Zack Jones

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COMM 241

Swearing: what’s the big f-ing deal?

It just happens, sometimes.

It just comes out, and nobody can control it. It is like vomit; one minute there is something gurgling, the next it is out of the mouth with nothing stopping it. It happens in the locker room, the cafeteria, the dorm room. Wherever it is, expletives come out.

“I’ve noticed that, often, they just come out,” said Jerome Schwich, a business major at Ohio State University. “They’re either filler for a conversation or for when someone does something stupid.”

College is a new place that has a fresh start. Someone can be a completely different person without any consequences. College has the potential to be a great experience, but the culture that comes with it can be negative. College culture has the ability to take someone’s vocabulary and add many colorful four-letter words to it.

It is becoming a trend to see college students using an exceptionally high amount of curse words. Swearing is heard on every campus and is often left unchecked by administration. With the freedoms allowed to students, swearing has become a trend among college students.

According to InsideHigherEd.com, Hinds Community College in Raymond, Miss. had a fine for swearing. The first offense was $25, which then doubled if it happened again. Finally, the student would possibly be served demerits if the swearing continued.

Cussing, it turns out, has become mainstream for students. But, it has also become the main stream for media and television.

In a study done by Newstatemen.com, in 38 episodes of U.S. television surveyed, 107 f-words were dropped while swear words with a religious base were said about 308 times.

Furthermore, in the movie “The Wolf of Wall Street,” the f-word was said 506 times in its two-hour span. This amounts to an astounding 2.81 f-words dropped per minute.

With popular culture’s use of swearing on the rise, the use of obscenity in everyday life rises as well.

Dr. Margie Berns, a sociolinguist at Purdue University, believes that pop culture has an influence on the rise of profanity with students.

“[When] taboo language becomes more prevalent in the media, it also becomes more prevalent in daily life,” she said. “I think cursing has always been common among college students, but today they are more openly using it as it loses its shock value.”

Christopher Deger, a psychology teacher at Maine South High School, affirms that it has always been in college culture.

“I thought cursing was much greater in my college than in my high school setting, so much so, that it unfortunately crept into my vocabulary,” he said.  “Our part of the dorm (as well as probably others) opted for the poor language.”

On the one hand, expletives are used for its shock value, much like Cincinnati Reds manager Bryan Price firing off 91 f-words during a pregame interview with the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. On the other hand, they are words that have lost their meaning.

“Swearing is a powerful expression of deep feeling,” Berns said. “When used selectively it can effectively send a message.  Now that it is used so often, it loses that power, although it still conveys a message about the speaker's attitudes toward something or someone.  Overuse can give an impression that the speaker is really negative about just about everyone and everything.”

Swearing’s overuse can directly impact the attitudes toward the speaker. Though this amount of swearing can be seen on college campuses, experts believe it is hard to gather data.

According to the Association for Psychological Science, more people have been exposed to the use of swearing because of television and new media. Because there is no baseline data to reference, this type of data is hard to collect, but they believe that the “culture is not getting ‘worse’ with respect to swearing.”

Though there is little data to prove that swearing isn’t getting worse, obscenities have always been around. Dr. Mattson, a rhetorician at Trinity Christian College, understands that cursing has come a long way.

“Language is always evolving,” he said. “If you read Shakespearean plays, there is a massive amount of creative obscenity; a lot of earthy, crude humor. I wouldn’t say it’s worse but [language and profanity] is always shifting.”

Mattson’s colleague, Dr. Bethany Keeley-Jonker, a fellow rhetorician at Trinity Christian College, believes that the new media surrounding teens has something to do with the uptick in profanity.

“It’s definitely a consequence of porous social borders,” she said. “It was possible thirty years to raise kids that wouldn’t hear a swear word in that culture. Now, you click something wrong on YouTube and you’ll be exposed to something you don’t want.”

It is hard to deny that the use of swearing has always been around. For some, it is used for the shock value. For others, it’s because of what college allows.

“It must be the freedom we get here,” Schwich said. “We’re let loose to do whatever we want and we don’t have our parent’s hearing every word we say.”

For whatever reason it is, college culture is experiencing a true renaissance of language; the trend is seen across the nation. It has been a culture and continues to be one.

“The problem with cursing is that it comes with an extremely low bar of expectations in regards to creativity and expression,” Deger said.  “It's like fart [and] poop humor - perhaps just universally acceptable since it is the lowest common denominator.”