Editorial: ‘Selfie’ as word of the year is a fitting self-portrait

Pope Francis took one. So did Meryl Streep and Hillary Clinton. Michelle Obama snapped one with her dog. And of course, Kim Kardashian, Miley Cyrus and Rihanna have been over-devoted practitioners. Justin Bieber even created a website for it.

We’re talking selfies — a digital self-portrait shared through social media — which Oxford Dictionaries selected last week as its word of the year.

After Oxford University Press made the announcement, the Mars Rover took a selfie and sent it back to Earth. Try to beat that.

Now, rest assured, Oxford did not arrive at its decision lightly. It has apparently been tracking selfie for years. It was in its “Words on the Radar” series in June 2012. Selection of the word, according to Oxford’s website, “was unanimous this year, with little if any argument. … Everyone seemed to be in agreement almost from the start. Other words were considered … but ‘selfie’ was the runaway winner.”

The fact that selfie can be used in an editorial and most of you know what we’re talking about is an indication that Oxford’s choice was spot-on.

Not only have selfies become ubiquitous in these days of Instagram and Twitter, but selfie is one of those rare words that encapsulate a society at a specific moment. It is the word of our times, a reflection both of who we’ve become — increasingly narcissistic and insular — and how we got there.

Oxford’s selfie specifically refers to “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.” But it could also describe the self-absorption of Facebook, or the person holding up traffic with his nose in his cellphone.

These days, it’s increasingly all about me — and my device. More and more, we deal with a complicated and hostile world by withdrawing into ourselves and our technology. We share photos as confirmation that we live, seek solace in “friends” we never see, and absorb only information that conforms to our views.

With such growing narcissism and insularity, is it any wonder then that civility is fading, that the people who operate our institutions seem unable to meaningfully engage in dialogue, much less compromise?

Oxford traces the earliest known use of selfie to a photo taken by an Australian man who drunkenly tripped and busted his lip, then posted the photo and the story on Sept. 13, 2002, in an Australian Internet chat room.

“Sorry about the focus,” he wrote about the photo. “It was a selfie.”

With all due respect to the learned folks at Oxford, perhaps the roots go back even further. Just try substituting an sh for the e at the end of the word.

Source: Dallas Morning News
Editorial:
Expanding Reading Partners could help struggling students

It is not uncommon to find serious reading deficits when you look at the reading scores of Dallas elementary schools. On some campuses, 30 percent or more of the third-, fourth- or fifth-graders failed the state's 2013 reading achievement exam.

Teachers are their first responders. And parents can back teachers up by reading with their children.

But sometimes schools require more help than that. They need volunteers who can assist in intervening with students who struggle to comprehend passages, decode words or read at the appropriate speed.

For that reason, we’re excited to see Reading Partners expand its footprint in the Dallas school district. The local chapter of the national organization now has tutors in 17 Dallas schools. That figure is up from 10 schools last year.

The volunteers work with students for an hour each week. In some cases, students may work with two tutors at different times each week.

Volunteers are not thrown into the classrooms without training. Reading Partners provides them a curriculum to help students overcome their struggles. They also have coordinators onsite to work with tutors in case they need assistance dealing with a student.

Something must be working. The organization’s data shows 90 percent of its Dallas students last year accelerated their reading rate. Similarly, 77 percent closed their reading gaps with students who are reading at the correct grade level. (Reading Partners assesses its students three times a year, plus uses other, regular analyses.)

We’re especially pleased that southern Dallas elementary schools are part of the mix. That includes campuses that feed into Lincoln, Madison and Pinkston high schools. Those feeder networks are the focus of Superintendent Mike Miles' Imagine 2020 strategy. He’s concentrating resources and strategies on them to improve the achievement levels of their students.

Volunteers from Reading Partners are now working with students in schools like O.M. Roberts Elementary, Lorenzo DeZavala Elementary and the Charles Rice Learning Center. Each feeds into one of the southern Dallas high schools Miles is targeting. By helping these students become better readers, volunteers are ensuring that they have the chance to perform better in other subjects as well.

More volunteers showing up for this important work means more students with reading challenges are getting help. Increasing the number of volunteers also will help make the case to Dallas school trustees to expand Reading Partners.

The district contributes some of Reading Partners’ funding, so trustees rightly will want to see whether there are enough volunteer tutors to make expansion worthwhile. We hope they see plenty. This newspaper has been championing an I Tutor Dallas! campaign, and Reading Partners provides an opportunity to expand that effort so that both students and the district benefit.

Source: Dallas Morning News
Editorial:
Texas schools owe their athletes insurance coverage

The perception of Texas high school football is big, bigger, biggest — from the talent to the stadiums to the passion. If you’re from here, you know; if not, you learn soon enough.

Yet the reality — far from the touchdowns and tackles, the cheerleaders, fans and marching bands — can change as suddenly as a single hit, fall, crash.

Injury is part of the game, whether it’s football or any other sport. No one wishes for it, but no one denies it. High school athletes suffer an astounding 2 million injuries a year, with 500,000 doctor visits and 30,000 hospitalizations, according to the National Athletic Trainers’ Association.

When injury hits, who would deny their child the best medical treatment? Treatment isn’t free, of course, which is why health insurance should be as essential as a helmet and shoulder pads.

In an ideal world, parents and school districts would share this responsibility. Parents would not let their children leave home without family health insurance; districts would not put them into extracurricular activities without catastrophic coverage, backed by a gap-filling supplemental policy.

This is not an ideal world. About 17 percent of Texas youths are uninsured, more than any state other than Nevada. If they are seriously injured playing school sports, they must hope their districts cover them.

Thankfully, just five of the 65 largest districts in North Texas fail to provide catastrophic insurance for their athletes. (Woe to the uninsured in the Birdville, Burleson, Cedar Hill, Mansfield and Richardson ISDs.) However, fewer districts provide the supplemental insurance that would help a family bridge the deductible, usually about $25,000, before catastrophic care kicks in.

Catastrophic plans are reasonably inexpensive for school districts; supplemental coverage is more costly. Dallas ISD, for instance, pays about $1.8 million for its supplemental policy, which includes a $25,000 cap, plus a catastrophic plan that covers expenses up to $6 million. Other catastrophic policies, typically used for injuries that call for extensive hospitalization and lengthy recovery, can cover up to $10 million. Disability benefits, in-home custodial care and mobility equipment are typical items paid for by these policies.

This newspaper generally favors local control, but reporting by Corbett Smith, David Just and Kyle Fredrickson from our SportsDay staff reveals how critical and basic a health and safety issue this insurance is. If even a few districts choose to leave their athletes unprotected, that’s a few too many. At a bare minimum, all schools must make absolutely clear to parents what an injury to an uninsured athlete could mean for a family.

Georgia and Florida allow only high school athletes covered by insurance to suit up. Illinois recently passed a law requiring school districts to purchase at least catastrophic insurance. Texas should do no less for the young people taking the field for the honor of school and community.

Source: Dallas Morning News