


Chapter 7

Social Media for Teaching Empathy, Civil and Moral Development, and Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing argumentative, hostile element found in many parts of society today; this growth, combined with increasing anonymity in online communications, suggests a dire need for youth to be harnessed with skills for civil deliberation. Numerous educational scholars have highlighted the importance for educational entities to consider utilizing youths' digital interests for teaching and learning. Additionally, recent research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic found social media used for online education helped engage students in experiential learning and created positive feelings. Thus, a discussion of advantages to using social media is presented for fostering youths' skills in critical thinking, empathy, community, culture, deliberation, discovery, and more, so they might effectively contribute to their society and have a better, fuller understanding of the world around them. Sample curricula for teaching the deliberative arts via social media is included.

INTRODUCTION

Why It Is Important to Teach Youth Empathy, Civil Deliberation, Critical Thinking, and Moral Development

Today, one might argue Western culture is training youth to be adversarial. Murray State psychology professor Daniel Wann stated, "Civility is going down in our society. Empathy is going down in our society," and the rising, socially abusive behaviors among people "could stem from the culture of ag-

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gression that exists online” (as cited in Schad, 2022, paras.13 & 25). Recently, the town of Rome, New York, canceled their youth basketball program on account of increasingly aggressive, abusive, and violent behavior by parents. In the cancellation letter, Ryan Hickey, deputy director of Rome’s Department of Parks and Recreation wrote, “I think we have lost our way a little. We have to somehow come back together and remember we are in this together” (“Rome youth basketball,” 2022, para. 2). Karissa Niehoff, chief executive for the Office of National Federation of State High School Associations, said fans of all ages are more extreme in their confrontational, offensive, and savage behavior (Schad, 2022). Apart from parents and online culture, the hidden and competing “curricula” found in today’s media must be considered.

When youth are exposed to cable television’s routine shouting of commentators’ opposing views, they likely gain a poor understanding of how to think or speak about controversial topics or positions with which they disagree. From these types of programs, youth learn it is better and more logical to meet someone’s opposing position with angered, blunt, and quick reaction rather than critical thinking and civil, respectful deliberation. Because too many sources routinely provide poor examples of what it means to civilly deliberate on controversial topics such as abortion, religion, civil rights, equity, politics, and other current events, it is hard to argue against schools promoting curricula with an emphasis on the civil development of youth. American sociologist Deborah Tannen suggested the cost for an argumentative culture was a “price paid in human spirit” (Tannen, 1998, p. 280).

Walter Parker, professor emeritus at University of Washington, wrote important scholarship for the civil development of youth. His work included strategies for youth to engage in skills for civil, meaningful deliberation and critical thinking. He called those skills the “deliberative arts,” a concept that included the following skills for successful critical thinking and deliberation: (1) realize and admit any lack of knowledge, (2) listen and only speak in turn, (3) be brave when discussion of disliked topics occurs, (4) aim to fully comprehend someone’s different point of view, (5) engage tactics for critical thinking, (6) critique only ideas being discussed rather than any person, (7) be slow to judgment (Parker, 1997; Parker, 2003). Parker (1997) summarized the mindset of a critical thinker in civil deliberation with a quote made by Voltaire: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it” (p. 19).

Amy Gutmann, academic and current US Ambassador to Germany, and longest serving president of University of Pennsylvania, wrote scholarship with strong support of curricula designed to enhance student empathy and moral deliberation, and believed public education was the appropriate space for such learning. She stated the absence of such curricula resulted in schools becoming “repressive by virtue of what it fails to teach” (Gutmann, 1996, p. 157). Gutmann’s (1996) recommended approaches for teaching deliberation properly and ethically included showing youth how to respect other speakers’ dispositions, backgrounds, and positions, and for them to understand and practice open mindedness and self-control.

Michael Pritchard, the Willard A. Brown professor emeritus of Philosophy at Western Michigan University, also supported curricula for critical thinking and moral education and believed both could successfully be taught in public education. In his book *Families, Schools, and Moral Development* (1996), Pritchard made a strong claim for moral development within public schools: “Children have a right to be given opportunities to become well-developed, moral persons ... Families lacking in this responsibility ... strengthen the case for public schools’ responsibility” (pp. 92-93). Pritchard suggested schools first begin teaching youth what it means to be an active listener during deliberation because when youth know how to listen, they can begin discerning which questions are important to ask next. As a result, classrooms foster a population of critical thinkers.

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