Self-Regulation, Empathy, and Compassion: A Critical Triad to Develop Anti-Racist Digital Citizenship in the Time of Pandemic

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Abstract:

The coronavirus has unleashed another pandemic: xenophobia. This article aims to counter the xenophobic narrative that affects many Asians and people of Asian descent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To counter this narrative, we offer an anti-racist digital citizenship framework in social studies. This illustrates a critical triad of self-regulation, empathy, and compassion. Self-regulation is the ability to develop cognitive control of emotional reactivity to facilitate self-directed change. Empathy is the understanding of another person's emotional state and the projection of oneself into the other's situation. Compassion is taking mindful action to alleviate the struggles and sufferings of others.

Introduction

As coronavirus ravages the basic structure of society, a "tsunami of hate and xenophobia" (Guterres, 2020) has been unleashed in the midst of the pandemic. Xenophobia, an intense dislike or fear of a particular member of an outgroup, usually a different race, has become an unexpected consequence of the coronavirus. While the idea of "xenophobia is conceptually distinct from racism" (Kim & Sundstrom, 2014, p. 21), the xenophobic behaviors against Chinese and other people with similar physical features manifest actions that are racist. Asians and people of Asian descent have been targets of derogatory remarks and physical attacks in the United States and other Western countries (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

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In this article, we situate xenophobia within the bigger context of digital citizenship in the time of pandemic. COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, has social ramifications, and its effects on people of color are magnified by unfounded antipathy and stereotypes. Words, memes, gifs, and photos depicting malevolent characterizations of Asians are simply racist and discriminatory. This xenophobic narrative is pervasive online, and it feeds the minds of many middle and high school students. Ninety-five percent of young adults have access to digital devices (Anderson & Jiang, 2020; Kenna & Hensley, 2019). Eighty-one percent of these teenagers, ages 13 to 17, use social media (Common Sense Media, 2018). Because of the dominant use of mobile devices and the easy access to digital information among youths, we offer middle and high school teachers an anti-racist framework for teaching digital citizenship in social studies. This framework aims to counter the xenophobic narrative that we currently face on- and offline. First, we describe the concept of emotional dysregulation as a potential consequence of xenophobia. We argue that the counter-narrative to xenophobia hinges on an anti-racist perspective. Then, we contextualize xenophobia within the study of anti-racist digital citizenship in social studies. Finally, we discuss the critical counter-narrative triad of self-regulation, empathy, and compassion as a pedagogical framework to develop anti-racist digital citizenship.

Xenophobia and Dysregulation

Xenophobic behaviors in the U.S. are deeply rooted in unfavorable attitudes toward non-white immigrants. A recent integrative review has shown that xenophobia harms the health of non-white individuals and their communities (Suleman et al., 2018). The experiences of social stress associated with race affect the mental and physical health of marginalized populations (Polanco-Roman, Danies, & Anglin, 2016). An attack on an individual's sense of self could, in turn, threaten their sense of safety and security, and consequently trigger a stress response (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007). Thus, maladaptive reactions to experiences of xenophobia may compromise the individual's mental health.

Undeniably, COVID-19 creates undue physical and mental stress for individuals (Saltzman, Hansel, & Bordnick, 2020). For Asians and people of Asian descent, xenophobia exacerbates this stress, which can lead to maladaptive cognitive responses: rumination on negative thoughts (Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1991) or thought suppression, avoiding unwanted thoughts (Wegner et al., 1987). This rumination and catastrophizing can result in adverse psychological outcomes that affect how individuals regulate their emotions and behavior (Selby et al., 2009). As a result, emotional dysregulation occurs. Dysregulation is a faulty emotional reaction to a perceived inconsistent stimulus (e.g., blowing up at a small inconvenience) that can lead to social discomfort (Price & Hooven, 2018). Consistent dysregulation of emotions may be an indicator of exposure to long-term stress, which affects the overall reactivity of the body's stress response

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system (Ellis et al., 2011). Moreover, this could indicate other underlying issues of depression or anxiety (Crowell et al., 2017; Price & Hooven, 2018).

Research has begun to assert that racial discrimination may lead to more racialized stress rather than being stated as a negative lived experience (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005; Carter, 2007). We have witnessed this in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests. The ethos was emotional, painful, and traumatic to many people of color. Racial discrimination is an adverse event capable of influencing multisystem psychological dysregulation. This can manifest in the form of racialized trauma and dysregulation, higher episodes of anxiety, and, in some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder (Polanco-Roman, Danies, & Anglin, 2016).

Anti-Racist Digital Citizenship in the Social Studies

Consistent with the C3 (College, Career, and Civic Life) Framework for Social Studies Education (National Council for Social Studies, 2013), studying xenophobia and the lived experiences of many people of color in the time of the pandemic highlights the importance of understanding the habits of civic life through critical thinking, problem-solving, and collective efforts to dismantle oppression. In a multicultural society like the U.S., many teachers use White, Eurocentric narratives in social studies and history (Crowley & Smith, 2015). The use of textbooks, for example, maintains the status quo of a monolithic perspective. Teachers cannot address the topic of xenophobia in social studies classrooms if they do not espouse an anti-racist stance. As we argued earlier, xenophobic behavior is racist behavior; therefore, teachers need to foreground anti-racism when covering this topic to underscore racial inclusiveness, social justice, and equity.

Race plays a pivotal role in deconstructing xenophobic behavior. When the president of the United States used epithets such as *Chinese virus, Wuhan Disease,* or *Kung Flu* about COVID-19 (Forgey, 2020; Rogers, Jakes, & Swanson, 2020), he was stirring racist sentiments in his politically charged governance. The racial narrative engenders hate and disdain toward Asian Americans and people of Asian descent living in the U.S. This irresponsible use of power endangers Americans. For example, extremist groups with white supremacist ideals took advantage of the pandemic to commit violence toward minorities (Margolin, 2020) and spread conspiracy theories (Benlolo, 2020).

With xenophobia at the forefront of our discussion, we ground our anti-racist stance in social studies based on the Critical Race Theory of education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Additionally, through our suggestions and descriptions in approaching anti-racism during COVID-19, we use Pollock's (2008) principles of anti-racist education to conceptualize our understanding of a more poignant form of digital citizenship (King & Chandler, 2016). These principles examine

the falsehood of human differences, acknowledge the reality of racially shaped lived experiences, encourage diversity in learning, and continue to challenge institutionalized racism (Pollock, 2008).

Understanding anti-racist pedagogy in social studies empowers teachers to reframe digital citizenship through an anti-racist lens, teaching students to challenge racial inequity in online spaces. With such a large number of teens using social media, digital citizenship should encourage students to participate in an online community that is inclusive and attends to issues of human rights, social justice, and other forms of political participation (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008; Oyedemi, 2018). Students must learn to acknowledge the presence of institutionalized racism in online sources and distinguish the difference between racially charged narratives and factual information (King & Chandler, 2016). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2016) calls for enhancing the critical thinking skills of students via digital citizenship so that students may ask questions, assess credibility, and reflect on varied information presented to them both in and outside of the classroom.

As educators, we recognize that this may be quite a challenging undertaking for students. The pandemic has already created a stressful learning environment with the switch to online schooling, and when we account for xenophobic social media, this may exacerbate any attempt at anti-racist learning (Levy et al., 2016; Sampaio, 2020). However, in an age where the media may be espousing fake and harmful information (e.g., conspiracy theories about the origin of coronavirus, racial remarks), it is imperative to develop skills that foster critical thinking outside of cognitive bias (Ball & Maxmen, 2020; Firth et al., 2019; Workman, 2018). In pursuit of furthering anti-racist learning in and out of the social studies classroom, we recommend layering a critical triad of skills to increase the likelihood of incorporating an anti-racist worldview. Self-regulation, empathy, and compassion are life skills that may be interwoven into digital anti-racism.

Self-Regulation, Empathy, and Compassion: A Critical Triad

The use of social media among teenagers had been rising rapidly before the pandemic (Common Sense Media, 2018). The aftermath of school shutdowns and moving to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed many teenagers more time to use social media for social support (Nauert, 2020) and gathering information (Ahmad & Murad, 2020). While the use of digital media has its benefits (Khan, Swar, & Lee, 2014), there is also an increased risk of socio-emotional problems as children spend more unstructured hours online (Alamri, 2019). Fake news and misinformation about the spread of coronavirus and the xenophobic images or information shared in teenagers' social media feeds can further aggravate the issues of anti-immigrant sentiments, racism, and hate. To address this issue of xenophobia, we offer teachers a framework
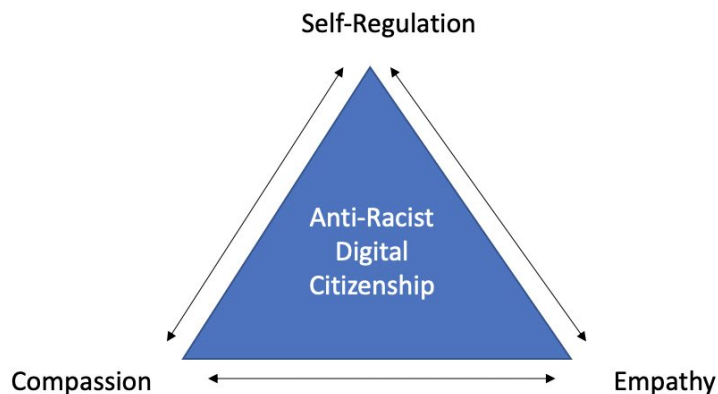
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to develop digital citizenship. First, we describe this framework that encompasses the self-regulation, empathy, and compassion triad (see Figure 1). Then, we apply this framework to a lesson on xenophobia in the time of the pandemic.

Figure 1 Anti-Racist Digital Citizenship

Imagine that a student opens his Snapchat and reads a story shared by his friend. This story is based on a U.S. government official's tweet related to coronavirus that says, "Millions of Chinese suck the blood out of rabid bats as an appetizer" (Behrmann, 2020). On the other hand, when another student opens her Instagram account, she sees an anti-racist photo at the top of her feed (see Figure 2).

This divergent experience evokes opposing emotional reactions and can positively or negatively affect students' well-being. The tweet exemplifies a xenophobic behavior and can stimulate emotional dysregulation. On the other hand, the picture on Instagram aims to call out people on their racist behavior and can elicit a favorable reaction. These two instances necessitate an individual's awareness on how the information affects their cognitive and emotional responses. This is the first step of achieving self-regulation.

Figure 2 Anti-Racist Photo on Instagram (Blunie, 2020)

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Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to develop cognitive control of emotional reactivity to facilitate self-directed change (Bandura, 1986; Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). The goal of self-regulation is to develop attentional shifts, to focus on external experience and introspective awareness, and to engage in appropriate internal emotional responses (Blair & Raver, 2012; Rothbart et al., 2011). Self-regulation is learned and practiced; one has to understand how motivation and behavior can engage in further cognitive control (Bandura & Simon, 1977; Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992). When presented with information in or out of the social studies classroom, self-regulation may look like a complete observation of self, cognitively processing situational context without judgment (Grossman et al., 2017). (See Figure 3 for self-regulation activities.)

When accessing information online, students need to withhold their initial reaction to the message, and they must reframe the emotional undertone of the information. Students need to develop a habit of healthy skepticism and critical thinking as they process online texts, photos, gifs, and memes. The students need to question the trustworthiness of the source and understand that this source comes from a particular perspective (King & Chandler, 2016; Lawton, 2016). As students self-regulate, they become mindful of other perspectives and critically aware of the sources of knowledge.

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Figure 3 Cultivating Calm: Self-Regulation + Digital Citizenship

Cultivating Calm: Self-Regulation + Digital Citizenship

What is self-regulation? Self-regulation can be defined as the ability to observe our physical bodies, our thoughts, and our emotions, and decide how we manage ourselves in an online space without judgement of ourselves and others.

TAKE A MOMENT AND PAUSE

Before jumping back in online, please use the following questions as a guided self-check in. You may either write your answers here or mentally answer.

PHYSICAL BODY: How does your physical body feel? Are you breathing slowly or fast paced? Are your muscles relaxed or tense?

THOUGHTS: How are your thoughts? Do you feel easily distracted? Are you able to focus on a single task? Are your thoughts more positive? Negative?

FEELINGS: How are you feeling? Angry? Sad? Happy? Scared? Joyful?

REFRAME

Upon examining your physical body, thoughts, and feelings you have the power to decide how you want to respond.

For example, if your breath was fast maybe consider taking slow and deep breaths. If you find yourself easily distracted, maybe allow yourself time to focus on something that you see in the room- observing it through the five senses. If you are feeling sad or angry, maybe on the back of this paper draw a picture of your "safe place" (if you do not feel like drawing, consider visualizing what that safe place is using the five senses).

RE-EXAMINE

Re-invite awareness and observation into the online space. Upon taking a moment to pause and reframe, how can you re-examine the online content through a more critical lens? How can you be mindfully aware of the pre-text, sub-text, and context and still maintain self-regulation?

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Empathy

One of the core values for teaching social studies is to "develop a spirit of inquiry that will enhance their [students] understanding of their world so that they will become rational, humane, participating, effective members of a democratic society" (Maxim, 2018, p. 13). In a diverse society such as the U.S., the use of multiple perspectives is an indispensable cognitive tool to understand the social world and the phenomena that make the world dynamic. When students deal with diverse points of view, empathy is an inevitable process of perspective-taking (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Empathy has affective and cognitive dimensions: From a psychological point of view, empathy is the understanding of another person's emotional state, in the affective dimension, and the projection of oneself into the other's situation, in the cognitive dimension (Ricard, 2015). Within the realm of historical reasoning, empathy requires students to be mindfully aware of others' affective and cognitive states as they situate their own lived experiences in the context of a social phenomenon (Endacott & Brooks, 2013).

Figure 4 Fostering Empathy in an Anti-Racist Digital Citizenship

Central to the development of empathy in digital citizenship is the awareness of the pretext, the subtext, and the context of the information being shared on different social media platforms. What is the underlying reason behind this image? What is the implicit meaning of the president's tweet? What set of facts do we know that influences the creation of the video? These are critical questions that demand perspective-taking and undergird the moral imperatives of empathy as applied to digital citizenship (see Figure 4). Fostering empathy is important, but not sufficient. A

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transformative pedagogy (Zembylas, 2013) in an anti-racist digital citizenship should involve compassion—taking a mindful action to alleviate the struggles and sufferings of others

Compassion

Self-regulation and empathy are connected intricately to compassion. Empathy helps us understand and identify the struggles of people who are affected by xenophobia. As we identify the stressors and define the oppressions that take place in social media, we self-regulate our emotional reaction and critically analyze the validity of the source. This self-regulation brings us clarity of mind and enacts compassion. In social studies, acting from a state of compassion allows us to interact with a diverse society (Rule, Montgomery, & Vander Zanden, 2014). It is from this space that we define compassion as the feeling that arises in bearing witness to another's suffering and fosters the desire to help (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010).

Figure 5 Suggested Activities to Enact Compassion

Rationale: Students are ready to enact their compassion after practicing self-regulation, identifying multiple perspectives, and understanding the affective and cognitive components of empathy. Compassion is identifying and understanding that suffering or struggle exists, and to alleviate the suffering or struggle of the marginalized individuals, one has to act upon it.

Suggested Activities:

1. Write a blog or an op-ed to a local newspaper denouncing xenophobic behavior.
2. Creating a video deconstructing xenophobia and what ways to dismantle this oppressive behavior.
3. Create a classroom profile on Instagram and curate photos, memes, gifs and illustrations that showcase anti-racist counter-narratives.
4. Organize a fundraising drive to support organizations that promote anti-racism.
5. Collect stories that promote social justice, critical hope, and multicultural understanding. Share these stories in the morning announcement.
6. Read social justice or culturally reflective novels.
7. Run for student council position with a social justice and anti-racism agenda.

Figure 5 presents some learning tasks that enact compassion in an anti-racist digital citizenship. Compassion, then, drives students to counter the racist behavior associated with xenophobia. The platform that actualizes xenophobic behavior can be the same platform that dismantles this

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behavior. Thus, calling out egregious behavior on Twitter to fight coronavirus-related racism or creating anti-racist videos and memes is an act of compassion; we bear witness to others' suffering in a digital realm, and this fosters a greater desire to aid in the removal of suffering. Compassion, therefore, transforms digital citizenship as a tool to create a socially just digital experience.

Conclusion

The issue of xenophobia has been around for centuries, but the proliferation of accessible digital information is exacerbating xenophobic ideals and behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. These hurtful behaviors underlie racism and anti-immigrant sentiments worldwide. In this article, we offered an anti-racist digital citizenship framework to counter this xenophobic narrative. Fundamental to the development of anti-racist digital citizenship is the transformation of one's desire to challenge mainstream conceptions of citizenship through critical and intentional analysis of how digital information is being created and used. Anti-racist digital citizenship becomes transformative when teachers develop self-regulation, foster empathy, and enact compassion in social studies classrooms, whether face-to-face or in virtual space. Transformative digital citizenship is anti-racist education because it challenges inequalities, enhances communal values, and motivates action to create multicultural, democratic, and socially just societies.

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