

Teaching Democratic Humility to Improve Classroom Discussion

Kason Kendall*

* Utah State University, USA
Email: kjkendall@graniteschools.org

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ABSTRACT

Democratic discussion in the classroom has been viewed as a way to increase consensus, however the spread of false and misleading information through social media and influencers can make classroom discussions problematic. This electronic text analysis study highlights the social media site of Quora and posts related to the Gulf War. Posts related to the Gulf War is critically analyzed and their potential impacts are examined. This study also analyzes the posts and potential impacts of a conservative influencer named James Lindsay. It also analyzes specific polarizing posts that Lindsay has made on Instagram and highlight the potential impacts on classroom discussions of some of these posts. A purpose of the study is to analyze negative potential impacts of social media on student's views and on classroom discussions. The study also highlights two potential solutions to overcoming these negative potential impacts. One solution is to use Stanford History Education Group's Civic Online Reasoning, and another solution is to explicitly teach Democratic humility. With democratic humility, individuals learn not to make hyperbolic claims about their beliefs. Students could also be taught when learning about democratic humility, the importance of suspending judgement until they have gathered sufficient information on the topic.

KEYWORDS

Social media; social media influencers; deliberative discussion; deliberative pedagogy; democratic humility

INTRODUCTION

Democratic discussion in the classroom has been viewed as a way to increase consensus. Dahlgren (2006) implies that the belief in consensus often comes from an assumption that problems can be solved through deliberation and that communication is the key issue instead of unresolvable antagonisms. Hess and McAvoy (2015); Parker (2003) note that discussion in the classroom is a kind of shared inquiry, the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views. Discussing societal issues in K-12 education can be a way that students are exposed to current events and topics in the past that have been viewed as controversial. Hess and McAvoy note that this can be beneficial as students practice giving reasons, listening, considering perspectives, evaluating views, and treating each other as political equals. Hess and McAvoy explain that there is a gap between this practice in the classroom and outside of the classroom as in U.S. society many individuals do not experience mutual respect in the public sphere and divisive partisan politics operate on the winner-take-all principle". Hess and McAvoy define polarization as "moments when political discourse and action that bifurcate toward ideological extremes." Elements of polarization from U.S. society can spread in the classroom during discussion of what is often referred to as controversial issues.

The term controversial issues should be reframed as controversial to some as the term controversial issues has been used to protect ideals within the dominant culture (Camicia & Knowles, 2021). Disagreement on controversial issues can be amplified through social media platforms and political influencers. Camicia and Knowles acknowledge that social media has been a powerful new tool for ideological groups that found themselves outside of most popular media. Conservative voices in particular have had an outsized voice on social media. One factor that gives conservative views a greater voice online is the class differential. Members of the middle and upper classes have greater online access, technological skills, empowerment, and time to use technology platforms (Schradie, 2019). This can give oversimplified conservative views more prevalence to the general public including students. At one point, Facebook refused to take down a fake video of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that had been manipulated to make her speech appear stilted and slurred. This was even after their independent fact checking groups had determined the videos were false (Harwell, 2019). This indicates the problematic nature of social media companies allowing false or misleading content to spread. Camicia and Knowles note how Alex Jones' Youtube channel had roughly 500k views per day at its height. Another polarizing conservative figure that is growing in popularity is James Lindsay. Lindsay will be a key focus of this paper that we will discuss at a later point.

Ideological polarization is a key defect in deliberative democracy (Knowles & Castro, 2018; Mansbridge, 2018). Hess and McAvoy (2015) note that when polarization is high and trust is low people are less willing to accept political losses. Polarization and distrust fuel each

other (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). Yudkin, Hawkins and Dixon (2019) carried out a study demonstrating that individuals who consumed a variety of news sources including Breitbart, Sean Hannity, Huffington Post, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and others believed their political rivals were more radical than they were. This was likely a result of the polarizing nature of these outlets. The study mentioned Instagram and this paper will highlight James Lindsay, a newer polarizing influencer on Instagram that is also spreading ideas on other social media and other technology outlets. Prager University is a YouTube channel funded by conservative Dennis Prager who had a net worth of \$12 million at the beginning of 2022. The channel currently has 2.95 million subscribers and has videos arguing John F. Kennedy would have been a republican in the contemporary era and that the Democratic party supported slavery while republicans freed slaves. These arguments ignored partisan ideological realignments that took place in the 1960s under Lyndon B. Johnson. The function of these videos is to increase loyalty to the Republican party (Camicia & Knowles, 2021). Prager University is not an actual university but uses the name to give the organization an air of credibility. Other recent video names from Prager University include Milton Friedman: No Free Lunch, The Sexualization of Children, Ron DeSantis On Where Courage Comes From, Three Ways to Fix America: Presented by Dave Rubin.

Quora

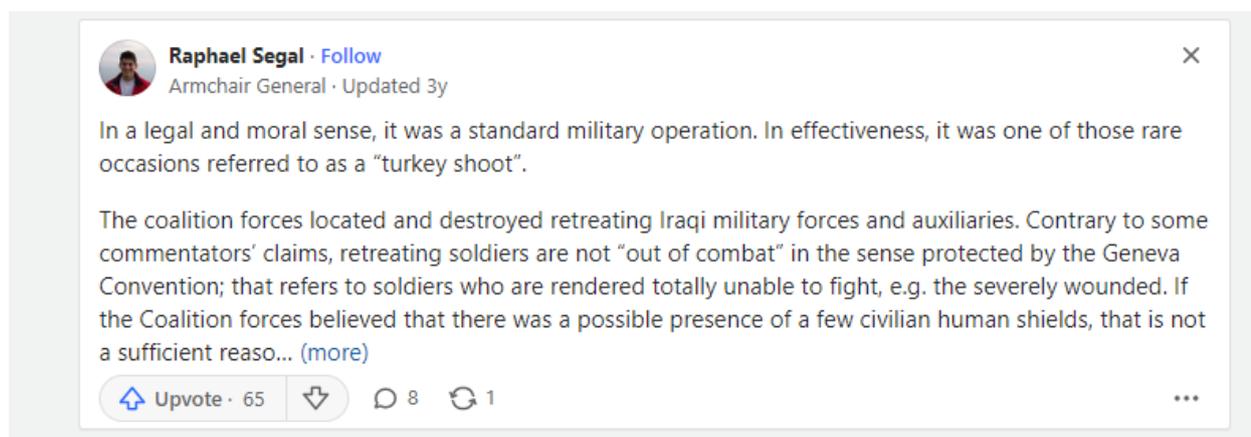
In addition to polarization increasing through individuals watching Prager U videos, polarization can be increased as people read the writing of individuals online. Ideological polarization around specific issues can also grow as individuals see memes or videos. One specific information sharing platform is <https://www.quora.com/>. There are many potential social media sites and platforms. One reason I went with Quora in this study is that answers are often in paragraph form and go into detail unlike a platform such as twitter with strict word limits. Users can also post their credentials that give them authority to speak on a topic unlike a platform such as reddit. Any individual can create a profile and start answering questions regardless of their lack of expertise. The procedures for this study were to first go to <https://www.quora.com/>. I then searched "Highway of Death" in the search box. In the Gulf War there was an event nicknamed the "Highway of Death" in which retreating Iraqi soldiers were shot by U.S. personnel. I then chose the first six answers listed excluding the answers that had images, which would have caused screenshots of the answer to take up substantially more room in the paper. I then compared the answers concerning the Highway of Death with the writings of Howard Zinn and Ramsey Clark. To obtain the James Lindsay screenshots, I followed his account on Instagram and used the snipping tool to create screenshots of what in my opinion were his most egregious posts. I then critically break down the potential intent and impact of these posts. In Zinn's 1999 book, *A People's History of the United States* he notes concerning the Highway of Death, "With victory certain and the Iraqi army in full flight, U.S. planes kept bombing retreating soldiers who clogged the highway out of Kuwait City" (Zinn, 1999, p. 598). This has been referred to as a war crime by former attorney general Ramsey

Clark (Clark, 1991). On Quora someone asked the question; Was the “Highway of Death” a standard military operation or a war crime? Here are responses of some Quora users.

Was the “Highway of Death” a standard military operation or a war crime?

Answer Follow · 4 Request

Figure 1. Quora Question <https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime>



Raphael Segal · Follow
Armchair General · Updated 3y

In a legal and moral sense, it was a standard military operation. In effectiveness, it was one of those rare occasions referred to as a “turkey shoot”.

The coalition forces located and destroyed retreating Iraqi military forces and auxiliaries. Contrary to some commentators’ claims, retreating soldiers are not “out of combat” in the sense protected by the Geneva Convention; that refers to soldiers who are rendered totally unable to fight, e.g. the severely wounded. If the Coalition forces believed that there was a possible presence of a few civilian human shields, that is not a sufficient reaso... (more)

Upvote · 65

Figure 2. Quora Answer 1 <https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime>

<https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime>



Michael Baker · Follow
Former Cellarman in a Courage Tied House at Courage (1973–1973) · 4y

It was a turkey shoot.

It took place on Kuwaiti, i.e. on invaded, territory. This was an invading army on invaded land - possibly the most justified place on which to attack them.

12

Figure 3. Quora Answer 2 [1 https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime](https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime)

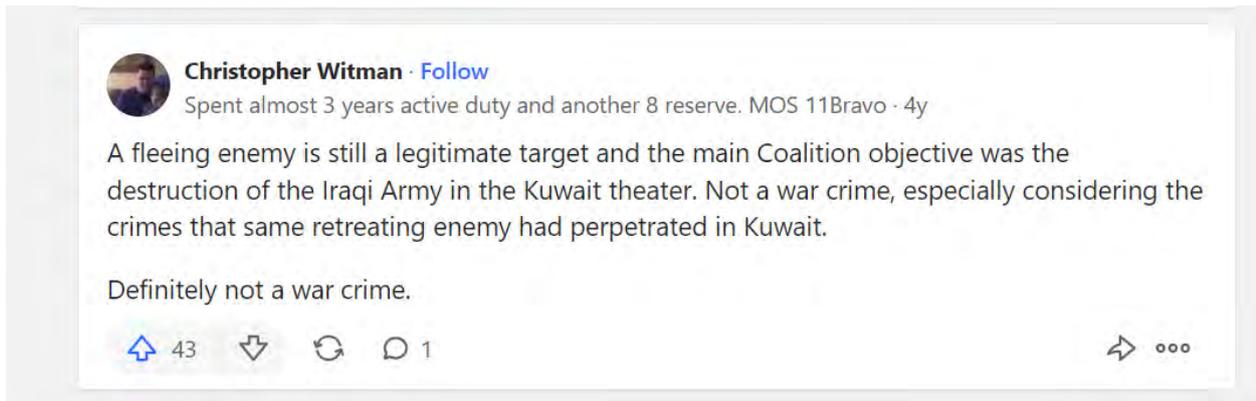


Figure 4. *Quora Answer 3 1 <https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime>*

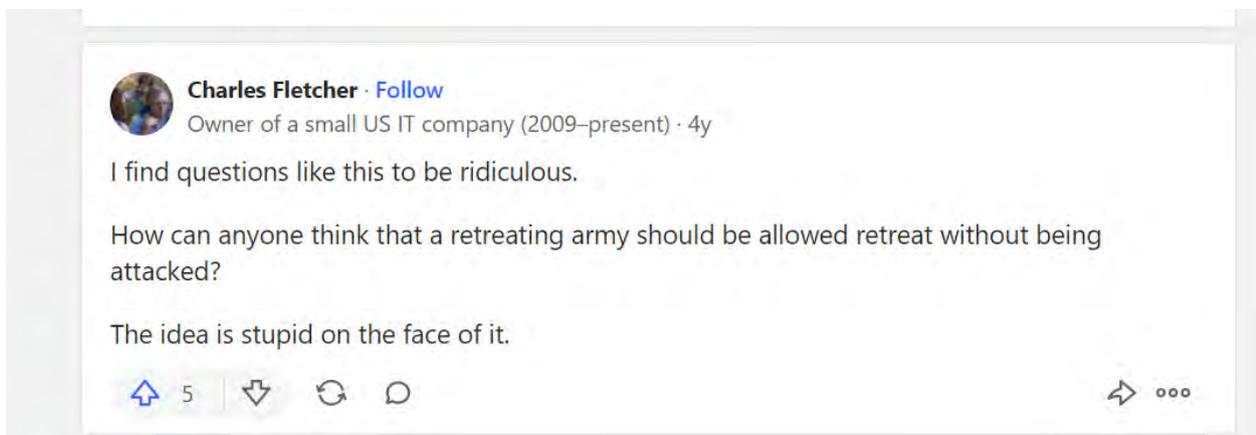


Figure 5. *Quora Answer 4 1 <https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime>*

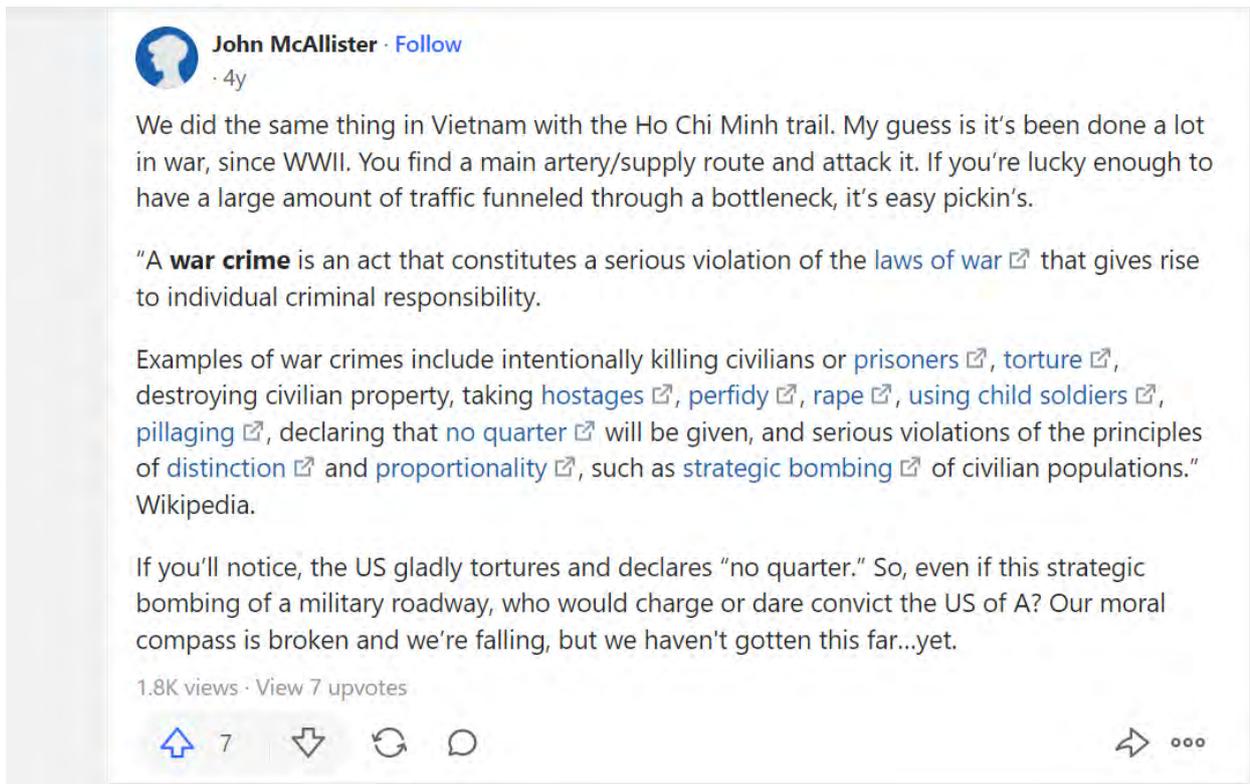


Figure 6. *Quora Answer 5* [1 https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime](https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime)

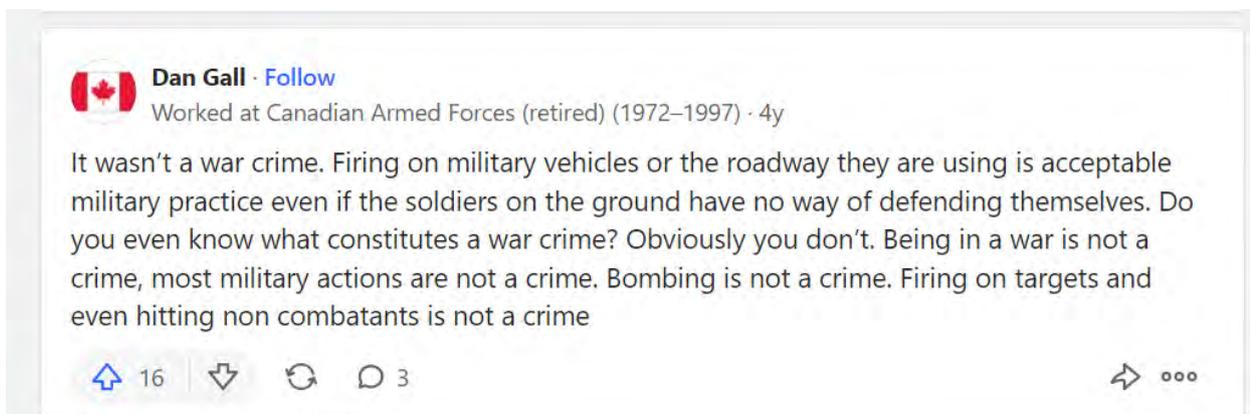


Figure 7. *Quora Answer 6* [6 https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime](https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime)

Another user on Quora asked the question, "What exactly happened on the "Highway of Death" in Iraq?" There was only one answer given by an individual claiming to be a military officer. This one answer will be analyzed.



Figure 8. Quora Question 2 <https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime>



Figure 9. Quora Answer 6 <https://www.quora.com/Was-the-Highway-of-Death-a-standard-military-operation-or-a-war-crime>

A curious student could stumble across these answers on Quora and walk away believing that they did legitimate research and had an informed view on the subject. A student's parent could also read these answers and then pass these ideas down to the student. Mere exposure effect indicates that when an individual hears an idea over and over, they will regard that idea as more likely to be true regardless of the accuracy of this claim (Myers, 2011). There is a lot of disturbing context missing from these answers of arm chair experts on Quora. An individual reading these answers could point to the fact that many responses were from military officers who must know the answers, but many of these military officers may not have all the pertinent information. Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark traveled to Kuwait shortly after the Gulf War. He filmed and collected testimony. The testimony that he collected indicates that Iraqi troops were returning home to Iraq under orders given from Baghdad. They were following United Nations Resolution 660 and exiting Kuwait. Testimony given by Kuwaitis affirms that these orders had been given over the radio and that troops started leaving on the afternoon of February 26, 1991. The Bush administration had claimed that Iraqi troops were retreating, so they could regroup and fight another day, but the testimony provided by Kuwaitis does not support this idea. Clark explains that the massacre of these withdrawing troops violates the third article of the 1949 Geneva Convention which bans killing soldiers out of combat. There are also implications that some bombed on the Highway of Death were Palestinians and Iraqi civilians, as cars, buses, and trucks that were not military vehicles were also hit. They point out the Washington Post

stating that senior U.S. officers were worried about senior officers within the central U.S. command were becoming nervous of the growing public perception that soldiers were leaving Iraq voluntarily, so the U.S. government intentionally downplayed Iraqi troops leaving Kuwait. This information also becomes more believable upon learning that the “smart” laser guided bombs Bush claimed would hit their targets were only seven percent of the total bombs. (Clark, 1991). One attack on civilians in a bomb shelter let to between three-hundred and sixteen hundred civilian deaths (McManus & Gerstenzang, 1991). The answers by military officers also omit the context of the war as Bush claimed that Saddam was worse than Hitler (Raum, 1990). The demonization of Iraqi civilians and soldiers among U.S. military seems extremely likely given this background information. Military officers answering questions online may not be intentionally spreading misinformation, but they may not have relevant facts and background knowledge. Spreading misleading information or oversimplifying answers online is as easy as ever. Quora is one of many platforms that can be used to spread misleading information and polarization, another popular one is Instagram.

James Lindsay

Some public intellectuals or influencers are making this polarization worse. One of these specific individuals is James Lindsay. James Lindsay has a PhD in math. He wrote a book called *Cynical Theories* that is highly critical of social justice movements. His latest target has been public schools and teachers. He has lately been calling teacher groomers. Stuart Hall notes that the establishment of hegemony has more to do with the ability to reshape oppositional forces to maintain them in their subordinate places (Hall, 2016). Lindsay reshapes the arguments of teachers and gay individuals to create a strawman he can defeat. He seeks to keep those with a more liberal message in a subordinate position by intentionally putting them in a negative light. He posts memes on his Instagram account titled conceptualjames. As of July 2022, he has 51.5k followers. His YouTube channel New discourses has roughly 109k followers as of July 2022. I have included screenshots of some posts he has shared in the last two to three months.



Figure 10. James posted this image shortly after the reversal of *Roe vs. Wade*. He is creating a caricature of women desiring reproductive justice. Notice the devil horns on the shadow.



Figure 11. James is implying that LGBTQ+ individuals are unstable.

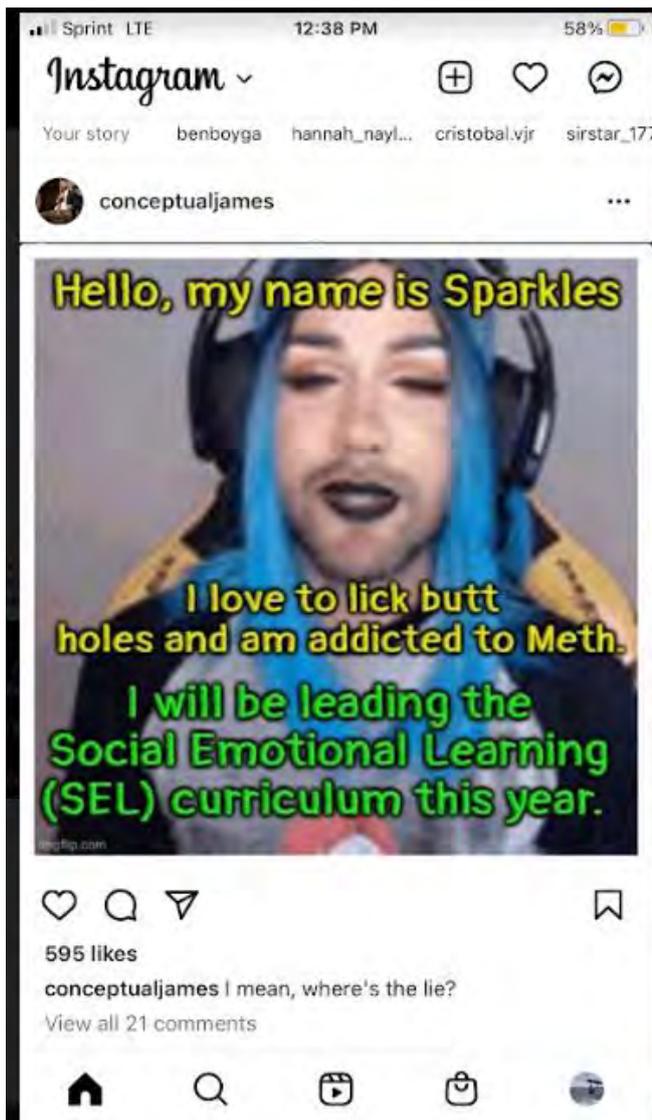


Figure 12. James is setting up a caricature of a teacher wanting to teach social and emotional learning. This could have the intended result of discrediting the public school system school system.



Figure 13. James is implying that many Alex Jones has legitimate predictions. Individuals in the comment section indicated that Alex is often right.



Figure 14. James is here implying that Biden is purposely creating food and fuel shortages. No context is provided of fuel shortages worldwide. Biden is framed as a communist even though his policy has largely been neo-liberal throughout his career.



Figure 15. *This post was created shortly after the Uvalde shooting. The implication is that those who are calling for widely agreed upon background checks want all guns confiscated, so that a government takeover is more realistic.*

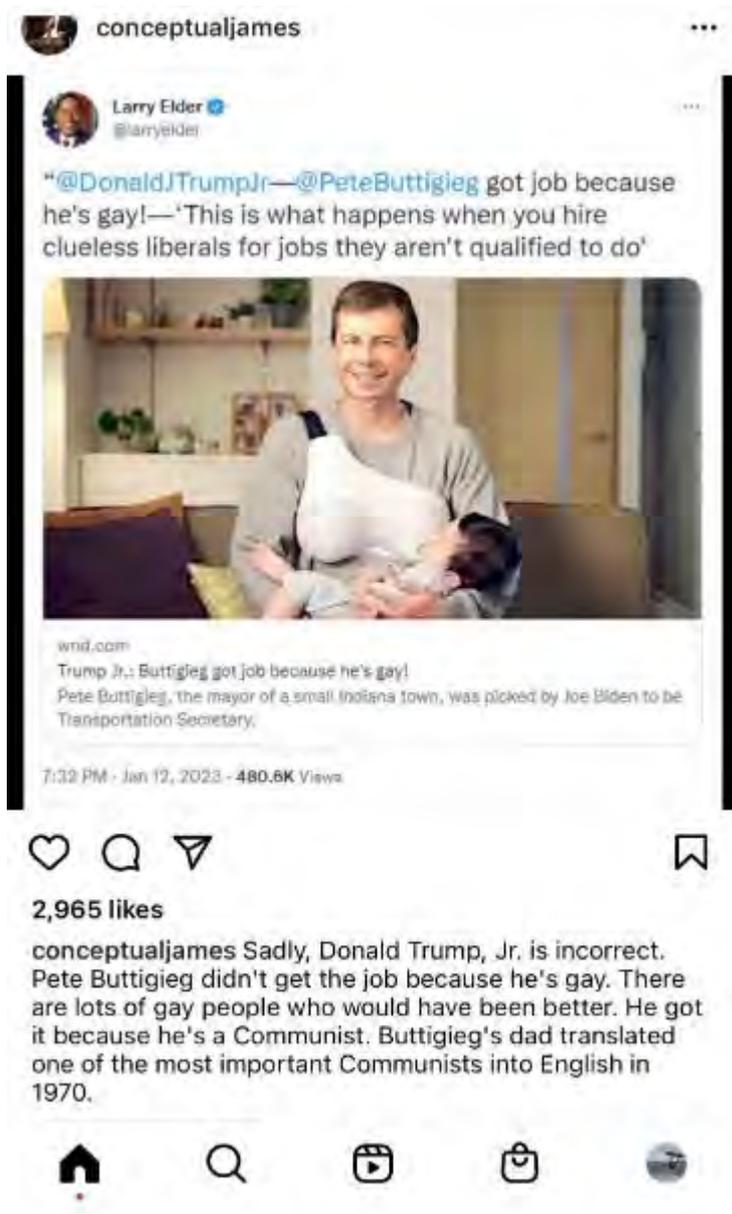


Figure 16. James is attempting to make Pete Buttigieg appear as if he is a communist and that this is the real reason that he got the job of Secretary of Transportation. This is by extension implying that Joe Biden who selected Buttigieg for his administration is a communist. Keep in mind Buttigieg worked for McKinsey & Company

There are multiple layers to the social media activity of James Lindsay. One layer is his promoting of conservative views. Another layer is the undermining of trust and promotion of hostility toward public educators. Influencers such as James Lindsay give the portrayal that all Democrats or left-leaning individuals are absurd. Lindsay sets up straw man arguments in his memes.

With his large following, Lindsay is providing an echo chamber for individuals who choose to follow him. Algorithms recommend Lindsay's accounts to individuals who already tend to lean conservative. Most of what James posts are memes. Memes can act as a cover for individuals who post misleading content. If an individual posting misleading memes is called

out on it, then they can say that the person criticizing them does not have a sense of humor since memes are supposed to be funny. This sets up a loaded scenario where the individual must either accept the meme or else, they are the problem, and they lack a sense of humor. For example, if an individual were to critique Lindsay's meme of Pete Buttigieg and point to evidence contrary to him being a communist then Lindsay's supporters could argue that the person missed the point or doesn't have a sense of humor.

For this reason, it is essential for students to develop critical media literacy. Students can benefit from the civic online reasoning lessons that have been put out by the Stanford History Education Group. These lessons help students focus on pertinent questions behind online material such as Who is behind the information? What is the evidence? And What do other sources say? In the What do other sources say lesson there is an emphasis on corroborating arguments and verifying information with multiple sources.

Other questions that students could potentially analyze in addition to the SHEG questions are – What is the financial incentive of the person posting? How have they ideologically aligned themselves in the past? There is also a lesson included called lateral reading. In lateral reading individuals leave the website they are getting their information from to see what other digital sources are saying about it.

Intro to What Do Other Sources Say? Saturday School Lesson Plan

COR Question: What do other sources say?

The Problem: There is an overabundance of easily accessible information online. This makes it both important to verify claims and evidence across multiple sources and relatively easy to engage in this verification, if we know how. If we are not committed to or verifying claims and evidence, we set ourselves up to be misled.

This lesson will introduce students to the importance of corroborating arguments and verifying information across multiple online sources. Students work in groups to practice corroborating claims and evidence presented within two sources about mandatory Saturday School.

Please note: The sources included in this lesson are fictional accounts that the SHEG team has created, often citing real sources and evidence. We've done this to help students zero in on the most salient aspects of evaluating each source. In this way, we can support students to develop new reasoning skills without overburdening them with complicated content that requires background knowledge.

Materials:

- Copies of sources and guiding questions for students
- We encourage educators to watch the [Introduction to Civic Online Reasoning](#) and [Civic Online Reasoning in the Classroom](#) videos before teaching this lesson. Please note that these videos were created for teachers, not students. Showing students these videos may compromise the lesson plan.

Lesson Plan:

1. Set the scene or remind students of the scene from the "Who is behind?" lesson:
 - a. If you didn't teach the introductory "Who is behind?" or "What's the evidence?" lessons, tell students: *Imagine that our school is thinking about starting a new policy—mandatory Saturday school for everyone. I imagine that you already have a strong opinion about whether mandatory Saturday school should happen, but today I'm going to ask you to back that opinion up with research. The school board wants to hear from students about their opinions on the proposed*



cor.stanford.edu

Figure 16. Stanford History Education Group Civic Online Reasoning Lesson <https://sheg.stanford.edu/students-civic-online-reasoning>

Democratic Humility

In addition to students utilizing the resources on civic online reasoning from Stanford History Education group, students can also be taught about developing democratic humility. Thomas Spragens (1999) argues that we should seek to instill democratic humility into individuals in the United States. I would argue that promoting democratic humility in the classroom is essential for productive deliberative discourses. Spragens notes that in promoting democratic humility, individuals are taught not to make unwarranted claims about status or belief. Democratic humility can instill in students the benefit of keeping an open mind and seeking out more information before forming opinions on issues. It can also instill the desire to keep searching and being open to new information even when opinions are formed. There is this individualistic notion among many in the U.S. that individuals need to form their own opinions on subjects. There is less attention given to the social, religious, and cultural factors that play into many individual's opinions. Educators can instead seek to instill in students the idea that it is better to develop an opinion after a lot of study and reflection. Promoting a healthy dose of

skepticism into students and teaching them that it is alright to change our minds as we gather more information is something to be celebrated and a sign of wisdom. Button (2005) argues that democratic humility would guard against dangers of complacency and dogmatism. He notes that an emphasis on democratic humility works on the willingness to actively, engage, listen to, and learn from diverse others.

Conclusion

Democratic humility demands the recognition that one's deepest and most cherished convictions have a fiduciary basis. An individual practicing democratic humility will recognize that their beliefs about moral truths and matters of empirical fact are just that: beliefs (Spragens, 1999). If students were taught to have this type of mindset and develop guards against dogmatism, they may have a healthy amount of skepticism when they see a meme or hear a political opinion from a parent. Camicia and Knowles (2021) highlight how deliberation can help students create democratic spaces where power is explicit rather than hidden. Democratic humility could lead to better classroom deliberation in which students more skeptically analyze the statements of their classmates and seek evidence both for and against different viewpoints. Democratic humility being explicitly taught to students can lead to a more productive deliberation as students drop the dogmatism that is so common in adults in contemporary times. Parker (2011) has indicated that through deliberative education young people can develop the ability to exchange ideas and reason with one another. Democratic humility can help these exchanges be more fruitful. Hess and McAvoy (2015) for example have highlighted how students view themselves as more politically engaged if they had impactful deliberation in classrooms during their high school years, and a focus on Democratic Humility can aid in making classroom deliberation impactful. Hess (2004) also explains how deliberating in classrooms about controversial topics can lead to more tolerance. Although there are benefits to classroom discussion, there can be downsides if students spread misinformation and students become polarized. Melissa Gibson (2020) writes of research concerning deliberative pedagogies in which educators teach with and for classroom discussion. She notes that there are downsides to social media. She writes of the existence of "Echo chambers, trolls, memes." (Gibson, 2020). This article provides potential solutions to overcome these specific types of downsides. The quora posts appear to be an echo chamber of individuals who likely have never read Zinn's or Ramsey Clark's writings regarding the Highway of Death. James Lindsay appears to be a troll who uses memes as an attempt to make anyone associated with the political left look absurd. Using the resource provided by Stanford History Education Group and teaching students Democratic Humility can be two methods to overcome downfalls of social media and strengthen classroom discussions. Further studies could include analyzing other social media posts and analyzing the potential impacts of these specific posts. Other studies could also include ways that democratic humility could be implemented in the classroom as well as the results of implementing lessons on democratic humility.

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