October 10 to 11, Valletta, Malta

FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH THE TEACHING OF ETHICS IN MALTESE SCHOOLS

Lucianne Zammit

Paper submitted to the Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning as part of the proceedings for the Conference Understanding the Post-truth Society: From Fake News, Datafication & Mass Surveillance to the Death of Trust. October 10 to 11, Valletta, Malta.

OCT 10-11

VALLETTA, MALTA

Acknowledgements

Author: Lucianne Zammit

Published by: The Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning

2019

To cite this report: Zammit, L. (2019). 'Fostering Critical Thinking Skills through the teaching of Ethics in Maltese Schools'. Understanding the Post-truth Society Conference, 10-11 October. Malta: Commonwealth Centre for Connected Learning.

Introduction

In this digital age, we are constantly bombarded by information from all fronts. The quantity of information that we are exposed to has grown exponentially, but the quality of information that we receive often leaves much to be desired. In what has been called the "post-truth" era, what is true is often interspersed with fake truths, alternative facts, conspiracy theories and lies, leaving us perpetually searching for what is objectively true. Although the concept of "objective truth" has been challenged by postmodernists, who believe that truth is relative to the community in which they participate (Grenz, 1996), one cannot deny that to some degree, society needs some kind of agreed version of events in order to function. Lobbyists and marketing people have always juggled truth, half-truths, implications and downright lies, but the digital age has taken this to unprecedented heights, as citizens are continuously bombarded with advertising and "information" without the oversight of editors or any kind of regulation. For example, whereas before people tended to trust their doctors' advice on the take-up of vaccinations, now they are faced with often unverified claims of their health risks, prompting them to question their doctors' expertise. Thus, every time we click on a headline, read a newspaper article, or even read politicians' tweets or posts, we must assess it for its truth value, depending on the validity and reliability of the source, and the agenda of whoever is making the claim. What we are effectively doing is using our "critical thinking" skills, which, in their simplest form, help us decide what to believe and how to act, following a process of evaluating facts in order to arrive at evidence-based conclusions.

Although the term "critical thinking" has become a bit of a buzz-word in the field of education, with no conclusive definition, it is what human beings have done throughout the ages. Mankind has always had to evaluate the words of others, in fact, survival sometimes depended on it.

Knowing who or what to believe was often a crucial way of staying alive and defending one's property. For example, when asking whether someone has seen dangerous creatures lurking about, one would have to take into consideration the trustworthiness of the person who is providing the answer, taking into consideration their familiarity with the territory, experience with dangerous creatures, accuracy of their eyesight, their definition of "dangerous creatures" and even whether they would benefit from one's death. This risk assessment is usually done in a matter of seconds. However, most of this information is only available when one knows the person that is being asked the question. When assessing information supplied by unknown others, we have to rely on other clues and be constantly aware of the agendas, biases and influences of whoever is providing the information. This is no mean feat, and it is something that must be encouraged and honed, especially in children and youths, who often have the same access to information as adults, but are more easily influenced. Recent research has shown that students often fail to evaluate online claims, sources and evidence (McGrew et. al., 2018). Thus, one of the tasks of education is to foster a critical attitude in students, in order to make them more aware of the steps that need to be taken in pursuit of truth, or at the very least, in the avoidance of lies.

Critical Thinking in Education

Educators have embraced the term "critical thinking", especially in relation to textual analysis. However, there is no agreed definition of what critical thinking is. Ennis (1964) defines critical thinking as the ability to correctly assess statements, while Elder and Paul (2013) believe that it is the ability to examine and evaluate our own thinking with regard to criteria and standards. Thus, critical thinking presupposes a willingness to question the beliefs and motivations of others, as well as one's own. In the times of the Ancient Greeks, circa 2,500 years ago,

Socrates put forward a method of probing questioning, now known as Socratic Questioning, which exposed people's confident claims to knowledge. This type of questioning aimed to uncover confused meanings, inadequate evidence and self-contradictory beliefs in an effort to critically examine the truth value of information put forward by those in authority. Socrates demonstrated that one cannot always depend on authority figures to provide the right answers, and in the process, established the importance of searching for evidence, and closely examining reasoning and assumptions instead of taking them at face value. In fact, this is one of the main aims of Philosophy, which can be thought of as the perpetual quest for fundamental truths.

Thus, for educators to foster true critical thinking, they must necessarily be willing to include students in a process of evaluating information, even if it comes from a trusted source, such as an academic textbook written by authoritative figures. They must also be aware of the possibility that their authority might be questioned, and their presentation of knowledge and the truth might be carefully dissected by students.

Although this might sound simple, our present educational system often discourages this due to a number of factors. What teachers teach in class, and the amount of time that is dedicated to some types of knowledge and skills over others, depends heavily on the type of curriculum that teachers are presented with. If they are to teach a curriculum which is very heavily content-based, and requires them to cover a number of different topics, which are then assessed via formal examinations, it is little wonder that they resort to "chalk and talk" methods which ensure coverage of the salient "facts" that students are expected to know in order to successfully pass their examinations. If, on the other hand, the curriculum allows for, and even promotes, discussion and debate, teachers will be encouraged, even expected, to provide a classroom environment in which a careful examination of facts and opinions can take place.

However, such an endeavour necessarily presupposes that enough time is dedicated to this, and that both students and teachers feel that such a task is considered worthwhile and is rewarded by the school community and society at large. Thus, when designing curricula, policymakers must remember that less is more, as too much content often leads to a superficial understanding of the topics being studied.

Similarly, a system which is based on high-stakes examinations is not very conducive to critical thinking, because such a system is often based on a series of sit-down, written exams in which students are not allowed to consult any notes or other sources of information. The purpose of such examinations is to test how well students are able to retain information, often requiring them to list, identify, describe or explain words or concepts. Such examinations are relatively easy to grade, and since they are centrally controlled, and are a good way of avoiding cheating, plagiarism and other reliability issues. They also provide a reliable way of measuring a student's performance against that of others, which is useful for benchmarking and cross-institutional comparisons. However, the problems with such examinations is they only measure relatively superficial knowledge or learning (Prus, Joseph and Johnson, Reid, 1994). Research shows that when teachers teach to the test, that is, they teach according to the content and format of specific high-stakes examinations, students are often unable to transfer the knowledge that they have acquired to different methods of assessment (Shepard, 1996). Thus, what is needed is a curriculum and assessment methods that focus on critical thinking, deep understanding and problem solving. Such assessment methods can include literary analysis, extensive writing, applied science experiments, research papers, presentations and products that students construct (Darling-Hammond, 2014).

The Maltese Curricular Reform

The Maltese educational system is currently undergoing a period of curricular reform. It is trying to move away from a one-size-fits-all type of system to a more diverse curriculum. The Learning Outcomes Framework[1], which is a new curricular framework designed to support the national curriculum, breaks away from the old system of high-stakes examinations and moves towards an approach in which continuous assessment is given more value. It promotes student-centred learning and encourages different forms of continuous assessment, which aims to provide learners with continuous feedback on their progress. Teachers and schools are given more autonomy, as the framework is less specific and rigid than the centrally-driven syllabi that preceded it (Attard Tonna & Bugeja, 2016). It is also complemented by new curricular subjects which are a recent addition to the Maltese curriculum. These subjects include Ethics, which can be taken by students as an alternative to Catholic Religious Education, as well as a number of Vocational subjects such as Agribusiness, Construction, Hairdressing and Beauty, Media Literacy Education, Information Technology, Engineering Technology, Health and Social Care and Hospitality, which can be taken in secondary school. The reform, which is called My Journey, aims to cater for students who have been short-changed by the more traditional educational system by offering them a blend of academic, applied and vocational subjects:

From September 2019, we will continue replacing the current secondary school model with personalised, relevant and quality education for all students through the My Journey reform.

Alongside their compulsory core subjects, My Journey will allow secondary school students to blend relevant and quality academic, applied and vocational subjects, in a personalised and inclusive learning environment enabling them to reach their full potential (Bartolo, 2018)[2].

The implications of this reform are wide-reaching. The new subjects, together with the Learning Outcomes Framework, aim to reach all students by ensuring that formal examinations are supplemented with formative, school-based assessment which can assess a more diverse set of skills. Thus, all subject syllabi have been revised in order to reflect this paradigm shift in the Maltese education system.

Critical Thinking and Digital Media Literacy

As outlined above, the technology and media-driven environment that children and youths inhabit calls for a particular kind of education, one that prepares students for the 21st century. For students to succeed in a digital society characterised by rapid change, they need to master a series of skills, abilities and learning dispositions which have been called 21st century skills (Battelle for Kids, 2019). These skills are not related to particular academic subjects because they are not content based, but are thought of as cross-curricular skills applied throughout the whole educational system. Critical Thinking, along with Information Literacy, Media Literacy and ICT Literacy, are considered to be essential skills that everyone must acquire in order to become an effective citizen (ibid.).

[1] http://www.schoolslearningoutcomes.edu.mt/en/
[2] https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/comment/blogs/90744/doing_and_not_just_knowing_and_why_it_matters#.XRn9FOgzZPY (accessed on 2nd August, 2019)

The Council of Europe has recently published a framework for incorporating these skills into educational systems. Over the last decade or so, the Council of Europe was more concerned with children's safety and protection in the online world. However, it has recently launched a digital citizenship project in recognition of the fact that children's interaction with digital media has evolved over these last few years. Thus, the goal for this project is for children and youths to "participate safely, effectively, critically and responsibly in a world filled with social media and digital technologie"[3] and to obtain the "knowledge, skills and understanding required for users to exercise and defend their democratic rights and responsibilities online, and to promote and protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law in cyberspace"[4]. The Council of Europe defines Media and Information Literacy as how we think about the media around us (critical thinking) and digital citizenship as how we engage with technology (Council of Europe, 2019, p. 49). The first phase of the project consisted of a review of literature on the concept of digital citizenship and digital media literacy and documentation of some of the good practices in Europe that promote this. The next phase of the project has resulted in a handbook for parents and educators which includes sections on fake news, privacy, digital ethics, and rights (ibid.).

Although the handbook suggests the use of particular resources and discussions, it is not related to particular curricular subjects, leaving it up to policy makers and school authorities to incorporate them into school curricula.

Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship in Malta

The Maltese National Digital Strategy of 2014-2020[5] states that:

Digital Citizenship will become part of the National Education Curriculum, to equip children and youths with the abilities to interact and use the Internet safely and intelligently. Parents and carers will be involved together with educators and youth workers. This action will stimulate the production of creative online content, empower the younger generation and help create a safer environment (Digital Malta, 2014, p. 28).

The spirit of this strategy is reflected in the Learning Outcomes Framework (LOF) referred to above, which also lists critical thinking skills, digital citizenship and media literacy as cross-curricular skills that must be reflected in school curricula. However, the argument that I make in this paper is that although there are efforts to include these skills in the curriculum, it is rather sporadic and does not ensure that all students are taught these skills. This is due to two factors. The first factor is that the learning outcomes set out in the LOF, which are considered to be the education entitlement of all students, are reached via the syllabi of different curricular subjects, which are not prescribed through the framework. Although the framework does list a number of cross-curricular outcomes, such as the digital literacy outcomes, these outcomes must be included in subject syllabi in order to be covered, since digital literacy is not a statutory subject in its own right. The second factor is that at secondary school level, in addition to their core entitlement, students are given a wide choice of subjects to choose from, and depending on their subject choices, they might not be acquiring all the skills that are required to navigate the digital era. Thus, in spite of the National Digital Strategy and the digital literacy outcomes as outlined in the LOF, the majority of students are not taught enough digital and media literacy skills.

[3] https://www.coe.int/en/web/digital-citizenship-education/home
[4] https://www.coe.int/en/web/digital-citizenship-education/digital-citizenship-and-digital-citizenship-education
[5] https://digitalmalta.org.mt/en/Documents/Digital%20Malta%202014%20-%202020.pdf

This is because unless these skills are included in the syllabi of the subjects which are compulsory to all students, that is, the core entitlement, not all students will get the opportunity to learn and practice these skills.

Personal Social and Career Development (PSCD), Social Studies and ICT are three subjects which are considered to be the core entitlement of students, that is, they are statutory subjects. They are also the ones which lend themselves more easily to the teaching of digital and media literacy. PSCD and Social Studies are taught throughout, from the primary school up till the secondary school, while ICT is introduced in the middle years (years 7 and 8) and continues until the end of compulsory schooling (year 11). These three subjects incorporate a number of learning outcomes that are related to the media and technology.

The PSCD syllabus has recently included Digital Citizenship Education as one of its themes, introduced in the new Learning Outcomes Framework. The primary school syllabus incorporates a number of learning outcomes which aim to help children navigate technology and social media. The outcomes talk about the digital footprint, how technology and social have changed our lives, excessive internet use and cyberbullying. The year 6 syllabus (when children are approximately 10 or 11 years old) also deals with "thinking and reflecting before choosing the right information online"[6] The middle and secondary school syllabi contain learning outcomes related to media stereotypes, cyberbullying and online harassment, sexual harassment and grooming, the inappropriate sharing of personal information and making good use of technology, however, there are no learning outcomes directly related to assessing information which is found online. This is probably due to the fact that PSCD covers a very wide range of topics, covering the personal and the social aspects, as well as career development.

The time allocated to this subject is 5% of curriculum time (Ministry of Education, 2012), amounting to roughly one and a half hours per week. In spite of these limitations, the PSCD syllabus makes a good attempt to teach digital citizenship and personal online safety, as evidenced by its inclusion of resources produced by the Be Smart Online project. In fact, the Directorate for Learning and Assessment Programmes forms part of the consortium which administrates this project, the aim of which is to raise awareness among educators, teenagers and youths on Internet safety. The project also promotes the celebration of Safer Internet Day in schools and distributes educational material on online safety through PSCD[7]. It also has a presence in schools, aiming to raise awareness about cyberbullying and Internet safety[8]. Although this is all very commendable, the focus of PSCD is clearly more on online safety than digital citizenship or media literacy. Although some of the issues are covered in the primary school syllabus, I believe that they should also be covered extensively in the middle and secondary school, which is when students are more likely to spend hours online. Furthermore, when students are older, they are able to have more nuanced conversations about how to navigate their lives, both online and offline.

Citizenship education is often associated with Civics or Social Studies, as it is called in the Maltese curriculum. Although the Social Studies syllabus incorporates citizenship education and discusses media in its wider sense, it makes little mention of digital citizenship, digital media or technology. It is probably assumes that teachers will cover digital media and digital citizenship when teaching the Social Studies content, but the fact that the syllabus does not ensure this is rather worrying.

[6] http://besmartonline.org.mt/uploads/linked/Booklets/Yr%206%20ENG%20High%20Res.pdf
[7] http://besmartonline.org.mt/resource-teachers
[8] https://www.mca.org.mt/initiatives/besmartonline

However, this is hardly surprising, given that the Council of Europe literature review and multi-stakeholder consultations showed that "digital citizenship is only now beginning to feature on the agenda of many European governments" (Council of Europe, 2017, p. 42).

The only other core compulsory subject that could potentially deal with such issues is Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Although the ICT syllabus is mostly concerned with operating systems, video editing and web development, the secondary school syllabus (years 9 to 11) also deals with digital crimes, e.g. cyberbullying, digital blackmail and sextortion. Some of the learning outcomes also refer to issues such as the digital divide, copyright laws and the implications of Artificial Intelligence on humanity. However, there are no learning outcomes dedicated to teaching students how to evaluate information or teach critical thinking in its wider sense.

After discussing the core compulsory subjects, I will now turn to optional subjects that students can choose at year 9, or when they are approximately 13 years of age. One of these subjects is Media Literacy Education, which is a brand new subject that has recently been introduced as part of the curricular reform which I have spoken about earlier. Although the title suggests the type of critical media literacy that is envisaged by the Council of Europe, the syllabus is very heavily based on a hands-on approach to media production, such as photography and film. It is offered in two forms, as a VET subject and also as an "Applied" subject called SEAC, the syllabus of which is a more hands-on, or "applied" version of the VET syllabus. Although the VET syllabus makes some attempts at deconstructing media, the SEAC syllabus focuses solely on the production of media.

Some of the learning outcomes for the VET syllabus mention cultural representations in the media and the responsibilities that come with publishing material online and making responsible use of social media, however, when compared to the rest of the syllabus, it is evident that these learning outcomes are not given as much importance as the more practical aspect.

Other optional subjects such as Information Technology, which is also offered as a VET or an Applied subject, and Computing and Social Studies, which are considered to be more academic in nature, do not include any outcomes related to spotting fake news, misinformation, bias, hidden marketing and so on and so forth. It is to be hoped that although such outcomes are not specified in the syllabi, teachers will teach these skills directly or indirectly when covering other content. This would depend on the personal initiatives of individual teachers, as well as the type of training that they are given.

Thus, from the analysis of the subject syllabi, it is evident that although media literacy and digital citizenship are on the agenda, there needs to be a more holistic approach to the teaching of these important issues. The cross-curricular approach is probably the most effective, however, for this approach to work well, there must be some curricular mapping across subjects to ensure that every student has access to a curriculum which deals with such issues in a systematic way. Also, one must ensure that enough time is dedicated to the development of skills and attitudes that promote good digital citizenship and the correct assessment of online sources, because this is not something that can be taught in a few hours. Such skills and attitudes must be honed over a number of years and in fact, should permeate the very fabric of schooling.

In the following section, I will discuss the introduction of another new subject, Ethics, which also deals with some aspects of digital citizenship and media literacy. Although this is not the primary aim of Ethics, I will argue that its learning outcomes, methodology and methods of assessment are based on teaching students how to think critically, which is crucial to their formation as active citizens who can critically evaluate information that they encounter online and fully exercise their rights as digital citizens. Access to information is a key aspect of these rights. According to the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy, "Information is as vital to the functioning of healthy communities as clean air, safe streets, good schools, and public health" (The Aspen Institute, 2009, p. 19). However, access to information is not enough. Digital citizens must be able to make good judgements about the credibility of the information (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013) as well as what they decide to do with that information.

Fostering Critical Thinking Skills through Ethics

Ethics is a relatively new subject which is being taught in Maltese schools. Ethics was introduced as a secular alternative to mainstream Catholic Religious Education (CRE), as a response to an increasingly multicultural student population. Thus, although students must take Religion or Ethics as part of their core entitlement, Ethics cannot be considered to be a compulsory subject, since the majority of children take CRE. Ethics aims to teach moral values through a secular non-denominational approach, and is deeply embedded in the tradition of Western philosophy.

Although the aim of Ethics is to teach values, it aims to do so without falling in the trap of indoctrination. It acknowledges that ethical and moral values can be very controversial, and often depend on personal beliefs and opinions, shaped by the society that one is brought up in. Ethics takes up philosophical discussions and applies them to moral values. For example, in the primary years, the Ethics syllabus covers the concept of truth. However, it aims to do so by getting the children to engage with the concept from multiple perspectives. First, it examines what we mean by "truth", "lies", "white lies", "lying by omission" and "lying to yourself". Then, it engages the children in discussion about why people lie, whether we should always tell the truth, and why lying creates distrust. It does so by using ethical dilemmas, scenarios and thought experiments that help children think deeply about the concept of truth, rather than relying on superficial statements like "Lying is wrong".

Although Ethics is not meant to replace digital media literacy or digital citizenship, the secondary school syllabus covers some of the topics that are usually found in such curricula. For example, in a topic about positive and negative role models, it takes into account the phenomenon of influencers on social media and the role that social media play in the emergence of role models. The Ethics syllabus is the only one that specifically mentions hate speech, online extremism and radicalisation, incorporating the following assessment criteria:

- 2.1e Define extremism and/or online extremism.
- 2.2e Describe forms of extremism that lead their supporters towards committing acts of violence.
- 2.3e Discuss the mechanisms of radicalisation over social media.

In contrast with other subjects, it does not only focus on personal online safety, but also aims to teach students about the responsible use of technology and social media. Thus, some of the topics discussed are: the distinction between that which is public and that which is private, the ethical and unethical use of social media, revenge porn, online pornography, hate speech, cyberbullying and the limits to self-expression. The way that the subject is designed encourages teachers to allow for classroom discussion. The syllabus is not overly loaded, ensuring that each topic is discussed in detail in order to avoid covering issues in a superficial manner. This is precisely the backbone of Ethics, because as a branch of philosophy, the aim is to think critically about fundamental questions that have always perplexed mankind. In fact, the way that Ethics is taught in Malta is based on a methodology called Philosophy for Children (P4C), which uses the traditional tools of philosophy such as logic and Socratic questioning to teach critical thinking, reading and argumentation.

This methodology was first developed by Matthew Lipman in the 1960s as a response to what he perceived as a deficiency in the educational system of the time, specifically a deficiency in reasoning skills. He thought that the students attending his philosophy courses at Colombia University demonstrated a shocking low level of thinking skills, and believed that the only way to address this was through introducing philosophy into the curriculum of young children in an attempt to teach critical thinking (Naji, 2005). He developed a number of resources to be used in the classroom based on philosophical novels for children, the first of which, Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery, aimed to teach basic reasoning skills, thinking and logic. He then went on to write other novels with a variety of themes, such as reasoning in language, looking for meaning, reasoning in ethics, and social enquiry.

Lipman proposed that P4C lessons should start with the reading of an extract from one of these novels, which would be followed by a philosophical discussion of a theme related to the extract, a theme chosen by the students themselves. This methodology aimed to develop crucial critical thinking skills, such as estimating, evaluating, justifying, classifying, hypothesizing, analysing and reasoning (Fisher, 1998). Lipman showed that after nine weeks of exposure to the programme, eleven-year olds could be taught to reason 27 weeks better in mental age from their peers who were not introduced to the programme (Naji, 2005). P4C has established itself as an established programme for the teaching of thinking over several decades (Burgh and Thornton, 2016), and research shows that it gives students a notable cognitive advantage (see, for example, Gorard et al., 2015; Millett and Tapper, 2011; Topping and Trickey, 2007).

Lipman put forward this programme as a challenge to the standard paradigm of the time, which assumed that the aim of education was to transfer knowledge and information from the teacher to the student. This assumption often led to a situation in which children often started their formal education as curious and inquisitive, but after a few years became rather passive and uncritical. He believed that schooling suppresses children's natural curiosity, conditioning them to believe that they are unable to think for themselves. Thus, one of the aims of the P4C programme is to encourage children to question things that they take for granted, and to discuss deep, philosophical questions through dialogue (Lipman, 1991).

In order to compensate for these deficiencies in the educational system of the time, Lipman combined philosophy and education to devise a new form of education which encourages children to question things that they had previously taken for granted, and to try to answer each other's questions through dialogue.

Together, students use the tools of philosophy to explore values, assumptions and concepts such as rights, respect, truth and justice in what Lipman called a "Community of Inquiry" (CoI) (see Lipman 1988, 1993, 1998). This term is derived from Peirce's "community of inquirers", which was applied to a community of individuals, often scientists, whose aim was to examine a theory as a group in order to come to a conclusion. Thus, the aim of the CoI is to discuss issues or ideas as a group, with a focus on fostering a number of critical thinking skills:

When people engage in a dialogue with one another, they are compelled to reflect, to concentrate, to consider alternatives, to listen closely, to give careful attention to definitions and meanings, to recognize previously unthought of options, and in general to perform a vast number of mental activities that they might not have engaged in had the conversation never occurred (Lipman et al, 1980, p. 22).

Thus, in the CoI, the children start off from a stimulus such as a novel, story, picture or cartoon, which they then discuss. In the process of this discussion, students are encouraged to give reasons for their answers and expect reasons from their peers. They are also expected to respect themselves and others and think for themselves (Thomas, 1992). Lipman believed that thinking for themselves is a crucial aspect to the programme, and that children should be encouraged to formulate their own thoughts and be proud of their own opinions, while respecting those of others (Lipman et al., 1980). This motivates students to reflect on their own perspectives and assumptions, and also question some of their previously held assumptions:

Thus we can now speak of converting the classroom into a community of inquiry in which students listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another's assumptions (Lipman, 1991, p. 15).

In the Community of Inquiry, the role of the teacher is not to impart knowledge or information, but to facilitate the discussion by asking for clarification, pointing out contradictions, restating the positions of others, summarising, asking for full and balanced participation, and so on and so forth (Kennedy, 2004). It is not the role of the teacher to teach philosophy as a subject, but as a method of inquiry. Although it helps if teachers have some kind of background in philosophy, all teachers can be trained in the fundamental procedures of philosophical argument (Whalley, 1991).

Thus, all teachers who teach Ethics in Malta are trained in this methodology and encouraged to make extensive use of it. The P4C approach are also reflected in the assessment of Ethics. As I have discussed earlier, formal examinations which rely on the regurgitation of knowledge are not very conducive to critical thinking. Thus, the assessment of Ethics is aimed at assessing higher-order skills such as analysis, evaluation and synthesis. For example, students are presented with case-studies which they first have to analyse in terms of the issues involved, then evaluate what would be the best course of action. At each point, students are expected to consider different viewpoints, provide reasons for their answers and argue effectively for or against a particular course of action. There is no scope for the memorisation of endless lists or the regurgitation of facts, and the whole point of the assessment is to evaluate the student's thinking skills. Such assessment encourages students to think critically and be able to express their opinions on a variety of subjects, thus paving the way to a true active citizenship.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed how the introduction of Ethics, a new subject in Maltese schools, can help students acquire the necessary critical thinking skills that they require to navigate the post-truth society that they are living in. I have argued that in the current Maltese educational system, Ethics is the closest thing that there is to a critical media literacy. Although the principal aims of Ethics education are not the same as those of media literacy, the Ethics curriculum and methodology foster the same critical thinking skills that are required for active digital citizenship.

The methodology employed for this new curricular subject breaks away from traditional "chalk and talk" methods, instead opting for a more inclusive approach aimed at promoting critical thinking, democratic values and active student participation. This is reflected in the Ethics syllabus, methodology and the methods of assessment. The methodology that is followed is based on the Philosophy for Children approach, which has been employed extensively to develop philosophical understanding, as well as social and intellectual dispositions that help students become active citizens (Cam, 2006). This approach aims to foster critical thinking skills through debate and discussion. Thus, the aim of Ethics is not to dictate a prescribed set of values, but to help students critically analyse information and situations that they are presented with, in order to decide for themselves what to believe and how to act.

This is especially important for this generation of students, who are digitally connected in all aspects of their lives and are immersed in social media. Although Malta is a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, children are exposed to different values, perspectives and lifestyles due to the global nature of social media.

Thus, more than ever before, education must prepare students for their role as global citizens, and equip them with the necessary skills to be able to critically analyse all the information that they encounter in order to be able to assess its truth value.

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