Beyond Blaming and Shaming: How to Learn From Our Digital Mistakes

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations, February 2016

By Rosalind Wiseman

What would high school be without photographs? Smiling couples at the homecoming dance, athletes racing down fields to win games, actors performing in the spring play. It’s ironic that as much as people describe the awkwardness, drama and sometimes misery of high school, the official school pictures only show the best and happiest of moments.
Official school pictures have always been as perfectly curated as today's middle schooler's Instagram page.

We know that technology has changed so much of our lives but it's also easy to lose sight of exactly how. Where we once had students walking around school to capture ‘official’ photos of what a school was like or the people who went there, that's no longer the case. Now every student using their phone can take an image that represents not only their life but can also end up representing an entire community.

For better and for worse, photos show spontaneous moments. Sometimes those moments frozen in time appear to reflect the worst of someone’s character. And sometimes these images reveal things that people in the community have turned a blind eye to and that actually need to be addressed. But in the firestorm that erupts afterwards, often any lessons that can be learned are lost in a cycle of blame and denial that dominates the discussion.

Here's the challenge we rarely talk about. An image never shows you the moments that lead up to when the person took the picture and rarely provides clarity or insight into the motivations of the people involved. All you know is what you think you see and then your individual biases and assumptions interpret the facts that seem so obvious.

A recent example took place at an Arizona high school when six white girls, after taking their official school pictures, wore t-shirts with individual letters on them and spontaneously arranged themselves to spell out the “n-word.”

There it was for the world to see: six smiling white girls posing for a picture on school grounds that spelled out the n-word. In a moment they not only looked racially ignorant or malicious, it also looked like they came from a community that supported their actions. Where were the teachers? Why didn’t another student stop them? What kind of community raised these awful girls?
It’s easy to blame. Not only the girls but everyone associated with them. And as usual, people did. When the image went viral, people all over the world felt justified to post self-righteous insults against the girls as well as their school, their school administrators, their parents and anyone else they could connect the girls to.

But those six girls went to a school with over 1400 students. For the most part, the people commenting on the story knew nothing about the past actions of the administrators, the girls’ parents, the community or the other students who attend that school.

In actuality, if you read the statements from the school administrators, they did exactly what they should have in their public comments on the issue: strongly condemn the girls’ actions and protect their privacy by refusing to say specifically what each one’s punishment would be until and unless it became public record.

It’s also clear from this Twitter post that many students did not agree with these students’ actions. And they want the world to know that.

When we hear about these moments in time—from people in our “real” lives to the moments we read or see online—we need to ask ourselves the following questions and talk to each other if we want to have a chance that we can learn from the experience.

- If you don’t know the people directly involved, what are your goals in commenting on and discussing these incidents.
- If you do know the people directly involved, how can their actions be discussed and even criticized without dehumanizing them?
- If the incident occurred in your community, what would be your goals in commenting on and discussing what happened?
- No matter how obvious it seems to you, what do you think the image was trying to communicate?
- Why do you think the people who took the photo wanted that image to represent them?
- How do we speak out against racist or other dehumanizing behavior without attacking the person whose actions are so hurtful?
- How do we all learn important lessons from this about how it should be unacceptable to attack someone online even when they've done something wrong?
- How do we stop others when they feel compelled to attack the person who has made this mistake, especially when they know little or nothing about the context or the people that were involved? How do we intervene?

Of course the conversations that come from answering any of these questions have the potential to be difficult—as in things can get heated. But having that discussion based on a process of self-reflection and listening to each other (i.e. being prepared to be changed by what you hear) is essential to learning from the experience no matter how we're involved, even if that involvement is limited to nothing but commenting online. We have to because we are in danger of having the most reactionary, thoughtless words dominate our online community and that impacts all of us no matter what community in which we live.

"Here's the challenge we rarely talk about. An image never shows you the moments that lead up to when the person took the picture and rarely provides clarity or insight into the motivations of the people involved. All you know is what you think you see and then your individual biases and assumptions interpret the facts that seem so obvious."