An Introduction to Digital Citizenship

Our world is changing, and schools need to adapt to new realities of knowledge, society, and education. Technology has fundamentally changed our idea of community and the ways in which we interact with each other, so that building individual networks for learning and support is more important than ever before. [4] The Internet has also broken down many barriers of space and time, allowing us to rethink the way that we work and connect;[5] we are no longer tied to only those in our immediate physical surroundings but instead now operate within more fluid and complex networks of people from around the globe thanks to social networks and mobile technologies.[6] **This means that today's classrooms need to prepare** students to succeed in these global networks, but it also means that teachers have access to **a whole world of experts and others who can support and augment their students' learning.**

The Internet also provides cheaper, freer access to an enormous amount of information and educational content;[7] **Sir Ken Robinson comments that** "our children are living in the most **intensely stimulating period in the history of the earth."**[8] **Education isn't limited to the walls** of the classrooms; more and more, it can be done anywhere, at anytime, and by anyone.[9]

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Unfortunately, present schooling practices have generally not adapted to the changing nature of society and learning, leaving students at a disadvantage;[10] indeed, our current education system **"was designed and conceived and structured for a different age."**[11] Education **is no longer "about centralized instruction anymore; rather, it is the process of establishing oneself as a node in a broad network of distributed creativity."**[12]

This means that we need to rethink our idea of school - if massive amounts of content are available to anyone, we need to ensure that students are equipped with the skills to safely

and smartly sift through this abundance of information and to navigate online spaces in ways that contribute to their learning. In other words, schools must teach students *how* to learn in the age of networks.
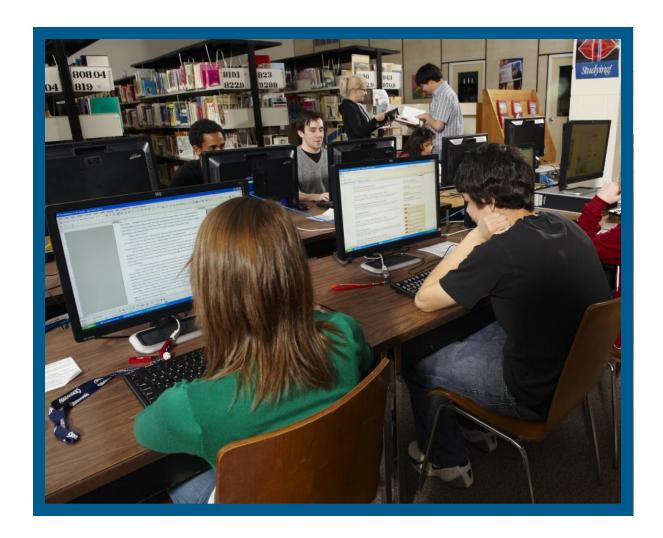
Bringing technology into the classroom and opening up the walls of our schools offers a way to bridge the gap between traditional school systems and those that equip students with the skills needed for the present and future. However, these types of changes cannot happen overnight; schools and teachers need to think through the potential challenges of bringing technology into the classroom in order to ensure that our students participate positively, responsibly, and safely in online spaces. This means that we need to plan for and address digital citizenship in our schools by creating policies at a school or school-division level.

What is digital citizenship?

In order to understand the concept of digital citizenship, it is helpful to begin with the idea of **citizenship, that is, "the state of being a citizen of a particular social, political or national community [which] carries both rights and responsibilities."**[13] Thus, citizenship in its traditional sense is tied to a bounded space and/or group of individuals and entails both the benefits of rights and the weight of responsibilities.

Given the changing state of communities, knowledge, and education, however, citizenship is no longer contained by physical location, so we need to expand our definition of citizenship to take into consideration who we are as members of the global, online communities in which we now find ourselves. Digital citizenship asks us to consider how we act as members of a network of people that includes both our next-door neighbours and individuals on the other side of the planet and requires an awareness of the ways in which technology mediates our **participation in this network. It may be defined as** "the norms of appropriate and responsible **online behaviour"**[14] **or as** "the quality of habits, actions, and consumption patterns that im-**pact the ecology of digital content and communities."**[15]

Digital citizenship both includes and expands on the more traditional definition of citizenship. If citizenship requires participation in a given community, we must consider what participation looks like in the digital world. We must also consider what new rights and responsibilities we have in online spaces. On top of traditional issues of citizenship, digital citizenship raises several other key issues: these include balance, that is developing an understanding of the effects of technology and balancing the advantages and potential risks; safety and security as they apply to online spaces, including issues such as inappropriate content and cyberbullying; and ethical issues such as copyright and plagiarism.[16]

"Digital Citizenship is more than just
a teaching tool, it is a way to prepare students
for a society full of technology."
- Dr. Mike Ribble

Why worry about digital citizenship?

Given the complexities of participation in online spaces, many school systems have taken the approach of sharply restricting students' access to social media and other online spaces in order to limit potential issues. While this approach may have been somewhat successful when Internet-use was less widespread, it is no longer a viable or appropriate strategy; students are using the Internet, so it is the responsibility of schools to ensure that they do so safely. Also, just as schools have played a role in preparing students to be citizens in the traditional sense, educators must now ensure that our children are ready to be active and responsible participants in our increasingly digital society:

> Citizenship requires participation. Communities, whether local, regional, national, social or political require members to participate for the community to have value and meaning. Without participation the community becomes non-existent. Digital communities similarly require participation and society has a role to play in preparing youth to participate in these communities in meaningful, responsible and caring ways.[17]

If digital citizenship requires participation, then schools must provide a safe space for students' guided participation in online spaces. Just as we would not teach a teenager to drive without ever getting into a car, we cannot teach digital citizenship without allowing students to go online.[18]

It is critical that schools address digital citizenship, and that they do so right away. Some key reasons include:

- Students are generally proficient at basic usage of technology, but they are not necessarily critical users and many of them do not have the skills to be safe and responsible online. We are putting students at risk by assuming that they are tech-savvy.
- Students are starting to use the Internet at an early age, and they're using it regularly. If schools wait until high school to address digital citizenship, we are putting students at risk.
- If we want students to be lifelong learners, they should see learning as something that can happen at any time, but by keeping technology out of the classroom, we send the message that school is separate from "real life." Incorporating digital worlds and digital citizenship into the curriculum helps bridge the gap between school and home.
- Schools need to prepare students to be successful in our digital world; teaching digital citizenship allows students to develop the skills and competencies that they will need to be safe, responsible, and productive members of our current and future society.

Research supports the need for digital citizenship:

In this section, you'll find a more in-depth look at why each of these issues is so important; this research may be helpful to administrators or teachers when discussing the need for digital citizenship instruction with parents or other school community members.

False perceptions of students' digital skills:

One of the major reasons for teaching digital citizenship is that although young people are often competent basic users of technology, they frequently do not have the requisite digital literacy skills.[19] For instance, a study of Canadian youth found that fewer than half of young people will look for additional sources to confirm their research if they believe the site they are using is reliable, while very few understand commercial aspects of the Internet, such as the ways in which companies can share their information. [20] One expert notes:

> *Just because today's students have grown up in a technology-rich world does not mean that they know how to effectively and responsibly utilize technology. It is a common misconception that today's learners can seamlessly transition from the routine use of devices for personal reasons to using them for learning, research, and enhanced productivity. We routinely hear how students use digital tools inappropriately for sexting, cyberbullying, cheating, video-recording teaching and fights with peers, and plagiarizing. Unfortunately, these behaviors have become quite common, as schools are not doing their part to educate students on digital responsibility, citizenship, and creating a positive footprint online.[21]*

Schools and teachers cannot assume that students are digitally savvy simply because they are connected. Clearly, students are often not learning to be safe and responsible Internet users at home, so schools and teachers must make sure that students are acquiring these skills in the classroom; otherwise, we are putting young people at risk.

High rates of Internet use among young people:

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A related argument for the development of a digital citizenship policy is that young people already spend a great deal of time of the Internet, so ignoring the issue while at school will not prevent students from running into problems online; as we mention above, school should help students develop transferable skills that they can apply to their personal usage. Below, we take a brief look at the present usage rates of technology among young people. These paint of clear picture of the prevalence of Internet use among younger generations both in Canada and in other countries.

Internet usage is now widespread across all ages: 82% of American adults now use the Internet, including 53% of those over 65,[22] and 65% of online adults use social networking sites.[23] The likelihood of using the Internet decreases with age, with the youngest group in the study (Americans aged 18-29) most likely to be Internet users; 97% of those in this age bracket are Internet users, while 89% use social networking sites.[24] Many technology experts agree that **these young users, known as Millennials, will "lead society into a new world of personal disclosure and information sharing using new media" and that they will continue to share as they** grow older, suggesting that high rates of Internet usage will continue or increase.[25]

Teenagers are similar to young adults in their usage rates. In Canada, 99% of young people in grades 4 through 11 access the Internet outside of school.[26] Close to three quarters of Canadian teens post some content to social networking sites, while 85% of Canadian youth in grades 7-11 stream or download content from online sources.[27] Of those youth who access the Internet outside of school, 45% do so using a cell phone or smart phone, with this number increasing as students get older, while 68% use a portable device such as a laptop, notebook, or tablet.[28] **This is significant as it suggests that teens' Internet usage is increasingly "anytime, anywhere;" the large numbers of students with cell phones and other mobile devices, many** of which allow for 3G and 4G connections, also means that students have easy, personal access to online spaces during school hours as well as the ability to create their own hotspots and circumvent school-based filters, making it impractical to deal with issues of Internet safety by limiting Wi-Fi or blocking websites in schools. Therefore, it is critical that schools provide students with the skills and competencies to filter appropriate content on their own.

> "Taking a one-life approach to technology has both practical and pedagogical advantages; teachers are not only ensuring that students will be safe online, but they are helping to build the bridge between home and school."

The Home/School Continuum: Two lives or one?

The high rates of Internet use among teenagers suggests that online communities play a major role in our students' lives. Given this fact, then, schools must think about whether we will view home and school lives as separate or connected:

> *Two lives or one? That's the question that should drive our desire to help children develop a sense of perspective about living in the digital age, which views success in terms of community and humanity, as well as abundance and bandwidth.*[29]

The "two lives" approach "assumes that studying issues related to the personal, social, and environmental effects of a technological lifestyle have no place in school . . . [leaving] our children to fend for themselves as they come to grips with issues of digital citizenship, cyber safety, and the responsible use of technology," while the "one life" perspective argues instead that schools have a fundamental responsibility to help students "balance the individual empowerment of digital technology with a sense of personal, community, and global responsibility."[30] However, the "two lives" approach is problematic for a few reasons:

- Teens have a great deal of power and agency through their use of technology, but they are often unlikely to think about the ethical or moral aspects of their participation online. This means that they need the guidance of adults in order to think about the effects of their actions in these spaces.[31]

- The whole idea of "digital dualism" (that is, that the digital and physical worlds are separate, with only the latter considered "real") is not a realistic viewpoint; instead, our online and offline worlds come together in an augmented reality.[32]

Taking a one-life approach to technology has both practical and pedagogical advantages; teachers are not only ensuring that students will be safe online, but they are helping to build the bridge between home and school.