Whose job is it, anyway?

Dennis Sleigh

As part of our regular repertoire, we teach (or revise) the manners needed to survive in this social world, although in some of the rowdier classes it might seem as though the lesson is offered by default, with pupils learning the value of courtesy by observing its absence.

Clear processes
In order to explore these topics, we need to set some clear ground rules or we will very quickly find ourselves more deeply buried under a new
The ancient days of Greek citizens casting votes on discarded shards of pottery would not help much today – it would be a prospect even scarier than the 1.02 metre-long ballot paper for last year’s NSW Legislative Council

Are all views considered?
We then need to be able to address a second issue: will everyone’s views be accommodated within this (existing) provision? Sadly, the answer has to be no. There are too many disparate views in any modern society to permit universal consensus; the best we can hope for is a majority view. However, while the majority might have their opinions accepted, there should still be some room for the disenfranchised to be heard as well. Compromises are essential. Many of the serious problems confronting our society today arise largely because we refuse to compromise.

Unfortunately, the idea that there are behavioural norms to which we are expected to comply seems to enjoy a reduced presence in our society today. I am reminded of a trenchant comment by Joan Chittister: “I grew up in a society where there were some words that were never spoken – in front of women, in front of children, in public, at a dinner table, in a professional setting, on a telecommunications program of any kind. But then, little by little, we began to see it painted on back walls of old buildings. And did nothing. Then we began to accept it in teenage music. And did nothing. Then it showed up in racy ‘literature’. And we did nothing. Then it showed up in racy ‘literature’. And we did nothing. Then it showed up in racy ‘literature’. And we did nothing. Finally, it was everywhere on the streets. And now, it seems, there is very little we can do about it all.”

The restoration of norms for the disenfranchised to be heard seems to enjoy a reduced presence in our society today. I am reminded of a trenchant comment by Joan Chittister: “I grew up in a society where there were some words that were never spoken – in front of women, in front of children, in public, at a dinner table, in a professional setting, on a telecommunications program of any kind. But then, little by little, we began to see it painted on back walls of old buildings. And did nothing. Then we began to accept it in teenage music. And did nothing. Then it showed up in racy ‘literature’. And we did nothing. Finally, it was everywhere on the streets. And now, it seems, there is very little we can do about it all.”

Manners defined

Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use.

Emily Post

The test of good manners is to be patient with the bad ones.

Solomon Ibn Gabirol

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Joan Chittister

How do we hear people?
This line of thinking then raises a third issue: if we agree on the role of schools, and we also agree that the views of a majority should be acceded to (within limits, depending on the topic), how do we assess those views validly? To answer that question, we need to look at a practical dilemma currently facing Australia: should we change the Marriage Act to accommodate same-sex marriages? From opinion polls conducted in recent years, it is clear that there is a growing level of support for changes to the current position, but not everyone trusts such metrics. Having recently participated in such a poll for the first time in my life, I am now more convinced of their validity but there are still many people who might wonder whether most polls are conducted in the local pub during half-time in the footy.

Referendums are another source of data collection, but we can hardly hold a multi-million dollar vote every time we try to decide on what should be included in a school’s curriculum. Parliamentary legislation is another option and in a democracy that seems to be a reasonable choice but again, many people have reservations about the validity of such decisions when the results seem to be tied to party allegiances.

Even a lightly populated nation like ours cannot realistically hope to canvass and respond to everyone’s views. The ancient days of Greek citizens casting votes on discarded shards of pottery would not help much today – it would be a prospect even scarier than the 1.02 metre-long ballot paper for last year’s NSW Legislative
teaching

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Council. We cannot pretend that our democracy represents the collective voice of our fellow citizens. Rather, it reflects (at least ideally) the expressed views of the interested participants. If “decisions are made by those who show up”, it follows that the chosen content in a school system’s curriculum will be influenced by the views expressed by vocal stake-holders. Sadly, too few people actually take the opportunity to express a considered view.

This brings us back to a rising community problem: the silence of the masses. In an age when communications are so readily available to almost everyone, it is ironic that participation in serious discussion is seemingly dwindling. Just look at the key issues of refugee resettlement, revision of the taxation system, the escalating climatic crisis or the increase in deaths by suicide; each of these ‘hot button’ issues is worthy of serious discussion, but society seems more interested in working out whether a footballer should be fined for off-field conduct or a model should be banned because her body shape is outside certain parameters. The founders of democracy must shudder in their graves as they see the futility of so many banal debates (not only in parliament but certainly obvious there) and the refusal to grapple with the key issues that impact on our lives.

Perhaps this is where schools come in – again! While it is common to find schools teaching public speaking and debating skills today, leading to far more confident students when called upon to speak in public, we must ask whether our emphasis is on the elite, rather than on the masses? Do we select our debating teams and then concentrate on them, or do we try to ensure that the skills of oratory, logical thinking, and self-confidence are developed in every student?

No school would restrict its maths or science programs to those who are gifted (tempted though we might be to do so); instead, we work hard to educate everyone in the class. Why do we do less with oratory and debating?

I started with a claim that no-one wants to add to our already crowded curriculum, but perhaps teachers can nurture the necessary skills in an incidental manner. If we all refuse to accept poorly reasoned answers to questions, if we all demand clear diction when responding to a teacher’s questions, and if we all extol the virtues of positive self-esteem, we will be contributing in a significant way to the development of communication skills and perhaps one day we will see universal improvement. Many teachers already do these things – just as you actively teach etiquette – but if all of us could accept the challenge, we could indeed make a major impact. The improvement in our own daily classes would be our reward.

Dennis Sleigh, a retired principal, now acts as a leadership consultant. He has been awarded Fellowships by both ACE and ACEL and is a successful writer, with four books (two co-authored) and over 250 articles to his credit. Contact him at dwsleigh@tpg.com.au.

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