



GARDEN SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

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Thoughts for the week

By Richard Marotta, Ph.D., Headmaster



"The use of social media has made life complicated." This idea was the opening remark made by danah boyd (yes, that how she spells her name) at a conference I attended several weeks ago. Throughout her workshop she presented statistical and anecdotal information to support her thesis that an emerging topic among teenagers is their need for privacy when they engage in various forms of social media. Ms boyd's position is that American teenager use social media as a way of discovering their identities. Her book, *It's Complicated*, will attempt to "shed light on the fascinating practices of contemporary American youth as they try to find themselves in a networked world."

I do agree with boyd's position that there is much more to social media than is apparent at first, and that it does play a significant role in the attempt by teenagers to define their lives within the larger context of a social environment that now includes this electronic space as well as family, friends, community in the more conventional and physical sense.

However, there is a significant difference between sitting in a room at home talking with friends and family, and texting or posting dialogue on a social media site. We know that the manner in which some teenagers use social media has been negative as well as positive. If someone is sitting in front of a keyboard or using the keypad on a cell phone, the words that are released lose the context of a human framework; it is easier to write something mean to a screen that it is to say something mean to a person in front of you. There are no reactions from the screen, except the linguistic ones that may be written by someone else.

Social media has pushed the writer to the edge of civility by removing the immediate presence of the other; social media has created the imperial self. Writing to a screen feels free, without consequences and without impact. It is a monologue that frequently forgets that it is a dialogue, or even more so, a "poly-logue." There is no privacy, no intimacy and no barriers within social media. We know how often postings have been used to bully others, to gossip about friends and acquaintances and to express feelings that have negative effects on others; this failure to remember that there the audience for social connection reaches far beyond the screen or the one person to whom you have addressed your writing had created a kind of social blindness. If you say something to another person in your living room or kitchen, that remark will remain there unless the gossipy part of our minds moves it to another person. On social media, one push of a key can distribute that remark almost effortlessly to numerous readers. There exists a kind of 'mob' mentality within the very heart of social media.

As boyd deepens her investigation into this topic, she begins to refine these ideas in very insightful ways. She writes that "Just because teens can and do manipulate social media to attract attention and increase visibility does not mean that they are equally experienced at doing so or that they automatically have the skills to navigate what unfolds." As an educational institution we begin guiding and instructing our students from the age of two how to establish, maintain and navigate social relationships. In our Nursery program, much of the curriculum is an exercise in socialization; it takes time, patience and insight in order to help even the youngest child to understand the worth of the self and the worth of the other. Social media negates this process; it is frequently instant, thoughtless and mean. It is antisocial in the deepest sense. Let's take back our right to true social interactions, based on kindness, honesty and humanity. Let's live in the world of human media.