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**edhelp@queensu.ca**

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**0:00:18.9 Chris Carlton:** Hi, there. Thanks for joining us, and welcome to another episode of Popular Pedagogy, where we try to bring big ideas in teaching and education to life. I'm your host, Chris Carlton. And this podcast is being brought to you by the Faculty of Education at Queen's University. Today, the power of social media is more evident and prevalent than ever before. It has the power to influence every aspect of our lives, it has the potential to influence our viewpoint, alter our ideas, and even affect our choices in life. Our students, starting at a young age, have access to social media and its many platforms, and it can often play a big part in their lives, affecting them both positively and negatively. In this podcast, we will be speaking with Dr. Claire Ahn, who is a professor at Queen's University, whose research focuses on how information is mediated across different platforms and how this affects people's understanding of issues, events and of people.

[music]

**0:01:29.5 CC:** I'd like to introduce our guests to our podcast today, and that is Dr. Claire Ahn, welcome Claire.

0:01:35.9 Dr. Claire Ahn: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

**0:01:38.6 CC:** Now, just to give our listeners a quick overview of your career and work so far, you have over 20 years of teaching experience, including a decade of experience as a secondary English language arts teacher, and your research projects include such topics as how visual images and genre of environmental documentary films affect viewers responses and awareness of issues, the impact of deceptive media and the importance of critical digital literacy education and how young people are understanding and learning about critical social justice issues. And that, to me, is a wow factor, that as a teacher, I'm so excited, especially in today's saturated social media environment that our students live in. Now, Claire, we mentioned earlier that your research focuses on how information is mediated across different platforms and how this affects people's understanding of issues, events and people, and we had many different ideas and questions that were presented to us about this topic, but we were able to narrow it down to the following three questions that have been forefront on many teachers' minds, especially during these days.

**0:02:53.0 CC:** And they are, why is it important that teachers help equip our students with tools and skills to critically navigate social media? And a sub-question, How can teachers facilitate this learning and what tools and research are available? And the second question, At one age or grade should we start introducing digital literacy? Now, I should mention, and Claire will probably back me up on this, critical digital literacy is not only about evaluating online content, but also understanding the internet's production and consumption process, its potential, and its structural constraints, but today's conversation will focus on the topic of Critical navigating social media. Claire, there's a lot of data and research out there about social media. The big thing is, why is it so important that teachers help equip our students with tools and skills to start navigating this?

**0:03:54.4 DA:** Well, I think as you say, it's just because it's so prevalent in our lives. We kind of can't live without it now, we're noticing that children are, for example, accessing or at least observing their parents using social media at a younger age, and they might not be fully engaging

with platforms like Twitter, for example, but they are observing how they're, for example, parents or teachers or older siblings are engaging with things, or their older siblings might be showing them what they're watching on Facebook or what they're seeing on Instagram and things like that. And so it is concerning because what happens is, and this is from my experience only, and I know I've had conversations with students, actually just last week, we were talking about this topic in my classes, and that we just kind of mindlessly gravitate towards our phones and just kind of literally, as a phrase has come to be, doomscroll, and we're not really thinking about it, it's just a mindless activity that we do when we're bored, when we're trying to kill time in the doctor's office or even on a walk, when we should be enjoying the outdoors.

**0:05:09.5 DA:** And so that's, I think, the concerning part for me as an educator and a researcher, is that we're just mindlessly kind of going through and scrolling through and not really thinking about what we're liking or re-tweeting, or tweeting, or the hashtags we're using, for example. And so really thinking about how we can educate our students from a very young age about being more aware and more critical about their engagement with, for example, social media platforms.

**0:05:39.2 CC:** And to sort of add on to that, Claire, I just did a... I quickly checked up on a recent poll that I've seen before, and even though as a teacher, I realized this and see this every day, it still sort of shocked me. And again, a lot of this is from the States, but the Canadian research sort of backs it up as well, 60% of children are engaging with a smartphone before the age of five, and then by age 10, almost 50% of children have their own smart phone, and 90% of teens between 13 and 18 years have their own smart phones. And like you said, 50% of teens check their phones at least every 30 minutes and, what was it? 60% of them, that's the last thing they do before they go to bed, is what you said, just scroll through it and see what's happening. And it might be mindless, like you're saying, just going through, but it's still that idea of intaking information. And then we look at the fact that 70% of teens are on Snapchat, Instagram, 85% on YouTube, and those were Canadian stats there as well. So Claire, we know that information is out there, so how can teachers facilitate this learning and what tools and research are available for us.

**0:07:04.5 DA:** So there is no easy answer to that, because the technology is continuously advancing, there's always new platforms coming out, Snapchat... I don't even know what Snapchat and TikTok look like. I'm not interested in knowing, but I know that a lot of my students, even though they're in post-secondary in our B.Ed program, and even our grad students are involved with that, so I understand that it's very challenging for teachers and it's very daunting. Depending on when they were in a teacher education program, for example, they might not even have addressed this topic. Like for me, when I completed my B.Ed degree in early 2000, we didn't touch on this, so I just kinda had to find my own way around things, and I think in teacher education programs as well, we're finding that not a lot of educators, teacher educators, are including these kinds of topics because again, it's something new and they don't always see it as something as being interdisciplinary in different subjects, and it's...

**0:08:03.8 DA:** I found it's always pushed on the English teacher when I was teaching because it's literacy, but literacy is an interdisciplinary skill that we all have to integrate into our classroom. That being said, the research also shows that, as you were saying, Chris, a lot of young people and people in general, no matter what age, in the survey that I conducted in 2019, they rely really heavily on social media for their news, to learn about information, young people, for example, in

the study that I conducted with Dr. Thashika Pillay in our faculty, with the 10 youth that we interview, they rely on social media with Instagram being their choice of platform, which is really interesting because Instagram is a very visually dominant platform, and that's what I'm interested in, particularly, is how images are used in these kinds of platforms and what kind of impact they have on young people's understanding about issues, people and events, for example. So that was a long kind of preface to say with regards to how teachers can approach this, and I think there are three ways, three steps that I see. And please jump in whenever you feel necessary or...

**0:09:25.8 CC:** Oh, I will, don't worry.

**0:09:27.3 DA:** Okay. [laughter] So the first step is to actually discuss with students, no matter what age, there... To invite them to critically examine their own relationship and their own habits with technology. I'm going to guess that a lot of teachers and a lot of young students, for example, don't really think about their habits unless they're forced to, unless somebody asks them, what are you doing? How are you navigating things, do you think about what you're clicking on or tweeting or re-tweeting and are you reading the hashtags and things like that? So actually inviting our students to critically engage with their own relationship with technology, for example. And Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, who's out of U Ottawa, I believe, has a podcast, and he has a conversation with renowned curriculum scholar, William Pinar, and they talk about this issue with technology in relation to curriculum, for example, and how this critical piece is really missing, and a lot of teachers just kind of add technology or add social media into their lessons as like a checkbox or a one-off, instead of really finding ways to complement the lesson and really engaging students in thinking about, again, their own habits and their relationships. The idea is if they're more aware of what they're doing or not doing, that they might become more aware as they're scrolling things and thinking about things like headlines and things like that.

**0:11:00.7 CC:** I think, Claire, also, and you'll see with this a lot of teachers that are out there, they are starting to use social media in their subjects and trying to do that type of thing, where they're allowing them to... Allowing their students to critically look at what they put on there, so that they can understand that also, that when they're looking at Twitter feeds or Snapchat, it's just somebody else that is putting their own opinion out there, and I think that's important that we realize that they are just other people. They don't have to be experts, they don't have to be specifically knowledgeable in that area, and they're providing all kinds of information that students are looking at, so sort of almost demystifying the fact that somebody that puts out a feed is an expert, and realizing that we have to sort of dissect all of that information, I think, is so important. And that reflection piece, which you mentioned, getting them to reflect on their own habits and seeing how that affects what's going on, I think that's a great point.

**0:12:08.7 DA:** I think, as you were saying before, maybe they don't realize the last thing they're doing is just scrolling through... I do that too. The first thing I do when I get up in the morning is I grab my phone and see what I missed on Twitter. And then before I go to bed, I have to make sure I haven't missed anything, but it's not until I have these moments like last week when I was teaching exactly this topic to my classes that I realize, Oh yeah, maybe I shouldn't do that. It's just this constant reminder that we need to give ourselves and kind of train our students to kind of think about that in their day-to-day lives as well. And I love that idea, Chris, with regards to the teachers that are bringing in social media into the classroom. And within this area that I'm interested, called

multi-literacies, there's this idea of literacy as a social practice, and so ensure that means bridging the ways in which students are engaging with literacy at home into the classroom, because usually there's a separation. Social media doesn't belong in the classroom, it's entertainment, we can't rely on it, things like that.

**0:13:16.9 DA:** But the reality is so many of our students are engaging with this, so why not bring it in, why not have these conversations as you were saying, Chris, and then go a little bit deeper into, for example, how people are sharing things as you say, and that kind of leads into this... My second point with regards to social media, understanding that those certain platforms only have a very limited space, and so understanding in particular with news items, for example, from whose perspective are these stories being shared and what are the implications? And if you look at platforms such as Twitter, and Instagram, and Facebook, Facebook allows for a longer text area for expansion, so I'm gonna focus more on Twitter and Instagram also because I only use Twitter and Instagram, [chuckle] so I can only speak to those platforms during this chat. But it only allows for 140 characters in Twitter. So news broadcast companies have to be very selective in how... In those... In their work choices to grab people's attention, and the other implication here that I think most... A lot of people tend to forget about, is a corresponding image. And do the images match with the headline or not.

**0:14:40.2 DA:** If they do, then what does that mean? What are the implications? There are many instances where the images don't match because maybe whoever is running the Twitter account was in a rush, they found the first image, they pop it up, but it's somewhat problematic because, right, it juxtaposes with the headline or whatever. And so there's an article that says, and I'm just... I have it on my screen here, it says, "Headlines and the few sentences that follow are often all it takes for a reader to form an opinion," and research shows that they don't click on the link to read the entire article, and we found that the youth in our study, the study that I conducted with Dr. Pillay, it was the same thing, they would just scroll through and just kinda get the gist of things and be like, oh, that's horrible. And kinda move on. So I guess training students or developing that skill for them to pause and think about, okay, who's sharing? What's going on in the headline? What's going on in the image? And actually taking that time to click on the article to read it. And there's a really great TED Talk.

**0:15:50.2 DA:** By Baratunde Thurston, who is a activist, a comedian, a writer as well, and the title of the TED Talk is How to Deconstruct Racism One Headline at a Time. It's a very American context, and he's specifically talking about how the headlines impact the Black community, but the same could be said for headlines that we see in Canadian context as well.

**0:16:18.2 CC:** I love that. I wrote down the pause, just pause, and what's going on behind the picture? Claire, we did when... With the Mars Rover going up, NASA has been doing Twitter feeds non-stop. And they're just amazing. So with me teaching science, I am able to use social media in my science program, so that... Is that they're multi-literacies, but at the same time, I will introduce a conspiracy website and look at their Twitter feed. And so when you talked about what is the picture? When we were doing that, one of the students came in and said, "Mr. C, did you see what they found on Mars?" And it was this structure that they've said that they had found on Mars, didn't read the content, just looked at the picture, and we had to go back to the NASA photos and the NASA pictures to sort of confirm or take a look at it. So I think it's important that we look at both

aspects, and it almost goes back to the shopping mall or the grocery store where you see the magazines, and that's how they advertise, they show that picture so that you buy into it. So it's very much, I think, similar to the platforms that do have that limited space and have to captivate you or grab your attention in some way, and we don't take the time to pause and go a little bit further, so that's an awesome point. Thank you.

**0:17:47.5 DA:** I think, just bouncing off of what you said with regards to the NASA and the conspiracy, conspiracy theories are a whole other topic we can go into, but to remind folks that the manipulation of media has existed since the introduction of media. Whatever that first media piece was, if it was a piece of writing, it could be even back to Aristotle, where people were speaking and sharing news and stories, and so reminding students as well that... And educators may be... Ourselves, is that it's not just because of technology. That's definitely kind of catalysed things, for example, and raised a further concern, because it's so easy to create and share these kinds of things now, but that it's existed since the 1800s, for example, with news articles and things like that. And so a really great site is to go to the Museum of Hoaxes, which has a whole list of all these kinds of hoaxes and how they've been debunked, and students can see that it was since a long... Way, way long ago and more recent ones as well, that they might have seen on their own social media platforms and how photographers, for example, really manipulate the setting in order to get some kind of a meaning across, for example. So that's a really good point there.

**0:19:14.5 CC:** Claire, the third point. You've got the first two. I love... Do you have a third point for us?

**0:19:18.7 DA:** I do. So the third and final point is to remind educators that it's not just about analyzing documents, and so if you search online... I'm just gonna backtrack a little bit here, if you search online critical digital literacy, you're going to be finding many different definitions and approaches, and you're gonna find different combinations. Critical media literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, and then a combination, so critical media digital literacy. In a sense though for me, it's... All of it's important, and for me, critical digital literacy kind of encompasses it all. And so one of the components is, and if you search this online, you'll get... People will receive so much information with regards to analyzing documents, finding reliable sources.

**0:20:09.8 DA:** When the, buzz word, fake news came out, a lot of news broadcasts were coming out with their own how-tos, CBC included. And that's important, and that's great, but to also remember that we should be engaging students in the process in the creation, and the example that I'll give, just because I'm an English teacher and we all took English classes in high school, so we can all relate. Our English teachers probably said something along the lines of, in order to be a critical reader, you need to be a good writer, you need to practice your writing, and in order to be a good writer, you should be reading more.

**0:20:51.2 DA:** So there's this... You're engaging with the process of writing in order to be a critical reader, but that kind of a process is very rarely seen in the classroom unless the teacher has a deep interest in that or motivation to include that in their classes, which was definitely my case. But the idea then is if you're engaging students in the process of creating, for example, a documentary or a short film and asking them to lay out their choices with regards to what they're creating, or an image or something that they can share on social media, the hope is then that they'll take... They'll be more

aware of the manipulative processes, for example, or the creative processes that go into creating these kinds of media genres, and they will then, as a viewer or an audience or whatever, reader on social media, become more critical when they're seeing things online, if that makes sense. And so this goes to John Dewey's idea of participatory experience, and that developing that critical skill that we all want our students to develop and hopefully engaging in these kinds of processes will then help students to apply these critical skills in different kinds of platforms as well.

**0:22:14.1 DA:** And why not have students create a little bit of fake news, a fake documentary, and trying to persuade peers or schools, their schoolmates, for example, that it's real, and if they're successful, then really thinking about, okay, what does that mean? And what does that mean for an audience, for me as a viewer, an audience, or a user of social media? And so I really encourage educators to consider engaging their students in the process, which again, I think is rare in the classroom because there aren't a lot of resources, and unless you're really invested and interested in this area, it's a lot of time, it takes a lot of time and a lot of trial and error as you know, Chris, with teaching, especially new topics.

**0:22:58.9 CC:** And I'm gonna let the English teachers off a little bit because I can't teach science without language, I can't teach math without language, I can't teach history without language, so all of those subject areas can also engage students in the process. When I'm doing my science experiments, using social media to talk about what happened and show the experiments that we've done, that's a big part of my program, so engaging them in the process of creating that social media content is such an important thing, and you can do it in math, you can do it in history, so there isn't a subject that we can't do that. I think that's very, very important. We talked about this, but the last question then is, at what age or grade should we start introducing digital literacy, Claire?

**0:23:49.2 DA:** I think as early as possible. In another research study that I'm conducting with Dr. Pamela Beach and our faculty, we're looking at the curricular documents from kindergarten to grade eight with a specific lens with regards to what supports or references to media literacy does the one curricular documents from Grade 1-8, focusing specifically on English language arts. Are there any references or good resources in these documents? Now, granted the documents are quite old, and they need a revamp, but even in the 20... I think it's 2009, there aren't very many references, and they tend to rely on very "Traditional resources" such as using advertisements where we all know manipulation happens there. And so starting as early as possible and understanding that if folks, or kindergarten teachers, or grade one and two, and saying, "Oh, my students aren't engaged with social media," for example, is to remind ourselves that young children are sponges. They just absorb everything. I'm reminded of a video of a toddler that I saw years ago, and the parent put a traditional magazine in front of the child, and the toddler is trying to swipe right to turn the page without knowing that they actually have to turn the page.

**0:25:19.9 DA:** So they're already involved in the movements of using technology and social media, and so maybe not bringing in Twitter and Facebook and all these kinds of things in the discussion that we have today with regards to critical digital literacy, but understanding, for example, the kinds of videos that you might be showing or cartoons, so for younger... For teachers who teach the younger grades to think about the kinds of media you are introducing in the classroom. For example, you might show video clips, and thinking about the representation of particular groups of people, media also doesn't mean things like video, it's also the kinds of picture books and stories

that you're including, and so engaging in those kinds of processes in conversations and starting students in that skill and development of the critical aspect from a young age that then in grades three, four, five and six and onward, teachers can then build on that by including things like media and social media a little bit more, as this... As young children are getting older and moving up in the years.

**0:26:27.8 CC:** I am in awe of some of my teacher colleagues that are kindergarten teachers and have classroom Twitter accounts and have Classroom YouTube channels, and get their students involved even at that age four and five-year-old, just to get them again, what you said, more into the process of it, and later on they'll understand it so much better. This has been amazing, Claire. I've got two pages of notes down here right now, so thank you so much. We always have one exit question, and I didn't tell you this one, so this is the fun part. It's if you had to give one final tip, what advice would you give to teachers wanting to introduce this aspect of digital literacy into their classrooms? What would it be? Just in two sentences. I'm told by our producer, I can only say that. Two sentences.

**0:27:20.8 DA:** One tip? Oh man, that's really hard.

**0:27:23.8 CC:** I know, but you've got so many great ideas. We're gonna narrow it down to one.

**0:27:28.4 DA:** The tip that I would say is... Okay, there's two, two short sentences, one for each.

**0:27:33.0 CC:** Two, yep. That works.

**0:27:33.5 DA:** One is do the research, understand what critical digital literacy is and how you can adapt it. There's really great resources online, Canadian as well. I'm gonna share some of these with the producer, and it will be on our website as well. Two, is engaging them in the process. They're not gonna understand how to be more critical by always analyzing the documents, that's... To be blunt, it's very boring for them, but if you engage them in these kinds of fun activities, as you mentioned, Chris, with kindergarten and older kids, with creating film, for example, then that kind of process really sticks with them, and the hope is that they'll keep those skills and remember them as they get older and leave high school.

**0:28:19.1 CC:** And I think that's such an important idea in terms of engagement. If we don't engage our students, they won't see the relevance and the importance of it, so that engagement factor is such a key thing. Claire, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm sure there's gonna be a lot of additional questions and follow-up, so we'll make sure that we have an opportunity to do that with you. Thanks for sharing your expertise, and we look forward to your future research and what it brings about because we do know as I was doing the research myself, they are outdated, and everything is changing so dramatically from year to year, so we look forward to more of your research. Thank you so much, Claire.

**0:29:00.6 DA:** Thank you for having me, it was a pleasure.

**0:29:03.4 CC:** Well, that does it for another episode of Popular Pedagogy. Again, thank you to our



amazing guest, Dr. Claire Ahn. Josh, as always, where can our listeners subscribe to make sure they don't miss any of our Popular Podagogy podcasts?

**0:29:18.5 Josh:** Yeah, you can find this podcast on Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Spotify, the CFRC website, the Faculty of Education website, and pretty much any other place you get your podcast.

**0:29:29.8 CC:** That is exciting, and I look forward to reading some of our listeners' suggested future topics. Please don't forget to check out our Queen's Faculty of Education website and search for our Popular Podagogy for additional resources and information. Well, that's it from myself, Chris Carlton, our podcast team, which includes Josh, Aaron, Carly, and Becca, stay healthy, stay safe and stay connected. And we'll see you next time for another episode of Popular Podagogy.

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