K12 Digital Learning in Action Newsletter

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Issue 3 (End of September 2025)
Theme: Digital citizenship month kickoff

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AI: Ethical use of AI in the classroom

As AI tools become increasingly common in classrooms, educators face a pivotal choice: fear their misuse or embrace their potential for good. The ethical use of AI isn't just about preventing cheating. It's about teaching critical thinking, digital citizenship, and integrity in a world where technology shapes how we learn and create. By fostering transparency, student agency, and thoughtful assignment design, teachers and librarians can guide students to use AI responsibly and creatively, turning an emerging challenge into an opportunity for deeper learning and inclusion.

Accessibility: Designing assignments with accessibility in mind

Designing accessible assignments isn't just about compliance, it's about creating learning experiences every student can perceive, navigate, and understand. Using the POUR framework and NCADEMI's nine accessibility basics, teachers can build assignments that work for diverse learners, from young elementary students exploring visuals and voice to secondary students managing complex digital projects. When accessibility is baked in from the start through clear writing, alt text, captions, color contrast, and flexible formats it transforms assignments into equitable pathways for learning, creativity, and belonging.

Google Workspace: Docs + Slides collaboration strategies

Google Docs and Slides make collaboration easier than ever but true digital citizenship means using them with purpose, structure, and creativity. When teachers design clear roles, feedback loops, and accessible templates, these familiar tools transform from shared spaces into engines for deeper learning and student voice. From co-planning lessons to peer-editing projects, Google Workspace can boost productivity and connection, helping both teachers and students move from simply working together to truly thinking together.

Bonus Categories: Digital Citizenship, Creativity

Digital citizenship and creativity go hand in hand. Students can't be empowered creators without also being responsible ones. By pairing trusted resources like Common Sense Media's digital citizenship lessons with creative tools such as Canva for Education and Adobe Express, teachers and librarians can help students build voice, choice, and ethical awareness in the digital world. When learners design, remix, and share with purpose, they move beyond consuming content to becoming thoughtful, creative citizens who use technology to express ideas, connect with others, and make a positive impact.

UDL Nugget: Balancing student choice with safe boundaries

Giving students choice is one of the most powerful ways to increase engagement and ownership but too much freedom without structure can leave learners overwhelmed or off track. The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework helps teachers strike the right balance by offering flexible options for how students learn and demonstrate understanding, while keeping goals and expectations clear. Whether students create an infographic, record a podcast, or write a reflection, thoughtful "choice within boundaries" allows every learner to show what they know in meaningful, creative, and accessible ways.

Ethical Use of AI in the Classroom

Ethical Use of AI in the Classroom

Why this matters now

The arrival and rapid growth of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools in K-12 and higher-ed classrooms has triggered both enormous promise and serious questions. On one hand, AI can be a powerful ally for educators by accelerating lesson-planning, differentiating instruction, offering accessibility support, sparking creativity. On the other hand, it raises concerns around academic integrity, bias, transparency, equity, student agency, and teacher readiness. For librarians and teachers who center collaboration, creativity, and accessibility, the ethical question is, how do we harness AI in ways that honour student learning, rights, and relationships while guarding against misuse?

Research shows that educators are broadly supportive of AI's potential, yet also deeply worried about its risks. In one recent survey, 78% of teachers believed generative AI tools can help tackle classroom challenges such as building lesson materials, grading, and differentiating lessons — but 85% expressed concerns about student use of the technology. (K-12 Dive) Another poll found over 60% of K-12 educators had already encountered students cheating with AI and more than three-quarters (76%) were very or somewhat worried about cheating and privacy issues. (THE Journal) So we are very much in a transitional moment from "should we use AI?" to "how should we use AI, ethically and effectively in our classrooms?"

Research "state-of-the-field" on AI ethics in education

A number of recent research reviews shed light on the ethical terrain.

- A systematic review of K-12 AI ethics education found that despite a global push for AI literacy, ethical dimensions like bias, student choice, transparency, and autonomy remain significantly under-prioritized in actual classroom practice. (ScienceDirect)
- Another review analysed 34 peer-reviewed studies on AI ethics in education (2020-2024) and flagged key ethical concerns including bias, privacy, transparency, algorithmic accountability, and equity. (ScienceDirect)
- A focused survey in computing education ("AI meets AI: Artificial Intelligence and Academic Integrity …") looked at how AI-assisted cheating is changing the integrity landscape, and emphasised that many of the strategies to counter misuse still lack rigorous empirical testing. (ACM Digital Library)
- Studies of teacher perspectives show that ethical judgments about AI depend in part on teacher confidence with technology, gender, and other factors meaning that equity in educator preparedness is also an ethical issue. (USC Today)

From these we can pull out some consistent themes:

- **Transparency and explainability**: Students and teachers should understand how AI tools work, what they produce, and what their limitations are.
- **Agency and student choice**: Students should have voice in if/when/how AI is used in their learning.
- **Fairness & bias**: AI systems may embed or perpetuate bias (in data, design, access) and may disadvantage some learners.
- **Privacy and data security**: AI tools often involve data collection, profiling, algorithmic decision-making, issues of who controls data and how it is used loom large.
- **Academic integrity**: With AI tools capable of generating content (text, code, images), defining and detecting misuse is a pressing challenge.

- **Equity and access**: If some students or schools have better access to AI tools (or teacher training) than others, existing inequities may widen.
- **Professional development and policy**: Many schools lack clear policies on AI use, and many teachers feel underprepared to integrate AI ethically.

Understanding the "cheating" concern and reframing it

One of the most frequently voiced concerns from teachers is: "Will students use AI to cheat?" The short answer: yes, but the deeper question is how we adapt teaching, assessment, and learning relationships in response to AI's presence.

What the research shows:

- In one survey of high-school students, 1 in 5 admitted they had used AI in ways they considered "outright cheating." (Study Finds)
- A July 2024 article noted that students and professors alike believe AI 'makes cheating easier' and many instructors expect the problem to grow. (Inside Higher Ed)
- A study exploring students' moral intentions found that generative AI's availability influences their attitudes toward cheating (e.g., the perceived ease, perceived legitimacy). (ScienceDirect)
- However, other commentary cautions against panic. One analysis noted that although the *mode* of cheating is changing (AI-assisted rather than traditional copying), overall cheating rates may not yet have skyrocketed. (Vox)

Here's a reframing for educators: rather than treat AI simply as a *cheating threat*, view it as a *trigger for reassessing* how we define learning, how we structure assessment, how we build student agency, how we teach thinking (rather than just "content"). Some shifts to consider:

- Move away from "take-home essay" where AI can easily be used unnoticed, toward more authentic, in-class, oral, project-based, iterative work.
- Make AI use **transparent**: establish classroom norms around when AI is permitted, how it should be acknowledged, how it supports student thinking rather than replacing it.
- Frame AI as a *thinking partner*, not a substitute for thinking. Teach students how to ask good questions of AI, how to evaluate and revise AI-generated ideas, how to use it ethically.
- Incorporate **metacognitive reflection**: ask students to disclose how they used AI, what decisions they made, how they evaluated the output, how it changed their process.
- Design assignments that emphasize process, draft/revision and student voice, not just final product. If someone delegates the entire task to AI and submits uncritically, the process is lost, and so is the learning.
- Provide teacher professional development specifically on recognizing AI-assisted work, designing assessments in the AI era, and integrating AI ethically.

In other words, yes, there is a cheating risk. But responding only by banning AI or policing students misses the larger opportunity to teach critical thinking, agency, and responsible digital citizenship in a world where AI is part of the toolkit.

Ethical use of AI for good: concrete strategies for librarians, teachers, and instructional teams

Here are actionable ways to lean into AI ethically and effectively:

1. Co-create classroom AI norms Start the school year or semester by having students and teachers discuss: What does it mean to use AI responsibly in this class? When is AI allowed, for what purposes? What counts as misuse? Document the norms together, include them in the syllabus, refer back to them. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's "Ethical Use in the Classroom" guidance emphasizes embedding ethical considerations at every stage of AI use. (Wisconsin DPI)

2. Teach AI literacy and ethics as foundational Before students "use" AI tools, teach them *about* AI: how it works (in broad strokes), its limitations, biases, privacy implications. Then ask them to reflect: what decisions will I make when using AI? What is still *my* work? The systematic review on K-12 AI ethics found this is still underprioritized. (ScienceDirect)

3. Design assessments with AI in mind

- Shift to accelerated, in-class or proctored tasks where appropriate.
- Emphasize drafts, student reflection, process documentation, peer-review.
- Use tasks that require personalizing: "how would you apply this in your context", "explain how you made decisions", "revise an AI-generated draft by adding your voice".
- Use AI-friendly assignments: allow students to leverage AI for brainstorming or drafting, but require them to annotate or explain their changes, justify their edits, submit both the raw and revised versions. This makes the learning visible.

4. Use AI to *amplify* teacher and librarian work (not replace it)

- Use AI to generate multiple entry points, scaffolds, differentiated templates, accessible formats.
- Use AI for translation, text-to-speech, summarising, helping students with disabilities access content more equitably.
- But ensure human oversight: verify AI outputs, ensure they are accurate, appropriate, bias-checked. The Cornell University teaching and learning centre highlights that ethics and equity must be central to any AI incorporation. (Center for Teaching Innovation)

5. Engage in ongoing reflection and revision of policy AI is evolving rapidly. Districts, schools, librarians and instructional teams should review their AI-use policies regularly. Guidance documents (for example from the Georgia Professional Standards Commission) emphasise the need for living documents that adapt. (GAPSC)

6. Center accessibility, equity, and inclusion Make sure AI tools or assignments don't inadvertently disadvantage students. Ask: Do all students have equitable access to the technology or scaffolding needed? Could the tool embed biases that disadvantage some groups? Research flags bias and transparency as key ethical concerns. (ScienceDirect)

7. Foster student agency and metacognitive engagement Use AI as part of the learning journey by asking students to reflect. "What did I ask the AI? What did I get? How did I evaluate it? What did I change and why?" These reflections make the student the active agent, not passive "AI user".

Addressing teacher concerns and supporting professional growth

Many educators feel optimistic yet cautious. For example, in the University of Michigan survey teachers said they can see the value of AI, but more than half (53 %) said they lacked confidence in their ability to use it, and

52% believed the technology was unreliable. (K-12 Dive) Here are recommendations for supporting teacher/librarian readiness:

- **Professional development (PD)**: Provide PD that focuses not only on how to use AI tools, but on how to integrate them ethically. Example: understanding how AI decision-making works, what biases might be present, how to design lessons/assessments that are AI-aware.
- **Collaborative planning**: Librarians, Tech Integration Specialists (TIS) can partner with teachers to co-design AI-aware lessons and assignments, share best practices and reflections.
- **Peer sharing and reflection**: Build communities of practice where teachers share: “Here’s how I used AI with my students”, “Here’s what I learned”, “Here’s what I would do differently”.
- **Policy clarity**: Work with school/district leadership to develop clear, communicated policies around AI use (student & teacher). When roles and expectations are vague, confusion arises. (BioMed Central)
- **Pilot and iterate**: Start small and pilot an AI-integrated assignment in one grade or subject, gather student and teacher feedback, refine and scale.

Connecting to the library/TIS mission (and the DOR framework)

For librarians and TIS, this is a rich intersection supporting **Discovery**, **Identity**, and **Purposeful action**.

- **Discovery**: Help students and teachers discover the “toolbox” of AI, not simply as a shortcut, but as a resource that requires thoughtful use. Provide instruction and curated resources on AI literacy, ethics, workflows.
- **Identity**: AI use invites reflection on what it means to be a learner, a researcher, a creator in a digital world. You can facilitate conversations about authoring, originality, remixing, attribution, digital citizenship.
- **Purposeful action**: When assignments are designed with ethical AI use in mind, students act with intention. You can guide students in using AI as part of the research process, not just getting the answer, but critically engaging with it, revising, and owning their work.

Accessibility and inclusion tie in neatly as AI tools (translations, summaries, text-to-speech, language generation) can support diverse learners. But librarians must ensure these tools are used in ways that preserve student voice and don’t reduce students to passive consumers of AI output. Thoughtful assignment design, scaffolding, reflection and process documentation are key.

Final reflection

In many ways, the arrival of generative AI tools in schools is less of a *threat* than a *wake-up call* by inviting educators and librarians to revisit these long-standing questions. What counts as student work? How do we assess thinking, not just product? How do we ensure all learners have access and agency? How do we build learners who can critically evaluate digital tools, not just use them? Viewed through this lens, AI becomes part of the broader evolution of digital citizenship, creativity, and accessibility.

As you launch your Digital Citizenship Month celebration, framing AI through ethics, access, agency and caring relationships fits beautifully. The goal isn’t to fear or ban AI but to guide students and teachers in *thriving* with it, ethically, creatively, accessibly, and relationally.

Accessibility: Designing Assignments with Accessib

Accessibility: Designing Assignments with Accessibility in Mind

Why this matters now

In an increasingly digital and hybrid learning environment, designing assignments that are accessible is not optional, it is essential. When we center accessibility from the start, we honor all learners' rights, support inclusion, and strengthen our teaching practice. The POUR framework provides a foundational lens for accessible design, while NCADEMI's nine core skills offer practical, actionable techniques. Together, they ensure that students at both elementary and secondary levels can access, engage with, and succeed in their classrooms. Support for librarians, teachers, and instructional teams in K-12 settings, embedding these design principles helps foster equity, creativity, and student voice.

Understanding the Frameworks

The POUR framework

The four principles of the POUR framework break down as follows:

- **Perceivable**: Information must be presented in ways students can perceive, regardless of sensory ability (e.g., alternative formats, captions).
- **Operable**: Interface and environment must allow students to operate or navigate assignments with a variety of input modes (keyboard, switch, touch) and not be locked into inaccessible interactions.
- **Understandable**: Content and instructions must be clear, predictable, using language and layout that support comprehension and reduce cognitive load.
- **Robust**: Materials must be compatible with current and future technologies, including assistive technologies, so students are not locked out by tool limitations.

NCADEMI's nine core accessibility skills

NCADEMI's "Accessibility Basics" key foundational skills for making digital instructional materials accessible include:

1. Alt Text (Images)
2. Captions
3. Clear Writing
4. Color Use
5. Headings
6. Links
7. Lists
8. Tables
9. Text Contrast

These nine skills map well into the POUR framework (for example, alt text and captions support Perceivable; headings, links, lists support Operable & Understandable; robust formats support Robust).

Designing Accessible Assignments: Elementary & Secondary Focus

Here are considerations and strategies for designing assignments with accessibility in mind, with differentiated guidance for elementary (K-5) and secondary (grades 6-12) settings.

Elementary Level (K-5)

Design Considerations

- Younger students often have shorter attention spans, need more scaffolding, more visuals, more interactive and hands-on work.
- Their reading, writing, language development may still be emerging; some may use assistive technologies or benefit from flexible formats.
- Assignments often lean toward guided practice, creative tasks, multimodal output.

Applying the Framework & Skills

- *Perceivable*: Use visuals with appropriate alt text, provide captions or read-aloud versions of instructions, ensure high contrast and readable fonts. For example, for a worksheet with pictures, ensure each image has alt text describing it so screen readers can access the information.
- *Operable*: Ensure that interactive digital tasks (e.g., drag-and-drop, online forms) are keyboard accessible or provide alternative formats (paper or simpler interactive). For younger students, touch, mouse and keyboard need equal support.
- *Understandable*: Use simple, direct language, clear headings, chunk the task into smaller steps. Use red/green cues but not **only** color - e.g., “highlight the nouns in blue” becomes “highlight the nouns in blue **and** underline them”.
- *Robust*: Provide multiple ways to submit work (online upload, shared doc, paper scan). Use file formats compatible with assistive tech (e.g., accessible PDF, Google Doc with styles).

Assignment Examples & Tips

- A digital scavenger hunt: Provide a Google Doc with headings (Use the “Heading 1”, “Heading 2” styles) to allow navigation. Within each heading ask: “Find an animal picture. Write a sentence about it.” Include alt text for each picture so students using screen readers know what the picture is.
- A collaborative slide deck: Each student receives one slide. Provide a template with clear heading, large text, suggested image placeholder with alt text field prompted (e.g., “Insert an image of ___ and in the description box write alt text”). Encourage students to record their voice on the slide (with captions) and to tab through elements to practice keyboard navigation.
- Paper and digital hybrid: For students who cannot reliably access the digital version, provide a print-friendly version (with the same headings, lists, clear layout) and ensure that if scanned it remains machine readable (not an image-only PDF).

Secondary Level (Grades 6-12)

Design Considerations

- Older students engage in more complex tasks: research, writing, collaboration, multimedia creation, self-directed work.
- They may use various technologies (LMS, Google Workspace, slide decks, video) and may have different learning needs (including assistive tech).
- There is greater expectation of student agency, peer review, choice.

Applying the Framework & Skills

- *Perceivable*: For a research-based assignment involving video or podcasts, always include captions, transcripts, and ensure alt text for images and charts. Ensure color use meets contrast standards (e.g., dark text on light background at minimum 4.5:1). (ncademi.org)
- *Operable*: Provide assignments that are usable on multiple platforms (laptop, tablet, phone) and navigable via keyboard or assistive tech. For example, interactive timeline or web-based simulation should be fully keyboard navigable and labelled.

- *Understandable*: Use consistent structure: Title, Purpose, Task, Steps, Resources, Submission Format. Use built-in heading styles so students using screen readers can navigate. Provide choice (e.g., write essay OR produce podcast) but scaffolding for each.
- *Robust*: Ensure that student products, whether slide decks, videos, or Google Docs, are compatible with assistive tech, backed up in accessible format, and that teachers can archive/retrieve them. Provide guidelines for accessible creation (e.g., when students create multimedia, instruct them to include captions, alt text, audio description).

Assignment Examples & Tips

- Research project: Students choose a topic, create a multimedia presentation. Provide a template with past accessible examples, including checklists. “Have you added alt text to all images? Have you checked color contrast? Are your hyperlinks descriptive? Is your video captioned?” Reference the nine core skills explicitly.
- Collaborative Google Slide activity: Use shared doc with clear heading structure. Reserve slide layouts that include placeholders for alt text, captions, audio. Encourage peer review focusing on accessibility (students check each other’s alt text, contrast, link text).
- Creative + Accessibility choice: Offer two tracks, traditional essay or podcast. For the podcast: provide transcript template, guidance on accessible audio (clear voice, no music too loud, simple language). For the essay, provide an accessible Word/Google template with built-in heading styles, lists, links, alt text instructions.

Common Challenges & Suggestions

- **Time and awareness**: Many teachers feel they don’t have extra time to redesign assignments for accessibility. Start small. Choose one assignment a term and apply accessibility checks. Use templates to save time.
- **Teacher tech confidence**: May not be comfortable with built-in accessibility features (alt text, heading styles, color contrast tools). Use quick-start guides, short video demos, peer-support.
- **Student access variability**: Some students may lack devices, internet access, or assistive tech. Offer multiple modes/formats for assignments (online, paper, hybrid) and allow flexibility in submission.
- **Complexity of multimedia**: Secondary teachers may assign multi-media and worry about captioning, audio description, file formats. Use streaming platforms that auto-caption, or guide students to use accessible podcast/slide tools.
- **Monitoring and feedback**: How do we check that student work is accessible? Build peer review into the task. Students check each other’s materials for alt text, contrast, link text. Librarians or tech-specialists review a sample each term and provide collective feedback.

Final Reflection & Call to Action

By designing assignments with accessibility in mind, we move from **reactive accommodation** to **proactive universal design** creating learning environments where all students can engage meaningfully. The POUR framework helps us keep accessibility at the core of design, rather than as an afterthought. NCADEMI’s nine core skills provide tangible techniques that teachers and librarians can apply right away. Whether you're working with elementary learners or secondary students, embedding accessibility in assignment design supports collaboration, fosters creativity, ensures equity, and builds student identity as capable creators.

Google Workspace: Docs + Slides Collaboration Stra

Google Workspace: Strategies for Collaborative Learning with Docs and Slides

Why This Matters for Classrooms

Today's students learn and create together, often in digital spaces. As teachers, helping students collaborate effectively online isn't just about using technology, it's about building the skills of communication, feedback, and teamwork that prepare them for the real world. Google Workspace tools, especially **Google Docs** and **Google Slides**, make this possible by transforming individual assignments into shared learning experiences. When used intentionally, they promote **student participation**, **deeper engagement**, and **authentic collaboration** while giving teachers new ways to scaffold feedback and differentiation.

Research and classroom experience (Alice Keeler, *Teacher Tech*) show that when collaboration is structured with clear expectations and feedback loops, students move beyond "group work" to true shared learning.

The Research Behind Collaborative Tools

- **Group Work Dynamics** Studies show that shared digital spaces like Google Docs can unintentionally lead to one student dominating the task while others fade into the background (ERIC). Teachers can prevent this by defining roles and checkpoints that ensure every voice contributes.

- **Effectiveness and Barriers** Research in higher education settings found that Google Workspace effectively supports teamwork and communication but that training and technical support are crucial to success (arXiv). Teachers can apply this insight by teaching collaboration routines explicitly, not assuming students "just know" how to work together online.

- **Accessibility and Differentiation** The Kennedy Center highlights how Docs and Slides support inclusive learning. Voice typing, translation, easy content modification, and offline access help meet the needs of diverse learners, including those with IEPs or 504 plans.

- **Practical Teacher Tips** Educators like Alice Keeler emphasize the power of real-time editing, role-based collaboration in Slides, and teacher monitoring through version history to promote authentic group work and accountability.

The message is clear: **Technology alone doesn't make collaboration work but intentional design does.**

Teacher Productivity Strategies

1. Co-Planning and Revising Together in Google Docs

Use Docs for **team lesson planning**, whether it's grade-level collaboration, co-teaching, or librarian partnerships.

- Work simultaneously to add resources, differentiation ideas, and assessments.
- Use **Comments** and **Suggesting Mode** to give and respond to feedback.
- Check **Version History** to see contributions and revisions.
- Store shared plans in a **Shared Drive** so all team members retain access year to year.

2. Pre-Built Templates to Save Time

Create reusable templates in Docs or Slides that already include:

- Prompts for student reflection
- Role assignments (researcher, editor, presenter)
- Spaces for peer comments or teacher check-ins. Once built, these templates streamline prep and promote consistency across projects.

3. Feedback Loops Through Comments and Version History

Encourage a **culture of revision**:

- In Docs, use *Suggesting Mode* for teacher feedback that students must review and apply.
- In Slides, leave guiding questions such as “What evidence supports this image?”
- Review *Version History* to monitor participation and progress, especially useful for identifying when groups need help or when one student dominates.

4. Track Accountability and Reflection

- Ask each student to **submit a link to their slide(s)** for clearer assessment of individual contributions.
- Embed a **Google Form check-in** where students reflect on their contributions and next steps.
- Use a shared **Google Sheet tracker** for groups to log meetings, completed tasks, and progress. This transparency builds responsibility and teacher insight.

Student Collaboration Strategies

Elementary (K–5)

- **Shared Story Building:** Create a Doc for collective storytelling. Students take turns adding sentences or illustrations using pre-set “My Turn / Your Turn” headings.
- **Interactive Class Slide Deck:** Each student adds to a “Class Adventure” deck, inserting an image and caption while a partner provides alt text and feedback.
- **Peer Review in Simple Terms:** Model how to comment respectfully, using questions like “Why did you choose this word?”
- **Reflection Slides:** After group work, students complete a slide with “What I did,” “What I learned from a friend,” and “What I’d change next time.”

Secondary (6–12)

- **Research & Presentation Workflow:** Students use Docs for shared notes and citations, then build a Slides presentation with assigned roles (researcher, editor, designer). Monitor through comments and version history.
- **Peer Feedback Exchange:** Each student creates two slides and swaps them for feedback using Suggesting Comments, building revision and critique skills.

- **Real-Time Collaboration:** Use Docs for brainstorming and outlining while you prompt deeper thinking with comments like “What’s another perspective?”
- **Peer Review Across Groups:** Have students review other teams’ Slide decks asynchronously, leaving feedback via Comments before final revisions.
- **Self-Reflection:** After finishing, ask students to complete a reflection form or slide on their role, challenges faced, and lessons learned.

Common Challenges and How to Address Them

Challenge	What Often Happens	Classroom Solutions
One student dominates	A few voices take over while others disengage.	Assign rotating roles, use version history for checkpoints, and require individual reflection.
Task division vs. true collaboration	Groups divide work instead of co-creating ideas.	Design projects that require shared decision-making and peer review.
Limited digital skills	Students or staff struggle with advanced features.	Provide quick tutorials, cheat sheets, or short PD sessions.
Lack of structure or norms	Groups delete each other’s work or fail to engage.	Co-create a “Collaboration Contract” outlining communication norms and conflict resolution.
Assessment challenges	It’s unclear who did what.	Combine version history with student reflections and peer feedback.
Accessibility concerns	Some students can’t access or navigate shared content.	Embed accessibility checklists including alt text, contrast checks, clear layouts, voice comments.

Bringing It All Together

As we approach **Digital Citizenship Month**, collaboration becomes more than a tech skill, it’s a vital part of how students learn to communicate, share ideas, and create responsibly.

When you design collaborative lessons in Google Docs or Slides, you shift the classroom dynamic:

- Students become creators and problem-solvers.
- Teachers become coaches and facilitators.
- Librarians and support staff become essential partners in teaching digital literacy and access.

Intentional collaboration with Google Workspace fosters **creativity, inclusion, and student voice** and builds the skills students will need for life beyond the classroom.

So, consider this your **invitation and roadmap** - explore, experiment, and refine how your students collaborate digitally. Each shared document or slide deck can become a living space for thinking together, learning together, and growing together.

Digital Citizenship & Creativity

Digital Citizenship & Creativity in the K–12 Classroom

Why This Matters Now

In today's digital learning environment, **digital citizenship and creativity** are inseparable. Teaching students to use technology responsibly also means helping them express themselves ethically and creatively.

As educators, the question isn't just *how do we keep students safe online?*, it's *how do we help them become thoughtful, empowered creators who use technology to make a positive impact?*

The answer lies in pairing intentional **digital citizenship instruction** with opportunities for **creative expression**. When students learn to evaluate, remix, and design responsibly, they not only meet academic goals but also build critical life skills in ethics, equity, and accessibility.

According to **Common Sense Media**, 70% of U.S. schools use its curriculum to teach students to "think critically and act responsibly both online and in life." Meanwhile, tools like **Canva for Education** and **Adobe Express** have become staples in classrooms that value design, creativity, and student voice. Together, these approaches build the foundation for what we might call *responsible creation*, a blend of citizenship and creativity that connects to every learner's sense of **discovery, identity, and purposeful action**.

Understanding Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship is about how students **behave, create, and engage online**. It encompasses media literacy, privacy, online relationships, ethics, and well-being.

Common Sense Media defines it as helping students make smart choices, think critically, and build healthy digital habits.

For educators, digital citizenship aligns naturally with broader learning goals:

- **Discovery** - Students explore digital spaces, learn how algorithms and data shape information, and understand their rights and responsibilities online.
- **Identity** - Students reflect on how they present themselves, develop their voice, and make decisions about what and how they share.
- **Purposeful Action** - Students apply their learning by creating ethically, engaging in digital communities, and using media to promote positive change.

Recommended Resources:

- Common Sense Media Digital Citizenship Curriculum (K–12) — Free lessons, family engagement toolkits, and teacher PD.
- Pair digital citizenship instruction with creative tasks: e.g., students create a short video or infographic reflecting on a citizenship concept like privacy or kindness.

Creativity Tools That Support Student Voice

Digital creation tools empower students to express ideas in visual and multimedia ways while also providing rich opportunities to model responsible use of digital media.

Canva for Education

- Free for K–12 teachers and students
- Offers templates for lesson materials, infographics, posters, magazines, and interactive visuals
- Built-in accessibility tools (captions, translation, color contrast checks)
- Ideal for elementary through high school for both teacher and student design projects

Adobe Express for Education

- Free for K–12 schools
- Includes creative tools for graphics, videos, and webpages
- Emphasizes design thinking, storytelling, and digital literacy
- A strong choice for middle and high school projects that require deeper design and production skills

Why Creativity Tools Matter

- Encourage **student agency** - students make design decisions and express original ideas.
- Build **digital literacy** - students learn about copyright, attribution, and responsible sharing.
- Foster **inclusion and accessibility** - students learn to design for diverse audiences.

When creativity meets digital citizenship, every design decision becomes a teachable moment about ethics, ownership, and voice.

Practical Classroom Strategies

1. Co-Design Projects with Librarians

Collaborate with your librarian or media specialist to design creative projects that integrate digital citizenship.

- Identify the best format for student expression (poster, podcast, infographic, video).
- Discuss the citizenship themes embedded in the project (copyright, audience, accessibility).
- Model best practices - add a quick mini-lesson on using Creative Commons images, writing alt text, or citing media sources.

2. Scaffold Student Creation with Reflection Prompts

Use guiding questions at each stage of creation:

- **Before:** “Who is my audience? What permissions do I need?”
- **During:** “Did I include alt text and credit sources correctly?”
- **After:** “What impact might my creation have? What responsibilities come with sharing it?”

3. Differentiate by Grade Level

Elementary:

- Use Canva templates for simple posters or storybooks.

- Teach digital citizenship concepts through friendly language: “Be kind online,” “Think before you post.”
- Model peer review through guided feedback.

Secondary:
- Assign projects like a digital story, short documentary, or advocacy campaign using Adobe Express.
- Build student choice into the format (video, infographic, web story).
- Include reflection slides or forms about audience, message, and digital footprint.

4. Showcase Student Work

- Create a digital gallery (within your LMS or school website) to celebrate student creations safely.
- Share a “Design Menu” of templates and tool links across your district or team.
- Embed reflection forms where students describe how they ensured accessibility and ethical use.

5. Connect to Media Literacy and the DOR Framework

Use these projects to spark discussions about **media influence, bias, and representation**.

Through the DOR lens:
- **Discovery:** Explore what it means to be a creator in digital spaces.
- **Identity:** Reflect on how media design expresses personal or cultural perspective.
- **Purposeful Action:** Publish and share responsibly, using creativity to make a positive difference.

Overcoming Common Challenges

Challenge	What Often Happens	Classroom Solutions
Limited training or comfort	Teachers may hesitate to use creative tools.	Offer short PD or co-teach sessions with your librarian.
Time constraints	Creative projects can feel “extra.”	Start small. Try one poster or one-slide campaign.
Copyright confusion	Students use uncredited images or media.	Teach Creative Commons and model proper attribution.
Sharing concerns	Student privacy and consent issues arise.	Keep publishing internally; teach responsible sharing.
Accessibility barriers	Designs may not meet accessibility standards.	Model use of alt text, contrast checks, and inclusive visuals.
Curriculum alignment	Teachers worry creativity takes time from content.	Design projects that *show* understanding (e.g., infographic instead of essay).

Final Reflection

As students navigate a world where they constantly create, remix, and share, the role of educators expands from managing digital tools to **mentoring responsible creators**.

By blending **digital citizenship instruction** (through resources like Common Sense Media) with **creative design opportunities** (using Canva or Adobe Express), you can help students see themselves not just as users of technology but as *ethical, empowered storytellers* in a digital world.

As you plan your **Digital Citizenship Month** or upcoming unit, try launching one creative-citizenship project: Have students design a **visual campaign on digital kindness**, display it in your school library or hallways, and reflect on how their designs model ethical creation and community impact.

In doing so, creativity becomes the vehicle for citizenship and citizenship becomes the lens that gives creativity purpose.

UDL Nugget: Balancing Student Choice

UDL in Action: Balancing Student Choice with Safe Boundaries

Why This Matters

Giving students meaningful choices in how they learn and show what they know is one of the most effective ways to promote engagement, ownership, and inclusion. Within the **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** framework, student choice sits at the heart of *multiple means of engagement, representation, and action & expression*.

But as every teacher knows, unlimited freedom can quickly turn into confusion or distraction. Structure matters. Clear boundaries help students use their choices productively, stay focused on learning goals, and avoid feeling overwhelmed.

In short: **choice empowers students; boundaries protect learning.** The sweet spot between the two creates classrooms where creativity, focus, and inclusion thrive.

What the Research Says

UDL research consistently shows that offering options in how students **access content** and **demonstrate understanding** improves motivation and learning outcomes.

- **Choice enhances engagement.** Students are more motivated when they can select learning pathways or output formats that match their strengths and interests. (CAST)
- **Boundaries maintain clarity.** Effective UDL design keeps all options aligned to the same core learning goal, ensuring every student demonstrates understanding of the same construct. (udloncampus.cast.org)
- **Curated choice works best.** Too many options can lead to cognitive overload; too few can limit creativity. The goal is *structured flexibility*: enough freedom for students to own their learning, with enough scaffolding to keep them successful.

Designing Choice with Safe Boundaries

Here are practical classroom strategies for balancing flexibility and structure when implementing UDL principles.

1. Clarify the Destination Before Opening the Pathways

Start by identifying your **learning goal**: what do you want students to know or be able to do? Then offer a few clear ways students can *get there* and *show it*.

Example:

- **Learning Pathways:** Read an article, watch a video, or explore an interactive simulation.
- **Expression Options:** Write an essay, create a short video, design an infographic, or record a podcast.

Keep the same rubric and learning criteria for all options. Every choice should measure the same standard.

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2. Use Choice Boards or Structured Menus

Choice boards help students make decisions within a guided structure. They support independence while keeping the range manageable.

Example: History Project

Column A	**Column B**	**Column C**
Topic (choose one)	Format (choose one)	Audience (choose one)
Event X, Person Y, Movement Z	Infographic, Video, Podcast, Slides	Class Presentation, Library Display, Blog Post

This design allows for voice and variety but keeps the teacher in control of learning focus and quality expectations.

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3. Scaffold the Process with Checkpoints

Freedom doesn't mean "go figure it out." Build in supports:

- **Planning stage:** Have students complete a proposal or outline in a shared Google Doc.
- **Peer review:** Use guided feedback forms or comment prompts.
- **Reflection:** Ask students, "Why did I choose this format?" or "How will my audience engage with my work?"

These checkpoints keep students accountable and reflective.

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4. Design Rubrics That Balance Choice and Clarity

Rubrics can honor both creativity and structure. Include criteria that assess:

- **Understanding of content** (applies across all formats)
- **Effectiveness of chosen medium** (evaluates communication through that format)

Share rubrics early, discuss them as a class and, if appropriate, let students contribute ideas for refinement.

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5. Ensure Access and Equity

Choice only works when *every* student can access and succeed in their selected option.

Tips:

- Provide templates or exemplars for each format.
- Offer basic training for digital tools (e.g., video editing, podcasting).
- Ensure all options have equitable time, resources, and accessibility supports (like alt text, captions, readable fonts).
- Avoid options that require advanced tech skills unless taught in class.

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6. Offer Choice in Both Learning and Assessment

Choice isn't just for end-of-unit projects. Offer options throughout the learning process.

Example:

- **During learning:** Students choose to read or listen to a text, work independently or in pairs, or engage with different media types.
- **During assessment:** Students choose how to express understanding using presentation, writing, visual display, or creative media.

Embedding choice throughout promotes sustained motivation and engagement.

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7. Use "Choice Architecture" to Set Safe Boundaries

Teachers design the structure behind the freedom. This is what UDL calls the *architecture of choice*.

Best Practices:

- Limit options to **2–4 strong, well-scaffolded choices**.
- Require consistent "must-haves" across formats (citations, reflection, accessibility checks).
- Remove off-target options that don't meet learning goals.
- Monitor progress regularly and intervene early if students veer off course.

Elementary vs. Secondary Applications

Elementary (K–5)

- Keep options simple: "Show what you learned using a poster, comic strip, or narrated video."
- Use visual choice boards with icons or pictures.
- Provide templates (Google Slides or Canva) with clear directions.
- Model decision-making: "I chose a comic strip because it helps me show sequence."
- Boundaries: Every student must include three key facts and one reflection sentence.

Secondary (Grades 6–12)

- Expand choice menus with options for topic, format, and audience.
- Encourage collaboration and peer feedback.
- Include milestones (proposal, rough draft, peer review).
- Use rubrics with shared criteria across all formats: accuracy, audience awareness, communication effectiveness, and reflection.
- Embed metacognitive reflection: “Why did I choose this medium? How might others perceive it? What would I change?”

Key Takeaways

- Student choice matters most when paired with clear boundaries.
- UDL gives a research-based framework for designing both flexibility and structure.
- Choice boards and rubrics keep creative options aligned to standards.
- Scaffold both the process and product. Choice without support isn’t equitable.
- Ensure access for all students by teaching tool use and providing templates.
- Start small: one redesigned assignment with structured choice can shift classroom culture.

Final Reflection

Balancing student choice with clear boundaries is at the heart of **inclusive, student-centered design**. It builds autonomy and engagement while ensuring equity and rigor.

As you plan your next unit, try this: **choose one assignment to redesign with structured choice.** Offer two or three pathways for students to demonstrate learning, set clear boundaries with a rubric, and include a reflection checkpoint.

Afterward, reflect as a team:

- How did students respond to having options?
- Did boundaries help maintain focus?
- What would you refine next time?

With each iteration, you’ll move closer to a classroom culture where freedom and structure work together empowering every learner to succeed and shine.