

Multiliteracies and The Critical Thinker: Philosophical Engagement with Mass Media in The Classroom

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Abstract:

Teaching children philosophy enhances critical thinking skills that are sorely needed in today's technological society. When it comes to mass art and social media, we need to discern between reliable sources of information and the plethora of dross. Using a virtue epistemological approach, I claim that Philosophy in the schools supports a values- and outcomes-based approach to education. There are measurable outcomes that are academic, but there are also holistic benefits including social outcomes that emerge from using philosophy in the classroom. Multiliteracies competencies is an important skill that can be gained by critical engagement with multi-media sources. As such sources are commonplace, we as educators should embrace them, and teach our students to engage with them critically. Teaching children critical thinking skills through the study of Philosophy is important because philosophical thinkers continue conversations that seek to dispel ignorance. I will support this claim using examples of engagement with mass art and media that can be applied to the classroom setting.

Keywords: Multiliteracies; critical thinking; virtue epistemology; CoI; P4C; philosophy.

"Students must be agents of text rather than victims of text, whether that text is printed and found in school or visually digitized and found in the street."

(Albers & Hartse, 2007, p.7).

Introduction:

Increasingly an awareness of the need to prepare students not simply for exams but also life has been behind educational approaches to pedagogy. Over the past twenty years, traditional epistemology has been augmented by the increased scholarship devoted to social epistemology and virtue epistemology. Social epistemology argues that forms of knowledge often depend on social factors for their possibility and claims we should critique social institutions that contribute to spreading knowledge. Such institutions and systems include education, science, politics, and mass media. Virtue epistemology, influenced by Aristotelian virtue ethics, claims that instead of focusing on what the knower knows we should examine the knower him/herself. For the virtue epistemologist, the relevant question becomes what does it mean to be a good knower? (Kotzee, 2013, p.157). When it comes to educational institutions, which specialise in the product of 'knowledge', we should include the study of Philosophy into the curriculum. Philosophy teaches critical thinking skills that are required for children to become informed, socially situated learners. When it comes to social media, for example, we need to discern between reliable sources of information and misinformation or, worse, hoaxes.

In this paper, I will be using a virtue epistemological approach to consider how it is possible to constructively engage with social media networking sites as a way of gaining and sharing knowledge. I will focus on the knower who possesses the intellectual virtue of discernment and claim that the community of inquiry method as understood by philosophy for children practitioners is a useful tool by which to develop and encourage critical thinking skills that can be applied to engagement with social media.

P4C and the Community of Inquiry:

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) is a method well-developed and practiced by advocates of Philosophy for Children (P4C) (Splitter & Sharp, 1995; Lipman, 2003). The CoI is valuable at all schooling levels if we wish to teach students critical, creative and caring interpersonal skills. Such skills assist these students to not only perform better academically, but also socially, encouraging self awareness as they identify as a member of a community of thinkers (Millett & Tapper, 2012, p.546). It is through an open, facilitated conversation that learners can reflect on the ideas of others as well as their own, and engage with meaningful topics in a safe environment that encourages intellectual exploration as well as a compassionate respect for views of others that may differ from their own. When it comes to social media, dialogue occurs online in cyberspace, but this may not be as 'safe' as in a classroom setting or when face-to-face with other inquirers.

In a CoI students and the teacher sit in a circle and the teacher acts as a facilitator for a discussion based on a particular topic. Usually work has been done beforehand, individually and in small groups, to develop questions associated with the chosen topic. This will work with any topic, including the media and news items. The teacher or students can bring in stimulus material in the form of a newspaper clipping or a story from the internet to discuss. Developing students' own questions is a key preliminary aspect to a CoI as it gives students the opportunity to first reflect individually on the subject before entering into dialogue. Once in the CoI itself, ideas are shared in an effort to uncover truth.

As Laurance Splitter explains:

Participating in a CoI allows students, individually and collaboratively, to develop their own ideas and perspectives based on appropriately rigorous modes of thinking *and* against the background of a thorough understanding and appreciation of those ideas and perspectives that, having stood the test of time, may be represented as society's best view of things to date. (Splitter, 2011, p.497)

The teacher as facilitator allows the conversation to follow the line of inquiry that emerges whilst keeping the discussion on topic. In this way, the CoI allows for intellectual inquiry that is contextual and dynamic. The ideas of participants are interactive, developing and transforming as they meet or yield to those of others. The CoI is aimed at truth rather than winning, valuing knowledge for its own sake as per the Socratic tradition.

Virtue Ethics, Virtue Epistemology and the Value of Knowledge:

The benefits of community of inquiry methodology are well-articulated by the language of virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. As a participant in a CoI the individual recognises that they are not an isolated cogito but, rather, a social, moral and rational being who is practically engaged with the world in a time and place. This seeing myself as '*one among others*' (Splitter, 2011, p.497) includes three key components that Splitter identifies as both cognitive and affective. These include, firstly, appreciating my own self-worth that arises from recognising my role in the community; secondly, appreciating that others are also striving for this kind of self-appreciation and thirdly, 'understanding that self-appreciation and appreciation for others are interdependent and mutually reinforcing' (2011, pp.497-8). As a member of a CoI, one may express, question, develop and alter their ideas. They can work out what assumptions and values they hold, as well as consider those of others. Participating in a CoI allows the learner to see which values are shared. Splitter remarks, '[t]he CoI is an interactive environment whose entire rationale is the wellbeing of its members (in intellectual, moral and affective terms)' (2011, p.498). This is similarly the aim of virtue ethics: the recognition of individual eudemonia as intrinsically linked to the wellbeing of the polis (Aristotle, 1876).

The virtue epistemologist and the Aristotelian virtue ethicist identify the knowing self as a social and moral self. This focus on a person's character differs to narrower conceptions of epistemology that focus on what is knowable or the object of knowledge. As educators faced with values-based education alongside learning outcomes, a virtue framework resonates as we do not simply want to teach students facts, but, rather, we'd like them to be moral citizens and happy human beings.

This is no small task, but philosophy can help. Carrie Winstanley (2008) defends the inclusion of philosophy in the school curriculum in the United Kingdom on the grounds that it has the capacity to develop children's thinking, particularly in light of the inclusion of 'thinking skills' in curriculums across the U.K. Winstanley gives Siegel's definition of a critical thinker:

A critical thinker, then, is one who is appropriately moved by reasons: she has the propensity or disposition to believe and act in accordance with reasons; and she has the ability to properly assess the force of reasons in the many contexts in which reasons play a role. (Winstanley, 2008, p.89 ref Siegel, 1988, p.23)

Winstanley also claims that:

Philosophy is the best possible subject for helping children to become effective critical thinkers. It is the subject that can teach them better than any other how to assess reasons, defend positions, define terms, evaluate sources of information, and judge the value of arguments and evidence. (Winstanley, 2008, p.95)

When participating in a CoI, the socially situated learner has the opportunity to practice developing the intellectual virtue of discernment. By discernment, I refer to the ability to consider the evidence for ideas presented and the ability to make truth claims based on such information. The benefit of the CoI is that it encourages self-reflection and openness to new information. This allows for the process of gaining knowledge to be dynamic, self-correcting, structured but democratic, and resists collapse into relativism by continuing dialogue rather than ending a conversation when opinions differ (Golding, 2011, p.476 & 482).

In the dynamic and fast-paced world of technological information and social media networking sites, a dynamic approach to quickly interrogating information received is vital. In this way, by shifting our focus on to the knower instead of what is statically knowable, we are better equipped to face multiple and often conflicting opinions, reports and images that are generated online *en masse*.

Furthermore, we don't want to do away with values and ethics when entering the online world of information and social media or networking sites. With reference to philosophy in classrooms, Christina Hendricks explains that realising we are socially situated and may adopt differing perspectives doesn't deny that normative values or guidelines for knowledge are shared. Referring to Siegel, Hendricks notes:

Siegel insists that without acknowledging that we share belief and criteria for judgement, there seems to be no reason to value consideration of other perspectives for the sake of critically evaluating our own (Hendricks, 2004, p.8, ref Siegel 1988, 14-15; 1987, 43).

In this way, pluralism doesn't deny shared values or normative moral principles. It is worth striving for transcendence even if 'perfect' omniscience may never be fully achieved.

Certainly we have access to more opinions than ever before and education has already moved away from a top-down, teacher-centred model of learning. Clinton Golding recognises that the CoI is not an authoritarian discussion led by a teacher, but, rather, is student directed as the teacher acts as a facilitator. Unlike unstructured discussion, 'the teacher becomes a thinking coach and trains students to engage in independent, productive discussion' (Golding, 2011, p.474). This skill is useful when the student faces the technological world of social media. One intellectual virtue that is encouraged in philosophical CoIs is discernment. Discerning between reliable sources of information and uninformed opinion is required in our technological society, as is the respectful interaction with others, particularly when these others are faceless avatars on Facebook, Twitter and the like. When engaging with a community of learners, it is important not only to consider whether or not you are receiving reliable information, but also to realise that the others with whom you are engaged are people worthy of respect even when you have never met them face-to-face.

If the CoI is disciplined dialogue that follows the inquiry of its members in a manner which allows for reflective judgements (Golding, 2011, p.482), then online discussion through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter may be considered akin to Golding's student-directed, abandoned conversation that results in relativism (2011, p.482). For individual users, this is where I believe the intellectual and moral virtues one has learned and developed through CoIs is of immediate use. If one learns the habits of respectful engagement with ideas and avoids fallacious thinking such as *ad hominem* attacks, then they are more likely to conduct themselves well when engaged in virtual realities as well as face-to-face. In a time where cyber-bullying is a serious issue, this respectful interaction online as well as in the school yard is highly topical.

I claim that philosophical skills may be useful for children because such intellectual, social and moral habits, once internalised, may be applied everywhere. Splitter writes:

Children belong to a variety of communities which come and go in their turn. It is the job of education to enable students to grow as persons, by *internalizing the process of collaborative inquiry à la* Vygotsky, even as these various communities-including communities of inquiry-eventually fall by the wayside (Splitter, 2011, p.503 footnote #37).

Virtue ethics and virtue epistemology both focus on the virtues, whether moral or intellectual, and recognise these as valuable to socially situated individuals. The virtue epistemologists recognise that knowledge is valuable for both ethical and epistemological reasons (Macallister, 2012, p.252). As Macallister states:

Virtue epistemologists have allotted primary relevance to a person's intellectual qualities and habits, in at least three different ways. Intellectual virtues may be demonstrated when: an *agent* deserves credit for obtaining *reliable* truth; truth-seeking inquiries are *regulated by virtue*; a person has a virtuous *motivation* for truth" (2012, p.253).

Figuring out what exactly these virtues are and their relevant dispositions is a trickier matter. Yet I see a link here to the training done in CoIs. The participant of a CoI is credited for aiming at and obtaining reliable truth that is motivated by a virtuous intention or authentic desire to seek the truth. This occurs holistically in the CoI by recognising oneself as a learner amongst other learners, which promotes self-worth as well as critical and empathetic attention to the views and ideas of others. The knower must be willing to be flexible, adaptive and dynamic without collapsing into a relativistic conclusion of, 'you have your idea and corresponding feelings, and I have mine', which so often occurs on social media after a 'cyber-fight' over a particular topic has taken place, for example the raging arguments over whether it is a parent's choice to immunise their own children. When there is a 'harm factor' involved the relativistic position becomes dangerous as, for example, it can adversely affect herd immunity and those who aren't able to immunise their children due to immune disorders, those who do not have the luxury of choice.

The CoI values the virtues of a socially situated learner who can collaboratively work at discovering truth and building knowledge. When this occurs online, social media can be a powerful tool for gathering momentum, spreading awareness and generating a powerful mass response to topical issues such as climate change or the export of live cattle. People signing online petitions or spreading videos until they 'go viral' are acting as citizen journalists and activists. Often images from natural disasters or military coups are captured by ordinary citizens and hit instagram or reddit before the news teams can pick up the story. There is much power in the hands of the ordinary citizen and it is worth using such examples in the classroom to encourage students not to underestimate the responsibility that comes with this type of communication. Negative examples may include the infamous house party that spiralled out of control when Corey Delaney, then 16, advertised it online on MySpace in 2008 and wasn't at all sorry when his parents house in Melbourne was wrecked as a result.

The Problem of Subjectivism:

It is problematic to assert that it is the social media networking technology or software that is to blame. The users of such technology must be critiqued, not the means by which such actions are carried out. While social networking does encourage users to gather contacts and post numerous images of any and all activities with

which one is engaged, this can be used to highlight political inequities just as easily as it can be used to participate in self-indulgent competitions to attract 'likes'. Yet it is particularly contentious to declare that virtue ethics is a normative moral framework. As Crisp notes, we cannot definitely detail the substantive position of a virtue ethicist. In answering the question of 'how should one live?' with 'virtuously', we do not arrive automatically at a set of normative guidelines for living or moral judgement (2010, p.22). This I call the problem of subjectivism, and Crisp identifies that a similar problem could befall virtue epistemology. The strength of virtue ethics and of virtue epistemology are likewise their weakness: both approaches appeal to common sense (2010, p.34). The problem facing both is the universalisation of 'common sense intuitions' and the normative guidelines that follow from these as virtues as well as epistemic intuitions. What we consider to be common sense varies culturally as well as through time, and such 'intuitions' are often or at times contradictory (Crisp, 2010, p.34).

Yet, the strength of this pragmatic approach is its pluralism that allows for multiple perspectives without collapsing into cultural relativism or anarchy. I would like to be optimistic and claim that most people would happily agree that if he had any common sense, Corey Delaney would not have advertised his house party online. I see a link here between virtue ethics, virtue epistemology and the Philosophy for Children pedagogy that aims at developing a holistic learner who is a member of several socially situated communities (that sometimes tug in opposite directions). The pragmatic nature of P4C sees its emphasis on critical, creative and caring thinking, which links well with virtue ethics and virtue epistemology. These frameworks share the same strength that may also be a weakness as they allow space for context whereby the individual is understood as a socially situated human being who thinks as well as feels. These frameworks thus allow for subjectivism and diversity, but their pluralism is overarched by normative guidelines, with the principles (or virtues) employed, along with their blurry boundaries, worked out case by case.

Using Social Networking and Sharing Platforms:

The problem of subjectivism is particularly evident on the internet. If the pragmatic nature of the CoI supports the development of intellectual virtues as well as social or moral virtues, I'd like to believe it is these skills that can be immediately applied not only to other face-to-face discussions, but also to virtual discussions. We have access to many diverse ideas and opinions through blogs, news shows, satirical websites, self-created and uploaded videos, images and discussion boards. We seek out information and we stumble across it, as do our children and students. We want them to be able to understand and process what they find, yet how can they distinguish between valuable sources of reliable information and the plethora of dross? The answer, I argue, lies not in censorship necessarily, but, rather in teaching those who engage with such mediums the ability to critically discern between them.

There is much discussion about multiliteracies as the need for educational institutions to catch up and keep up with the speed of individual technological literacy is felt. Gee (2004) claims that new technologies are redefining the world of literacy and basic notions of what it means to be literate. Children today are learning more about literacy outside of school than they are in, especially through electronic and digital devices and software. Teachers increasingly need to look critically at the influence of media on in-school and out-of-school literacies, but educational institutions cannot afford to ignore these new media platforms. Technological tools must be embraced if we wish to teach our students to engage with them critically as well as creatively. Literacy is reinventing itself, with the advent of new information technologies and the complex multiliteracies allowed by them; but the critical thinking skills required to engage with different texts is the same.

Thinking first trained in communities of inquiry may be applied to social media and online networking sites as it is useful to remember that you and the others you engage with online are forming a community. The intellectual and moral virtues developed in CoIs allow the reader of new texts to ask important questions about the nature of their validity, aim, evidence, scope and intention. The critically engaged user of social and mass media will ask questions such as, what can I believe to be true? What is the intention of the author? What implications does such a view have for society? And, can I make an oppositional reading of this text?

One example of the difficulty in evaluating epistemic evidence occurred recently on Facebook. During October, you may have seen some of your Facebook friends change their profile pictures to an image of a giraffe. You may also have read the accompanying joke that, if you didn't answer correctly, you were told you had to change your Facebook profile picture to an image of a giraffe for 3 days. This is the riddle: *At 3:00 am, the doorbell rings and you wake up. Unexpected visitors, It's your parents and they are there for breakfast. You have strawberry jam, honey, wine, bread and cheese. What is the first thing you open?* (A: your eyes). However, at the same time, a message started rapidly circulating on Facebook that by changing your profile picture to an image of a giraffe, you allow hackers to steal your Facebook login details and remotely control your computer due to the weakness in JPEG images of giraffes. It turns out that the warning message was the actual hoax, not the joke itself. But by then spreading the joke also spread the paranoia associated with the hoax. The question is, as this occurs, how do we know which message to trust?

Exploring this idea within your classroom could be done via a concept game of 'what is a hoax' and an exploration of related questions such as when is a hoax a political act or how do we know if a cyber hoax is illegal or immoral? Think of email chain letters, scams and the like. There are blurry boundaries between a joke, cyber activism, and an illegal or immoral hoax. I asked my Facebook friends who believed what when the giraffe game went viral. Some did Google searches for answers and this revealed opposing answers to the dilemma as some websites were warning people not to change their Facebook profile picture to a giraffe and some adopted a 'better safe than sorry' attitude. Most friends said they trusted sources such as Hoax-Slayer or their 'clever friends'. Hoax-Slayer is a website that was established in 2003 by Australian Brett Christensen who details his mission statement as follows:

The goal of the Hoax-Slayer Website is to help make the Internet a safer, more pleasant and more productive environment by:

- Debunking email and Internet hoaxes
- Thwarting Internet scammers
- Combating spam
- Educating web users about email and Internet security issues.

(<http://www.hoax-slayer.com/about.html>)

The philosophical training of CoIs can come in handy when identifying hoaxes. Critical thinking skills include discernment and understanding that there are at least two sides to every opinion, story or news report. Encouraging multiple perspectives on mass and social media topics is a good thing because it encourages a healthy skepticism that supports informed knowledge.

Social media can raise awareness about important topics and help individuals to feel connected to a global community. Yet online discussions are unstructured and may be restricted in various ways. Important non-verbal cues may be lost online when expression is limited by emoticons or text speak. Twitter further restricts conversations by limiting each tweet to 140 characters. In contrast to a CoI, online discussion is usually non-instantaneous, asynchronistic, democratic and relativistic. The forms of evidence used vary greatly in credibility from subjective examples to links provided to other websites, including articles or blogs. In these ways, social media is not the best forum to convey a complex philosophical argument, and yet the power of opinions on social media to persuade others (including large businesses and governments!) and to disseminate ideas is undisputed. It is precisely due to the power and impact of social media that we need to train users to be critically as well as compassionately engaged with it.

What we should be aiming for in terms of social media is the same self-awareness aimed for in CoIs; namely, to realise we are one amongst others and apply the Golden Rule: treat others as you wish to be treated and avoid treating others in a harmful manner. What constitutes harm is a matter of common sense, pausing to reflect on whether you'd be happy if someone treated you in a particular manner and then proceed accordingly. This intention to avoid harm and engage with others in a constructive manner constitutes virtuous behaviour, whether online or face-to-face. With online and in-school bullying as an example of anti-social behaviour that needs rectifying, the training of character is one aspect of trying to solve a difficult and complex problem.

Conclusion:

The virtual public sphere is exciting as ideas are discussed and debated in a transparent and engaging manner. Yet the openness of the internet also makes it a public forum that may be used to voice criticism. The technological tools themselves are value neutral; it is the character that employs them for constructive or destructive means which may be labelled virtuous or vicious. At worst, unstructured discussion online is full of misinformation and promotes superstition and anti-scientism. It may allow for negative personal attacks or bullying. At best it fosters genuine learning through expansive dialogue that respects those engaging in the discussion and encourages self reflection. To foster the latter, we must train the habits of the individual that include critical and creative thinking, the intellectual and moral virtues, discernment and empathy. Instead of dealing with concerns about social media networking sites by banning their use, we ought to teach our students to engage critically with information sources so they have the tools they'll need when out on their own in the technological world; a world that cannot be ignored or avoided without disengaging from society.

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