotiable rules, there are countless suggestions. Try for eye contact. Try nodding. Try smiling. Try pursing your lips in thought. Students should reflect on what they appreciate from a listener and try to mimic those behaviors when someone else is speaking. Regardless of whether or not they are in doubt, they should ask each other if they feel “listened to.”

### Listen Actively

Each idea can inspire another, can inform, and can be the reason that no two classroom conversations are exactly the same. As such, ideas should not just be shared, but built on. In order to build, ideas must be actively collected before they dissipate. Toward this end, we must design structures that require students to engage each other’s ideas and listen actively. In my class, this means notebooks, where students are encouraged to write down classmates’ comments that intrigue them. Student teachers, or occasionally student volunteers, do the same on the whiteboard.

As teachers, we can offer just as much praise to students who thoughtfully build on classmates’ ideas as we offer to those who say cool things. In the early days of a school year, I like to follow the thread of a conversation, maybe even illustrate it on the board: “Joe said \_\_\_\_\_, which inspired Mike to tell this story, which Marcia thought related to this character in the play. After she made this connection, Tanya told us about this book she read that seems to back up Joe’s thesis. I love the way you all are building.” After a few examples of this, students find themselves eager to cite each other.

I teach them transitional language, my favorite being a simple, “Building on [classmate’s name]’s point ...” By the middle of the year, I can tell how well my students are listening actively by how often the comments appear daisy-chained together by citation. Of course, I must also model appreciation for the original speaker, working hard to extrapolate points they might not be clearly articulating. This type of synthesis and modeling does require a lot of mental energy from the teacher, but it’s work that transfers in a fairly short time.

### Police Your Voice

The focus shifts here, but still places listening at the forefront. If your classmates have to listen both patiently and actively to you, you must make it easier for them to do so by *policing your voice*. The teacher is no longer the prime audience, a fact that I make clear to students by pointing to their classmates and saying, “Speak to them.” Early on in the school year, I constantly nudge my students to turn their faces away from me when answering a question, look-



ing instead at peers. The reminder is gentle, and often excited, as if I am trying to say, *What you are saying is too good for just me to hear. Let's get everyone else in on this stuff!* Classmates are often surprised to have a speaker address comments to the larger group. Many perk up immediately because they are used to one-on-one student/teacher exchanges that they'd felt free to check out of. This encourages the golden moment: when a student, without teacher prompting, asks classmates for their opinions on an issue. Whenever I hear this, I know they are nearly ready to keep each other safe during meaningful race conversations.

The second part of policing your voice is understanding that students (and teachers) should speak succinctly. This means that, as a speaker, you are humbly aware of how much space you are taking up at any given moment. Class time is limited. Students should not speak forever; they should not repeat themselves or deliver sermonettes. Transgressions happen. Our students are young, impulsive, and, we hope, impassioned. But there are ways to redirect that build community and respect instead of just shutting kids down.

### House Talk

Students might not be as afraid to discuss race as we often make them out to be, but this does not mean that they are eager to do so with *us*. Consider the following: I run an afterschool poetry club. The first few minutes of every meeting are normally set aside for unstructured conversation because it gives exhausted students a chance to unwind after a long school day and to build community with each other. I sit with them but generally keep my mouth shut, unless I'm directly asked to participate.

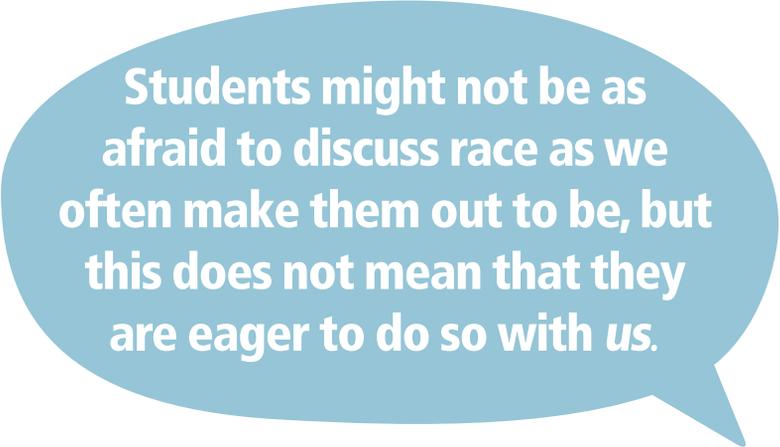
In the fall of 2014, one of these conversations took an intriguing turn. One student had just left a class where they'd discussed that summer's protests in Ferguson, Missouri, which flared after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, a young black man, by a white police officer, Darren Wilson. Apparently, one of her classmates had made a statement about the protesters that she'd found inappropriate. She became frustrated when her teacher didn't "step in," and she aired these grievances in poetry club. Her fellow poets shared similar stories, some dating back to middle school. Over the next few minutes, two camps formed: students annoyed about having to discuss the protests in a diverse environment, especially in conversations facilitated by white teachers, and students of all colors who were frustrated by the lack of Ferguson conversations in their classes.

I pointed out the obvious conundrum. I asked our young poets, *What's a white teacher to do?* According to these students, white teachers were supposed to avoid discussing the Ferguson protests with students of color—an act that opened them to harsh criticism from the same minority students they were trying not to offend. A poet in the latter camp shrugged, then explained that the protests were monopolizing their social media, which made images from Ferguson constantly top-of-mind. Their school subjects seemed trite by comparison, and they appreciated that their teachers wanted to directly address the elephant in the room.

A poet in the former camp offered a quick rebuttal to this cliché. "I don't want to talk about Ferguson with white people. No matter how liberal they are, it's still going to be just... academic for them. But it's our actual lives. We really have to be black when this stuff is going on. I don't have the energy to explain my emotions every time a teacher decides to talk about race." There was near-universal

agreement, and the implications of her comment were not lost on me. Listening, as emphasized in the last section, is already hard. But it takes even more effort to both listen *and* be heard when your conversational partners (or facilitators) don't have the same emotional sensitivities, investment, or cultural background. This exertion tempts minorities to just keep their mouths shut, rather than enter into exchanges that would otherwise sap their energy.

This debate, I told them, made me think of something. When I was growing up, my parents used the term *house talk* to label conversations that I was not to share with anyone else. This term implied that people outside of our family wouldn't understand, and involving them would annoyingly complicate things—or cause actual trouble. I asked this latter group of student-poets if they felt that race conversa-



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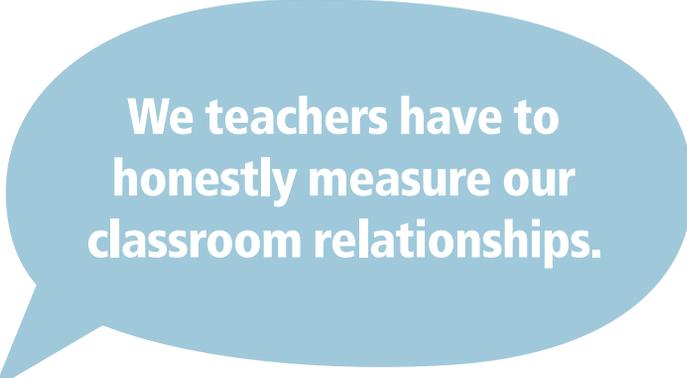
tions were better kept as house talk. When they agreed, I asked them to explain. Interestingly, a white poet spoke first, sharing that during such conversations, she was often wary of offending classmates of color—not because she disagreed with them, but because she wasn't always as articulate as she wanted to be. There seemed to be a thousand ways to be misinterpreted. Ask a question the wrong way and one might be chastised for one's ignorance. Disagree with a minor point, and one might be charged with leveling "microaggressions." Occasionally, it seemed that her expected job was only to absorb the anger and frustrations of her classmates.

One of their fellow poets, a black boy, answered this by sharing how he felt the need to soften such anger as to not offend well-meaning white classmates or teachers. After prodding, he admitted that he also was inclined to disguise his strong disinterest in the empathetic anger of white allies and pretend that it just doesn't frustrate him. At this, some admitted that, when tensions are highest—as they'd been during the height of the summer's protests—it's sometimes hard to look a white person in the face, even when that person is smiling.

This last bit was rough to hear, a brutal honesty that was followed by silence. As I figured out where to go next, a few parallels came to mind. First, I considered classroom conversations about street harassment. By the time many of my female students reach ninth grade, too many of them have been repeatedly called the foulest words in the ugliest manner possible by complete strangers. In my role as mentor, I rail against this and do my best to affirm my female students when I can. However, I am not a woman, and as such, I recognize that I might look and sound like the man who tried to touch them this morning on the way to school. It would

be hubris for me to expect every girl to feel comfortable sharing their anger, embarrassment, or shame with me. What is academic to me is visceral to them. At certain times, some would rather discuss their frustrations with a woman, who might better understand the violence of being objectified, the fear of late nights and lonely street corners. It's equally understandable if these girls don't want to deal with the annoyance of reassuring male classmates who might answer "Not All Men" to their protestations.

As the seconds ticked away, I thought about how often I had mis-handled conversations that I couldn't viscerally identify with. A few years earlier, I had been teaching Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*. For this unit, I'd wanted students to engage the countless propaganda tools used by Nazis during the Holocaust. Early in the text, the protagonist has to attend the BDM (the Hitler Youth for Girls), which inspired me to find out how adults tailored their propaganda to influence young girls. If I found primary sources, my students could then analyze their use of propaganda techniques. A quick Google search turned up a collection of anti-Semitic children's fables called *Der Giftpilz*, which begins with a famous story called "The Poisonous Mushroom." In the tale, Jewish citizens are compared to mushrooms that appear harmless, but are capable of killing little boys and girls who can't distinguish them from less evil vegetables.



We teachers have to honestly measure our classroom relationships.

I ordered it. For a teacher who had just spent a unit having students analyze and create allegories, it was a gold mine. Eighteen illustrated stories laying out the structure and intentions of anti-Semitism. When I showed it to my students, I haphazardly voiced my history-nerd enthusiasm. My exact words may have been, "This is a *beautiful* thing!" The kids giggled—all but one, Adam, who raised his hand to say, "Beautiful?" His great-grandparents, he told me, had escaped the Holocaust. I apologized immediately, though the import of my recklessness came at me in waves. How could I even make this mistake? I organize trips to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., every year, and I have invited survivors to talk to my classes. I make certain to frame our Holocaust studies around resistance so as to not make the genocide just about victimhood. Every step of the unit planning is thoughtful, meant to respect the varied humanity of everyone who experienced the era's trauma. Yet, I was still capable of such a terrific blunder, one that I would be considerably less likely to make if I were Jewish, and not merely a well-meaning black ally.

**I**n tough times, minority communities often believe that we're all we've got, so we more thoroughly invest in each other's well-being. Our struggles directly, and maybe even subconsciously, influence the language we use with each other. (This became

mortifyingly clear during the more publicized police shootings, as I noticed black students leaving each other with a handshake and a reminder to "stay safe.") With this in mind, it should be easy to understand why minority students might prefer to discuss racial issues only within an intimate community of shared experiences. However, daily cultural exchange with students from different races has duped many teachers into assuming an intimacy that does not exist. We reason that since students from different backgrounds are comfortable discussing occasional racial topics with us, they are automatically eager to join us in "unpacking" their deepest racial anxieties, anger, and confusion.

Yet there has always been a difference between collegial banter and house talk, between the water cooler and the dining-room table. It is dangerous to invite ourselves to the latter because we are tolerated at the former. We must, if we value our students' right to determine healthy relationships, never accept invitations unless they have been proffered. We must, through earnest humility, earn our seats. Just as we cannot conjure *safe spaces* from midair, we should not expect the familial intimacy, vulnerability, and forgiveness needed for meaningful race conversations to emerge from traditional classroom relationships.

To this point, we teachers have to honestly measure our classroom relationships. A good place to start is to reflect on our classrooms' stated and implied priorities. Familial intimacy depends on both parties feeling like a priority to the other. We do not tend to feel close to those who continually treat us like afterthoughts. To preserve our emotional well-being, healthy people draw specific parameters around these relationships, saving our vulnerability for those to whom we are the greatest priority. This extends to the classroom, where most students consider their teachers only tangentially invested in their lives beyond their academic performance. Traditional classroom conversations rarely trouble this perception, as most of the discourse is directly related to course content. Notre Dame's former vice president for public relations James W. Frick famously claimed, "Don't tell me what your priorities are. Tell me how you spend your money, and I'll tell you what they are." It is the same, with a slight variation, for teachers: allot more time for a particular activity, and that is what students will think you value most. By this reasonable metric, students generally understand our course content to be the most important subject in the room. So while students may believe that we mean them no active harm, and that we would generally prefer that they were happy, their personal lives rarely feel like a *priority*.

This is problematic when it comes to discussions of race, where teachers suddenly find themselves asking students to pry open wounds; be honest about fears, hopes, and anger; and mine their own lives instead of assigned texts for source material. Teachers here break a tacit agreement to keep our class conversations detached. This paradigm can be changed, but only through the effort and practice of building genuine *house talk* relationships.

We may not always be invited to engage in house talk, but our odds increase once we create an environment of humility and genuine interest in each other's lives and passions. This is the sort of real safe space I try to build in my classroom, a not-so-magical notion that has opened the door to rich and meaningful race conversations—and deep, empathetic learning. □