“YOUR VIEWS SHOWED TRUE IGNORANCE!!!”:
(Mis)Communication in an online interracial discussion forum

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Abstract

In this article I focus on the dynamics of interracial electronic communication by studying the asynchronous posts made by 75 students from across the country to an online Affirmative Action/Diversity discussion forum. Drawing from my textual analysis of the posts and from my interviews with the most active participants—five students from four institutions—I examine the misunderstandings that arose in this interracial discussion, situating the causes and consequences of the students’ discourse within both the local context of the electronic forum and within wider cultural patterns. I show that flaming cannot be easily identified as destructive communication because posts that seem to be violent attacks intended to shut down dialogue may be attempts by writers to educate other, and posts that do not seem to be violent attacks may actually perpetuate an “othering” that is more destructive to interracial communication than online shouting. I conclude by suggesting strategies for facilitating more productive electronic discussions about race and racism.

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“Too little of our work in computers and writing, however, has considered the persistence of racial difference in electronic environments.”

–Todd Taylor (1997)

“Clearly… the Internet is no panacea for creating equity within a diverse environment or for healing racial divisions that are firmly woven into the fabric of American society. However, the creation of a multicultural classroom, whether real or ‘virtual,’ is one step in unraveling the ideological fabric of such divisions.”

–Michael Bennett and Kathleen Walsh (1997)

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1. Introduction

Each semester for the past two years, my composition students have participated in the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project (IEDP). Founded in 1996, the IEDP is a teaching and learning collaborative that enables students from across the country to discuss via asynchronous posts social and political issues in the United States (Intercollegiate, 2001). As an instructor involved with the project, I ask students in my classes to participate because I want them to write to and receive feedback from a more diverse group than is possible in any one classroom on any one campus. I also hope that they will gain experience in participating in deliberative discourse that is more concerned with what Phil Burns (1999), another IEDP instructor, called “the ‘give and take’ of public reasons” than with winning an argument and that recognizes that “learning to cooperate [to continue the discussion]... is more important than achieving consensus on any given issue” (p. 137). Each semester the number of classes participating in the IEDP varies, as do the specific discussion topics of the electronic forums. But the regional, racial, and socio-economic composition of the participants remains quite diverse, and it was particularly so in the fall of 2000, the semester I focus on for this study, when over 500 students from 18 institutions (public and private, two-year and four-year, single-sex and coed) in 8 states participated, including my first-year composition students. Using their real names and email addresses, students posted messages and replies in one (or more) chosen topic forums of the twenty available that fall. Although many instructors involved with the IEDP develop some (if not most) class discussions and assignments around the project, there are no faculty moderators in the forums; rather students conduct the discussions amongst themselves with the understanding that their instructors might log on occasionally to read their posts and that students can and should discuss with an instructor any occurrences in the forum that they feel are unacceptable.1

In general, the discussions in the IEDP exhibit respectful deliberation of the issues, particularly in such forums as those on science, health care, education, the environment, and the economy. But sometimes discussions do get heated, and participants seem less interested in listening to and engaging with the ideas of others and more interested in winning and defending their individual arguments. In my research I focus on those moments in the IEDP where conversations did not work, rather than those that did, because I believe that by identifying some of the underlying causes for the truncated discussions, we, as instructors, can help students and ourselves work through these points of stasis, making for more productive electronic communication.

When I examined the Fall 2000 IEDP forums, one of the indicators that I used to determine if a conversation was working was to look for incidents of flaming because I surmised that when a conversation reaches an impasse, students might be more likely to resort to flaming. At the time my understanding of flaming was shaped by definitions put forth by other composition researchers. Cynthia Selfe and Paul Meyer (1991) stated that flaming is “heated, emotional, sometimes anonymous, venting by a participant” (p. 170). Gail Hawisher (1992) wrote that “Flaming can include impoliteness, swearing, charged outbursts, and often a high use of superlatives” (p. 91), and in “The Rhetorics and Languages of Electronic Mail,” Hawisher and coauthor Charles Moran (1998) mentioned that the faceless, uncensored nature of email may produce “‘flaming’ or outrageous and often hurtful language” (p. 91). Common among
these definitions is the notion that flaming is emotional, charged, outrageous, somehow outside
the boundaries of polite conversation and thus rhetorically “destructive,” to use Chelley Vician
and Susan Brown’s (2000) categorization. Also common among these definitions and expla-
nations of flaming is the unstated—and, I think, the unintended—assumption that flaming is
something that can be easily identified and categorized. Or at least that was my assumption in
reading those definitions. When I started my research, I believed—erroneously—that I would
know flaming when I saw it, but I now realize that flaming cannot be identified or explained
without careful consideration of the specific rhetorical situation in which it occurs, includ-
ing an examination of the wider cultural and social positionings of the participants involved
(Thompsen, 1996). 2

Given the relatively unsupervised nature of the student exchanges in the IEDP (an issue
perhaps compounded that fall by the sheer volume of posts—over 3000 were made) I expected
when I read through the forums at the end of the semester to find occasional incidents of
flaming, particularly in often polarized discussion forums, like the Abortion forum or the Gun
Control forum. But in reading through the discussions, I found one of the highest rates of
flaming in the Affirmative Action/Diversity/Multicultural forum (henceforth referred to as the
Diversity forum), where I initially categorized 23 of the 185 posts as flaming. When I read
lines from the Diversity forum like:

YOUR VIEWS SHOWED TRUE IGNORANCE
HOW CAN YOU COMPARE A CAR TO A HUMAN BEING? HOW!!!!!!!!!!!!
STOP POINTING YOUR DIRTY FINGERS AT MINORITIES!
How can you say such a ridiculous thing?

I was dismayed because these statements seemed characterized less by rational deliberation
and more by impoliteness, charged outbursts, and emotional venting intent, it seemed, upon
shouting down and belittling others rather than furthering the dialogue.

While reading through the posts, I also wondered about the dynamics of interracial online
exchanges because in the Diversity forum, unlike in the other forums, I noticed that most
of the 75 participants explicitly positioned themselves within a racial or ethnic identity and
that often in their posts students referred to the named—or inferred—racial and ethnic iden-
tities of other participants. I also observed that all of the incidents of what I perceived as
flaming were directed by a student of one race toward a student of a different race, an ob-
servation that particularly disturbed me because it seemed that the forum, at least for the
most active participants, had only served to heighten, not lessen, the racial divide in our
country.

From my textual analysis of the students’ posts and from interviews with the most active par-
ticipants, I realized the same cultural factors that make face-to-face interracial communication
difficult—factors described in detail by such educational researchers as Alice McIntyre (1997),
Beverly Tatum (1997), and Helen Fox (2001)—are also present in electronic discussions. As
Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman (2000) explained in the introduction to Race
in Cyberspace, “... race matters in cyberspace precisely because all of us who spend time
online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters off-line, and we can’t help but
bring our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on” (pp. 4–5). As my
analysis will show, the discursive practices of the participants in the Diversity forum—how
they read and responded to posts—were influenced in large part by the cultural and societal contexts shaping each individual’s experience.

I decided to focus my research on the frequent incidents of flaming—in all of its forms—because these were moments when the barriers to interracial communication were most evident. Drawing from my textual analysis of the posts and the participants’ reflections on their experience, I discuss the possible causes and consequences for these moments of miscommunication. I also show that flaming is not that easy to define, particularly when situated within wider cultural contexts. I conclude by indicating how instructors might facilitate interracial electronic discussions because, as Christine Sleeter (1997) has pointed out, “Cross-racial dialogue about racism... is rare and difficult to develop and sustain” but it “is in all of our best interests to learn to engage in cross-racial dialogue about racism, for the expressed purpose of dismantling institutional racism, and addressing needs and issues that most people share” (p. x).

2. Theoretical positioning

My research of cross-institutional electronic interracial exchanges is shaped in part by my social constructionist positioning: I see meaning as something that is made and shaped by individuals and by the discourse communities to which they belong. Although individuals do have agency in choosing their utterances, they also express themselves, whether they are aware of it or not, within, through, and against the discursive formations of their communities (Duin & Hansen, 1994; Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1972). In the Diversity forum, I believe the flaming exchanges between the White students and the students of color can be understood in relation to the discursive patterns of White privilege (Fox, 2001; Moon, 1999; Rains, 1998; Tatum, 1997) and White talk (McIntyre, 1997), as well as the “burden of memory” imposed by the ongoing racial injustices and violence in this country (hooks, 1995, p. 41).

At the same time that I recognize the importance of situating an individual’s utterances in wider cultural contexts, I am also leery of extrapolating too broadly from one student’s experience. Todd Taylor (1997) argued that those scholars who do examine issues of difference, including racial differences, often fall into an essentializing trap, making broad generalizations without qualifying their statements or conclusions. Because my study draws on interviews with five students—two White students and three students of color—and because I want to focus on flaming from the perspective of the students who wrote and received potentially flaming posts, sections of my analysis are based upon the perspectives of only one or two students. Where possible I attempt to broaden the basis for my observations by including the posts of students I did not interview to show that discursive tendencies I note in one student’s post are also evident in the posts of others.

Another issue I want to foreground is one with which I struggle and with which I think anyone who researches or participates in interracial discussions struggles and that is how to talk about racial identity and what terms to use. Students named their ethnicity and race in many ways in the Diversity forum, using terms like Asian American, biracial, Black, Caucasian, Chinese American, Hispanic, Irish American, Jamaican-born, Latina, Puerto Rican, and white, to cite just a few. When I refer to a specific student, I use the racial or ethnic terminology that he or she self-identified with in posts to the IEDP or in an interview. When I discuss racial
groups in general—and for this study I focus on two general groups (a focus I’ll explain in the following)—I choose to refer to all students of European and Caucasian descent as White because that is how most students identified themselves. By capitalizing the term, I wish to draw attention to this often-unexamined racial identity. I refer to all students of African descent as Black because, as Beverly Tatum (1997) explained, “The term is more inclusive than African American, because there are Black people in the United States who are not African American, Afro-Caribbeans, for example, yet are targeted by racism, and are identified as Black” (p. 15, original emphasis). I also use the term people of color because I find it more inclusive than the inaccurate term minorities and much less offensive than the term non-White. Although I recognize that any racial categorization is problematic and that race is an illusionary social construction—we are all hybrids as Thomas West and Gary Olson (1999) have pointed out—I also feel, to quote Tatum (1997) again, that: “it is difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that is itself problematic. We have to be able to talk about it in order to change it” (p. 17).

I also struggle with how my research examines the miscommunication in the forum through the lens of race creating a focus that I realize simplifies the complex interrelationships among and between individuals. People’s identities and the discourse they produce are influenced by so many different cultural factors that I worry about generalizing based solely on one aspect of a person’s multiple identities, particularly an aspect as politically, historically, and socially contested as racial identity. Yet when certain rhetorical elements might result from a person’s racial positioning, or when a deeper understanding of the rhetoric employed might be gained from situating an individual’s discourse in the potential larger patterns of his or her racial community, then I do not think scholars should shy away from such fields of inquiry. What I found in the Diversity forum was that there were distinct separations in perspective between the majority of the White students and the majority of the Black students—differences that were caused by their conceptions of racial identities and their differing experiences in the society because of their racial identities.

I also think it is important that I explicitly state my own cultural positioning as a White, middle-class female academic who attended schools comprised predominantly of White students and White instructors because this positioning definitely biased my research. As I noted earlier, I first read the posts made to the Diversity forum with expectations for netiquette and with definitions for flaming shaped by the discursive practices of White privilege. To be honest I initially thought that many of the responses Black students posted to White students’ comments were outrageous overreactions; I wondered why, when presented with what seemed like slightly close-minded, but polite discourse from White students, the Black students had to SHOUT back. I also thought—erroneously—that flaming statements only occurred in the Black students’ posts. But upon closer analysis, an analysis informed by my interviews with the most active participants in the forum, I realize the bias in my initial observations. Posts that did not seem to be violent attacks, at least to me as a White researcher, may actually perpetuate a violent “othering” that is more destructive to interracial communication than all-capital online shouting, and posts that initially seemed to be merely destructive emotional venting were actually attempts by writers to express their anger in ways intended not to shut down dialogue but to produce the necessary conditions upon which further dialogue could occur. I know that I cannot avoid bias in my research, but what I can do is to
try to become aware of it and to be sure to note it wherever possible, as I do throughout this article.

3. Methodology

In setting out to research the IEDP and interracial electronic communication in particular, I located several studies that focused on cross-institutional and cross-cultural electronic communication between students in the United States and other countries (Ma, 1996; Meagher & Castaños, 1996; Shamoon, 1998) between pairs of high school students (Whitaker & Hill, 1998), and between pairings of classes at regionally and socio-economically diverse colleges within the United States (Craig, Harris & Smith, 1998). But I located only two studies (one resulting in two publications) that focused on cross-institutional communication between White students and Black students. Michael Bennett and Kathleen Walsh (1997) used the Internet for a classroom of predominantly White students in Oregon to exchange responses to reading questions about Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a classroom of predominantly students of color in New York. Teresa Redd and Victoria Massey (1997) explored issues of orality, community, and enfranchisement in relation to emails exchanged between pairs of Howard University students and Montana State University students as they discussed drafts of essays on racism written by the Howard University students. In a separate article about this same exchange Teresa M. Redd (1998) explored issues of accommodation and resistance exhibited by her Howard University students as they revised (or didn’t revise) their essays for their mostly White audience of Montana State University students. Although the authors of these studies do acknowledge that their students encountered differences in perception when reading the comments made by students of different races, there was less examination upon the online negotiations of the students as they encountered and reacted to their differences (and their similarities). Perhaps because of the structure of the student exchanges—either posting responses to set reading questions or providing comments on drafts—incidents of flaming did not occur. Although the study I present here is limited in scope, it is, I believe, unique in its approach, situating interracial electronic miscommunication explicitly within wider racial patterns of discourse through textual analysis of students’ online postings and through interviews with students at multiple institutions.

The posts made to the fall IEDP occurred on a password-protected Blackboard site that, as an instructor involved with the project, I had permission to read. Of the 75 participants in the Diversity forum, 49 posted just once, 9 posted twice, 4 posted three times, and 13 posted four or more times. Of the thirteen students who posted most frequently, six were White (four female, two male), five were Black (three female, two male), two were Asian American (both female), and one was Puerto Rican (female). I focus my analysis on the exchanges between White students and Black students because the majority of the students who posted to the Diversity forum and the majority of those who flamed or were flamed (as I will show) were from those two general racial groups.

After mailing consent forms to students, I received permission from some of the students to quote their posts and interview them. Fortunately, I received permission from 11 of the 13 most active participants, whose posts accounted for 44% of those made (82 out of 185). I was
also fortunate in my research in that the most frequent participants attended schools within 200 miles of me, and five of them—Alexander, Kayla, Matthew, Patrick, and Regina—graciously agreed to be interviewed. In the face-to-face interviews, I primarily asked students open-ended questions: What do you remember most about participating in the forum? Could you look through your posts and talk to me about specific ones? To whom were you responding? What did you hope to accomplish? How did you feel when you read (or wrote) that? How would you define flaming? And how do you think this conversation would have been different if it were face-to-face? Occasionally, I would direct participants’ attention to a specific post (collected and printed out in binders that I shared with the students), but most often they flipped through the binder and directed my attention to posts of their choosing. My research draws primarily from the posts either written by or mentioned by the students I interviewed. Except for Patrick (who was not able to recall much from the forum, in part, I think, because he only received two responses to his four posts), I was amazed at the recall students showed even though I was interviewing them the semester after their participation had finished. In this article, I draw most frequently from the interviews and posts of Alexander, Kayla, Matthew, and Regina.

The last question I asked in the interviews was “How would you like me to describe you when I write this up? For example, I will identify myself as a White middle-class woman who attended schools with predominantly White students and White teachers.” Alexander identified himself as a half-Nigerian, half-Russian Black man, born in the United States who was raised in a predominantly Black community and who attended a high school that was, in his words, “99.9% Black.” Kayla described herself as White, explaining that the high school she attended was “diverse in that at least 40% of the school was either Asian or Middle Eastern descent.” Matthew said, “I am African American, but Caribbean-descent; both of my parents are from Jamaica” and that he grew up in racially diverse neighborhoods and attended racially diverse schools. Patrick identified himself as a White, Irish American, and the high school he attended was predominantly White. Regina, who immigrated with her parents to the United States when she was a child, explained that she is not “really African American... I’m from Kenya, so I’m African,” but that she was just a “regular kid” growing up in a diverse neighborhood.

4. Barriers to interracial electronic communication about race

4.1. “What people know and what people don’t know”: a cultural divide

When asked what she remembered most about her participation in the Diversity forum, Regina said: “It surprised me how people didn’t really know what I thought was general knowledge.” She added later that she felt that the IEDP was “helpful because then you get to find out what people know and what people don’t know.”

The assumptions and miscommunication created by “what people know and don’t know” were the leading causes for tension in the Diversity forum. In the numerous threads about Affirmative Action (the most discussed topic in the forum), the friction created by the differing cultural positionings of the White students and the Black students manifested itself most strongly when students discussed whether Affirmative Action is needed and whether American society is discriminatory or not. Most of the White students in the forum based their arguments
against Affirmative Action on the premise that they took to be a given, that discrimination based on race no longer occurs in this country, except maybe among overtly racist groups like the KKK or with overtly racist individuals. Because all individuals have equal opportunities, they argued that admission policies need to be “race-blind,” otherwise a reverse discrimination against Whites would occur.5

... The law has caught up with the times. While in the past there was discrimination and no protection for those harmed by racist policies, today we have the deterrence of, and punishment, by, laws to counter the negative affects of racist attitudes. Racism will never go away, there will always be ignorance, but with the laws we have had in place since the mid-1900s, racists cannot bring their feelings to the office or school. . . (Sarah, 9/26)

I think that affirmative action has outlived its usefulness. When society was still dominated by racial prejudice, it was a good idea, but know that is ended. There is obviously still a certain level of prejudice, but this is not enough to cause a significant problem. It is only the uninformed who hold onto these prejudices . . . All affirmative action does is to emphasize the role that discrimination once played in our [society]. It is important that this part of history not be forgotten, but affirmative action is not the way to ensure this. The only thing that it accomplishes is reversing previous discrimination. Originally it was meant to provide people, who had been discriminated against, the opportunities that had previously been unavailable to them. Now these opportunities have become available to everyone. Our society has progressed past this point so now we must realize that affirmative action is no longer necessary. (Robert, 10/4)

These posts exhibit typical elements of what some scholars define as White discourse, including denial of the benefits of White privilege—the advantages a White person receives simply by being White—and the unwillingness (conscious or unconscious) to recognize the implications of institutional and epistemic racism (Fox, 2001; hooks, 1995; McIntosh, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Moon, 1999; Rains, 1998; Tatum, 1997; Wildman & Davis, 1997). Because White people are not often asked to consider what it means to be White, they tend to engage in what Alice McIntyre (1997) in her study of White inservice teachers called “White talk,” a discourse that reflects in part a “unidimensional perspective of racism, situating racism in the individual, and perceiving it as unrelated to a constellation of societal, institutional, and cultural factors” (p. 99). It might seem that this unidimentional perspective could simply be attributed to the relative youth of the participants in the Diversity forum—most were in their late teens or early twenties—but as Thomas West (1997) pointed out in his examination of a discussion on race in a predominantly White listserv for composition faculty and administrators, college students are not alone in this action. West argued that White discursive norms set up racists as “others” so that individuals can easily condemn individual Whites for being racist to “both ignore their participation in racist culture and deflect tough questions they might ask themselves” (p. 222). For many White people, and I certainly include myself in this critique, it is easier to think of racism as occurring in individuals rather than to recognize the innumerable ways that White individuals benefit from inherently racist social systems. Because of their immersion in this culture of denial, most of the White students in the Diversity forum did not recognize that “White privilege is the invisible corollary to racism” (Rains, 1998, p. 80), and they were able “to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all” (McIntosh, 1997, p. 298).
Many of the students of color in the forum responded with shock, anger, and outrage at the premises upon which many White students based their arguments. Some expressed their opinions in non-inflammatory ways, such as “When debating the issue of Affirmative Action, there are a few questions we must consider first” (Amanda, 9/30). But other students responded more forcefully, and I quote from posts made by two students I interviewed, Alexander and Matthew:

...As for the talk that racism is no longer an issue and is over now. You are extremely naïve. That’s why racial profiling is a problem, right? That’s why I got pulled over last week for looking like I was lost because I was going to a friend’s house in an affluent white suburb? That’s why the LA police department is under the most intensified police investigation for their wrong doings in framing and convicting possibly hundreds to thousands of people? that’s why I can’t get a cab uptown? That’s why I can tell someone I’m VP of my Senior class and someone ask me really? How?” That’s how a man can get shot 41 times in his home, unarmed, AND THE POLICE ARE FOUND INNOCENT OF EXCESSIVE USE OF FORCE!!... (Matthew, 10/5)

The ignorance of your comment is unbelievable! Discrimination is a huge problem in our society! I do not understand how you don’t see it? I will go for a strong assumption and assume that you are not minority, nor a woman because discrimination is not apparent to you. ...Discrimination is not show with acts such as slavery and extermination in death camps, but it still exists today severely. Look at racial profiling, look at job placement, and distribution of money to minority owned businesses businesses owned by women. To say discrimination does not exist, is like saying we do not need air to breathe anymore. It happens a lot in the world now. (Alexander, 10/21)

OPEN YOUR EYES... CAN YOU NOT SEE THESE THINGS [discriminatory acts] WITH YOUR OWN EYES? DO YOU AGREE WITH THE RACIST AND OFFENSIVE COMMENTS OF OUR FORMER PRESIDENT THAT SAID WE SHOULD LIVE IN A COLOR BLIND SOCIETY? (Matthew, 10/16)

The common thread in these retorts is disbelief that the White students cannot see discrimination in our society. Whereas the White students speak of racism and discrimination as distant, anonymous actions unrelated to themselves, a characteristic of “Whitespeak” as defined by Dreama Moon (1999), the Black students responded with their personal experiences with racism. It is this personal experience that accounts in part for the anger in their posts.

Initially, before I interviewed Matthew and Alexander, I thought these posts were flames because of their anger, their emotional outrage, and, in places, their impolite venting intended, perhaps, to shout down and thus to silence the participants to whom they responded. (Unfortunately I was not able to interview Robert and Sarah, the two students to whom Matthew and Alexander directed the posts I cited here.) But in their interviews Matthew and Alexander did not see their posts as impolite or outrageous, nor did they intend for them to shut down dialogue. They both noted that they were trying to reach the White participants, not just to educate them about the real effects of racism, but in hopes of improving social institutions now and in the future. Alexander said he was saddened to think that “it’s going to be people like them [the White students who said discrimination doesn’t exist] running the corporations, being president, being teachers, psychologists, whatever. High prominent positions in society
Matthew felt that the purpose for all of his posts was to try to educate others. "It's like each one, teach one. I don't know, this person could quite honestly be sitting behind a desk and hiring one of my kids. . . . so I would hate for them to have these views. . . . I can't believe that these people really feel that racism doesn't still exist. That baffles me."

Although shouting and calling someone's views ignorant may seem to be an ineffective rhetorical strategy for persuasion, there is perhaps a need for such direct statements of anger. In a brief discussion of flaming in *Rhetorical Ethics and Internetworked Writing*, James Porter (1998) speculated that "We might see flaming as representing the willingness of writers to speak plainly and bluntly and angrily when the circumstances warrant" (p. 130). Michael Dyson has asserted that "the impoliteness of certain people must be permitted because their pain is deep and unheeded. We must surely shatter the rituals of correctness and civility to hear from those whose voices have been shut out, where the ability even to articulate pain and rage has been delegitimized through social stigma" (Chennault, 1998, p. 314). And in "Rethinking Negotiation in Composition Studies," Thomas West and Gary Olson (1999) argued that negotiation can "act as a strategy of colonization disguised as civil interaction" (p. 241), where participants are expected to rationally and civilly accommodate each other's views. This enforced politeness, according to West and Olson, eliminates passion; what is needed instead is "critical negotiation," an understanding of negotiation that more consciously evokes its Latin roots: *to create a sense of unease* (p. 243, original emphasis). Certainly, the posts quoted earlier "shatter the rituals of correctness and civility," particularly in an online forum where using all capital letters is considered shouting, but when considered in the framework of the topics discussed in the Diversity forum, perhaps some direct expressions of anger intended to create unease in others are necessary to establish the conditions under which further dialogue may occur. If in an interracial discussion about Affirmative Action and racial discrimination, many Whites do not even acknowledge that racial discrimination exists, then how can there be a productive dialogue? Given, as educational researchers have noted, how difficult it is to get White people to see racism as "a system of advantage that structurally benefits Whites and disadvantages people of color on the basis of group membership" (Tatum, 1997, p. 103), expressions of passion in this Diversity forum, even when directed sharply at individuals, should not immediately be dismissed as flaming, but considered by researchers, instructors, and participants as potentially productive rhetorical devices.

However, although the potential for emotional outbursts to further the discussion seems productive in theory, getting the person to whom the angry post has been directed to recognize this appears a difficult proposition, and I am not so certain, at least in the Diversity forum, that direct expressions of anger did serve to further the discussion. Thus, even though Matthew's and Alexander's intent was educational ("each one, teach one"), their posts most likely did function as destructive flames for the participants who received them. These differing perceptions of sender and receiver—educational plea versus potentially angry attack—points to the complicated nature of flaming and raises a number of questions. How should we define and understand flaming? By the intent of the sender? The reaction of the receiver? The effect of the 'flame' on the discussion? By some other criterion altogether? As I analyzed the posts to the forum and as I interviewed participants about the causes and consequences of their miscommunication about race and racism, these questions of audience reception versus authorial intent,
questions complicated by the faceless nature of electronic environments, kept resurfacing for me, as they will in more detail throughout the rest of my discussion.

4.2. “How do you know you’re more qualified?”: an assumed hierarchy

When I interviewed Alexander, Matthew, and Regina, they each talked about incidents of racism they’ve faced in their lives and how angry reading many of the posts in the Diversity forum made them feel because it seemed that the White students dismissed both the reality of their lives and their qualifications to be in school. White students who opposed Affirmative Action in the forum (and most of them did), often evoked the notion of merits or qualifications in their posts.

...Some of us worked hard to be where we are, while others got in because of Affirmative Action. This is not to say that all those who benefit from Affirmative Action are lazy or that they are ALL undeserving but some of them are, and that is why the whole program is harmful... (Sarah, 9/26)

...Affirmative Action is wonderful in theory because it promotes a racially balanced society. In practice it simply does not work. Affirmative action promotes feeling of inequality among races. After having just completed the college process, I can vividly remember people talking about how unfair it was that minority students received special consideration purely because of their skin color. Is America a country not based on merit? When did we stop judging people on the basis of their talent and performance?... (Jake, 10/4)

In the first post to the forum, a post with the subject line “the problem with affirmative action,” Kayla, one of the students I interviewed, wrote:

...I feel that affirmative action is reverse discrimination and is therefore wrong. If I get rejected from a university and a student who is African American gets accepted even though I am more qualified, then I was rejected because I am white and that’s discrimination. Admission to universities should be race-blind and be based solely on qualification. I agree that minorities need to be given opportunities, but affirmative action is not the right way to do it... Affirmative action also leads to an increase in tensions among the many races and ethnicities of this nation by amplifying the importance of race in society. The way to end the discrimination that has been taking place for so long is not by transferring the discrimination to another race. (Kayla, 9/19)

When she made the above post, Kayla said that she “was hoping to try to convince people... that the major problem I had was if universities would lower their standards.” But because of her tone, her immediate identification of Affirmative Action as a problem, and her example of “If I get rejected,” her post did not succeed, at least with people of color. The assumptions—intended or not—in the above posts that Affirmative Action is for unqualified students rankled a number of students, including two African American students who replied to the White students:

First let me say that I am generally offended by some of the opposition towards Affirmative Action. I am not offended because you oppose it but because you all have said that people who benefit from this program are less qualified to be in the institutions that Affirmative Actions allowed them to be in... (Gail, 10/5).
As for the talk that racism is no longer an issue and is over now. You are extremely naïve. That’s why you can look at a minority student who got into college that you wanted to get into and got denied and say they were “less qualified.” Am I not qualified to be here too? Racism is far far from over (Matthew, 10/5).

Regina, who lurked the first couple of weeks in the forum, remembered being upset when she read the White students posts against Affirmative Action. In her interview, when asked to provide an example of what specifically upset her, Regina pointed to Kayla’s first post and read aloud the first few sentences, explaining “It’s like how do you know if you’re more qualified than me? To me it felt like you don’t even know if you’re qualified or not, if you’re more qualified than that African American... So how can she just go and be like the African American got chosen because I’m white and she’s black, you know? ... I was just like that’s B.S. I don’t need that. You don’t have to come up with it—it still pisses me off.” Kayla’s post, while not emotionally charged and while less generalizing than some of the posts made by other White students, was still perceived as flaming by the students I interviewed because of its assertion (whether unintended or not) that people of color are less qualified than Whites.

4.3. “Nobody’s looking at what I’m doing”: the effects of the interface

When I asked Regina how she thought her reaction to Kayla’s first post would be different if they were conversing face-to-face, she noted that reading the post rather than talking may have made her more angry because “when you read this—it’s like one thing catches you. That’s what makes you angry so you go directly for it. You just start jabbing at it, jabbing at it. And maybe you don’t really have to jab ‘cause it’s not really what you think it is.” She explained that face-to-face “it would be easier to hold your anger back” and that she could ask questions of Kayla who could then explain “But I don’t mean that; I mean this.”

Even though the inability to ask for and receive an immediate explanation from a person was a drawback, Regina also thought that an electronic forum like the IEDP was better than a face-to-face interracial discussion because people “were honest about how they felt.” Matthew too felt that an electronic forum had benefits because he wondered whether some of the White students would have been as open in a face-to-face discussion, particularly given that “if I met [Kayla] and [Sarah] and they’re like this tall [holds his hand at shoulder-level] and I towered over them. I wonder if we would have the same dialogue if I’m sitting this close face-to-face to them.” Alexander also believed that in an electronic environment “You’re definitely more honest, definitely so because you’re like ‘Nobody’s looking at what I’m doing. I can say what I want.’”

Whereas these three students of color believed that online interactions were ultimately more beneficial than face-to-face interracial discussions for promoting honesty (particularly, in their opinion, from the White participants), Kayla thought that a face-to-face discussion would have been better. In her interview she explained that “it would have been very toned down” and that everyone would have been “a lot more concerned with coming across in a more positive light.” According to Kayla, “Things done by Internet are so much easier to go totally ballistic and irrationalize because no one really knows who you are... You forget and you don’t worry as much about hurting other people’s feelings.” When I asked her if she worried about hurting other people’s feelings, she explained:
Yeah, I didn’t want to come across as very confrontational... And I didn’t want to be remembered as the confrontational one... I try to put my feelings across in a proper way. I definitely didn’t want to be remembered as someone who had been irrational and offensive to other people... I tried to reach common ground by making my views from a rational standpoint. Because I’m a big believer that if you think about something rationally you can usually start to see the other side even if you don’t agree with it.

Yet despite Kayla’s efforts to be “proper” and nonconfrontational, at least judging from both the replies to her posts from people of color and the comments of the students I interviewed—Alexander, Matthew, and Regina—her attempts at “rationality” not only did not succeed at reaching common ground, but were actually perceived as flaming attacks.

Kayla was the most active participant in the forum, making a total of 15 posts. Even when her posts expressed views similar to other White students who posted less frequently than she did, her posts were the ones that attracted the most heated responses and the most controversy. Whereas some of the White students in the forum wrote in response to Kayla’s posts that they agreed with her one student wrote “I wanted to applaud [Kayla] on her contribution to the discussion” [Jake, 10/4] and when I interviewed Patrick, he said that he found her posts the most persuasive because she used “fact after fact” that “really made you think” no student of color did. In one post to Kayla, Matthew wrote that he was “tired of your stats an statistics” (10/5), which he pointed out came from sources potentially biased toward Whites. Regina explained that she responded as angrily as she did to Kayla in part because, as she said, “I had this animosity already built up,” especially from the first post of the forum, which Kayla titled “the problem with affirmative action.” Regina described how Kayla’s posts “struck a bone” in her because when she tried to explain her views to Kayla, she felt, “She didn’t show that she could go both ways or that she could understand what somebody was saying. She was like, ‘This is my point. My point is right. Whatever you say does not matter.’ That’s like me trying to speak to you and you’re like, ‘Nope, I won’t listen. Nope, I won’t listen.’... She didn’t look like she could be reasoned with.” At one point in the forum, Regina posted to Kayla, “You seem to look at things at one outlook, all I am saying is that maybe what someone is stating means more then what you look or give it to mean” (10/25) and in her interview Regina commented that “if [Kayla] had just explained herself more and explained why she felt that way maybe somebody like me would understand it that this is how she feels. And then I could put myself more, maybe like, try to push myself inside instead of just jabbing.”

When I mailed a draft of this paper to Kayla, requesting feedback and input if she had time (as I did for all participants I interviewed) she wrote back:6

I did not intend for any one of my posts to come across the way they did, but once I read your paper and the responses of the other students toward my comments, I realized what my posts must have sounded like to them... I approached the forum with the idea that good, intellectual writing should be devoid of personal feelings... I think this could have caused many students to believe I was unwilling to alter my views. I truly did not intend for this to be the case.

Unfortunately I did not ask Kayla to explain what she meant by “good, intellectual writing,” but based upon her comments and her posts, I surmise that she approached the online environment with more formal standards for writing that excluded the personal and followed a pattern of pick a thesis and argue for it. Although this writing strategy may be “proper,” to
echo Kayla’s earlier phrase, in some academic venues, in the give-and-take of an online discussion forum this strategy was too rigid, closing down dialogic exchange, which was, as Kayla notes, certainly not what she intended. Kayla explained to me that she had never participated in an online forum before, so when she made the first post to the Diversity forum, she only had her prior experiences with off-line writing on which to rely. Unfortunately, her transfer of an off-line writing strategy into an online environment created a fissure not only between herself and some of the other participants, but also between her intended meaning for her messages and what they actually conveyed. Although the other participants I interviewed did not mention this tension, I still wonder how many others whom I didn’t interview may have also experienced difficulties and disjunctures when they wrote using off-line strategies in an online environment.

4.4. ‘Don’t they know how to read?’: universal audiences

Besides the potential difficulties of the online interface and besides White students’ denial of their implication in systems of oppression, the differing conceptions of history underlying the discussion were another factor contributing to the misunderstandings and miscommunication among the participants. According to bell hooks (1995), the “representations of whiteness in the black imagination” are often linked with “rituals of terror and torture” (p. 39). Whereas White Americans have the opportunity “to erase and deny” or to “reinvent the past,” Black Americans must “bear the burden of memory” (p. 41), meaning that although the atrocities of slavery are a horrible, but distant event to most White people, to many Black people, slavery (and its modern-day aftereffects) is still a real event. The impact on interracial communication of these differing conceptions of history—distant past and present-day marker—can be seen in the exchanges made in a thread discussing possible reparations for slavery.

At one point in the discussion, Kayla posted that there should be no reparations for slavery. I quote her post at length because her manner of argumentation (again, without her intending it to) offended many of the participants in the forum.

While I think that this lawsuit is a really audacious venture, I don’t agree with it. Slavery formally ended in this nation 135 years ago, and no one who owned slaves, owned businesses which benefited from slavery, or fought for the south during the Civil War is still alive. I think that it is unfair to prosecute and seek reparations from private and public parties when the people who work for and own these “parties” had nothing to do with slavery. It is part of our Constitution (1:9:3) that no one can be tried for a criminal offense that was committed before it was considered a criminal offense. For example, let’s say that I own a purple car. Several months after I buy this purple car, the state makes a law that says no one can own a purple car. The state cannot prosecute me for owning a purple car during these months before it was a law since while I owned the car it was legal.

While this suit would be civil in nature, I believe that the ex post facto theory should still apply. Why should we punish those that had nothing to do with slavery? If those seeking reparations win this suit, companies could be forced to lay off workers, or could possibly go bankrupt (especially if it was a small company part of a larger industry). I think that we can all agree that this would not be fair to those innocent workers.
I can see why the parties seeking reparations would request a formal apology (I think that a formal apology is needed), but I don’t think that money should be involved. It is wrong to fine someone for a “crime” that they didn’t commit, did not participate in, and weren’t even alive for... (Kayla, 11/8).

Surprisingly, to me at least, what bothered people the most about this post was not the assumption that those who benefited from slavery are no longer alive, but Kayla’s purple car analogy. Perhaps in some contexts, such as an all-White discussion forum, an example of a car to explain an aspect of the legal code might be effective. But in the Diversity forum when presented in the context of a discussion about reparations for slavery, the analogy became a focal point of controversy causing many Black students to respond with anger.

Let me get this right, YOU are COMPARING a CAR to a HUMAN BEING! an inanimate object to a human, to someone who might have been LIKE YOU AND ME! You have every right to express yourself and what you believe in, but PLEASE DO NOT COMPARE A HUMAN BEING TO A CAR TO A HOUSE OR TO ANYTHING. I wonder before you send your posts do you read them? Please answer my questions HOW CAN YOU COMPARE A CAR TO A HUMAN BEING? HOW!!!!!!!!!!

think before you speak, don’t be so quick to return a comment, because that’s what it looks like! A car to a human being. “must have took you a long time to came up with that one.” Think just a little harder, just try! (Regina, 11/8).

Are you referring to the ignorant misconception that slaves were property? Because if you are you are just as ignorant as those who lived and practiced slavery 135 years ago. I wanna know what planet some people living on because I don’t think we are living on the same planet. From reading this and your previous posts I can conclude that some of you (not all of you) obviously have lived sheltered lives and have no clue about race relations in this country... Can’t you see the root of tensions between African-Americans dates all the way back to the founding of America by the beginning of slavery!!!! THE POINT IS THAT AFRICAN-AMERICANS ARE NOT AND NEVER WERE OBJECTS AND SHOULD NOT HAVE BEEN CONSIDERED PROPERTY!!!!!!!! (Amanda, 11/9).

Regina’s all-capital emphasis on “LIKE YOU AND ME,” the tone near pleading in her post, and Amanda’s use of the present tense “ARE NOT AND NEVER WERE OBJECTS” shows how they read the purple car analogy not as an illustration of ex-post facto laws, but as a bitter and painful reminder that Whites today can still think—even if unintentionally—of slaves as legal property (and by inference, possibly, even themselves).

In response to these replies, Kayla posted to the forum that she “did not mean to offend anyone” and that she used the example of a purple car because she “wanted an example that everyone could easily relate to” and she thought “this one seemed to easily demonstrate ex post facto at work” (11/5). The phrase, “an example that everyone could easily relate to,” highlights how differing cultural assumptions—assumptions particularly about universal audiences—can lead to miscommunication. According to Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969), “When a speaker selects and puts forward premises that are to serve as foundations for his argument, he relies on his hearers’ adherence to the propositions from which he will start” (p. 65). When determining what propositions an audience is likely to accept, a rhetor constructs,
both consciously and unconsciously, a “universal audience” (p. 30), an audience comprised of people whom the rhetor believes would reasonably accept as valid a variety of premises. What makes a universal audience universal is that the rhetor, the constructor of the audience, believes that the audience universally shares and accepts the same values as “real, true, and objectively valid” (p. 33, in original emphasis). But the name universal is misleading because there is no such thing as one universal audience; instead, “Each individual, each culture, has thus its own conception of the universal audience” (p. 33).

Because Kayla erroneously assumed that her example was one to which everyone should easily relate, she was angry at what she perceived to be willful misreadings by Regina and other students of color in the forum. In her interview she commented:

When I got the email replies, I ran directly down to my friend’s room and I was like, ‘Can you believe this? Look at this. They’re accusing me of doing this. I didn’t do this at all. Don’t they know how to read?’ I was really mad. Very frustrated again because of the fact that people weren’t listening and looking and trying to understand what I was saying. They were making these split second assumptions about the fact that I was comparing slavery to cars. Maybe they wouldn’t have done that had my previous posts been in defense of Affirmative Action. Maybe they just built me up and stereotyped me as the type of person who was not Civil Rights inclined or something.

Her attributing the angry responses she received to “split second assumptions” shows that just as most of the Black students did not easily relate to the purple car analogy, so too did Kayla not easily relate to their pain and anger over being equated with property. In her interview she said that she was accused of “comparing slavery to cars,” not, as it were, humans to cars, which may indicate the disconnect between her understanding of the purple car analogy and the students of color’s understandings. Because of her cultural distancing from slavery, Kayla’s post exhibited what was experienced by Regina and other students of color as a violent othering that was definitely damaging to interracial communication.

I find this exchange about the purple car analogy fascinating not only for what it reveals about the rhetorical impact of differing conceptions of history, but also for how it complicates any easy understanding or categorization of flaming. Kayla’s post falls within the bounds of “polite conversation,” doesn’t exhibit “emotional venting,” refrains from using all capitals, and yet it did have a “destructive” effect on communication. Should it be categorized as flaming? On the other hand, Regina’s and Amanda’s posts border on impoliteness, exhibit strong emotions, make frequent use of the shouting nature of the caps lock key, and most certainly resulted in a breakdown of communication. Yet there is something, at least for me, compelling in their emotional expressions that makes me feel that categorizing these posts as flames—a categorization that carries such negative connotations—does an injustice to their experience and to what they were attempting to convey. The complexity of this exchange, especially that no posts can be easily categorized, emphasizes for me the importance of studying online discourse only by in-depth consideration of the rhetorical context, including the perceptions and intentions of the participants. Because any application of the term flaming is so context-dependent, I wonder, despite my frequent employment of it in this article, if flaming is even a useful term to use. Perhaps it should be reserved for only the most obvious of insults—only one example of which I think existed in the Diversity forum.
4.5. “Your view is garbage Baby!!!”: the impact of anger

One post in the forum, a response by Alexander to Kayla’s first statement about Affirmative Action, was mentioned by each of the students I interviewed as having gone too far, and it is in this post that I believe offers—perhaps—the only explicit categorization for flaming in the Diversity forum. It is this post that I think was in part responsible for Kayla’s unwillingness to “show that she could go both ways” (to use Regina’s phrase). That is, the following post angered Kayla so greatly that it adversely affected the rest of her participation in the forum.

Your views are garbage!! Obviously, you do not know what affirmative action is!!… Now you do not understand what it is and if there were no affirmative action than your mother would not be as established as she is now either, now would she? I know not!!… Without affirmative action, your mother would be sweeping one of your professor’s floor, and I know you would hate that! Now I’m sorry to pounce on you like that, but you need to understand the entire purpose of affirmative action before you downgrade it. Do your homework baby then voice your views! (Alexander, 10/5)

Using the word “garbage” and mentioning Kayla’s mother were what most people identified as making Alexander’s post an example of an unacceptable attack. (I was surprised that no student commented on the sexism in the post, particularly Alexander’s use of the word “baby.”) Matthew noted that “the comment of she’d still be sweeping an office might have been a little much.” Regina said, “I can understand where he was coming from. But at the same time that kind of hurt her. That would hurt me.” Kayla was indeed hurt and insulted by this post, “Especially the whole thing about when he wrote... about my mother... I found that incredibly insulting, probably beyond anything else he ever said to me because I really admire my mother for her accomplishments.” Alexander, however, did not see his post as having gone too far. Instead, he felt that he may have expressed himself in a “more aggressive, hostile manner,” but that “I didn’t disrespect you though. I didn’t flat say, ‘Hey, bitch, your shit is stupid!’” Like most of the participants I interviewed, Alexander had not considered the effects of differing cultural positions (including differing conceptions of what constitutes a disrespectful statement), and he just responded to Kayla in a manner identified by most as having overstepped the conversational boundaries of the forum.

Part of the reason Alexander might have been willing to engage in more overtly aggressive and hostile communication was that he felt the need “to get myself revved up” to get “heated in battle,” and Kayla was the person he chose for that battle. If Alexander’s purpose for a battle was to win, his post definitely backfired; if anything, it made Kayla even more against Affirmative Action. When I asked Kayla why she kept posting to the Diversity forum, she said it was “Because I wanted to prove them wrong. I wanted to prove them wrong. Especially the whole thing about when he wrote—I think it was Alexander—about my mother was probably sweeping my professor’s floors.”

In her concluding reflections on participating in the Diversity forum, Kayla stated that she thought that “people who started with their views set left with their views the same way. Although Regina felt that the forum was good for finding out “what people know and don’t know,” she was disheartened by “how close-minded some people could be” and how “Even when you try to explain to them, it’s like, No, you’re wrong and I’m right and you don’t have
a stand, but I do.” Like Regina, Matthew felt that the forum was good because it “gets people talking and exchanging ideas,” but he too was bothered by how it seemed that “people a lot of times rushed to put things down” without “having to think about what you said.” Alexander explained that he found the discussions beneficial:

I didn’t realize how strong my opinions were until I did this forum. My opinions were always strong, but going to an all-Black high school, it seems like a lot of people shared my opinions of Affirmative Action... And now I go on this [forum] and everybody’s like shitting on me. Like, ‘Shut the hell up. You don’t know what you’re talking about.’ So it really made me get my thoughts out and have a little battle competition.

5. Implications for teaching

If a goal of the Intercollegiate E-Democracy Project were to have students express opinions no matter what the form or the purpose, then having students post simply to “prove them wrong” would not be so troublesome. But because those of us involved with the IEDP hoped that our students would not only express themselves but also listen to others, the exchanges that occurred in the Diversity forum were troubling. The high rate of miscommunication reveals that not only is “racism far far from over” (Matthew, 10/5), but that interracial dialogue is as “rare and difficult to develop and sustain” in electronic exchanges as it is in the face-to-face forums to which Christine Sleeter referred (1997, p. x). Although the exchanges and their effect on the participants in the Diversity forum may be disheartening, they do point to ways instructors can better facilitate interracial electronic discussions, particularly discussions about race and racism.

But given the frequency of miscommunication that occurred, are interracial electronic exchanges an idea even worth advocating? Are forums like the IEDP’s Diversity forum useful? Although the answers to these questions will vary depending upon the structure of the forums being set up, the instructional goals shaping students’ participation, and the student participants themselves, I do think that forums like the IEDP are useful because as imperfect as the electronic discussions are at times, they provide a space for students to discuss issues that are not often discussed in society, particularly among individuals of different races. If students are never exposed to interracial discussions about race and racism, then how will they ever learn to engage in them? But to lessen the chance for miscommunication, I think it is imperative that as instructors we accept responsibility for helping to make these discussions as constructive as possible. To do this, we need to address a variety of issues, including those that underlie any online or face-to-face interracial discussion about race and racism as well as those unique to online environments.

Probably the most important step, and one that I wish I had done, is to ask students to self-analyze their individual and cultural positionings in relation to race before they begin participating in an interracial discussion forum (whether online or face-to-face). This might prepare students not only for the discourse they will write, but also for the discourse they will read, and it will prepare them for potentially flaming encounters. Certainly this is not an easy undertaking—for instructors or students—but, as a number of researchers have shown, it is possible. In her research involving White inservice teachers talking about race, Alice McIntyre
(1997) asked students a list of questions, including “What does it mean for you to be white?” (p. 79), something that none of her participants had ever been asked before; they simply had never thought about their race. Beverly Tatum (1997) in Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? argued that asking White people this question is a crucial beginning for their understanding of racial identity development, both of their own and of people of color (p. 95). When I interviewed Patrick he mentioned that he felt “naïve” going into the Diversity forum because “my parents raised me so that I didn’t really think about that sort of stuff” and he wished he had “thought more about race,” including “the way other people would react.”

In an email responding to a draft of this article, Kayla commented: “I also liked how you recommended that instructors ask their students what it means to be white. I have never been asked that before, and I think that it really would help students to think about their race, so that they can go into the [IEDP] with a better understanding.”

Although college students of color have, according to Beverly Tatum (1997), grown up aware of their racial identity, they too have different perceptions of and the positioning of others. Providing opportunities for them to explore their own individual experiences will help them navigate the often-difficult task of speaking as a person of color in an interracial discussion about race. Both students of color and White students could also benefit from situating their individual experiences of race and racism within wider social systems. Alexander commented that he wished participants in the Diversity forum had “discussed the society level as a whole more,” and Matthew noted that “People didn’t really look at the bigger picture with a lot of stuff.” By fostering in students the ability to situate individual experiences with wider social systems, incidents of misunderstanding in interracial discussions about race may be reduced.

Students also need a better understanding of the nature of online environments and the sorts of miscommunication that may occur. Before conducting this research, I discussed guidelines for netiquette with students in my classes in the hopes of lessening the potential for misunderstandings, but what I realize is that I simply talked about what not to do. What I should have done and what I will do in the future is discuss what they might do when a post, in Regina’s words, “pisses me off.” I need to prepare my students for handling and analyzing their reactions to others’ posts. This is where I think it will be helpful to introduce and then complicate the notion of flaming by discussing just how difficult it is to place blame on one person for breakdowns in communication. If students have at least considered the possibility that posts that may appear reasonable to them could really be offensive to someone else, then maybe if misunderstandings do occur, they will first examine their own posts for possible causes rather than attributing it to the ignorance or willful misreading of others. Similarly, if a student is offended by a post, he or she should be encouraged to read closely to see if such offense was intended and to consider what other cultural factors might be shaping such a reply. Although this is indeed a difficult task and certainly no person will ever be able to read through perceived insults to the author’s underlying intent all the time, it is, I believe, a goal worth striving for and one that would benefit online conversations, particularly online interracial conversations, which have so much potential for misunderstanding.

As for using all capitals, which contributed in part to the misunderstandings, I think that instructors need to discuss the issue with students. If as instructors we try to impose a strict code of netiquette, we could not only be stifling the conversation, but also ill-preparing students for their actual exchanges with actual people in online environments, where, most likely, someone
will use all caps at some point. Many handbooks assert guidelines for netiquette such as “Don’t use ALL CAPS. Like shouting they are considered rude” (Anson, Shwegler, & Muth, 2000, p. 59) and “don’t write in all capitals SINCE IT LOOKS AS IF YOU ARE SHOUTING” (Carbone, 2000, inside cover). By setting all caps as something wrong and unacceptable, these admonitions are explicitly shutting down expressions of emotion and implicitly interfering with other possible interpretations of all caps. These admonitions shape the discursive norms so that messages using all caps are marked as being outside the boundaries of ‘polite’ conversation so when a person receives an all caps message he or she dismisses it as rudeness rather than reading for the emotional pain that may have prompted such shouting (e.g., Regina’s “HOW CAN YOU COMPARE A CAR TO A HUMAN BEING? HOW!!!!!!!!!!!”). Only in-depth discussions of the overlapping social and cultural contexts will help students negotiate both the writing and the reading of messages written with all-caps.

It would also be helpful if instructors discussed the different rhetorical strategies needed when engaging in online communication particularly in forums such as the IEDP where the diversity and the immediacy of the audience call for posts that engage in give and take with others. Often times in the Diversity forum, however, dialogue was stopped before it even began; but one thread that did work well focused on interracial dating and issues of biracial identity. In this thread, which began when a White woman asked for advice on how to deal with her father who opposed her dating a Black man, students discussed issues in ways that showed respectful reading and listening of each other’s views. Although not all threads can lend themselves to such a direct call for help, there is something in that to be modeled; namely, the thread started with an openness to hearing others’ views, not trying to change them. According to Anne Hill Duin and Craig Hansen (1994), “All dialogue should have the goal of eliciting further dialogue, not shutting it off with pronouncements of truth or other forms of closure” (p. 92). Posts like Kayla’s “the problem with affirmative action” or Alexander’s “your views are garbage” close down dialogue by asserting a certainty on the issue that denies the validity of other viewpoints. A repeated refrain from participants in the Diversity forum—both in their interviews and in their posts—was that they were not being listened to, that others were not taking their viewpoints into consideration. If instructors were to emphasize and model posts that invite dialogue (and I know a number of IEDP instructors do this), then perhaps this would make the transition to online communication, particularly communication about controversial issues, easier and would lessen the need for students to get angry with each other because they would feel that the participants with whom they disagreed were at least trying to understand their viewpoints.

In the Diversity forum, one student attempted to draw attention to what she felt was at the root of the misunderstandings and her post reveals a number of ways that miscommunication could be lessened in an online, interracial discussions.

It is really wonderful to see that among all our different comments there is still a common feeling in these discussions: offense. Many people, self included, have mentioned how offended we were by someone else’s comments… When I initially read that people were offended I thought good now they know how I felt reading some of these postings. BUT then I remembered what it was that caused me to be offended. It was not the comments themselves but how the comments had made declarative statement that demeaned me and people like me but that was not totally accurate or explained. Then it dawned on me that someone had possibly done the same thing
to other students who proclaimed being offended. I only want to inform you the forum that I am learning from all of you to be clearer and more fair to the whole truth (not just the part that best fits my argument). . . (Gail, 10/24)

Because she was able to re-read the posts made to the forum, Gail was able to analyze and to see common threads from the participants in the online conversation. This points to one of the real benefits of online exchanges over face-to-face interaction—the archival nature of the medium. Whereas in oral conversations the words (though not their effects) are ephemeral, electronic discussions produce a written record that is available for ongoing analysis by all participants. Unfortunately, Gail’s post seems to have been ignored by those in the forum, at least judging from the fact that that particular thread ended with her post, but if an instructor were to encourage such posts as these and to assign analysis of the discourse then perhaps students would be able to gain a fresh perspective and distance on their discussions.

Stepping back from the discussion is often difficult, especially in electronic forums where messages can be read and then replies immediately sent. Regina realized that her responses to Kayla about the purple car were written quickly when she was still angry. She noted that “I could have calmed down more and actually looked at—understood more what she was trying to say about the relation.” Kayla commented on this same point in a followup email to me after the interview, “I think that instructors should suggest to their students to delay a reply. I think it would have made the forum more civil.” While I believe that it is common practice among instructors involved with electronic exchanges to talk with their students about the need to delay a reply, I realize that it cannot be emphasized enough, particularly because the reply button is so conveniently and so immediately there on the screen next to the offending message.10

The fear of inadvertently sending or of actually receiving an offending message is what may keep many students from participating in interracial discussions about race and racism (Fox, 2001; Tatum, 1997). In the fall of 2000, the students who felt nervous or uncomfortable about joining a discussion explicitly about racial issues probably chose to participate in other topic forums, avoiding the Diversity forum altogether. Perhaps some thought of participating, and may have even posted once (as did 49 of the 75 participants—65 percent) but they then might have withdrawn from the conversations because they were uncertain about how to proceed, particularly if their first post provoked unanticipated reactions from others. If instructors wish students to participate in interracial electronic exchanges, then it is important to provide venues for them to not only express their fears and uncertainties but also ask questions about how to proceed.

We all, regardless of our racial and ethnic backgrounds or our educational experience, make mistakes when we discuss issues of race and racism. But because these issues are ones that are too often ignored or shunted aside, I believe that it is important that we try to engage students and ourselves in these discussions, both online and face-to-face, and that we continue to research the dynamics of interracial communication, especially interracial electronic communication. Only by researching and sharing our experiences will we learn to facilitate more dialogic exchanges. Given the de facto racial segregation in much of the United States and given the lessening of diversity at many institutions (due in part to dismantling Affirmative Action programs), electronic forums may become the primary means where people of all races can discuss and attempt to resolve the issues of social, institutional, and epistemic racism that adversely affect us all.
Notes

1. For more information about the IEDP, including information about joining the faculty listserv or having classes participate in the online forums, visit <http://www.trincoll.edu/prog/iedp>.

2. Philip Thompsen (1996) asserted that most of the explanations for the occurrences of flaming reside in speculations about the nature of the electronic medium itself—its relative anonymity (deindividuation theory), its lack of bodily presence (social presence theory), and its technological limitations (information richness theory). Pointing to the narrow focus of these theories, Thompsen argued that flaming cannot be understood outside of its social matrix and he called for a “social influence perspective on flaming [that] considers both the behavior of flaming and the social negotiation of what that behavior means” (p. 303). Because of my social constructivist positioning, I agree with Thompsen that flaming can best be understood by examining it in relation to wider cultural and social contexts, including the forum in which it occurs, the individuals who send and receive it, and the discourse communities to which those individuals belong.

3. Some interviewees specifically requested that I use their real names; other interviewees chose pseudonyms. For the students who gave me permission to quote their posts, but with whom I did not conduct interviews, I selected pseudonyms.

4. In this preliminary study I did not examine the influence of classroom context on the students’ participation in the forum, partly because, except for mailing consent forms, my research began the semester after students’ participation in the IEDP was concluded. In subsequent studies of cross-institutional electronic communication, I believe the classroom context should be explored because the manner in which a communicative forum is presented and evaluated shapes how students perceive it and participate in it.

5. In reproducing the students’ posts, I did not change grammar, punctuation, or spelling. I use ellipses to show where I have omitted words or sentences from the post, and I add explanatory brackets when I think there may be an unclear antecedent for a pronoun. In transcribing the interviews, I used italics for words that students especially emphasized. Although I recognize the subjectivity of this procedure, I wanted my transcription to reflect as much as possible the students’ voices.

6. I have the students’ permission to quote from follow-up emails and their feedback on drafts of this paper.

7. I was first pointed to this passage by Thomas West’s (1997) essay, “The Racist Other.”

8. I also noticed that no one mentioned the classism inherent in the comment “sweeping one of your professor’s floors,” and I wonder how students in the forum whose parents are janitors and cleaners felt when they read this.

9. In the forum few students explicitly raised the issue of conversational boundaries. Perhaps encouraging students to discuss such issues amongst themselves online would promote greater understanding.

10. Although I have considered the need for students to delay their replies, conversations with Linda Shamoon, a fellow IEDP instructor, have led me to consider the difficulties caused by interfaces that situate the reply button right on the same screen with the message.
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