

Digital Citizenship: Building a Positive and Safe Online Environment

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Abstract

Digital citizenship is a term that describes the actions and behavior of online users. There are many facets and components to this concept and they all work together to impact the digital world and its participants. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the definition of digital citizenship and analyze its nine different elements. While all the aspects of digital citizenship are important to build a positive and safe online environment, certain elements need to be emphasized at different times with different ages. In educational settings, teachers must treat digital citizenship as a part of the preparation required for equipping students for life outside of school. All elements of digital citizenship are necessary for students to find success in life as modern technology develops and society grows ever more dependent on digital platforms.

Keywords: digital citizenship, digital access, digital etiquette, digital law, copyright, cyberbullying

Digital Citizenship: Building a Positive and Safe Online Environment

Technology is everywhere. It is in our homes, in our stores, in our appliances, in our cars, in our pockets, and our schools. Most aspects of our everyday lives have some sort of digital component if they have not already fully transitioned to an online format. Distance no longer prevents instant social connections to anyone at any time. People frequently communicate through email, texting, video conferencing as well as broadcasting their social status to the rest of the digital world through social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. Our economy is driven by digital commerce as well as global buying, selling, and trading by way of technology. The entertainment industry has been expanded and personalized for consumers by way of streaming services, where movies, sports, television shows, music playlists, and more are all instantly available. Over the past few decades, as society has reaped the benefits of technological progress, it has been coupled with challenges that face the digital community. Users need to understand the concept of digital citizenship and how to properly act online which creates a safe environment for themselves and other digital citizens. Furthermore, it is irresponsible to assume that everyone automatically gravitates toward healthy digital behavior. Research conducted by Polgar and Curran (2015) proves there is a large gap between digital citizenship evangelists and the general masses. By defining digital citizenship and exploring ways to apply its elements, educators can equip themselves to train others and potentially close this gap.

Digital Citizenship Mantra

Digital citizenship is an extensive topic that includes many different dynamics. Heick (2020) loosely describes “digital citizenship” as an active effort to improve the digital communities in which one participates and from which they receive benefits. Ohler (2012) is more specific with his definition of digital citizenship; he directly links digital citizenship with character education, stating that these two concepts are interdependent on one another. Ribble (2015) describes digital citizenship as the continuous development of norms of appropriate,

responsible, and empowered technology use, going so far as to dissect his definition into nine different elements. These elements can be categorized and grouped based on different criteria when considering how they can be both applied and taught to young digital citizens. The practical application of these definitions can be assimilated into one mantra, Digital Citizenship: Building a Positive and Safe Online Environment.

The Elements of Digital Citizenship

In his book *Digital Citizenship in Schools: Nine Elements All Students should know*, Ribble (2015) analyzes the concept of digital citizenship by detailing nine different aspects and further categorizes them into thematic principles which he labels as REPs. A thorough investigation of these principles and all of these components they contain gives a well-rounded and holistic picture of what it means to be a digital citizen.

Educate Yourself and Others: Literacy, Communication, Commerce

Learning occurs all of the time, not just in the classroom. People learn from experiences, friends, family members, and of course the internet. Digital literacy is the process of learning about technology and how to use it (Ribble, 2015). Ideally, this element would be integrated into a classroom curriculum. There is a temptation for both students and teachers to view the school setting as a completely different atmosphere from how they live the rest of their lives outside of the classroom. Students use technology in almost every aspect of their daily lives and therefore, schools should use this fact to promote the development of digital literacy as students learn subject content. Developing these types of skills in students is vastly important to not only give them the best learning opportunities but to understand how to effectively utilize technology in all areas of their lives.

The electronic exchange of information is known as digital communication (Ribble, 2015). This includes what users communicate, when they communicate and how they communicate. Students could potentially engage in cheating, bullying, and other explicit behaviors that negatively impact the digital community. When kids connect with one another

through a screen, it is easier for them to behave irresponsibly, cruelly, or unethically; oftentimes, students feel less accountable for their online actions, which affects their digital communication (Relationships & communication, n.d.). Educators can model proper digital communication through the posting and delivery of online instructions, facilitating peer to peer online forums.

Digital commerce is defined as the electronic buying and selling of goods (Ribble, 2015). While students won't be exercising this in their daily school lessons, learning to become an intelligent consumer is a mark of a good digital citizen. School-age students have access to digital transactions like never before, where downloads for apps, upgrades, and virtual merchandise for online video games are only a tap away. Consumers of all ages are vulnerable to identity theft, unwanted tracking, and other digital security concerns if they are not careful with their online activity.

Protect Yourself and Others: Rights and Responsibilities, Security, Health and Wellness

Everyone in the digital world is provided with both rights and responsibilities. Digital rights and responsibilities refer to the concept that digital users have protections for their online voice and work. They also have the responsibility of respecting the rights of other authors and the content they post online (Ribble, 2015). Students and educators should be well-rehearsed in citing sources when using unoriginal work as well as request permission or apply the proper transformation to a work to ensure that the rights of the author are being protected.

Digital security refers to the electronic precautions users can take to guarantee safety (Ribble, 2015). As mentioned earlier, technology has infiltrated almost every aspect of our lives; this causes people to rely more and more on the digital storing of personal information as businesses and institutions continue to move towards online platforms. Actions must be taken in order to protect identity and sensitive information from being stolen. Many do not realize that every action that is performed on the internet can be searched, copied, shared, broadcasted, and is permanent; this digital footprint is forever tied to the user and needs to be considered when using any digital device (Common Sense Education, 2013). The anonymous nature of

digital interactions will often result in more careless behavior, especially in young users, which can have exacerbated negative effects on the safety and security of the digital community (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015).

Digital health and wellness is often an overlooked component of digital citizenship. This element refers to the physical and psychological well-being of those in the digital technology world (Ribble, 2015). Rambhark (2014) reports that overuse of technology by children is contributing to alarming increased rates of sleeping disorders, anxiety, depression, obesity, and other forms of physical and mental conditions. Learning how to moderate the amount of time spent online as well as taking care of the body is a skill that must be learned and practiced. As schools utilize technology more and more in the classroom, this is an important element to address with students because many of them will continue to use technology throughout the rest of the day.

Respect Yourself and Others: Access, Etiquette, and Law

As educators work with students to promote good citizenship and model best practices, intense concentration on a few of these elements may be appropriate to better equip young learners for life online. While every aspect is important, students at the intermediate level, fifth and sixth grades, require a focus on digital access, digital etiquette, and digital law. These elements directly affect life both within and outside of the school environment; they also focus on the consequences of poor online decision making. A proactive intervention with students concerning these components may prevent students from making mistakes that could have lifelong negative effects. A clear understanding of appropriate use and norms for these elements will help students build a positive and safe online environment for themselves and others.

Digital access

In the year 2020, access to the internet is more prevalent than ever before. Ribble (2015) explains digital access as the equitable distribution of online resources and technology use. However, it is not safe to assume that everyone has equitable access to both the

availability and quality of online services. When considering the trends in education, this element must be understood and promoted as more content delivery and learning is taking place online and at home. While tremendous progress has been made in K-12 education, especially towards low-income communities, the development of personalized learning models and distance learning have provided new challenges (Vander Ark, 2017). Simply implementing a 1:1 device initiative is not enough when advocating for digital access. Due to the rise of distance learning and virtual schools, teachers are implementing blended learning techniques, flipped classrooms, and moving direct teaching into a video format at a higher frequency than in years previous. The ability to use that device outside of school hours and outside of school grounds is equally important. School districts must also consider all demographics regarding this issue, including economically disadvantaged as well as members with special needs. This is an issue that should concern all digital citizens, not just those with the power to make financial decisions. Teachers can also play a part in ensuring equal opportunity for students by knowing which students are at a digital disadvantage and by considering accommodations for students who do not have access to technology (Ribble, 2015). Providing access to all participants is an important part of caring for the digital community and ensuring equal opportunity for all members of society.

Digital etiquette

One of the most rampant problems, when students use technology, is the amount and frequency of inappropriate conduct that occurs online. Ribble (2015) refers to the electronic standards of appropriate conduct and procedures as digital etiquette or netiquette. The problem with the specific element is that few rules have been established for the proper use of devices, therefore students simply repeat the type of behavior that they view online, whether that be from their peers or other adults. While educators hope that young users would use technology in ways that minimize the negative effects on others, society has seen an increased rate of destructive behavior that includes flaming, inflammatory language, and cyberbullying,

particularly through the use of social media platforms. Unfortunately, this is the dark side that progressive technology has brought along with its remarkable innovations. Bullying is now no longer relegated to the playground and on the bus; cyberbullying is everywhere. Cyberbullying is the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015, p.11). Cyberbullies are not restrained by time or place and may use multiple media platforms to target their victims. Furthermore, the negative impact of cyberbullying is exacerbated due to the “often anonymous nature of the interaction, speed of distribution, permanence of material and constant availability of victims” (Willard, 2007, as cited in Brewer & Kerslake, 2015, p. 255). Tragically, these types of situations end with fatal results if support systems are not in place and proactive programs are not implemented.

Character education, cyberbullying prevention, and the constant communication of desired social norms are all ways educators and institutions can address digital etiquette with students. Hinduja and Patchin (2015) argue that school staff should dedicate time in the classroom for the purpose of educating students about these issues, specifically to raise awareness of risks, possible school and legal consequences, and all the different types of harm that can result. Moreover, simply addressing inappropriate behavior isn’t enough to see improvement in desired digital etiquette. Schools should also instruct, model, and reward helpful behaviors among their student population (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Another way to raise awareness of cyberbullying is to implement some sort of anonymous reporting system. Such systems have been found to help create a safe environment where students can openly share experiences where previously they may have felt uncomfortable or ashamed (Hinduja and Patchin, 2015). Research conducted by the Cyberbullying Research Center found that in 2016, 33.8% of all teens had experienced some form of cyberbullying, and the rates have only risen since that time (Tippet, 2018). Even though this seems to be an incompatible epidemic, steps can be taken and action plans can be implemented to help students create a positive and safe online environment they need in order to thrive.

Digital law

Although it may seem that fifth and sixth graders are too young to be concerned with digital legal issues, if students do not conduct themselves properly and exercise suitable digital etiquette, they may face consequences that could potentially impact the rest of their lives. Educating young users on these consequences is a way to make them make the best decisions when interacting online. Digital law refers to the electronic responsibility for actions and deeds, which include copyright infringement, plagiarism, sexting, and sharing of illicit photos, pirating, and in some cases cyberbullying (Ribble, 2015). If students continue to operate digital devices without care, penalties such as fines, suspension, arrest, and even conviction. Sexting has become a major topic among teenagers, with 24% of this age group reporting to have been involved in this activity (Siegle, 2010). If this type of material involves someone under the age of 16, the sender and receiver could potentially be arrested for the distribution of child pornography, even if the recipient did not want it on their device (Ribble, 2015). Such crimes permanently ruin the reputations of those involved and they will oftentimes be required to register as offenders.

Digital law also involves the protection of original work under copyright legislation. Copyright infringement involves reproduction or creating derivatives of a work without permission and displaying or distributing copies of a work without permission (Bailey, 2013). For educators, it is important to adhere to and model copyright compliance while encouraging students to do the same. As teachers integrate this element of digital citizenship into classroom instruction, students will be able to understand what can legally be downloaded without charge versus pirating music or file sharing. Attribution is a major component to ensuring that fair use and the utilization of Creative Commons are adhering to copyright laws. Doing so will also help students understand their protective rights as creators. They will learn how to successfully post and share their creations while taking advantage of the legislation that is meant to preserve their original work.

Conclusion and Further Reflection

Given that society engages in online activity in so many ways, and adequate education on digital citizenship is something that all students require if they are to benefit from and contribute to the online community in positive ways. All nine elements of digital citizenship are important and none of them should be left out of a digital citizenship educational experience. Educators must find a way to integrate these aspects of digital life into their daily instruction, modeling best practices, and taking advantage of opportune times to better equip students for life online. Investing in the development of these skills will produce better digital citizens, ones that have the knowledge, motivation, and tools they need to build a positive and safe online environment for themselves and others.

On an intermediate campus that educates fifth and sixth graders, I believe that the most important aspects of digital citizenship that need to be addressed are digital access, etiquette, and law. Ribble (2015) categorizes these three elements as “respect yourself and others.” While all nine elements have their place, these specific elements need special attention as most students spend the majority of their waking hours online, whether that be in the classroom or after the bell rings at the end of the day. They need to understand the concept of digital access as these are the years that most of their schoolwork is moved to a digital platform and teachers utilize teaching methods such as blended learning. Students need to know how to behave online and need exposure to the topic of cyberbullying and its negative impacts. Furthermore, students need to understand the details of the consequences that can occur due to inappropriate online behavior. Cyberbullying, copyright infringement, and plagiarism can all have legal ramifications, reinforcing the need to understand the importance of digital law.

As educators, it is our responsibility to address these elements with students and promote the idea of good digital citizenship in our schools. While preparing a presentation that targets the components of my mantra, I wanted to build something that would also target fifth and sixth graders. Especially this school year, students are receiving instructional videos for

almost every content area all the time. As teachers have moved most instruction to digital platforms to accommodate virtual learners, students are oversaturated with direct taught, voiced-over slides; teachers are also accustomed to receiving information through this avenue as faculty meetings and announcements are sent out through video. Part of my teaching philosophy is that learning should be exploratory, interactive, and learners benefit from immediate feedback. Therefore, I have created a digital citizenship presentation in the form of a game to engage students and teachers, while promoting self-directed learning. Participants will explore, learn, and review material using the Kahoot! Platform. This instructional tool usually serves as a formative or summative assessment resource, however, I have adjusted the settings to allow participants time to make their best guesses, receive feedback on their attempts, and progress at their own pace. Not only does Kahoot! align more with my educational philosophies, it also models good digital citizenship. Participants will utilize digital literacy and communication while seeing proper compliance with digital law, rights, and responsibilities as sources are cited and referenced. Again, learners who participate in this type of presentation will be fully engaged in this learning experience. This is not a typical click and view equipping time, but rather a learner-driven, exploratory session that allows students the freedom to interact with the material as they learn how to best build a positive and safe online environment.

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