

Not One Space for Y

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I see Y reading the comments her teacher left on her paper. She uses Google Translate to add perfectly spelled words clarifying a detail about her grandmother's aspiration to become literate. At least this is how I imagine Y to have prepared her college essay. I have not met Y. But I am certain that she never expected her writing to be the focus of a teachers' planning meeting.

On this Friday morning Zoom call, Y's English teacher is presenting her college essay as a possible exemplar to show other classes. "She isn't the best student," she concedes, "but this is a great piece of work."

"You know," my supervising teacher says, "she's got internet problems. That's why she doesn't complete many assignments. She lives in a small apartment with her mother's boyfriend. He's a misogynist. He calls her stupid and—" She lets out a sigh. "A real pig, to say the least."

After a lengthy discussion of Y's essay among the three English teachers, the art teacher breaks his silence. "Frankly, I don't think you should use her work." He speaks of her poor attendance, her refusal to talk to him, and her missing assignments. Finally, he adds, "I don't have space for her."

In an instant, I picture Y again, except this time she is trying to secure a stable Wi-Fi connection, all while tuning out threats hurled at her by a man she was forced to live with. How would Y feel if, having survived another day confined to the same walls as her mother's abusive boyfriend, she was finally able to log on to her art class only to realize that she was not welcome?

We, as teachers, tend to leave spaces for our students in various ways. We leave spaces by way of blank lines for names and empty chairs for latecomers. But we also leave less visible yet meaningful spaces for students to grow and learn. In a time of virtual classes, when our students are in need of human connection more than ever, it is this element of humanity that has been most difficult to preserve. Months of interacting with a grid of black squares on Zoom for five days a week have led many of us to develop a sense of isolation and emotional distance from the students whose faces we do not see. Some educators, including the art teacher, I suspect, have forgotten that it is a teacher's responsibility to create a space where all students feel they belong. When we deny our students access to this intangible but crucial space, we cast them out of the emotional and mental landscape of our classrooms.

As the only student teacher in this meeting, I want to unmute myself and denounce the cruelty of such rejection. Instead, taking a cue from everyone else, I nod along acceptingly, wondering if Y will ever know that her teacher held no space for her.

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