



Empathy Machines: Harnessing the humanitarian power of Portals

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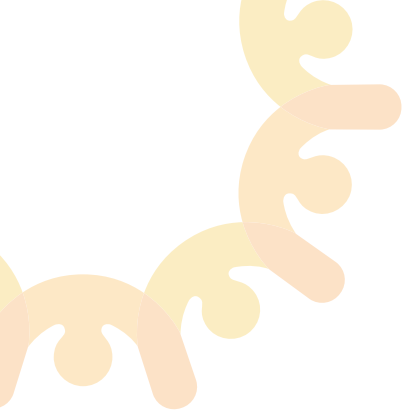
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Combining the sophistication of modern communication technology with the simplicity of an unadorned mobile room, Portals are making it possible for people around the world to connect and recognize their shared humanity.

Empathy Machines

Harnessing the humanitarian power of Portals



It is a great irony that in this age of technology-supported connections, we are more polarized than ever before. Children have abundant online “friends,” yet they rarely truly engage in meaningful dialogue. Despite these virtual connections and ready access to news through Internet sources, many students learn about people of other cultures only through textbooks or headlines and not through direct discussion. Given recent refugee crises and talk of building walls, it seems crucial that we encourage children to engage fully in dialogue across cultures and borders with an aim to building a more global citizenry.

For the past few years, children from all over the world have been able to participate in a global dialogue fostered by a technological innovation called Portals. Using a network of gold shipping containers placed in schools, colleges, refugee camps, and city squares, children and young adults enter these spaces and use an Internet video connection to meet face to face, in real time—talking, dancing, singing, eating, painting, drawing, and even “dabbing” with one another.

During the fall of 2016, Greenwich Academy in Connecticut became the first K-12 school to host a Portal, an experience that was transformative for students and faculty alike. Portals is the brain child of entrepreneurs Amar Bakshi and Michelle Moghtader, both of whom spent years as reporters in the Middle East. Seeking to capture in real time the poignant moments they experienced when the cameras and microphones were turned off, they created the multi-disciplinary arts, design, and technology collective Shared_Studios. Bakshi’s other motive was to create a space where his Pakistani grandmother, who longed for simple conversations with people in the land she fled after Partition, could chat about nothing in particular—effectively having a cup

of tea with a friend in a foreign land. With the goal of creating “wormholes” through the Internet, Bakshi created the first Portal in his Washington, D.C., backyard. Unfortunately, his grandmother died before the Portal was realized, and so the first connection was actually to Iran. When he put up a sign reading “Portal to Tehran,” his neighbors called the FBI. Nevertheless, Bakshi was undeterred.

Today, the Portal network has expanded into dozens of locations around the globe, fostering thousands of conversations. With the help of on-site curators and translators in countries as far ranging as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Mexico, Honduras, Rwanda, Myanmar, and the United States, Portal connections have quietly fostered that most elusive of goals: empathy. It’s no wonder these gold boxes have been described by one journalist as “empathy infrastructure.”¹

At Greenwich Academy, we chose to place the gold shipping container adjacent to our oldest building, a former Rockefeller mansion with a Greek-revival portico. The effect was a disruption in our traditional school day—as children passed the “gold box” on their way into school, their curiosity was piqued. Through the Portal, we effectively invited strangers to engage virtually in our campus space.

The power of Portals lies in the immediacy of the connection and the simplicity of the medium. Visitors step inside a shipping container to find a grey, carpeted interior and face someone thousands of miles away in a similar space, thus eliminating external context and creating a sense of being in the same room. A Portal connection can initially feel uncomfortable, because it is so direct; facing a stranger in another country, one develops a heightened awareness of non-verbal cues, like hand gestures, facial expressions, and stance. A traditional Portal engagement lasts for 20 minutes and begins with a universal prompt: “What would make today a good day for you?” Few exercises create such an immediate sense of the different scale of values that exist around the world.



“Wormholes” through the Internet.

Within the Portal, political, historical, and economic issues and differences become completely insignificant.

Working with UNICEF Iraq, the United Nations' SDG Action Campaign, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, a network of global universities, and local partners from Jordan to Germany, Shared_Studios Portals are emerging in sites for internally displaced people (IDP) and refugees across Africa, the Middle East, and Europe.

Portals help displaced communities get their stories out, putting a face on numbers. They provide local revenue for Portal Curators and people within the displaced communities. And they offer educational opportunities, both for refugee and IDP communities, and other communities around the world.

Current Portals in refugee and IDP sites can be found in Berlin, Germany; Amman, Jordan; and Erbil, Iraq.

During our time with a Portal at Greenwich Academy, we developed more heavily curated conversations on the global reach of hip hop, environmental issues, and criminal justice. Our Modern Middle East seminar studied the Syrian refugee crisis and then connected to a Berlin Portal located in a refugee hub. Nothing in our class readings or videos could convey the emotive power we felt hearing a Syrian man's story of his dangerous Mediterranean crossing. When students from Greenwich met with pre-teens in Iraq who had fled their homes in Mosul due to the invasion of ISIS, their initial shyness gave way to rich dialogue about the conditions in the Harsham Camp, located in the Kurdistan region. Iraqi children played their traditional instruments and American students brought out their iPhones to stream music; shocked that they liked the same songs, they began to dance together. The Portal at Harsham Camp, a reconfigured pump station, was sponsored by the UNHCR as a way to give Iraqis an outlet, a chance to feel like children again. American students were surprised to discover the Iraqi children had no interest in migrating to Europe or the United States, despite the violence in their region. "We love Iraq," they declared. "We just want to go home." A Greenwich Academy sophomore later observed: "The boys I had the privilege of talking to were excited, positive, curious, and overall happy. It was strange to think about how many things we have in common. . . . Within the Portal, political, historical, and economic issues and differences become completely insignificant."

Shared_Studios has also developed a group of American Portals devoted to criminal justice issues, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Newark, New Jersey; Chicago, Illinois; and Los Angeles, California. One Portal curator, Lewis Lee of Milwaukee, is a former gang member who has been incarcerated three times, but now works to help children in his neighborhood, the 53206 zip code, stay off the streets. His Portal functions like a teen center every evening, with kids coming together to dance, rap, and generally hang out with people in other locations. When word of the Milwaukee Portal brought reporters to Lee's neighborhood, his community felt

a greater sense of pride and crime dropped significantly. With a desire to build bridges between two very different communities, the Greenwich and Milwaukee Portals hosted a three-hour talent show, featuring children of all ages singing, drumming, dancing, reading poetry, and performing spoken-word presentations. One Greenwich student was shocked to hear that "many students are homeless and lack a safe environment." Another wrote of Lewis Lee himself, "I was not expecting such an inspiring story."

Portals allow us to see the common humanity in people across the country and around the world. Responses to Portal visits, generally written in gold books placed outside, read like this: "My mind has begun to ponder the immense vastness of the world . . ." and "I think I have an increased sense of empathy for the people who are displaced." It is not uncommon for Americans and their counterparts, even those in countries the United States has recently fought in war, to feel mutual respect.²

Now, more than ever, we must commit to harnessing the humanitarian possibilities of technology for our students. Through a simple design and a talented group of embedded curators and translators, Portals are reaching into communities across the globe. Portal dialogues prompt us to pay greater attention to those we meet in cultures very different from our own, a process that ultimately means we learn more about ourselves. Long after our history class met the Iraqi children, we heard news of coalition forces retaking Mosul. A student turned to me and said, "Do you think those children can go home now?" It's through connections like these that Portals and the curators operating them are creating a new generation of global citizens.

Notes:

¹ "The Next Genius Idea Is Creating Global Empathy." *Fast Company*, March 10, 2017. <https://www.fastcompany.com/3068880/the-next-genius-idea-is-creating-global-empathy>

² For more gold book reactions, visit the Shared_Studios website. <https://www.sharedstudios.com/reactions/>

Other ways to connect with students around the world:

Skype in the Classroom

This is a free community that offers live transformative educational experiences for students, including Virtual Field Trips, talks from Guest Speakers, classroom to classroom connections, and live collaboration projects.

<https://education.microsoft.com/skype-in-the-classroom/overview>



Global Read Aloud

The project was created in 2010 with a simple goal in mind; one book to connect the world. From its humble beginnings, the GRA has grown to make a truly global connection with more than 4,000,000 students have participated.

The premise is simple; GRA picks a book to read aloud to students during a set 6-week period and during that time they try to make as many global connections as possible. Each teacher decides how much time they would like to dedicate and how involved they would like to be. Some people choose to connect with just one class, while others go for as many as possible. The scope and depth of the project is up to the participant. While there are commonly used such as Skype, Twitter, Padlet, or Flipgrid, participants choose the tools that will make the most sense for them. Teachers get a community of other educators to do a global project with, hopefully inspiring them to continue these connections through the year.

Due to the time commitment, this is project takes place only once a year project—starting in early October and running through mid-November. However, two fantastic spin-off projects run at other times: the New Zealand Read Aloud and the French version of GRA, Ecouter Lire le Monde.

<https://theglobalreadaloud.com/>