

The Need for Digital Citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classroom

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Student safety when using internet tools and resources is paramount to creating effective online learning environments. Children need to learn how to act and react safely, effectively, responsibly, and morally in an environment where dangers such as lurking predators, misinformation and the potential for cyberbullying attacks are a very real threat. Issues such as appropriate social media use, privacy concerns, storage and sharing of personal information and helping students to develop positive digital footprints need to be explored and monitored by teachers when using online tools with their students. As our society is becoming one of seemingly ubiquitous use of the internet for learning, Digital Citizenship is not just a new catchphrase, it is a series of essential understandings and skills that all students and teachers must be familiar with in order to ensure their safety online.

In this paper I will outline the ongoing surge in internet and social media use, summarize potential concerns that could arise from that swell and then list potential resources and ideas for teaching digital citizenship to students.

Use of the internet in classrooms across North America, in fact in many parts of the world, has been rapidly increasing over the last two decades. Debell (2003), Franklin (2005), and Boyd, Hargittai, Schultz and Palfrey (2011) all provide statistics that describe the increased use of technology and the internet in the classroom and in society as both teachers and students become more comfortable and accustomed to using it. What can be quite surprising is the young age at which many children are being exposed to the virtues and challenges of the internet, sometimes with very little guidance or support.

Debell (2003) reports that 80% of Kindergarteners and 67% of children in nursery school use computers and roughly a third and a quarter, respectively, use the internet in their learning. Though differences are noted by population demographic, even in 2003 computer use was prevalent in all levels of education and with the advent of mobile devices since this study, those numbers will be significantly heightened.

Franklin (2005) debates that the increase in computer use in the classroom comes from increased comfort levels of teachers using technology, largely due to better use of it in their teacher training programs. Franklin (2005) further notes that virtually all of the upper elementary students (gr 3-6) in the schools that were studied used the internet, while more than two thirds of K-2 students made use of it in their learning. Though some teachers are still wary of working with technology, a distinct shift in philosophy is recognized as many teachers are choosing to explore online tools and resources for their lessons to increase student engagement.

Boyd, Hargittai, Schultz and Palfrey (2011) specifically discuss the use of social media sites by underage account holders. Though most sites require users to be 13 years of age or older (mostly due to regulations imposed by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) 1998), a large number of pre-teens lie about their age in order to get accounts, many with their parents aware of them having the profiles or even helping to set them up. Interestingly, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg is quoted in this article as saying that he feels younger children should be allowed access to social media as experience using it is "an important part of the educational process." (*Facebook's response to circumvention by children of the under-13 ban*).

The reality is that many children, regardless of the restrictions put in place by COPPA, are already using social media sites. Boyd, et al. (2011) report that 46% of American 12 year olds use social networking sites and that 44% of online teens admit to lying about their age in order to

access them. The numbers are even more alarming in the UK where information suggests that 31% of 10 year olds, 44% of 11 year olds and 55% of 12 year olds are on social media sites, regardless of the age limits. Additionally, Lenhart, Madden, Smith, Purcell, Zickuhr, and Rainie (2011) note that 95% of American teens aged 12-17 are online and that 80% of those use social media sites.

Though Boyd, et al. (2011) note that 78% of parents are concerned about the dangers of their children meeting strangers with ill intentions online or the potential for online activities being tracked and analyzed for direct marketing purposes, they suggest that parents might judge their own children to be more mature than others and see the age restriction as being more a restriction of maturity levels, much like drinking age requirements or movie ratings are. Thus the blurring of the lines of what is acceptable or not are used as a reason for allowing their children to be on social media sites at a younger age than required by COPPA regulations.

The increased use of the internet in the classroom is commendable, even necessary, especially given its central place in the future careers of many of our students. Tarte (2013) touts social media use in the classroom, noting that it is where students (and their parents) are and suggesting that if teachers do not have an online presence they risk losing out on the value of an effective communication tool. There are, however, some very valid cautions and concerns that, as teachers, we must be aware of when using the internet and social media in the classroom. These concerns include, but are not limited to, maintaining the privacy of personal information, the very real risk of cyberbullying and the need to cultivate and promote a positive self-image online.

Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, Gasser, Duggan, Smith, and Beaton (2013) provide a plethora of statistical information about the types of information teens share on social media sites. Particularly alarming is the finding that many teens do not believe that anyone other than their friends or followers can view their profiles (Madden, et al. (2013)). Though many teens do take

steps to protect their information, the majority are posting pictures, videos and personal information that could be used to track both their location and interests, making them easy prey to the tech savvy aggressor. Also concerning is the number of friends or followers that teens have that they don't know or haven't met in person (up to 33% of their contacts) (Madden, et al. (2013)). Though this number could represent friends of friends or celebrities they choose to follow, it extends the number of people that have access to student profiles and could be aware of their movements, preferences or interests. It also increases the potential for online stalking or harassment by someone pretending to be a friend or a part of their age or interest group.

Hengstler (2013) notes: "BC educators, administrators, schools and districts must make sure that the content posted does not provide any specific personal and identifiable information without express written consent of a minor student's parent or guardian" (p5). As pre-teens become teens it becomes more and more difficult for parents or teachers to effectively monitor their children's and student's movements online. Madden, et al. (2013) note that use of Facebook by teens is dwindling as more and more adults (including their parents) are infiltrating the site. Teens are moving on to sites like Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and others less known by their parents. Not only is this concerning from a lack of parental monitoring perspective, but it is also potentially harmful due to the supposed 'disappearing' nature of such instant messaging sites (especially since a simple screen shot takes away that 'disappearing' nature, allowing users to easily collect and share compromising photos and information with others). While parents or teachers may try to track student use of social media sites, new apps and sites are appearing regularly and it is becoming increasingly difficult to monitor and contain the type and amount of information shared on social media sites.

Between openly accessible account profiles and information readily shared by users themselves, the potential for cyberbullying exists on an alarming scale. An inappropriate picture captured and shared for entire networks to see, a verbal disagreement that goes viral, or a nervous teen looking for attention by posting pictures or comments seeking advice, comment or approval; all open the door to the potential to cause harm to others on a global scale. Many high profile cases (Leung and Bascaramurty (2012) and Connolly (2014) report on a few) have garnered attention to the issue of cyberbullying, noting that the ability to pose as someone else or comment on sites anonymously using social media allows people to attack others in ruthless and harmful ways. Lenhart, et al (2011) further note that while 88% of teen users of social media sites have witnessed online cruelty in some form or another, a large number tend to ignore the cruelty without responding to it.

It can be said that what happens online, stays online.....forever. Students in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century classroom must be made aware of the impact of every post, picture and tag that they share and how their reputation, and the reputations of others, can easily be altered by an unfortunate or inappropriate post. Hengstler (2011) emphasizes the importance of cultivating a positive self-image online and working to overcome potentially negative consequences by monitoring and removing inappropriate tags and posts on social media sites. Lenhart, et al. (2011) report that only 55% of teens surveyed stated that they chose not to post content that might harm them or result in people perceiving them in a negative way. That leaves an alarming amount of teens who are not specifically concerned about what they are posting online or what their profile says about them.

Issues such as cyberbullying, privacy of personal information and creating positive reputations online are as old as the internet itself. However, restricting student access to social media or internet resources is not necessarily the answer. Setting age restrictions for social media

sites or restricting student use will not magically make the problem disappear, especially considering the reality that so many teens are already working around such rules and regulations. The fact is that students are already using social media, chat enabled games and various web tools to collaborate and communicate online. As teachers, we need to accept this fact and work to ensure that students have a strong foundation in digital citizenship skills to ensure that they are aptly prepared to work online in a responsible and ethical manner. By pre-loading students with effective strategies for using social media and learning online we can help them to act and react to online incidents in safe, effective, and responsible ways that will improve the overall safety and quality of their social media activity.

There are many companies that provide lessons, videos and activities to help educate students in the foundations of digital citizenship. From these resources teachers can compile a comprehensive curriculum for all ages of students that can be tailored to individual school needs to ensure that proper understandings and practices are in place when students are using technology in the classroom.

In response to the increasing complexity of the digital world in which we live and learn, the BC Ministry of Education has recently developed a Digital Literacy Framework to outline and guide teachers in their use of technology in the classroom. Literacies such as analysis, evaluation, creation and communication are explored for all grade levels. The framework also provides teachers with links to resources, activities and a number of lessons to develop effective student use of technology.

Ribble (2011) provides a comprehensive look at what digital citizenship is and what it looks like. He defines Digital Citizenship as “the norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use” (Ch 1, p 4) and outlines nine elements that include digital access,

commerce, communication, literacy, etiquette, law, rights and responsibilities, health and wellness and security (self-protection). Ribble (2011) provides definitions of each element and specific examples of what both good and irresponsible uses look like. He also notes that many parents are not well versed in the use of many of the technologies that their children are using and don't understand how to use them effectively and responsibly, thus providing poor role modelling opportunities for their children. Ribble (2011) also outlines a plan for implementing a digital citizenship program in schools and provides a variety of lessons and activities to help teachers do so. These lessons encompass a variety of topics, including ensuring fair and equitable access to technology for all, how to communicate appropriately and how to protect yourself from injuries that can result from technology use, both physical and psychological. Ribble has developed a vast body of work on the topic of digital citizenship and he is quoted in a number of other resources as a basis for their work.

Berson and Berson (2003) note that education is of the utmost importance in order to protect children from harmful online content and emphasize the need to “instill a set of appropriate online behaviors for safe and rewarding use of the Internet” (p1). They also speak to the anonymity factor and how it allows youth to be less concerned with acting in a respectful manner online. This is heightened by the lack of contact or witnessing an immediate reaction which might affect the way they would approach others in a face to face interaction. Berson and Berson (2003) also speak to the vastness of the internet which causes students to be less concerned with being caught and punished for their actions and also results in students inadvertently being disrespectful of others based on misunderstandings of cultural norms when dealing with people from outside of their geographical area. They conclude by providing ideas for teachers to promote safe, ethical and legal behaviours online.



Websites such as [www.common sense media.org](http://www.common sense media.org) and [www.cybersmartcurriculum.org](http://www.cybersmartcurriculum.org), among others, provide ready resources for teachers and parents that include simulations of online incidents, background information about what information is appropriate or inappropriate to share online, how to respond to cyberbullying attacks and developing effective digital footprints with students. These activities also teach students how to critically analyze a source of information to determine whether it is factual or not, to think before sharing information with others and to ensure that information they do choose to share is appropriate and not personally identifiable. Jones and Finkelhor (2011) suggest that rather than scaring students into acting safely online, a better approach to preventing inappropriate online behaviour would be a program showing examples of positive responses to online incidents, providing common situations and outcomes that students might encounter and providing statistical information to emphasize how prevalent certain online behaviours are.

Zuccato, & Al-Shamari (n.d.) also provide a resource developed for Microsoft entitled *Fostering Digital Citizenship* in which they note “[t]he online world presents great opportunities for young people, but it is not without risks. We can mitigate some of those risks by helping young people develop a strong sense of digital citizenship” (p5). The resource outlines elements of digital citizenship in practice, identifies risks associated with technology use and lists actions that can be taken by parents, teachers, and the government to ensure the safety of everyone online. They emphasize that “[r]ather than relying solely on protective measures, an approach to online safety that includes digital citizenship will help young people safely interact in the online world. Teaching them about digital literacy and digital ethics and etiquette is no longer merely an option; it is an imperative.” (p5).

In summary, students are already collaborating, researching and sharing information online in the form of posts, videos and projects that they share via social media. In many ways this is a positive endeavour, allowing the creation of shared knowledge and the expression of who they are. However, not everything that students are sharing online is appropriate or leaning towards the creation of a positive reputation. Students at a young age don't necessarily have the wherewithal to understand that things that they say or do now could end up harming them in the future. Negative images and comments can have far reaching effects – not only in the here and now in the form of bullying or ostracizing, but in the long term as students move into the workforce and apply for jobs or complete college applications that could be compromised based on an inappropriate post that they made as a teen. As more and more of our students are exploring the world of social media and online interaction, they are unwittingly opening themselves up to potential harm based on their naïve world view and inexperience in dealing with issues on such a large scale.

At the same time we cannot simply keep students hidden away on the internet, closed off from the world and expect them to know how to act safely and responsibly when they get older. What students need is a program of gradual release of control where they are guided through a series of lessons that teach digital citizenship skills with hands on experience of how to act and react to others on the internet. Though they may not always follow the rules and guidelines set out to keep them safe, it is imperative that we, as educators, provide them with the tools and safety protocols necessary to allow them to do so. We must prepare our students to be able to practice effective and responsible online behaviours and impress upon them the necessity to do so.

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