
Special

Fundamentals of relationships still similar, whether online or in person

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PEORIA — New technology, especially social media, has changed how people interact and build relationships.

But how dramatic has that shift been, and are the fundamentals of how we relate to one another still solid? Two local educators say that many of the underpinnings of how we relate to each other remain the same.

It's easy to criticize the changes in how people deal with one another in a social media world, but Bradley University sociology professor Jackie Hogan says each generation grapples with "a bit of a moral panic or societal panic where we worry that new technological forms of communication are going to have negative social impacts."

She says that similar fretting also ensued with the telephone, radio and television.

"There were panics about how this was going to erode morality, we're not going to talk to each other anymore." But changing technology has always been a part of how human interaction evolves.

Nor does it mean that kids today — or anyone else, for that matter — are somehow flummoxed by the difference between face-to-face friendships and those online.

"I hear people saying 'my Facebook friend' as a way of distinguishing them from a 'real' friend," Hogan says. "... I think that people do have a sense that these relationships are different if they are not in personal, face-to-face contact."

Learning to relate

Still, interacting with one another between computer or phone screens requires some training — much of which students are getting in the classroom. "That they have digital etiquette when they're conducting themselves online, that they're good digital citizens

is typically the kind of concept we try to promote,” says Dean Cantu, the chairman of Bradley University’s teacher education department.

Students from kindergarten through high school are taught from — and teachers-to-be learn about — standards set by the International Society for Technology in Education.

And while those ISTE standards include a focus on good digital citizenship for educational purposes, many of the lessons dovetail with good advice on being a decent human being.

“If they have that background, if it’s tied in with the standards and there’s certain expectations relative to the use of technology, then they’re going to be better digital citizens, and that includes not only in their academic lives, but in their personal lives as well — including in relationships eventually that they build with others that may actually start online,” Cantu says, noting that much of this social-emotional learning “doesn’t work in a silo separate from what our expectations are for someone regardless of whether they’re using technology or not.”

One example of that is stressing that kids “should be as sincere and honest as possible” even if interacting with someone via computer that they’ve never met in person, he says.

“If that relationship that you have with someone starts off with some untruths, then that’s probably eventually destined to not work out well, or not work out in your favor whether you’re doing it online or in person,” Cantu says.

The good and the bad

There can be unintended consequences to how people portray themselves in a digital age. When, for example, we make posts on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, “we all tend to put our happy face” there and “only highlight our best moments,” Hogan says.

One recent study suggests that can even lead to depressive symptoms in folks reading those posts, convinced they’re not having nearly as good a time. The younger generation’s version of that — another of those abbreviations you might have seen — is FOMO, “fear of missing out.”

Hogan says such symptoms can be most common in girls in their early teens, hence groups springing up to urge that kids be kept off social media until at least that age.

Digital communication can also create a “false sense of intimacy,” Hogan says, with people more easily following their favorite celebrities online, while at the same time “it can create that anonymity that makes people feel free to attack others and insult others because they are insulated by that digital divide.”

Yet, the online world isn’t entirely pernicious. It has, if anything, broken down barriers. For major news events that we often see in real time, with posts from people who were at the scene of big stories, with personal experiences shared and re-shared, something thousands of miles away can feel like it was nearby and more personalized.

Hogan says that it also can boost our own recollections — a process that’s been evolving since the first Kodak film cameras began being used by individuals. Where that once-new technology helped people across all classes freeze moments and memories in time, it’s now in hyperdrive.

“People are better able in a lot of ways to remember significant events in our own lives more vividly, in more detail, because we’re self-documenting,” Hogan says of the ease of cell phone camera photos and posts on Facebook and Instagram.

She refers to them as “museums of self” and a way of ensuring that “everybody’s story can get told” — not just those of the rich or famous.

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