

EDITOR'S DESK

As language evolves, we must change too

In America's culture wars, words are the weapons of choice.

The problem with this, I have increasingly noticed, is that the words used often mean completely different things to the two sides.

Take racism. In my experience, the word carries a spectrum of meanings. On one end, you have people who think of racism only as a hatred of all people with a different color of skin, possibly to the point of wanting them dead. On the other end, you have people whose much broader definition of racism includes unjust institutional structures, microaggressions, cultural appropriation and even the unconscious biases of well-meaning people.



Jade McDowell
NEWS EDITOR

I watched last summer as those differing definitions caused complete meltdowns in communication. If someone used the word racist, what one person heard as "We can all do better at combating our own prejudices, so that's why I'm explaining to you why what you said is harmful," another person would hear as an accusation that they love Hitler and the Ku Klux Klan. Things would go downhill from there.

You can see the same problem repeat itself over and over again as liberals and conservatives have absurd arguments based on the fact they both have very different definitions of words like "gender" or "rights". Half our political discourse



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald, File

A protester holds a sign asking, "Why is racism a debate?" outside the Umatilla County Courthouse in Pendleton on July 15, 2020, as systemic racism became a topic of debate in the county.

these days is like going into a classroom of kindergartners and telling half of them that "blurble" is the number of fingers they have on one hand and telling the other half that it's the number of feet they have, and then asking the class what blurble plus blurble is.

I'm sure everyone reading this right now is absolutely convinced that their own definition is the correct one in every case, and everyone who doesn't agree with them is a dummy.

Perhaps you are right. But even if that were the case, we're not going to accomplish anything worthwhile in this country if we can't have even a basic dialog.

As you talk about controversial issues, discuss what both of you mean. If you say "Congress should pass gun control," you might mean universal background checks and the person you're talking to might think you mean banning all private ownership of guns. Meanwhile, "I'm against gun control" to them might mean "I think there should be few restrictions on gun ownership," while you might be assuming they mean convicted felons should be able to walk the streets with machine guns. Establishing in good faith what you both mean when you use the phrase "gun control" will lead to a far more productive discussion.

Conversations also work better when we ask the right questions. Instead of having an intense, days-long, national debates on the question "Is this specific person/incident/book/tweet racist?" we would be better off spending our energy discussing questions like "How can we make sure all Americans have an equal shot at this opportunity?" or "Is this system working equally well for everyone, and if not, what can we do to change that?"

We can also be thoughtful in using words as they were intended, to preserve their meaning. Too many phrases, from "cancel culture" to "fake news" to "virtue signaling," started out with specific, useful definitions and have now devolved into nothing more than a blanket term for "something I don't like."

Other words, it's time to purge from our societal vocabulary. There are words that I'm ashamed I used as growing up that seemed harmless at the time that I stopped using when I got older and understood how hurtful they could be. Many years ago, I quit using a certain "R word" I used to hear on the playground a lot, for example, after a conversation about it with a friend in high school with a brother with intellectual disabilities. As our society has become more aware of how harmful some language can be, habit is no excuse for continuing to use it.

Language is a constantly growing, ever-changing thing. If we don't adapt with it, we won't get anywhere.

COLUMN

Students return to the classroom thanks to community's efforts

In a year like this, we have learned to celebrate the small milestones.

Wednesday, Feb. 17, was the day we welcomed kindergartners and first graders into the classroom. Aside from some limited in-person instruction for high needs students, this was the first time we have been able to put kids at their desks, in front of a teacher, learning together.



Tricia Mooney

Older elementary students have been added each week since then, and teachers and students alike have been reinvigorated by the personal interaction.

On Tuesday, March 2 we hosted the first sporting event at Kennison Field, a Bulldogs girls soccer game. Just playing the first home game since Nov. 8, 2019 was a victory in itself, and beating our friendly rival Pendleton Bucks was icing on the cake. Other Bulldogs teams have been practicing and competing as well, and watching student-athletes reconnect with teammates and coaches has been thrilling.

On Monday, March 22, middle school students will return to

the hallways of Armand Larive and Sandstone. And on April 12, the Monday after Spring Break, we're planning to reopen Hermiston High School for in-person classes. These milestones are possible because the Hermiston community is working hard to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

It's been a long road, and unfortunately there have been plenty of disappointments along the way. As a district and school board, we have done everything possible to safely bring students back since the start of the year. The education and health of our kids and community is our top priority.

Part of the compromise has been the hybrid model, where students are in the classroom for part of the day and learning from home part of the day. This is to make sure we can comply with state guidelines on maintaining distance between students within the building. It's not ideal, but our teachers are seeing growth from the limited time together.

Even with a hybrid schedule, reopening Hermiston High School means bringing 1,000 people into the building. If this isn't the single largest gathering of people in Umatilla County since March

2020, it's close. Because of the exciting growth of our community and enrollment at our schools, we have additional work to ensure the health and safety of students, staff, and their families.

I am optimistic that we will be able to bring all students back to the classroom for full days this school year, even though updated state guidance still makes it challenging. New rules released this week will allow larger cohorts of students, giving schools flexibility. However, continuing limitations on personal distance — 35 square feet per student and staff member — won't allow us to bring all students back at the same time.

The school district will do its part by following testing protocols to make sure the virus isn't spread on our campuses as we continue to make a case for the safe and productive conclusion to the school year.

We are committed to continuing to do our part to make sure our schools and businesses can safely stay open, and that we have many more positive milestones in the coming year.

Dr. Tricia Mooney is the superintendent of the Hermiston School District.

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