Can We Talk?

ENCOURAGING CONVERSATION IN HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Susanne Rubenstein

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NCTE Editorial Board

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Ah, good conversation—there's nothing like it, is there?
The air of ideas is the only air worth breathing.
—Edith Wharton

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Acknowledgments

This book is a thank you to every student who was brave enough to raise a hand, share a thought, and contribute to the conversation in our classroom. And it is an apology to every student who needed more of my encouragement to find the courage to speak.

To those whose conversation sustained me through the lonely months of the pandemic, thank you. Your voices, whether from across the kitchen table, the country road I live on, or the telephone line, took me out of myself and into another world, as all good conversation should do. Those days reminded me just how much we all need the connection and comfort of conversation, and how lucky we are when together we find those moments when we can talk.

Introduction

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Give me the gift of a listening heart.

—*King Solomon*

When I begin a book, the introduction is as much for me as for my readers. I always feel I need to write the introduction first in order to rethink for myself the ideas I want to talk about. Putting those ideas in words on a page confirms for me why I am writing the book. The introduction takes me to the heart of what I am doing.

This time I struggled to write this opening. The words didn't come, and so I jumped into the chapters, all the while wondering why I couldn't find that beginning and if maybe what I thought I had to say didn't matter much after all. I felt almost afraid that what I wanted to say wouldn't resonate with teachers in the twenty-first century. And then COVID-19 hit and the world turned upside down. In the turmoil of the ensuing days, the days I'm living through now as I write this introduction, my uncertainty has disappeared. I know for sure why this book matters, why conversation matters, and why we *must* talk with one another.

In the first week of turmoil, as schools shut down, as grocery store shelves emptied, as we all tried to find a way to navigate the new normal, I had long telephone conversations with three of the people I care most for in the world. Interestingly enough, I couldn't have said when I had last actually had a long conversation with any of these people, either in person or over the phone. The first of the three was my niece, whom I had last seen weeks before in the happy chaos of a family celebration. The second was a colleague and good friend whom I often see only at department meetings, as her classroom is two floors below mine, our teaching schedules and free periods rarely jibe, and our lives are eternally busy. The third was my best friend, whom I last saw for a goodbye

hug two months earlier as she was about to leave for a teaching position across the world. So it's not that I had been entirely out of contact with these people. We had communicated in all the ways technology and time seemed to allow, but *we had not spoken in any depth*. Quick exchanges, cheery emails, a card in the mail, but conversation? No. Yet in the early days of the COVID-19 crisis, we spoke, and we talked in a way that I remember talking before technology took hold of us. Our telephone conversations were long and rambling, and we moved from one topic to another as the spirit moved us. At one point, my niece said hesitatingly, "I wasn't even going to bring this up, but . . . ," and began to talk about a piece of her life that she suddenly felt she wanted to share, maybe because it felt right, maybe because the leisurely conversation welcomed it, maybe because I was there listening, murmuring encouragingly, asking questions to clarify, and hearing more than her words through the timbre of her voice. None of the three conversations was planned; there was no agenda, no list of points to cover, no expected time constraints. All three of the conversations involved hearty shared laughter, despite the conditions we were all facing, and the laughter buoyed us and kept us talking. And all three of the conversations ended with a promise to talk again soon, very soon. In fact, one closed with the words, "Can we talk again this week?"

After two weeks of school shutdowns, my colleagues and I were suddenly thrust into a world of remote learning. Difficult at best, even harder for someone like me who is not a fan of online learning, I found myself scrambling to adjust to the technological demands. For me, finding a way to communicate, both efficiently and personally, with my 140-plus students seemed daunting, to say the least, and despite all the emails and directives from those in charge, I was fumbling and frustrated and felt doomed. After a flurry of emails that simply confused me more, I sent an administrator one more email, asking if I might call him. He was gracious and helpful and immediately sent his phone number. I called, he answered, and within minutes, after a series of clear and pleasant exchanges, my immediate problems were solved and I breathed easier. And all I could think was how glad I was that I had typed the words "*Can we talk*?"

Finally, an invitation came from another dear friend, also quite far away, suggesting an online Zoom gathering where eight old friends would connect, commiserate, and hopefully cheer one another on as the dark days continued. But after having spent weeks in more online faculty and department meetings than I cared to count, I just couldn't quite rally to meet on a screen for fun. The awkward, staccato rhythm of an online meeting felt little like human connection, but rather an activity that only emphasized the abnormality of the times. So I declined with what I hoped was a polite email, but I'm sure my words came across as brusque at best, more likely cranky, and so this very good friend

reached out and phoned me. We talked, our conversation bounding back and forth as each of us tried to explain our positions on this way of connecting. I heard myself saying, "No, no, I meant . . . ," "But are you saying . . .?," and the like, clarifying my words as she did the same. When we ended the phone call, we both better understood the other's feelings. And then the next morning an email came in which my friend wrote, "I'm really glad we had the conversation about how electronic communication feels to you. . . . Once again it has made me think, 'Oh, . . . of course . . . I never thought about it that way. . . .' As we make our way through this extraordinary new time, I feel like that happens to me over and over again, and I want to keep paying close attention to everything I learn." I read her words and thought, so can we talk again soon?

These three anecdotes are meant to illustrate the power of conversation. Though most sources define *conversation* simply as two or more people talking together, I much prefer Robert Frost's reflection on conversation: "I was under twenty when I deliberately put it to myself one night after good conversation that there are moments when we actually touch in talk what the best writing can only come near" (qtd. in Jost 397). Something happens in conversation that goes beyond a simple exchange of words. Conversation is human connection with an element of risk. When we open our mouths to speak, we don't always know what we are about to say, and we can't take our words back. We put ourselves in a vulnerable position when we engage in conversation, and we grow in an understanding of ourselves and others as a result. Though sometimes verbal communication can be awkward or tedious or even painful, often it is, as Anne Morrow Lindbergh describes, "as stimulating as black coffee and just as hard to sleep after" (102). Those are the conversations that make us feel alive—and truly connected. Those are the moments we can experience *if* we make the time to talk and allow ourselves to speak the truth.

There is nothing normal about these days of COVID-19, and even the most optimistic among us are hard pressed to find any sort of silver lining in all the tragedy we have seen. But here is something I suspect most of us will take away from the long months and now years of the pandemic. The virus and the new way of life it demands have reminded us of our humanity and of what we need to survive as human beings, and that is empathy, compassion, and connection. Certainly, social media has helped with all three (those of us of a certain age can't help but wonder how different this experience might be were it happening in the days before the internet), but my experiences with people close to me have highlighted, emphasized, and ultimately convinced me that we absolutely need conversation if we are to thrive. In conversation, words are spoken, heard, and responded to without the "benefit" of a delay or a delete. Conversation is freeform and often freewheeling. It lacks the safety net of written communica-

tion, with time to process an idea, to seek additional input, to review and revise a response, or to ignore someone's words entirely. Conversation is risky, and for that very reason it exposes us as individuals and reveals our true selves. For the very same reason, it is wonderful and illuminating and intensely human.

With each month of the stay-at-home order, conversation becomes even more important. The phone rings and I feel my spirits lift, or I am outside on my daily constitutional and someone headed the other way, masked like me, pauses and, across the country road I live on, we call to each other in conversation. These opportunities for spoken words, spontaneous and sincere, hearten me, and remind me, in a way that no email or text does, that I am not alone.

So perhaps, especially after having endured months of social isolation, we'd all agree on the importance of conversation in the social sphere. Yet, curiously, I'm not so sure we all recognize that it is equally important in the classrooms where we teach. In classrooms packed with students and stuffed with required curriculum, with bells ringing and tests looming, it's easy to regard conversation as a luxury, as a frill, maybe even as an outmoded teaching strategy. I believe that is a loss and perhaps even an assault to our humanity. I hope this book will convince other teachers of that. If we as human beings learn best when learning involves human connection, we must embrace and encourage the power of conversation.

Although this book is about conversation in the classroom and ways that we can promote an authentic exchange of ideas among our students, I'd like to add here that, as educators, we also need to make more time for conversation among ourselves. We need meetings that do more than disseminate information. We need professional development that goes beyond the lecture of a supposed expert. We need time in the school day to sit down and talk to one another about the challenges we are facing and the solutions we are finding. We need to connect to one another as people, not only as pieces of data in an administrator's report.

Even now, as I end this introduction, I'm wishing that I could sit in a room with those teachers who are reading these pages. I wish that instead of me "speaking" and readers just "listening," we could have a conversation where our words would fly back and forth in all their unscripted glory, and we could hear one another's ideas, opinions, and laughter. Simply, I wish I could say to all of you, "Can we talk?"—and that in that conversation, we would find true connection.

It is quite honestly difficult to write a book like this in a time that is so out of time. It is even harder, many months later, to edit it and to smoothly straddle that line between what was and what is. When I first wrote this introduction, I ended with this paragraph:

As September nears, so too does the idea of continued remote learning. It almost feels a bit delusional to be touting ideas for classroom conversation when classroom doors are locked or students sit in semi-isolation. But I remind myself that there will come a time when we do all return to our classrooms, and I suspect there will be extraordinary joy in that coming together. Perhaps all these months of separation will have made us thirsty for conversation, and perhaps we, both teachers and students, will have a newfound appreciation for the sound of human voices around us. Perhaps we won't have to ask, "Can we talk?" Perhaps we will simply rejoice in the fact that we finally can.

I think maybe I was a little optimistic. Now, more than one September later and finally back in our classrooms, I know we all do feel this joy. We are grateful to be together, teachers and students alike, and we're poised to share our thoughts, our stories, our selves. *Finally*, we think, we can talk. But can we? The permission to meet face to face and to engage in real conversation is only part of it. For our students, there is also the question of ability, and it seems the long months of isolation have only exacerbated the struggle many of them face when it comes to spoken communication. They are literally at a loss for words at a time when they desperately need to find true human connection. So though the question is still "Can we talk?," I believe the answer now is "We must talk." As teachers, we have to make conversation happen.

I

Understanding the Problem

It is the encounters with people that make life worth living.

—*Guy de Maupassant*

This book was born out of a conversation, one carried on in a Baltimore restaurant over soft-shell crab sandwiches and iced tea. The two of us were catching up, and at some point, the conversation turned, as it inevitably does when two people involved in education meet, to "kids today." We shared stories of children and students, and suddenly I found myself announcing, "Kids today don't know how to talk." It wasn't the first time I'd thought that, but I think it was the first time I'd said it aloud, and somehow the vehemence of that statement combined with the questions the two of us tossed back and forth—"Is it because of technology?" "What sort of opportunities do they have to talk?" "Do they even *want* to talk?"—became the idea for a book—even before the check arrived.

There is no question in my mind that this book would not have been written without that conversation. No number of emails or texts would have allowed the space and spontaneity of that conversation, and though I might still be grumbling to myself that kids today don't know how to talk, I wouldn't have had an audience for my thoughts, and I probably wouldn't have explored those thoughts any further—or the delete key would have allowed me to reconsider. The philosopher John Armstrong writes, "[Conversation] is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure." I was lucky that day to experience such an adventure

with someone who listened and spoke and challenged and questioned—and made me feel free to do the same. I have come to believe that students today rarely have such an experience, and the absence of this sort of engagement leaves them something close to speechless.

And that is the problem. They seem unable to talk. Even students themselves are aware of it. They struggle to talk, in class and out, to adults, to their families, even to their friends. They sit alone in their bedrooms or basements, they hide behind screens, they panic when a situation requires conversation. They struggle to find words to express what they are feeling, and when the words do come, they hold them back, scared to say what they're thinking. They are twenty-first-century kids, practically born with a smartphone in their hands into a world where change is the only constant. And they are lonely.

One of my students writes, "School is teaching us to be dependent on technology rather than each other," and those words render *me* speechless. I am poised to say, "Can we talk?" but I think I would amend that to, "We *have to* talk—now." We as teachers must find a way to get our students talking with us, with one another, and ultimately with a wider world. We need to give them the chance to experience the connection and comfort that conversation can bring. To do that, and to be passionate in our quest to change our classrooms, we need first to face the reality of the problem, and we need to make sure our students face that too.

I would ask that you pause a moment to watch a short spoken word performance. Gary Turk's "Look Up" first appeared on YouTube in April 2014 and immediately became an extraordinary internet success.

There is a curious irony here that a five-minute video performance speaking out *against* smartphones and the use of social media became a media success, but Turk clearly understands both that irony and the power of the media, and he uses it to make his audience, particularly younger viewers, think about the negative consequences of total immersion in an internet world. His poem cries out to viewers to put down their phones, look up into the world, and make a true human connection. Though scholars and scientists have offered similar sage advice, it's the emotional appeal of this video that works.

Watching the video, I am transported back to the summer of 2019 when I was in Paris, participating in a writing workshop. I traveled without a smartphone, well aware of the supposed "disadvantages" of doing so. No GPS, no French translator, no restaurant reviews, no bite-sized bits of tourist info. My workshop mates were by turns amused, befuddled, and stunned, and more than once they looked amazed when I met them at a café at the agreed upon time. "How did you find it without a phone?" they'd ask. I became "The Woman without a Smartphone," which, I admit, I held as a badge of honor. The point is, I wanted

to experience Paris. I didn't want to constantly have to remind myself to "look up." For years, long before anyone ever owned a smartphone, I had traveled throughout Europe, often with a guidebook, sometimes with a map, and always with my words. And it was through my words, even in another language, that I made the best memories.

So too on this trip. On an early Sunday morning in search of the church of Saint-Sulpice, I encountered an elderly gentleman with a blue bow tie and a small white dog who valiantly tried to decipher my poor French and then led me through the winding streets to the wide doors of the church, where he motioned for me to hold his dog while he went in to light a candle. On another evening, a young woman with a wide smile shook her head when, with a question in my voice, I named a particular restaurant, and she pointed me instead to a tiny bistro, which I'm certain was much better than my choice would have been. And by day four and after much bumbling conversation, the woman who cleaned my room began to show me pictures of her children. As I wandered around the city, I didn't spend my time snapping pictures (in truth, I knew I could count on my new friends and their social media sites for that), but instead tried to connect with my surroundings and the people within them. As Turk says, "You don't need to stare at your menu, or at your contact list, / just talk to one another, and learn to co-exist." Though some might think that is an especially formidable task in a foreign country, I think I'd say it's becoming no easier here in the United States and in the more intimate spaces in which we live. Simply put, actual human connection through face-to-face conversation challenges many of us, and some of the greatest challenges we experience are in our classrooms.

One issue I need to address here is terminology. Is there a difference between *conversation* and *discussion*? What about *dialogue*? Is one more formal than another? What should we be doing in our classrooms? Conversing? Discussing? Dialoguing? To me personally, discussion sounds quite serious, conversation much more pleasant, and dialogue, well, a bit new age-ish. And then there are "academic conversations," what Jeff Zwiers in *Next Steps with Academic Conversations* describes as "powerful ways to develop students' content understandings, thinking skills, and language" (5). I wrestled with this issue of word choice as I began writing this book, and more than once I replaced one word with another with some sort of meaningful intention. But then I read *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. In the opening pages, the authors make a convincing case for recognizing the ways in which the three—discussion, conversation, and dialogue—blend, and they conclude that human connection is the goal, no matter what the word: "We define discussion as an alternately serious and playful effort by a group of two or more to share views and engage in mutual and reciprocal critique" (6). They go on to say, "Dis-

cussion is an important way for people to affiliate with one another, to develop the sympathies and skills that make participatory democracy possible" (7).

So, I decided, call it conversation, discussion, dialogue, whatever. The important point is that young people today need opportunities to experience the connection that talking to one another brings. Contemporary society offers them few opportunities—and many distractions. We are raising a generation for whom face-to-face communication is alien and intimidating. This reality and the consequences of it are startling and should concern every one of us as educators. Only when we recognize the problem do we have it in our power to alleviate it.

What Students Tell Us

Everything becomes a little different as soon as it is spoken out loud.

—*Hermann Hesse*

"Once it got going, a conversation seemed to run itself, swooping and gliding like the planchette of a Ouija board" (Gordon 85). Could there be a better image of good conversation? When I read that line in Emily Fox Gordon's essay "How I Learned to Talk," I was immediately carried back to a moment in my classroom when my students and I were suddenly swept up in words like that swooping planchette, one that had sat motionless for months. Perhaps we too were all searching for answers.

It had been a long, silent semester, me prompting and pleading for participation, my students reticent and reserved. There seemed to be no apparent reason for this struggle. These were college-bound sophomores, bright and hard-working, as the grades on their written work reflected. But they didn't talk. They sat quietly, they listened to me, they took notes assiduously, and when the bell rang, they clapped their notebooks shut and disappeared out the door. I'd end each period feeling like a mediocre stand-up comic, not bad enough to merit boos but unable to provoke a reaction from the audience. And then one day my students and I had a conversation about conversation—and the words began to fly. It was a discussion prompted less by my desperation than by my curiosity; I just wanted to know why they were so quiet. After so much silence, I didn't expect them to change, but I did want to know what they thought about talking, in class or out of class. I wanted to understand how they viewed this most basic form of human communication—and why it was missing in our classroom.

Except suddenly it wasn't. There I was, leaning against the file cabinet, looking out at all twenty-seven faces, when I heard myself say, "Talk to me about talking. What's up with conversation these days?" Then, strangely, hands began

popping up all over the room, and there were those who couldn't even contain themselves long enough to raise a hand and instead simply started to speak.

"Nobody talks anymore," declared Jaclyn, but I couldn't quite tell if that was a lament or a simple statement of fact.

"That's because nobody wants to listen," a boy across the room called out, and though his classmates chuckled, I again wasn't sure how to interpret his words. Was he just being funny, or was it the truth?

"We don't need to talk. We text and stuff," said Ella.

"Yeah, it's so much easier," the student sitting next to her said, and all around the room heads nodded in agreement.

"I don't think I know how to talk," Sean announced, and more laughter erupted from the group. "That's what my parents say, anyway. They say I'll never get a job, never be able to do an interview." He looked glum briefly, but then brightened. "But hey, they're always on their phones and they got jobs. None of us talk to each other anyway."

"You're lucky!" This from Nina. "My parents make me talk. We have to put our phones away at dinner. We have to have *family* conversation." She rolled her eyes.

"Well, I talk to my friends . . . sometimes," a girl in the front ventured. "But in school, no one talks."

"Teachers don't even want kids to talk." This pronouncement came from the back of the room.

I was about to jump in here, to explain that I'd been trying desperately to get them to talk since September, but the metaphorical planchette was skittering across the board, and they were on to a different idea.

"When you talk, you can sound stupid," Annie said to a loud murmur of approval, and I wished I could point out the irony there. She spoke, and apparently her classmates saw her as smart. But at this point I didn't want to interrupt what seemed to be almost a miracle. The class was talking. So I leaned back and listened.

For a while the comments were random. They came from all corners of the room, spilling out of my students' mouths, and it seemed these were thoughts they had held in for too long.

"I used to talk in elementary school, but not anymore."

"I don't talk in school because I know I'll be wrong."

"My mom says that kids used to talk on the phone for hours. That's so weird."

"I feel like I don't know very many words."

 I'm not sure I would call this conversation, as there was less swooping and gliding than there was lunging and leaping, but it was a start and an astounding

change from the stony silence I was used to. So astonished was I by this out-pouring of ideas that I forgot to monitor the time, and suddenly the bell rang. The students looked as surprised as I, and, even as they hurried to pack up their things, I heard them continuing to talk about talk.

As they were going out the door, I made a quick decision. "We're going to continue with this tomorrow," I called over their chatter. "Your assignment is to think about all you heard today and what you believe about conversation. Please really think about this!"

I took the few minutes before the next class to sit at my desk and wonder about what had just happened. How could it be that the best (the only?) conversation we'd had all year was one about conversation? And what were the chances it would happen again?

But it did. The next morning my students trooped into class, many of them looking expectant.

"Hey, are we gonna do that thing we did yesterday?" Sean asked.

I refrained from noting that "that thing" was talking. "Yes," I said. "I've been looking forward to it. How about all of you?"

There was much nodding and murmuring, and before I could suggest that we try to remember where we left off, Ella jumped in.

"Last night I was talking to my mother" (*Talking to her mother?* Again I showed restraint and didn't shout "Hallelujah!"), "and she said that when she was a kid, she and her friends talked all the time. We don't do that anymore. Even me and my best friends. I don't have conversations with them that last even four minutes."

I'm not sure of the significance of the four-minute mark, but I do know that her words set off a volley of comments, and immediately we were all engaged in a conversation with a clear connective thread. Students began to voice opinions about the importance or lack of importance of conversations among friends, and they began to offer ideas about why things have changed.

"Social media. It's much easier. You can talk to a bunch of people at once," a girl in Ella's camp said.

"But that's not real conversation," a boy responded. "That's just people hiding behind screens."

"Nah, I don't agree." Chase hadn't spoken much, but now he was vigorous in his opposition. "People always say that phones take away from face-to-face conversations. But that's not true. I've met a lot of people because of my phone. And when I'm hanging out with my friends, I might not look at my phone for hours."

Was I imagining it, or was there an almost audible gasp from some corners? Not look at your phone for hours?

The conversation continued for the entire period, with most of the class participating. I said very little, asking only for a point of clarification here or there, generally for my own benefit as someone not entirely familiar with the attitudes and behavior of my students' generation. At some point, the conversation moved naturally to conversation in the classroom, and students began to voice their fear of judgment and their anxiety about being wrong and sounding stupid. Today I was paying better attention to the clock, and as the minutes of class wound down, I told students to continue to think more about all the ideas they had heard and expressed so that tomorrow they could do some freewriting to synthesize and fully reflect on their ideas. I wanted the chance to reflect on their ideas as well.

"That was fun," Annie announced as they all started gathering their things. "We should have discussion more often."

Call it a teachable moment—for them and me. "But that's what I've been trying to do all year," I said. "I've been trying to get all of you to talk to each other and to get everyone involved."

Some of them looked at me quizzically, an unspoken "You have?" on their faces.

"When I ask you about Walter Younger and what it means to him to be a man, or why the Wingfield family is so caught up in dreams, I'm trying to get you to discuss ideas."

"Yeah, but those things have *answers*." This again from Sean. "I don't always know the answers."

"Because you don't always read the book," one of his buddies cracked.

Sean laughed good-naturedly and shrugged. "Whatever," he said. "But this is different. This is just our opinions. We don't have to know anything."

Had the bell not rung at that very second, I would have told him that you *do* have to know something. You have to know what you believe, and you have to know how to put your beliefs into words, and all of that is far more important than being able to summarize the plot of a play. But right now it was too late, so that would have to wait until after they wrote about conversation and I read their pieces and we talked once again.

And so conversation about conversation was born in my classroom and finds its way to this book.

Much of what I've learned about conversation in the classroom comes directly from my students, and so this knowledge is likely to change as society and the human interactions that are a part of it change. Certainly, as the research explored in Chapter 2 indicates, this would be an entirely different book had I written it prior to the appearance of the iPhone in 2007. This book is already somewhat different from the book I envisioned in 2019, months before either

the COVID-19 pandemic or the social and political protests that shook the country. These events have changed all of us as individuals as well as the systems and structures we base our lives on. So I would not be at all surprised if other world-changing events, events that profoundly affect how we interact with one another, occur before this book ever finds its way into publication. But no matter when a book on conversation is written and no matter what the state of the world is at the moment it is read, the simple fact is that, as human beings with the capacity for conversation, we possess, as Celeste Headlee explains in *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter*," a uniquely human skill[,] . . . a compelling force behind our success as a species and our ascent up the food chain" (3). Some, like me, may bemoan what appears to be dwindling interest in conversation, but the ability—and the desire—to talk to one another continues to exist—and, as I am discovering, when this opportunity to talk is taken away, we feel its loss.

I had been asking my students to reflect, both orally and in writing, on the topic of conversation well before COVID-19 closed schools and dramatically changed the way students learned. But, as the school year wound down in June 2020, after three months of remote learning, I asked students for further thoughts on the importance—or lack of importance—of conversation in the classroom. I sent them the following assignment:

> I'd like you to write a reflection focused on *conversation in the classroom*. I'm curious as to how students view conversation these days. Though I'm specifically thinking about conversation in the classroom, you can certainly write about talking to others in general. I'm also wondering about remote learning, and since you are the experts (and guinea pigs!) on that, I want to know if and how the lack of "in person" conversation among students and teachers and other students affects your learning. Anything you have to say on the topic of conversation will be really helpful to me. This can simply be a freewrite. It will not be graded, and it does not demand any real polishing. You can make it an anonymous submission if you choose.

In many respects, the comments I received echoed in content the written reflections students had provided pre-COVID, but there was a difference in tone. Though students in both groups largely recognized the dearth of conversation in their classrooms and their lives in general, students in quarantine voiced a frustration and a despondency that I hadn't heard in the writing of students from months earlier. Perhaps it was simply the weariness we were all feeling after weeks of tedium coupled with anxiety, but I think there was more to it. Isolated—and with plenty of time to think—these teenagers became aware of the

effect this lack of true human interaction was having on them, both as students and as human beings. As one student wrote:

> I feel that conversations in person is one of the main factors we lost through this quarantine online learning. It's actually pretty funny when I think of it, all these years of hating going to classes to hear lectures and taking notes, all I wanted to do was be done with them. To never have to sit through a 45-minute class again, but, since remote learning has started, all I wanted was to be in that class again, half asleep, trying to keep my eyes open enough that I don't get yelled at. There was something about being in the classroom and hearing the teacher explain it in person that just made learning a lot easier for me. I could stay on track a lot better and know what assignments I had for each class, and not only that, but if I had a question, it was a simple raise of the hand and wait to be called on where now I feel like I basically need to write a short story just to email the teacher about a question I have and wait for a specific day and time to get on Zoom with them to ask a question. Before quarantine life was a lot more simple and I think I speak for a majority of people when I say that I just want this online learning over with so I can go back to class and be surrounded by others all wanting to learn the same thing.

"Surrounded by others all wanting to learn the same thing." That, I think, is a pretty good definition of education when it works best, and it's an opportunity my students seemed to mourn the loss of. As one senior explained,

> Another thing that I do not like about remote learning is the disconnect from peers in the classroom. I feel that I learn better with other people around me so if I am struggling, I can ask, "What do you think of …" or similar questions. Overall, I think that learning in the classroom with discussion with others and the teacher is more productive and beneficial than remote learning.

A classmate concurred but offered an even darker picture:

> As far as communication goes in a classroom setting, I believe it is a key aspect to being a successful team member and learner. However, the coronavirus and the transition to remote learning and quarantine has caused people to be stripped of the freedom of communicating with people and friends face to face. If I was to predict the future, I would say that when this virus is gone, many people, especially kids and teens, are going to be very antisocial due to the lack of communication they get from school.

And finally, an eloquent reflection that made me very sad, sad that my students missed the experience of sharing together a play as beautiful as *Fences* and sad that they felt so separated from those of us who want so much to help them learn:

> If we didn't have an avenue of learning other viewpoints on a piece of literature, we would all end up in an echo chamber of our own interpretations which is always a real shame. However, that's what remote learning has kind of resulted in, as I didn't really feel like I was getting the benefit of hearing other voices and that made reading *Fences* a bit more difficult. I ended up understanding the book after a few re-reads of certain scenes, but overall, I was really missing the ability to talk about the scenes with others. The last thing that I missed a lot from school was the ability to talk directly with teachers for clarification or help. Having to email questions in place of actually talking directly with instructors added a barrier that made it difficult to understand the material completely. While it may be easy to just send an email, it still felt like I was never gonna get as concise of a response as I would in person and that was something I truly missed since leaving school. All in all, I feel like remote learning has given me a newfound appreciation for being able to discuss with my peers in class and in person, and it makes me miss school that much more.

The pandemic was, as we heard again and again, an unprecedented event, and its effects, particularly in terms of human connection and interaction, are ones we hope students will never encounter again. But the decline in verbal communication, both in school and out, is not limited to that time period, as students can attest. Three excerpts from their reflections, written months before the pandemic, are a clear indication of that, and, I would say, a clear cause for concern:

> I definitely feel like we don't talk as much in school as we used to and it's a lot more silent solo work than learning with class discussion. . . . I see it most when walking to the bathroom during class because there are many rooms that I pass where I see kids just silently glued to their Chromebooks. . . . I get very anxious when I have to talk to adults or even my older cousins because I'm only really used to talking to people my age or online, and having to talk to adults in person and not over text freaks me out.

> I don't think people have enough conversation both inside and outside of class. For example, I went to my cousin's house in New York for a few days during vacation, and I remember walking into the living room and seeing everyone on their phones. My

entire family was sitting in silence scrolling away. We barely get to see that side of the family, so it made me upset that no one was actually spending time with the family. I feel like this happens too often. Whenever I hang out with my friends, two of them are on their phones. . . . I was taught that when you are around people that it's rude to be on your phone. That's why it upsets me so much. I think everyone could benefit from putting the technology down and having a face to face conversation with someone.

I think that technology/texting makes it hard to have a normal conversation. Texting is carefree, short, to the point, and sometimes mindless, and it might be just me, but I'm terrible at carrying on a conversation in person. This maybe doesn't make sense, but that's as best as I can explain.

But it does make sense. It makes sense that when we as a society, and specifically when we as teachers, limit occasions for young people to engage in face-to-face conversation, they have fewer opportunities to hone their communication skills. Just as babies develop the ability to speak through repetition, practice, and, significantly, the praise and encouragement of those around them, so too do young people need many and varied low-risk chances to verbally interact with others if they are to learn to express themselves clearly, as well as to feel at ease in the exchange of ideas with others. When conversations are limited in society as a whole, it becomes our job as educators to provide consistent opportunities for students to engage in meaningful conversation in the classroom. And as hard as it is to keep a classroom full of twenty-first-century students engaged in conversation, we have to keep trying. Sometimes, as I well know, it seems easier to give in. When a class is disinterested in a discussion, my instinct is to abandon it and move to another activity. In one telling piece, one of my students vividly describes this all too familiar situation: "But I just think that now when a teacher asks something and tries to make it an open conversation, it is common for the room to go silent as everyone stares at their desks and the teacher sits in silence for a painful minute until they finally say something to wrap it up and continue teaching."

I know I've experienced more than one such "painful minute" and have, as a result, let my students off the hook. I can almost hear myself saying, "Okay, well, it doesn't seem as if anyone has much to say today. Maybe we should do some writing?" Not that there's anything wrong with doing some writing, and sometimes students can return to a conversation full of new ideas if they've had time to process their thoughts on paper. But when I or any other teacher routinely backs down from encouraging classroom conversation, we deprive our

students of the chance to improve their skills as both speakers and listeners. The world today doesn't offer young people many chances to participate in conversation. So many human transactions are conducted via email or text, and I might note that, even in those interactions, students need help with communicating appropriately. I often shake my head when I open yet another email that begins, *Hey Ms. Rubenstein*. It's not that I demand formality, but I fear my students don't know that there are people and occasions that do. When it comes to verbal conversation, students first just need to do it more. As teachers, we know that consistent practice and repetition improve our students' reading and writing skills. The more they read, the better readers they become, and the more they write, the stronger their writing grows. So too is it true that the more students talk to one another, the better communicators they become, both as speakers *and* listeners. In the process, they develop skills that will serve them well, both professionally and personally in the adult world.

Why then is it so difficult to initiate fruitful conversation in our classrooms? When I was a student, I loved class discussion, partly, I suspect, because it saved me from taking notes on the teacher's lecture, but more because it was interesting and sometimes even exciting to hear my classmates' opinions. There was a rush and energy to our conversations on Kafka or Transcendentalism or Plath's poetry, and I remember our conversations spilling out the door and down the hall after the bell had rung. In my early years of teaching, I felt the same excitement in my students when we considered Hemingway's possible misogynism or Hawthorne's view of morality. It seemed that the challenge for a teacher in those years was to make sure that every student who wanted to speak had the opportunity, as so many hands were waving in the air and students were so eager to respond to their peers' comments. But times have changed, and it is important that teachers recognize how truly difficult conversation is for many students today. While we can decide to provide more opportunities for conversation, we need to also consider why students may not seize these opportunities. I see three main reasons for their reluctance, and I'll let my students' actions and words illustrate each.

#1: The Effect of a Distracted Attention Span

"Jimmy," I say, "for the last time, put that away." *That* is his phone. We're twenty-five minutes into the period, and this is the third time I've called him on it.

The first time he shoved the phone in his pocket. The second time he looked vaguely chagrined. Now, this third time, I'm met with the words, "Why? I'm

paying attention." And it occurs to me that in the way we as a society have come to "pay attention," perhaps he is in fact doing so. Isn't multitasking what we're all about? But I try to put that train of thought on pause.

"Jimmy, just put your phone on the floor for five minutes," I say. I know I should simply take it away, but frankly I'm curious to see if he's even able to put it down. When he balks, I resort to the threat, ". . . or else I'm taking it away."

He sighs. "Okay," he says and puts the phone close to his sneakered foot. "Time me."

I do, and with one eye on the clock, the other on Jimmy, and my mind on the class discussion (now who's multitasking?), we all resume talking, but barely a minute goes by when I see Jimmy looking down, reaching down, and then suddenly swooping up the phone. He's not being recalcitrant. He can't help himself, and I'm reminded once again of the powerful hold technology has over our students and its ability to distract them from any other sort of activity. Students in the classroom have always been distractible, but what I see as different now is that (1) they truly believe they can give partial attention to a multitude of activities without negative impact, and (2) virtually *nothing* holds their attention for long, even that which technology offers, as the constant scrolling and clicking indicate. Yet in this climate and faced with these hurdles, we strive to get them to talk to one another.

Good conversation is a slow process and one that involves discoveries we make as we hear and consider the ideas of others. We speak glibly about "the art of conversation," without perhaps acknowledging that, as with all art forms, the creation of good conversation takes time, patience, and commitment. As Catherine Blyth explains in *The Art of Conversation*, "[Conversation] takes two or more people and two things: attention and interest" (14). These days the first is hard to come by. We know it by our classroom experience, but research adds an interesting twist:

> The average attention span for the notoriously ill-focused goldfish is nine seconds, but according to a new study from Microsoft Corp., people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds, highlighting the effects of an increasingly digitalized lifestyle on the brain.
>
> Researchers in Canada surveyed 2,000 participants and studied the brain activity of 112 others using electroencephalograms (EEGs). Microsoft found that since the year 2000 (or about when the mobile revolution began) the average attention span dropped from 12 seconds to eight seconds. (McSpadden)

This may not sound like much, but when we are struggling to get students to "Pay attention!" to the thread of a discussion, seconds matter.

As annoyed as I may get when students begin riffling through their backpacks, whispering to one another, or surreptitiously checking their phones while one of their classmates is speaking, I try to remind myself that they are not being intentionally rude. They just don't know how to focus their attention, and so they lose interest in the conversation and want to move on to something new.

I frequently see my students grow impatient with discussion, and more than once one has asked irritably, "So what's the answer?" It's difficult for them to understand that you can't Google everything and that some ideas and "answers" only arise when people offer half-formed thoughts that others welcome and build upon. Teenagers are so used to the speed of so much in our contemporary, fast-paced world that face-to-face conversation can feel slow and purposeless to them, and this contributes to our struggle to keep them focused and engaged in class discussion. Just as language has in effect become stunted by the demands of technology, so too have our students' conversational skills been stunted by their reliance on technology. For most of them, communication should be, as the student above described, "short, to the point," the language of the text screen, and as such completely different from the slow pace and rambling style of much conversation. I admit, it cheers me when I read a rare comment such as this from a student: "People that text the way they talk are people I tend to stay in contact with the most. People that text very casually come off as uninterested, and I stop trying because it seems like they don't care. Conversation can be nerve wracking and awkward, but essential to life in my personal opinion." Actual conversation demands attention in order to follow the threads of speakers' ideas and to interpret underlying emotions, the latter skill one with which many young people especially struggle. As one student writes, "It's hard to read emotions in text conversations." Another notes, "Now with remote [learning], not only can you not ask teachers questions face to face, but often when you email them it is hard to understand what they mean sometimes due to the absence of an inflection in their voice." Focused attention, attention that appreciates nuances, is not the forte of this generation. They have been raised to admire the ability to multitask, and they are not alone. Despite evidence that indicates the negative outcome of multitasking, we all engage in it, and we often pride ourselves on our ability to "get so much done"—or so we think:

> But in this, we pursue an illusion. When we think we are multitasking, our brains are actually moving quickly from one thing to the next, and our performance degrades for each new task we add to the mix. . . . We've seen that not only do multitaskers have trouble deciding how to organize their time, but over time, they "forget" how to read human emotions. Students—for example, my students—

think that texting during class does not interrupt their understanding of class conversation, but they are wrong. The myth of multitasking is just that: a myth. (Turkle 213)

The students Sherry Turkle, an expert on technology and its effects on human relationships, refers to are her seminar students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, presumably more motivated than many of our high school students. Still, even for them, there is a competition between class conversation and the lure of technology. Though we *might* in our high school classrooms be able to control, to some extent, the use of cell phones and computers, we all know that students are perennially involved in activities that are not the focus of the day's lesson, and for them that is simply the norm. Today a teacher's command to "Put that away"—whether "that" be homework for history class, a phone in a lap, or a tube of mascara—is frequently met with the same bewilderment Jimmy expressed. Why can't they be doing two or three or four things at once? Isn't that just the way we get things done in our world? Maybe in some instances it is, but not, as Turkle explains, in terms of conversation. This sort of "distracted attention" is counterproductive to real conversation because, "To converse, you don't just have to perform turn taking, you have to listen to someone else, to read their body, their voice, their tone, and their silences" (45). In other words, productive and meaningful conversation demands serious attention to all aspects of those with whom you are conversing. You can't just hear their words; you need to "see" those words—and feelings—through body language. You need to listen carefully to the pitch of the voice, which sometimes doesn't match the words being spoken. You need to process and interpret the pauses and silences. Moreover, as an active participant in the conversation, you need to be fully present if you are to communicate your own thoughts in any meaningful way. How often in classrooms do students repeat something that was just said or ask a question that was just answered, all because they weren't paying attention? Conversation in classrooms has become something of a novelty these days, and some students think of it as "downtime" and a "break" from learning. But the more they engage in it, the more they realize how much effort each participant must give to the conversation and how profound the human connection that results can be.

I'd like to think that this sort of realization can extend beyond the classroom and have a positive effect on teenagers' wider social interactions. One of the most startling facts I discovered when researching the topic of conversation was something that I knew intuitively from my own experience but had never before seen verified. This involves the presence of cell phones when people are engaged in face-to-face conversation. We all know how annoying it is to have

a conversation interrupted when our conversational partner abandons us for a ringing cell phone, but what strikes me as even more unnerving is what the simple *presence* of a phone does to negatively impact meaningful conversation:

> Studies show that the mere presence of a phone on the table (even a phone turned off) changes what people talk about. If we think we might be interrupted, we keep conversations light, on topics of little controversy or consequence. And conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection. If two people are speaking and there is a phone on a nearby desk, each feels less connected to the other than when there is no phone present. *Even a silent phone disconnects us.* (Turkle 21)

If students had their way in class, they would likely never put their phones down. My students are allowed to have their phones in class, but they must keep them off unless a teacher gives permission to use them for a particular purpose. Now, considering these studies, I think it's even more important that phones be completely out of sight. We know that for some students, certainly for Jimmy, their attachment to their phone borders on addiction, but it seems that for all of us, a phone becomes a barrier to the kind of conversation and human connection we want to nurture in our classrooms. We need to do everything we can to reduce the distractions for our students and to help them develop the ability to truly engage with others face to face. As one of my students writes, "I think people are talking less because they are more focused on their needs, what they want. . . . I think it's harder for people to have conversations because they are doing it less and focusing only on what they want."

In a sort of aside, I'd add this—our students are not the only ones who become "distracted." Even as teachers committed to a path defined by what we believe our students need, we sometimes fall victim to the "hurry up" culture and try to do too much too fast. Faced with tightly packed curricula, we feel pressured to "move along" in order to get our students to reach the next step, the next skill, the next level. This pressure, combined with our concern about losing many class periods to mandated testing and other "essentials" ordered by administrators and state requirements, causes us to feel we can't quite justify time spent on conversation and extended discussion, the sort of thing we can't easily assess, check off our list, and call "done." As a result, we often don't encourage students to explore ideas through conversation, but instead supply the material we think they need and move on. In the process, our classrooms and our students suffer.

#2: Fear of Failure

"Casey," I write in the margins of a purple striped notebook, "you have such great things to say in this journal. How come you don't share some of this in class?" Okay, so I know this is basically a rhetorical question. This journal is a composite of Casey's reactions to the readings and discussion we've been having in our Contemporary American Culture class. I don't expect her to respond to my question—even though I wish she would. But this doesn't stop me from writing these sorts of comments in students' journals, or from thinking about the reasons these insightful writers don't speak up in class. I suspect we've all been surprised by the startlingly perceptive comments that can pop up in students' journals or reading logs and have thought about how much their ideas would have contributed to the class discussion—had the writers been willing to share them. And I know that though no doubt Casey and others like her appreciate my positive comments, my words won't necessarily make a difference when it comes to the next opportunity to share their thoughts. It's likely Casey will continue to sit there silently while the discussion falters, perhaps replaying her thoughts in her head, but staying silent. As students tell me repeatedly when I push them to explain why they don't speak up to share their ideas, they are simply afraid of being "wrong."

Students have always been afraid of being wrong. It takes confidence to offer up an opinion or answer in front of your peers, and it's certainly easy to understand why it seems more appealing to many students to just keep quiet. One of my sophomores begins a reflection with these lines, "Classroom-wise I believe there's less conversation because less people are confident. People are scared to raise their hand and answer a question because they think everyone will think they're dumb if they answer it wrong. If they ask a question, they're scared it will be a stupid question."

While students in previous decades might have written these same words, research indicates that there's an additional problem, particular to the present social and educational climate. A student describes it this way: "I don't usually talk in class because I don't like being blatantly wrong. I'm still learning and taking in information, but I just don't have the confidence to actually say what I'm thinking. I think this is because we've kind of been brought up in such a way that there's one answer and if you get it wrong, you have to fix it."

In her book *iGen*, Jean M. Twenge offers evidence of this situation. Twenge's work studies young people born between 1995 and 2012, those students graduating from high school between 2012 and 2030. This is a book I strongly suggest every teacher read, as it offers a vivid portrait of this generation in all areas of

their lives, as well as guidance to help the rest of us understand these young people. Twenge discusses changes in learning styles of this generation, the iGen'ers:

> iGen'ers are more hesitant to talk in class and to ask questions—they are scared of saying the wrong thing and not as sure of their opinions. (When McGraw-Hill Education polled more than six hundred college faculty in 2017, 70% said students were less willing to ask questions and participate in class than they were five years ago.) It takes more reassurance and trust to get them to actively participate in class. (307)

Saying the "wrong thing" can have two very different meanings, the second of which I discuss in #3 below, but here the focus is on the fear of being "incorrect." This is a fear that can, in part at least, be attributed to the effect standardized testing has had on this generation of students. Our students have been raised to believe in one correct answer. When they prep and practice for state-mandated testing, they are trained to find the right response; creative thinking is not encouraged. More than once I've found myself trying to defend the "correct" answer on a Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) practice test, when I, like the original thinker sitting in the front row of my classroom, can definitely see the validity of a different response. For the most part, I try to avoid asking questions in class that do have only one correct answer, recognizing moreover that this factual material ("How does Mrs. Mallard react to the news that her husband is alive in Kate Chopin's 'The Story of an Hour'?"; "What's the difference between ethos and pathos?"; "Give an example of metonymy in 'kitchenette building' by Gwendolyn Brooks.") is not the stuff of good conversation. It's far better to ask students why they think O. E. Parker is so driven to get tattoos in Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back," to describe the feeling of sunlight, or to consider the levels of symbolism of Kamala's bird in the golden cage in *Siddhartha*. But even when the question or discussion prompt welcomes a wide range of responses, it's still easy for students to fear that their particular response will be seen as a foolish one. As one student explains, "Sometimes the kids don't participate. I feel that's because we feel pressured to be cool or answer right. Maybe we're all more socially conscious because of social media, I don't know. There is a lot of pressure."

There *is* a lot of pressure, and to ease the pressure that students feel to be "right," it's important for us to be encouraging toward *every* serious response that students offer in class conversation. Although it's true that we often disparage the present culture that awards every child a trophy in virtually every endeavor they undertake, I'm not so sure that we as teachers are always quick to applaud our students' verbal efforts in the classroom, perhaps because we forget

what a tremendous risk some students feel they take when they put a hand up in the air. It can be difficult at times to offer praise of a teenager's comments without that praise sounding inflated or making the student feel self-conscious. Somehow, no matter what the time period, it's never been considered entirely "cool" to participate in class. But as Twenge points out, students need reassurance in order to feel comfortable speaking up in class. A comment that comes out of the proverbial left field may suddenly provoke an entirely new way of looking at a topic, and a comment that stirs controversy may keep the conversation alive. So too do questions, even ones that many students may already know the answer to, promote more conversation. Certainly, as teachers we need to work to help our students engage in increasingly *productive* conversation, but, until students are willing to share whatever ideas they have, there will be no conversation at all. So we must first create an environment where students feel safe sharing their opinions and asking their questions. We all know the students who are always eager to make their voices heard, and we all know those who happily sit back and let them. Our task is to encourage as many students as possible to share the time we have for conversation. A good teaching day for me is when a student who rarely speaks suddenly has something to say—and their classmates listen. That, I believe, is a good learning day for all of us.

But not all days are good learning days for our students, as the following writer points out. These words shook me and made me wonder how many times I was guilty of this impatience and frustration—and how many conversations I had squelched in the process:

> Teachers sometimes get mad when we ask questions at all. I sometimes will ask more about a certain topic, and the response is, "You should have learned this last year. I'm not teaching it to you again." I've gotten this response a lot and it makes me not want to ask questions. It makes me just want to suffer through silently rather than "disrupt" the class by asking a question.

How sad is it that students view the act of asking a question—and likely promoting a conversation—as causing a disruption, but that is what their experience has taught them. In an earlier portion of the reflection, this same student wrote, "[Teachers] say things like, 'You should have been listening,' or 'You're a sophomore. You should be able to figure it out.'" Clearly these are the kind of comments that effectively shut down conversation. Sure, kids should be listening, and sure, they likely have been taught certain things before, but if they are searching for answers, they're at least open to genuine communication. I think sometimes of things that I good-naturedly tolerate in conversations I have

with friends—the repetition of ideas, an irrelevant comment, a bit of stage stealing—and I wonder why I often feel exasperated by students who do the same things. Perhaps I too am a product of a culture that pushes students to find the right answer and to find it fast, and, as a result, I lose patience and fail to offer students the encouragement they need to speak up. But I know that it's up to me, and to every classroom teacher, not only to offer this encouragement but also to serve as a model listener, giving each student's words the respect and consideration they deserve. And if some students make a face, groan, or guffaw when a classmate speaks, it is absolutely my responsibility to quash that behavior. My approach isn't to sternly call out such an ill-mannered student with a sharp "Stop that!" sort of command (which only calls more attention to the rude behavior and likely embarrasses the original speaker), but rather to pull that student into the conversation.

So, when Alex makes it all too clear that he thinks what Krista has said is stupid, I turn to him and say, "Alex, you seem to have a different perspective on this than Krista. What are you thinking?" In the best-case scenario, he's thinking something that *does* move the discussion along, but if he's thinking nothing other than critical thoughts about his classmate's words and falls silent, then perhaps he'll think twice before making those thoughts public again.

As teachers we must do our best to create a risk-free classroom environment where students feel comfortable expressing their ideas and asking their questions, but we also need to be realistic enough to accept that not all students will choose to be actively engaged in class conversation. Reading students' final reflections in June 2020, I realized that for a small group of students, three months of online learning had provided a blessed respite. As one student wrote:

> In terms of conversation—both in the classroom and in the social community—it can be important but not always the easiest outcome to achieve. For students like myself who are highly introverted, quiet and spend our time listening, it is a bit out of our comfort zone to need to speak out in the classroom (or in most situations). I think that "cold-calling" and forceful participation by voice is not effective in the classroom. Instead, it is a major source of daily anxiety for some people. Going back to myself, it puts me on edge, causes a need for on-the-spot thinking (resulting in a lack of composure), and is a major cause for anxiety in all classes. With the current remote learning situation, it both makes school harder and easier in [the] context of conversation. It makes it harder (nearly impossible) to get the complete and direct help from staff and teachers, as well as getting extra help. It does, on the other hand, give the students like me a break from worrying about having to talk in class.

Students like this writer are not just afraid of being wrong when they speak in class; they are afraid of speaking at all. I believe it's important that we respect the qualities of an introvert, just as we respect all students' differences. A compassionate teacher can tell the difference between a student who is simply hesitant to talk and needs some support to do so versus one whose entire nature is opposed to any sort of public speaking. I see no benefit whatsoever to putting a student in the latter group on the spot through cold-calling or the like, and I trust this writer (and those like her) when she writes, "One major thought that comes to mind, and generally always has for my schooling career, is this: just because we are not talking or volunteering to participate, does not mean we are not engaged and learning."

Engagement—this is what I seek through conversation in my classroom, and I am willing to recognize that it comes in different forms. But my goal is to give students the opportunity to develop their unique skills as speakers *and* listeners in a safe environment, one in which there is no shame in being wrong. When that happens, we all benefit, from those with the loudest voices to those with the softest.

#3: Fear of Giving Offense

But what is a safe environment these days? I have students who preface virtually everything they say with the phrase, "I don't want to offend anyone . . ."—and I have students who, from the moment they open their mouths, consistently use words, body language, and tone to express the opposite. This second group I can deal with most of the time. Courtesy and civility are on my side, and I feel justified in telling them to tone it down. Dealing with the former group is different, and it grows more challenging each year.

We live in a time when it's easy to offend, even when there is no such intent. The "rules" seem to change almost daily, and these days I find myself in class passing the words in my head by a sort of self-censor before I say them aloud. Fortunately, the censor rarely has to stop me, but I'm cautious in these times because language has become so charged. For the most part, this is a good thing. Thoughtless use of language can do irreparable damage and can certainly perpetuate prejudices and divisions that we must all fight against. But, for many of our students, this "PC culture," as they call it, is extremely intimidating, and they find it difficult to honestly express themselves within it. As one student laments,

> In today's society it's hard to express your opinion in the classroom. There's always going to be someone who disagrees. People could find your opinion offensive and get critical and upset. It's their way or the highway. You can't talk about politics because everyone gets upset with your beliefs, so it's better to just say nothing at all. You can feel attacked by others when they comment on your views.

This writer is not alone. These sorts of feelings are echoed in many of my students' reflections:

> I don't talk much in class any more due to how judged I feel when I speak my mind.

> It's easy to offend some people, so I have to be really careful. I can't act like myself sometimes.

> People lie through their teeth constantly, and many important conversations are diluted and censored to remain "polite" and "politically correct." What this does is hide truths and doesn't let any positive changes occur. In fact, any changes. . . . Conversations have become bland and unimportant.

Such are the times in which we and our students live, and this fear of giving offense creates an enormous challenge for us in terms of classroom conversation. Chapter 6, "'We Need to Talk': Navigating Difficult Conversations," considers in much more depth the challenge of holding difficult conversations and offers suggestions for doing so. But the primary point to consider here is that, in their attempt to not offend anyone, many students simply opt out of the conversation, especially—and unfortunately—when that conversation tackles a controversial issue. As a teacher, it's vital to continually reassure students that all opinions, expressed with civility, are welcome, and that it's only through the open sharing of conflicting ideas that we come to understand each other, and sometimes even modify our own views. Which all sounds fine until you're teaching a class that's just read "The Problem That Has No Name," an excerpt from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and most of the boys in class are looking down at their desks because they know, they just know, that one wrong word and the wrath of fifteen senior girls will come down upon them.

"I'm just not gonna say anything," Brian says. He pauses for a second. "But—"

"But what?" I prompt. Everyone is watching him, and I see a couple of his buddies shake their heads, as if in silent warning. "Brian," I say, "if you have

thoughts or questions, this is the place to express them. We're all here to share our ideas—and to learn from each other." I send a glance across the room, hoping to see agreement in the girls' faces. Most are just waiting, their expressions not welcoming.

"Okay, well, I don't want to get anyone mad at me, but I'm just gonna say it." His buddies groan and look at him woefully. "The thing is, girls are just better at taking care of kids. It's *nature*."

It's also 2019 and, frankly, his words surprise me. Not surprisingly, there is a huge eruption from the female contingent, and words begin to fly, toppling over one another.

"That is *so* wrong. . . ."

"Having a kid isn't the same as raising a kid—"

"Why should women have to give up their careers for kids? Men don't."

"What do you think we are? Just babymakers?"

Brian gives me an *I told you so* look, but I know he's tough and can handle a bit of attack, so for a minute or two I let students air their immediate reactions, hoping that will decompress the situation enough to let us all step back to discuss the comments rationally. At the same time, I'm listening carefully to make sure none of the spontaneous outbursts attacks Brian personally. My students know that you can challenge someone's ideas, but you cannot make that attack personal.

Once calm is restored, I remind everyone that Brian has the right to his opinion, as does every student in the room, and I assure Brian that he's likely not alone in his beliefs and that I appreciate his willingness to express controversial views.

"It's only when we talk about things we believe that we can begin to find some points of shared consensus," I tell them. "I know it's hard to say what you believe when you know that many of those around you are in strong disagreement. But I also know, Brian, that your beliefs in this instance are not directed personally to anyone in this room, and I know you're not intending to anger or offend anyone. You have reasons for believing what you do, as do those who don't agree. So let's talk about those reasons."

My hope is that this sort of approach opens the door to one of those difficult—but necessary—conversations. For many adolescents, beliefs are often borrowed or handed down and, as a result, parroted without any real thought. At this moment, I don't know whether Brian has a real basis for his beliefs about women's roles based on his experience or some sort of knowledge, or whether he's simply repeating ideas he has heard and never questioned. It's only through serious conversation that students can begin to understand not only the opinions of others but, equally important, the reasons behind their own opinions. Yet

it's vital that they explore ideas, especially unpopular ones, without offending others, making their disagreement constructive rather than destructive. This, I think, is best achieved through the teacher's guidance and modeling.

So Brian, his classmates, and I spend the period in conversation about male and female roles and the changes in these roles over time. We continue to refer back to Friedan's words, and we discuss the social implications of her work. We talk about nature versus nurture, and we share stories of our own upbringing. What we have is a civil conversation. It's not one intended to change any student's beliefs (even when you might just want to do so), but rather to provide a safe and open forum for the expression of beliefs and the opportunity to explore the rationale behind them. If students can leave the classroom still sharing thoughts and maybe even laughing—"Good luck on getting a prom date!" one of the senior girls teases Brian—then we have had a good class and a meaningful conversation.

This is an issue I explore further in Chapter 6, but it's important to emphasize here that, despite the friction inherent in a difficult conversation, teachers need to encourage students to pursue these serious conversations and to honestly express their thoughts and opinions. Teachers should also be willing to admit to their own concerns in terms of voicing ideas on sensitive topics. I want my students to understand that we are all learning to navigate our way in this quickly changing world, and that takes courage. I tell them to remember that the classroom *is* a place of learning, and one thing they will continue to learn is how to use language and express controversial views appropriately with respect to societal norms. It is far better for students to learn these lessons—and to make mistakes—in the relative safety of a high school classroom rather than in the wider adult world where the consequences are far more severe.

Another reason it's important for teachers to emphasize their commitment to a safe and open classroom is that students can mistakenly believe they can be penalized for holding views different from that of the teacher. In one student's words, "I believe a lot of kids don't talk because they fear judgment, from peers who might think they're weird and stupid and from teachers who may come to dislike them or give them a bad grade." In the very first days of class, I make it clear to students that, at various times, all of us will likely hold widely differing views, but that this is a safe space and that everyone's views deserve to be heard. I don't shy away from expressing my personal views when we discuss controversial topics, but I stress that these opinions in no way affect my feelings toward students who might disagree, nor do they ever impact students' grades. It is, of course, easy enough to say this, and I know that students will come to truly believe it only when I demonstrate it. I do that by always welcoming diverse opinions and encouraging intelligent questions that help students

clarify their views for me and for their classmates. If there are moments in a class when it seems students are holding back, fearful of expressing what they believe, I might give them a few minutes to put their ideas on paper, and then I share these freewrites anonymously to get honest discussion going. Students quickly learn too that a well-written paper earns an A, whether I support its views or not, and, with the writer's permission, I often share such papers aloud with the class.

I truly appreciate the sentiment of that student who begins, "I don't want to offend anyone. . . ." I'd like to believe that most of us don't want to offend anyone, but it takes a remarkable blend of awareness, sensitivity, and diplomacy to avoid doing just that in many situations. For students soon to enter the adult world, the classroom may be their last opportunity to develop the skills necessary to engage honestly and positively with a wide and diverse world. If we, as educators, close off their opportunities for difficult conversation, we have narrowed their world and failed to give them the skills they need to make that world a better one.

I want to note one more thing that deeply impacts the potential for conversation in the classroom but that is out of the teacher's hands. This involves the home environment. Simply put, there are parents who encourage conversation within the family, and there are those who don't. Some students come to us from homes where conversation is an integral part of family life, while others live in families who, for a variety of reasons, do not make conversation a priority. Kids see the difference. Like Sean and Nina in the first part of this chapter, they recognize that in some families, parents work to make conversation happen (whether their children appreciate it or not!), while other parents are perhaps too busy or too overwhelmed by other family responsibilities to do so, or they may have fallen victim to the lure of technology themselves. One student writes, "In my house, my family is never really there. So we don't have many conversations," while another speaks regretfully of the increasing presence of technology:

> Conversations have gone away at home too. When I was younger I always went to a family friend's house. All of us would always play games or watch a movie together. However now I get to their house and all they want to do is sit on their phones. This is extremely annoying to me because I would enjoy playing a board game or just talking to them, but they can never focus due to the distraction of their phones.

As teachers, there is little we can do to change the quantity or quality of social interactions our students have within their families. I can, though, silently applaud the efforts of this father who, as his child writes, "will make my broth-

ers and I talk to the cashier or place orders over the phone and usually won't answer texts unless they're important if we don't call because he says we never have any human interaction." That writer is lucky to have a parent committed to helping them learn the art of conversation. But for those students whose homes are silent, we in our classrooms offer what is likely the next best chance they have to develop conversational skills. In a time when so many responsibilities that once belonged to other factions of society are now being put on us as educators, it can be easy to think, "Oh no, not one more thing." But this one thing—this ability to converse with one another—is one very important thing. It's the thing that gives us our humanity and allows us to share ourselves fully with the world.