



AONTAS Adult Learners Festival 2021

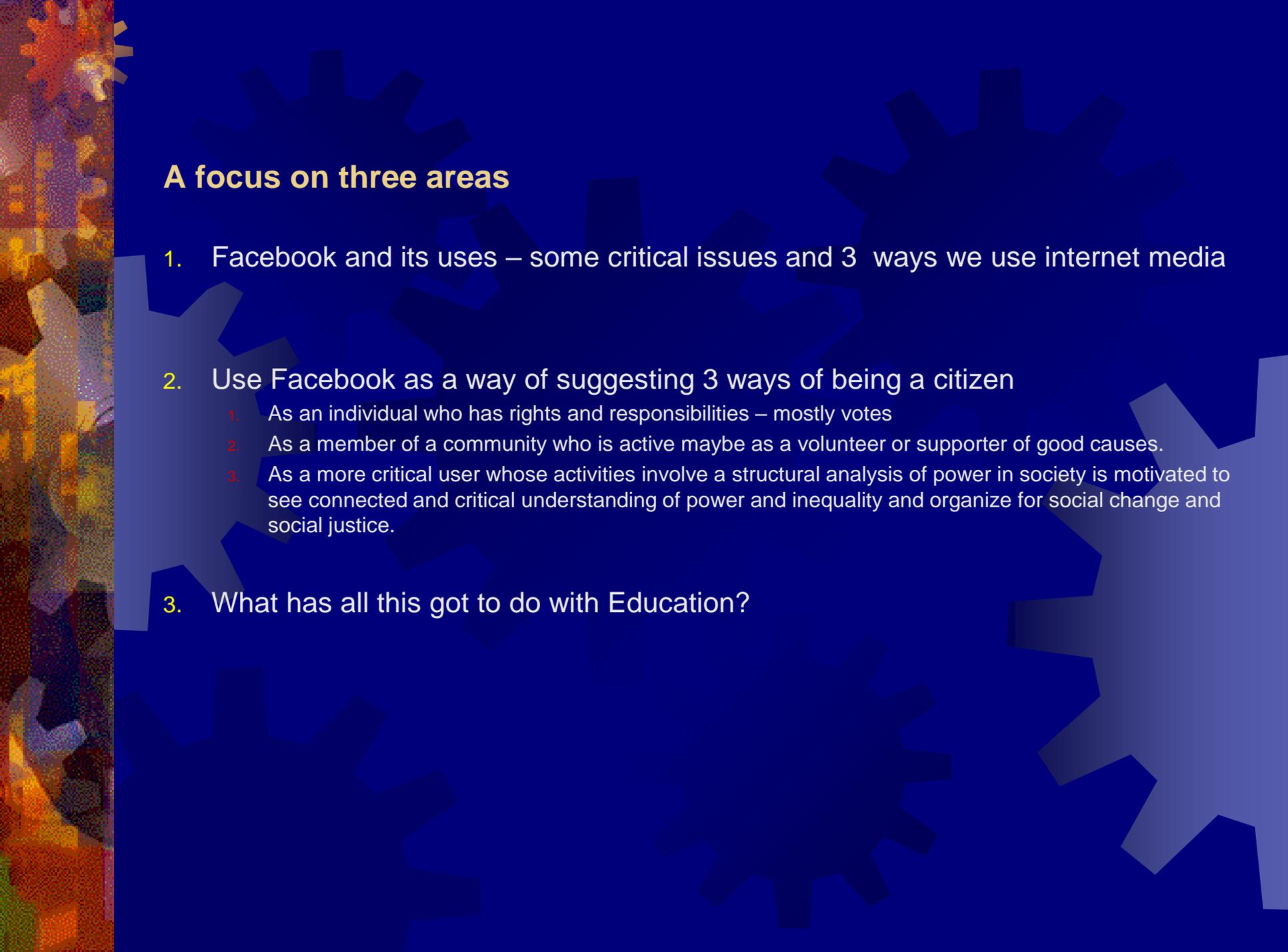
Workshop on Developing Democracy through Community Leadership in Ireland

Learners as Leaders, Leaders as Learners: Education for Active Citizenship and Social Change

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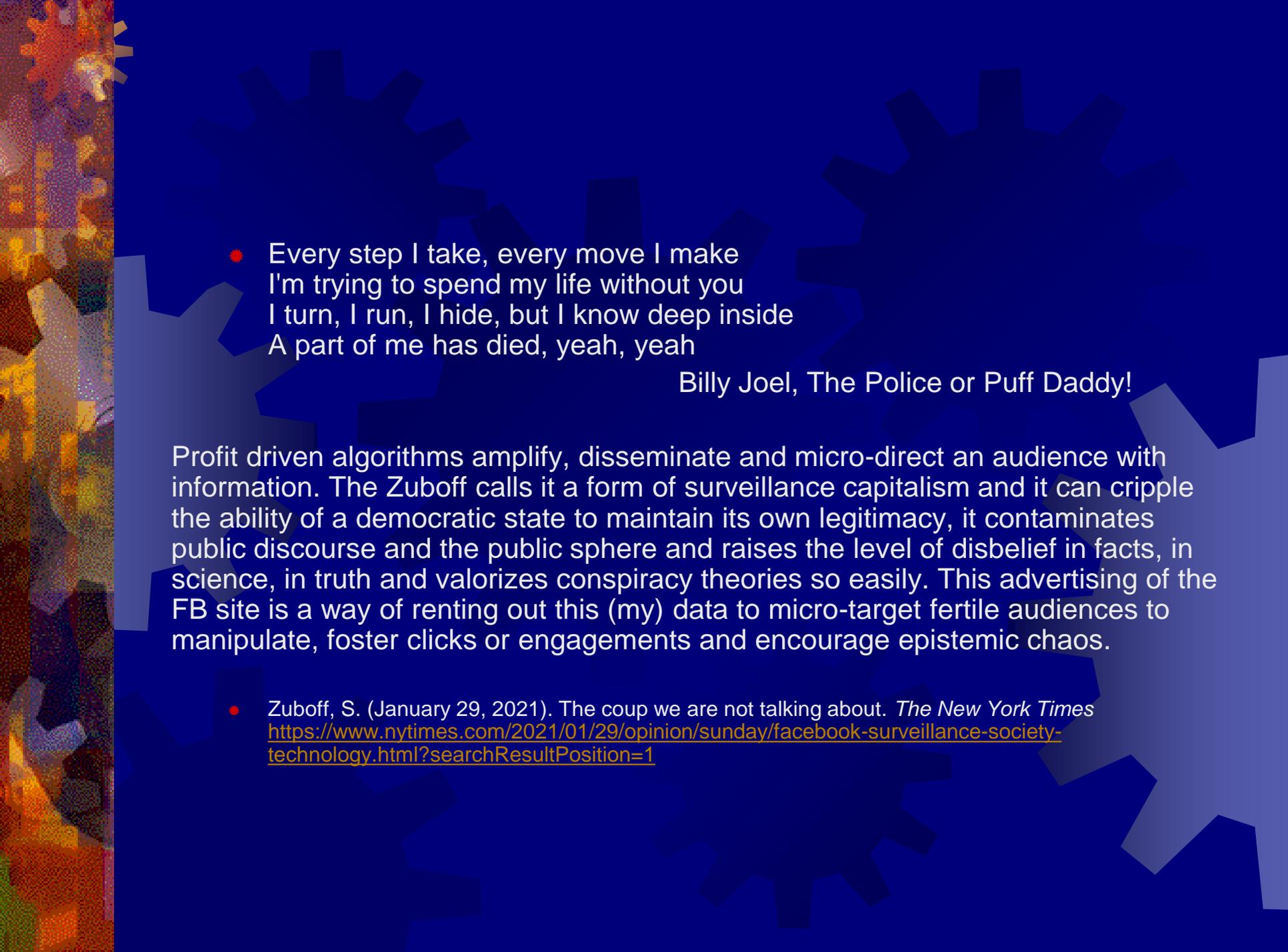
A focus on three areas

1. Facebook and its uses – some critical issues and 3 ways we use internet media
2. Use Facebook as a way of suggesting 3 ways of being a citizen
 1. As an individual who has rights and responsibilities – mostly votes
 2. As a member of a community who is active maybe as a volunteer or supporter of good causes.
 3. As a more critical user whose activities involve a structural analysis of power in society is motivated to see connected and critical understanding of power and inequality and organize for social change and social justice.
3. What has all this got to do with Education?

Facebook: Using and abusing Facebook

Three ways of approaching Facebook.

1. Facebook as a way of keeping in contact and of present oneself to friends and a wider public.
 - a) This is a really useful platform and media that keeps people connected and is particularly useful in a Covid-19 era.
 - b) The skills involved are sometimes more complex than we assume and often require learning, which many community and adult programs teach.
2. Facebooks as a way of organizing involvement in community and social activities
 - a) AONTAS uses FB in this way as do many people in their local organizations (Literacy, advertising for classes and programs, keeping members in contact with supports and is essentially a way of increasing social and community involvement.
 - b) Must be learned and is taught occasionally in public programmes but is mostly self-taught.
3. Facebook as a way of addressing inequality and injustice in society.
 - a) Understanding how Facebook operates as a system for making money, how it operates as a business model; how other platforms (YouTube, Instagram, Whats App) operate in a similar fashion.
 - b) The learning here is critical analysis of the ways that FB harvests date (my data) and behind my (our) backs turns it into a product to be sold, exploited for commercial and often political gain by other powerful entities in the world.
 - c) An 'epistemic coup'.

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- Every step I take, every move I make
I'm trying to spend my life without you
I turn, I run, I hide, but I know deep inside
A part of me has died, yeah, yeah

Billy Joel, The Police or Puff Daddy!

Profit driven algorithms amplify, disseminate and micro-direct an audience with information. The Zuboff calls it a form of surveillance capitalism and it can cripple the ability of a democratic state to maintain its own legitimacy, it contaminates public discourse and the public sphere and raises the level of disbelief in facts, in science, in truth and valorizes conspiracy theories so easily. This advertising of the FB site is a way of renting out this (my) data to micro-target fertile audiences to manipulate, foster clicks or engagements and encourage epistemic chaos.

- Zuboff, S. (January 29, 2021). The coup we are not talking about. *The New York Times*
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/29/opinion/sunday/facebook-surveillance-society-technology.html?searchResultPosition=1>

Types of Citizen

- ✿ These three approaches to Facebook can also be applied to how we approach and use Instagram, You Tube, Twitter, Whats App and other platforms that give access to the internet.
- ✿ The real focus is on internet companies in the above scheme.
- ✿ I suggest that the three approaches are not mutually exclusive. One can be engaged in any or all of these, and they overlap.
- ✿ The second area I promised to discuss was to look at ways of being a citizen (suggested by this story of Facebook)

Types of citizens

	Personal Responsible	Participatory	Justice oriented
Description	<p>Works hard, obeys laws</p> <p>Volunteers esp. at times of crises</p> <p>Acts responsibly</p> <p>Actively recycles waste and rubbish</p>	<p>Active in community organizations & Organizes with others to care for people in need.</p> <p>Delivers groceries in lockdown</p> <p>Knows how local and national government works</p> <p>Has abilities and skills to engage in society and community activities</p>	<p>Critically assesses social, political and economic structures seeing beyond surface realities</p> <p>Searches for areas in which people suffer injustice and inequality</p> <p>Knows about social movements that actively address systemic change</p>
Actions (sample)	<p>Will contribute food to make food parcels</p> <p>Will support actions for refugee and direct provision centers</p>	<p>Will organize a food parcel delivery</p> <p>Will engage in working with refugees in centers</p>	<p>Understands and has the skills to know why people may be hungry and understands root causes.</p> <p>Understands the global systemic causes of refugees and how climate change, poverty and war are related.</p>
Basic Assumptions	<p>It is most important that citizens are good, have strong values such as honesty, a sense of responsibility and obey the laws of the land</p>	<p>Citizens must participate actively and exercise leadership in local community and in existing structures</p>	<p>It is the task of citizens to ask critical questions in order to gain knowledge, exercise accountability and work to change unjust social structures</p>

How is this connected to democracy?

★ The kinds of discussions and critical questioning of power, the kind of critical enquiries that lead to this kind of learning are the exact same kinds of discussions that we know are central to a democracy.

- A democracy of citizens who vote;
- A democracy of active volunteers who are active socially;
- Exercise a critical imagination built on indignation and awareness (see Covid as a social disease and not just a medical or viral issue).
- Covid is a social disease and is not only a health issue with a medical response.

★ The same kinds of discussions that adult education tries to engage in for learning is the same kind of discussion we would propose that democracies engage in, in order to bring about the following:

- identifying the real needs of citizens;
- an analysis of the current causes and consequences of existing power and policy situations; and
- the bringing of those ideas, needs and proposals to be made actual in the political, legal and economic arenas.

★ Most civil society organizations are learning organizations;

★ A democracy is a learning society;

★ Democracy makes people better: A developmental dividend.



Threats to democracy

- ✱ **There is an inherent contradiction between democracy and capitalism.**
- ✱ **Neoliberal capitalism is about believing that everything can be bought and sold.**
- ✱ **From the far-right**
- ✱ **Democracy is always not yet achieved, and never a given, never achieved, always to be worked for.**
- ✱ **Support for democracy is dependent on it delivering its promises.**

What is a democracy?

- ✱ Democracy is a way of living together in which all members have equal power to discuss and bring into public debate, not influenced by vested interests (those with money and power), all matters of concern to citizens;
 - ✱ To make decisions and suggestions that can be taken into public policy and legislative arenas for implementation;
 - ✱ It is a way of having conversations that hold every power holding person and institution to account, open to critical questioning and searching for evidence to support arguments.
 - ✱ It creates a way of living together in which all are treated with equality.
 - ✱ Democracy is a learning and developmental project.
- ✱ A very good argument can be made to state that this is also the kind of discussion that defines an adult learning community.

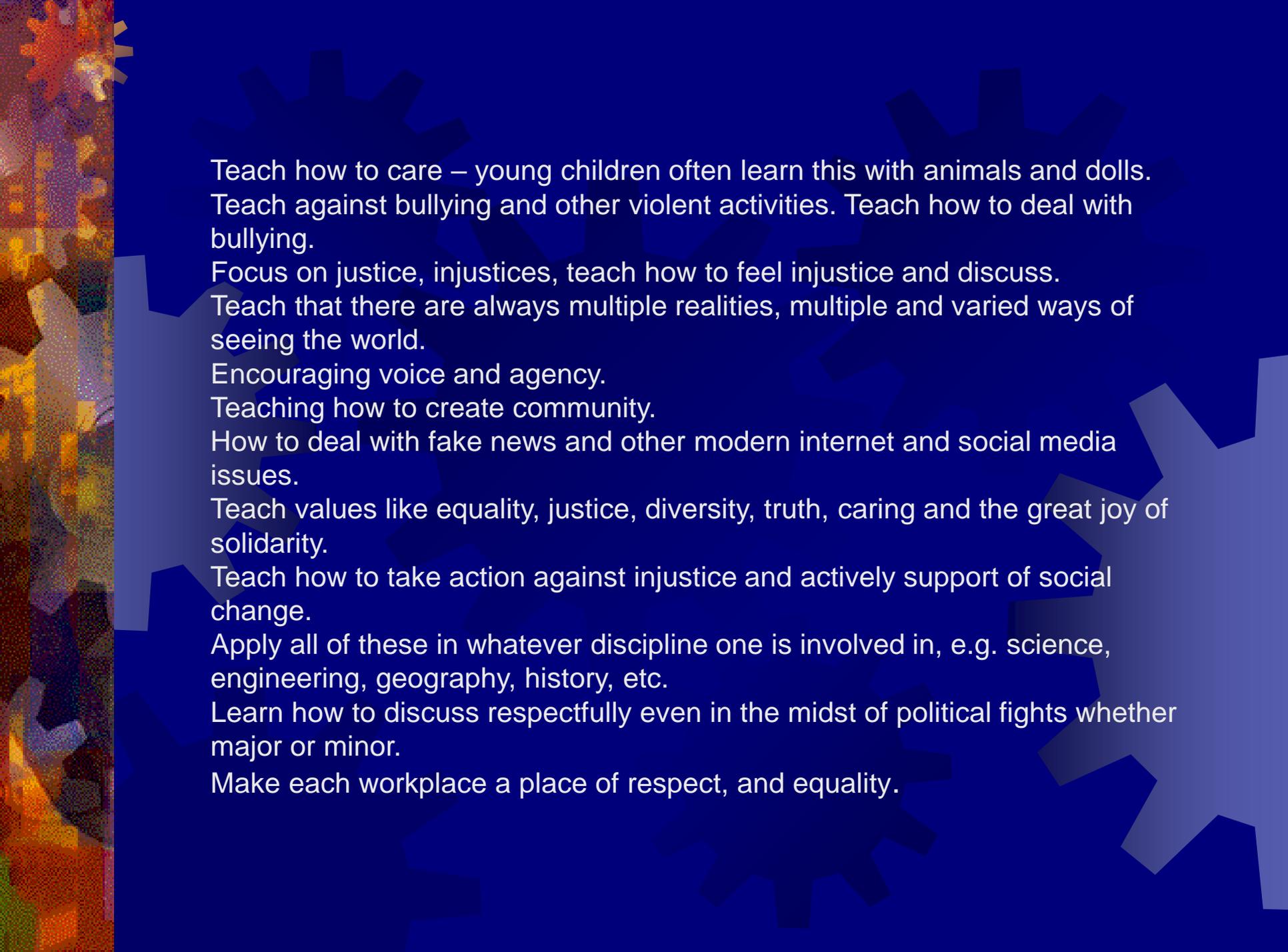


There is a crisis in the Lifeworld

- ✦ The lifeworld is the horizon of meanings within which we interpret the world and find meanings.
- ✦ Fake news, anti-science, conspiracy theories and other pathological expressions of meaning can dominate or at least corrupt public debate.

A charter for a Democracy that Learns

- ✿ Teaching how to hold on to the imagination so we can picture how it is for others and how it ought to be.
- ✿ Making opportunities for exercising creativity through art, dance, literature, theatre and all works of creativity and play. Assisting young people and adults with the difficult tasks of making decisions about what to do with their lives.
- ✿ Creating the possibilities of empathy and valuing one's own feelings and of others so that we can communicate with civility.
- ✿ Learn to recognize our own uniqueness and that of others; Respond to the need for all to be recognized.
- ✿ How to debate, discuss, argue, defend points of view, opinions and values in a community of equal respect in solidarity.
- ✿ Teach respect for others, especially those we perceive to be different – refugees, youth, other religions, travellers, disabilities, gender, respect by men for women. Men must move over (slightly or a great deal to make room for our sisters on public platforms and in all social areas).
- ✿ To see the world as connected.



Teach how to care – young children often learn this with animals and dolls.
Teach against bullying and other violent activities. Teach how to deal with bullying.

Focus on justice, injustices, teach how to feel injustice and discuss.

Teach that there are always multiple realities, multiple and varied ways of seeing the world.

Encouraging voice and agency.

Teaching how to create community.

How to deal with fake news and other modern internet and social media issues.

Teach values like equality, justice, diversity, truth, caring and the great joy of solidarity.

Teach how to take action against injustice and actively support of social change.

Apply all of these in whatever discipline one is involved in, e.g. science, engineering, geography, history, etc.

Learn how to discuss respectfully even in the midst of political fights whether major or minor.

Make each workplace a place of respect, and equality.

Conclusion

John Adams:

Wherever men, women or children are to be found, whether they are old or young, rich or poor, high or low, ignorant or learned, every individual is seen to be strongly actuated by a desire to be seen, heard, talked of, approved and respected by the people about him/her and within their knowledge.

It is the task of a democracy to transform social structures and institutions towards more dialogue, equal and just forms in the light of the prevailing injustices in society.

In the work of Paulo Freire he proposes the primacy of hope that allows us denounce injustices and announce the possibility of a better life. The main threat against this hope is the idea that this current situation is inevitable and any situation is the result of bad choices made by individuals or those at the bottom of society.

Freire's thought is driven by a hopeful critique of injustice and each moment in history offers a unique opportunity to become more human. Even though in each moment the challenge looks different and the task more challenging the work to be more human is constant. Always on the move.

Our hope has to fix on specific targets and at this moment we are faced with the task of making choices and decisions and to make history, to depart from the present and create a better future. This requires political imagination, the capacity to reflect and think, critique, asking questions, rigorous work to understand and challenge and rebuild unfair structures. In other words to learn.

We are condemned to learn.