Digital Citizenship Essay

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Giving a student a device without moral parameters is like handing car keys to a teenager without ever providing behind-the-wheel training (Connected Consulting, 2017). Providing opportunities to learn how to safely navigate the internet with respect for others and themselves, will ensure that students make safe, responsible choices independently. These norms for digital behavior has been termed *digital citizenship* (Dotterer, Hedges, & Parker, 2016). Students must be explicitly taught that their use of devices and the digital footprint that follows them will affect their current and future relationships, careers, and safety (Hollandsworth, Dowdy, and Donovan, 2011).

Unfortunately, many teachers are unfamiliar with the topic of digital citizenship (Ribble, 2012), and must be coaxed into providing instruction on these norms because many digital citizenship issues are sensitive in nature, such as sexting and cyberbullying. Schools need to face these serious issues head on, rather than choosing to “hide behind their Acceptable Use Policy (AUP)” (Ribble, 2012, p.149). In fact, Mike Ribble (2012) provides nine key elements of digital citizenship which should be addressed: access, commerce, communication, literacy, etiquette, law, rights and responsibilities, health and wellness, and security or self-protection. These specific skill areas guide students’ behavior as they utilize technology in the classroom and personally. Rather than simply focusing on the *don’ts* of an AUP or filtering inappropriate sites or preventing student plagiarism (Garland & Tajeda, 2013), schools should focus on teaching the nine elements of digital citizenship to empower students to make wise, safe, respectful digital choices.

The first step in providing digital citizenship instruction is to locate a sound curriculum, such as Common Sense Media which is a free resource for teachers of grades kindergarten through twelve. Other reliable resources are Digital Citizen Resource Roundup or Edutopia’s series of articles on teaching digital citizenship (Connected Consulting, 2017). Explicit instruction about the nine elements will help students navigate the ever-changing world of technology, equipping them with the norms to prevent choices they will regret later.

Additionally, schools should connect the behavior concepts already being taught about citizenship in schools to digital citizenship (Connected Consulting, 2017). If the school already focuses on respect, as most schools do, the discussion can connect to the cyber-realm as to how to respect the privacy of others or how to use respectful language on a blog. Tools such as posters displaying the THINK acronym provide a visible reminder of these digital behaviors (Anderson, 2013). The acronym asks the following questions: “Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it inspiring? Is it necessary? Is it kind?” (Anderson, 2013). Relating digital behavior to face-to-face behavior aligns with Standards 4a and 4c of the ISTE Standards for Teachers in promoting digital citizenship through responsible, respectful actions (ISTE, 2008).

Similarly, as teachers use resources such as Common Sense Media lessons on digital citizenship, Connected Consulting recommends (2017) that teachers provide ample practice by incorporating meaningful opportunities for online activities in the classroom, followed by discussions about how students modeled the behaviors taught. Students not only are provided relevant learning experiences, as suggested by ISTE Teacher Standard 2a, but students see the relevance of the lessons as they practice these behaviors first-hand (ISTE, 2008).

Woven throughout the digital citizenship curriculum and online experiences, should also be modeling; as much as possible, teachers must learn how to use tools like social media, blogs, and online multimedia to ensure they keep pace with students (Connected Consulting, 2017); if teachers do not know how to use the technology, how can they teach it, let alone be a model global citizen? Being proactive to learn this media also enables teachers to see the possible safety issues and risks (Hollandsworth, et al., 2011), along with modeling how to make safe, responsible choices. Some schools have also utilized peer mentor programs to model online safety and global citizenship (Hollandsworth, et al., 2011). Such mentor programs also support ISTE Teacher Standard 1d and 3b, encouraging student collaboration with peers who model responsible technology behaviors.

However, there is a world of others who our students can benefit collaborating with, and there is a plethora of resources which encourage such global connection. Twiducate.com is a free platform which allows teachers to provide social networking for their class or with other teachers’ classes around the world. Safe for any age, Twiducate allows the teacher to monitor student posts and e-mails to one another or with other students, and users can create custom avatars. This site allows students to practice the digital citizenship lessons provided in class, specifically social media literacy and etiquette skills. Teachers can search for a class to connect with through the site or simply network with likeminded educators.

Edublogs.org is a great site for teachers of all subject areas for third through twelfth grade. Not only a private space for a class to extend discussions about classroom topics, Edublogs provides the ability for students to collaborate on projects and practice those communication skills, not to mention etiquette with peers. Teachers can monitor students’ posts and assess their learning daily. Like Twiducate, Edublogs encourages skills in social media literacy, digital access, communication, and etiquette. Furthermore, if teachers sign up for the free version of Edublogs, students will also need to be taught to think of their digital safety before clicking on one of the pop up ads.

At first glance, Google Hangouts may not seem like the typical classroom tool. However, all learners can benefit from verbalizing their learning through face-to-face communication. English Learners could work with a virtual elbow partner if teachers have a colleague whose class is using the same platform. In fact, conversations can be recorded and reviewed later for future reference. Students could read text to one another or share a piece of original writing. Of Riddle’s digital citizenship elements, Google Hangouts promotes skill in digital access, communication, literacy, and etiquette.

The fact remains that technologies will constantly change, yet the necessity to teach the parameters for appropriate behavior remains (Ribble, 2012). Educators cannot wait until their district provides a directive; we must teach digital citizenship to our students now.

References

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