Chapter 26
Civility in Social Spaces:
A Pedagogical Reflection

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on creating a course at the undergraduate level that gives students the opportunity to explore the origin of social media platforms, understand intention in their creation, compare engagement across platforms and brands, and explore the dark side of social spaces, all within a framework of communication ethics. While the course is directed at students, the chapter speaks to the need to cultivate civility both within and outside of the classroom. The philosophical framework of civility is grounded in the work of Janie Harden Fritz and Ronald C. Arnett. The hope of this chapter is to offer a praxis approach that gives students and professionals the tools to become thoughtful contributors to spaces that are unpredictable as well as potentially (and often) problematic. The chapter encourages social media users to contemplate how to situate difference, how to connect through stories, and how to have more nuanced conversations when conflict emerges.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a pedagogical entrance for reflecting on civility and mindful engagement in social spaces. Building on the work of Arnett (1980), Fisher (1987), Fritz (2013), Putnam (2000), and Turkle (2011), this chapter invites reflection on the implications of new communicative technologies for human flourishing connected to civility. Social media platforms are a large part of students' personal lives, and, in an increasingly cosmopolitan marketplace, it stands to reason social media will play a role in their work engagement, as well.

This chapter focuses on creating a course at the undergraduate level that gives students the opportunity to explore the origin of social media platforms, understand intention in their creation, compare engagement across platforms and brands, and explore the dark side of social spaces, all within a framework of communication ethics. While the course is meant to be directed at students, the chapter will speak to the need to cultivate civility both within and outside of the classroom. The groundwork discussed will

be framed within the context of the classroom, but it could be used in seminars and training courses in other organizations; it is a framework for education on civility.

Beyond that, the important piece is the groundwork calls for reflection on communication that is often unreflective. A key element in this scholarly reflection is creating a code of ethics that guides civil and mindful engagement on both professional and personal levels. For example, if a student is running a social media account for a brand, and an individual responds to social media content by posting hateful comments, what is the appropriate course of action? One goal is to analyze potential tent poles to inform civil engagement online (Arnett, 1980; Fritz, 2013). Civility and compassion can emerge upon reflection of communication ethics as a framework for engagement – the reflection can start in the classroom or anywhere people are encouraged to be mindful of their communication. The hope of the reflection is to facilitate the construction of a strong foundation for civil public discourse that is applicable to all people who want to create healthier social spaces. This chapter hopes to offer an approach that can be applied to online workplace harassment, specifically, as well as online harassment and engagement in general. The same principles can inform the construction of a healthy foundation. The foundation of reflection stands on the premise Fritz sets forth:

From a virtue ethics perspective, behaving with civility toward others is an integral part of a flourishing human existence that defines the good of, and for, human life…at the broadest level…civility in interpersonal interaction in public and private settings is a communicative virtue. (Fritz, 2013, p. 3)

This understanding of civility supports the notion of protecting and promoting the good of persons with attention to human behaviors within a professional environment. For Fritz (2013), work is part of a good and meaningful life. For students and professionals, social media is not only embedded in their everyday lives; social media is a part of their work life, as well. The examination of civility and human interaction in social spaces empowers protection and promotion of the good in personal and public spaces. Reflection on and attention to civility and empathy informs engagement in social spaces. This foundation can inform and guide responses to interactions in online communities, social platforms, organizational communication, and interpersonal communication in general. The goal is to encourage contemplation on how to situate difference, how to connect through stories, and how to have more nuanced conversations when conflict emerges. With this toolkit, students and professionals can meet harassment online, from a coworker or otherwise, with a deeper understanding of how to respond in the spirit of nonviolence and civility. Having communication ethics literacy in constructing such a response may create less anxiety and open up healthier dialogue in times of conflict (Arnett, Fritz, & McManus, 2018).

The next section will explore the need for and significance of understanding civility and moving with civility into social spaces. In order to build a solid framework, one must define and examine the dark side of social media, including doxing, alienation, loneliness, bullying, and depression, addressing the implications both professionally and personally (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Turkle, 2011; Twenge, 2017). Students and professionals need to reflect on how to navigate the dark side with an understanding of mindful engagement across social media; this is important as they encounter harassment online, personally and professionally. A praxis approach provides the means to become thoughtful contributors to spaces that are unpredictable, as well as potentially (and often) problematic. From this foundation, students and professionals can build those spaces into ones that protect and promote the good of human flourishing (Fritz, 2013). There is a need for attention to civility in this historical moment; the framing of the significance is addressed in the next section.

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