

September 2008 — Features

Text Unto Others... As You Would Have Them Text Unto You

by Matt Villano

Schools can teach basic principles of good citizenship to help shape students' behavior in the virtual world.



Define digital citizenship.

It's nothing anyone would have thought necessary to do only a decade ago, but the concept of citizenship no longer exists only within the realm of the physical world. With K-12 students seeming to at all times have one foot in the real world and one in the virtual, school districts are starting to acknowledge a new collective responsibility: to teach kids what it means to be a good digital citizen and how to go

about being one. The answer follows the same rules entrenched in the prescription for being a good citizen on the ground: Obey the law, have respect for others, act civilly and sensibly.

The movement to address and characterize digital citizenship originated in the UK, where educators have been working toward establishing protocols for good digital citizenship since the mid-1990s. The effort has been picked up today by Digizen.org, owned and operated by London-based nonprofit Childnet International, which loosely defines the term as the responsibility of all online users to interact with each other with dignity and respect. The site provides a manual for educators and students on making the most constructive and ethical use of social networking, as well as guides for recognizing and tackling cyberbullying. According to Digizen.org, if educators can help young people see online environments as communities they're helping to shape, they'll act more responsibly.

"Digital citizenship isn't just about recognizing and dealing with online hazards," the site reads. "It's about building safe spaces and communities, [having students] understand how to manage personal information, and about being internet savvy-- using your online presence to grow and shape your world in a safe, creative way, and inspiring others to do the same."

In the US, the notion of digital citizenship is less expansive, more concrete-- focusing on individual ethical behavior, with particular attention paid to online piracy. One high-profile effort to arrive at the meaning of being a digital citizen has come from the Digital Citizen Project at Illinois State University. The program, which targets the higher education environment, bills itself as a "proactive approach to peer-to-peer and copyright issues." It confronts illegal music and movie downloading by challenging students to consider right and wrong as it exists both in

the physical world and on the internet.

"To me, it comes back to the basics and the golden rule: Treat others as you want to be treated. If something isn't yours, don't take it. If you aren't sure, err on the side of caution."

"Creating good digital citizens involves making students aware of all the things that can happen once you put anything out there on the web," says Cheryl Elzy, dean of university libraries, who runs the project.

One educator has taken the step of itemizing the ingredients that combine to create a good digital citizen. Mike Ribble, director of technology at **Manhattan-Ogden Unified School District 383** in Manhattan, KS, spent the better part of three years working to create an authoritative definition of digital citizenship while pursuing his educational doctorate. He emphasizes the appropriate use of technology as a learning and communication tool. Ribble believes that maintaining privacy is of paramount importance, in light of the amount of time kids spend on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, so it's imperative that schools teach students how to use these sites without putting themselves at risk.

Ribble has encapsulated his theories at his website, *Digital Citizenship: Using Technology Appropriately*. There he lists the fundamental elements that he says together form the underpinning of digital citizenship (see "9 Steps to Building a Good Digital Citizen"). Ribble admits the nine-part formula-- which includes explanations of digital etiquette, law, commerce, and even health and wellness-- can be daunting for school districts, but he says that all the components can be accounted for gradually.

"When this was first put out, everybody thought they had to fix all nine at once, but there's just way too much to do that quickly," he says. "The whole idea is to create a framework for teachers, administrators, and parents so they can look at this large picture and be able to say, 'There are all of these large issues out there, and now we have them organized.'"

Leading by Example

In the K-12 environment, being a good digital citizen can involve anything from following certain e-mail protocols to paying for proprietary content online. Think of the old "Goofus and Galant" cartoon from *Highlights* magazine-- a good digital citizen protects personal information and turns his cell phone off in class; a bad digital citizen misrepresents himself on Facebook and forwards cell phone pictures of friends in compromising positions.

But identifying the parameters of digital citizenship doesn't accomplish anything unless students understand and adhere to them. Districts have tried a number of approaches. Some hold "Cybermites," where they invite parents and students to come in after school hours for workshops on what it means to be a good digital citizen. Others broach the subject on regularly scheduled

parent/teacher conference nights.

Ribble says that he and his colleagues at Manhattan-Ogden try to instill good digital behavior at the classroom level. The district works regularly with faculty members to explain its acceptable use policy and help them understand how to apply the policy in their classrooms. These lessons have a trickledown effect; when a student violates the AUP for the first time, teachers use the experience as a teachable moment, dissecting the incident and reflecting back on where the student erred.

"We understand that nobody-- teachers or students-- is going to be proficient at the beginning," Ribble says. "We see digital citizenship as an evolving thing and give our users the opportunity to get better over time."

9 Steps to Building a Good Digital Citizen



ACCORDING TO MIKE RIBBLE, director of technology at **Manhattan-Ogden Unified School District 383** in Manhattan, KS, nine elements combine to constitute good digital citizenship. Ribble has published his recipe at his website, *Digital Citizenship: Using Technology Appropriately*. Here he comments on the role of each of the nine themes.

Etiquette. Ribble says educators must go beyond setting acceptable use policies and teach students how to act responsibly. "Etiquette to me is how we interact with each other. Kids need to know that when they use technology. They need to keep in mind how they're using it in relation to everyone else."

2. ***Communication***. Ribble says it's important for educators to teach students which digital communication options are most suitable to use in certain circumstances. "In the olden days, you wrote something and that was it. Now it's more of a conversational thing, which means new norms apply."
3. ***Literacy***. Ribble says digital citizenship must involve educating students about a variety of new programs and applications, and how those technologies should be used. "Just because students leave school at 3 p.m. doesn't mean they stop learning about digital tools. This is a way to make sure they are at least familiar with much of the new technology they'll come into contact with outside of school so they don't misuse something down the road."
4. ***Access***. Ribble says that educators should work to ensure that the bounties of the digital world are available to every student-- regardless of gender, race, or physical or mental challenges. "There are a lot of great things technology can do, but we need to make sure everyone has access to them."
5. ***Commerce***. With an increasing number of goods being sold online, Ribble believes educators must teach youngsters how to be effective consumers. "This doesn't only translate into the capacity to differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate vendors; it also means knowing when to avoid illegal or immoral goods or services such as pornography and gambling."

6. **Law.** According to Ribble, educators must teach students about online ethics: that hacking information, downloading illegal music, plagiarizing, or causing damage to other people's work, identity, or property online is a crime. "Students need to understand that there are laws out there, and that their use of technology can affect them in legal realms."
7. **Rights and Responsibilities.** Just as the Bill of Rights protects individual freedoms, Ribble says a basic set of protective rights extends to every digital citizen. "Students need to know they have these rights, but with them comes a responsibility to be mindful of laws, too. By emphasizing these things, teachers can ensure that students won't take their digital rights for granted."
8. **Health and Wellness.** Ribble says students must be informed that excessive technology use can lead to a spate of medical issues, such as repetitive stress injuries and bad backs, and psychological problems like internet addiction. "There are still schools that buy computers, put them on folding tables, and put folding chairs in front of them. Does that approach give students technology? It does. But students need to avoid using it in ways that ultimately could put them at risk of physical harm."
9. **Security.** Ribble says educators must teach students about the importance of antivirus software, data backups, and surge protectors. "Security is one of the most often overlooked pieces of technology. We need to teach students that just because they're careful with their computer doesn't mean the security of that machine hasn't been compromised somewhere along the line."

At **Campbell County School District 1** in Gillette, WY, many workshops are geared toward the students themselves. Assistant Superintendent for Technology Education Lyla Downey explains that the schools in the district hold workshops at both the elementary and secondary levels, led by full-time technology teachers who instruct on subjects such as digital communication, where students learn the boundaries of appropriate chatting and e-mailing, and digital security, where they learn how to protect their identity and avoid phishing scams.

Campbell County also offers online classes for teachers designed to bring them up to speed on what they need to know to facilitate good digital citizenship among their students, and instruct them on how to teach lessons on online copyright law, chat room etiquette, and the like. Downey says the classes also serve to educate teachers on the latest and greatest technologies, while providing them with ideas for showing students how to utilize the tools responsibly.

"This technology thing isn't their backbone," Downey says. "I would say that probably half of our staff members have never blogged or posted a contribution to a wiki, which makes it even more important that we familiarize them with these technologies so they can help students use them right."

Tackling Piracy

Some efforts to teach good digital citizenship are powered by sources outside of education that have a vested interest in keeping students on the straight and narrow when they're online.

For example, the Recording Industry Association of America has taken an aggressive stance by working directly with school districts to raise awareness about illegal music downloading. Moreover, according to Ribble, the RIAA was one of the first organizations in the US to talk about the need to foster good digital citizenship. The group's campaign began years ago and continues today through various pamphlets, curriculum components, and other materials available to school districts across the country, all meant to inform students that when they go online and download songs without permission they are stealing.

Similar programs are under way at the Motion Picture Association of America. The MPAA's goal is to raise awareness among students about movie piracy, and to remind them that receiving an illegally downloaded movie from a friend is no less against the law than pirating it oneself.

In April, the MPAA teamed up with the educational magazine *Weekly Reader* to develop a new curriculum featuring DVD-sniffing dogs named Lucky and Flo, intent on educating students about copyright theft and various forms of piracy, the consequences of film piracy, how to identify counterfeit DVDs, and why protecting copyrights should be important to them.

"These dogs are helping us educate children about the importance of respecting copyrights while presenting it in a fun and exciting way," says John Malcolm, the MPAA's executive vice president and director of worldwide anti-piracy operations. Malcolm explains that the curriculum includes a teacher's guide, a workbook for students, and posters for classrooms and libraries, and has been distributed to 20,000 schools in 10 states.

Even independent third parties have contributed to the effort to explain what it means to be a good digital citizen. A perfect example is the development of the word *netiquette*, the catch-all term that describes responsible online behavior.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the word traces back to the 1980s. In 1994, a writer named Virginia Shea authored a book on the subject, called *Netiquette* (Albion Books), in 1994. The following year, the Internet Engineering Task Force, an international organization that develops and promotes internet standards on a number of subjects, codified the rules of netiquette in a document titled "RFC 1855: Netiquette Guidelines." Those two publications offer basic instructions that are common practice today, such as refraining from writing e-mails in all capital letters. More recently, in 2006, author Matthew Strawbridge published a modern, broader take, titled *Netiquette: Internet Etiquette in the Age of the Blog* (Software Reference Ltd.), in which he prescribes proper behavior on the newest digital forums, such as blogs and wikis.

"Cyber etiquette, netiquette-- whatever you call it-- is a subtle issue, but it's important," says Illinois State's Elzy. "This is the kind of thing where the sooner a student understands these concepts, the easier it will be for that student to apply them in the real world when he or she has graduated and is working in a serious job."

Whose Responsibility Is It?

Many educators and academic experts argue that digital citizenship is not something school districts should be handling alone, that these are lessons that should begin at home, and that parents should be playing an equal role in developing their children into good digital citizens.

Among those voices is Warren Arbogast, founder and president of Boulder Management Group, an education technology consulting firm in Washington, DC. Arbogast says that considering the overlap between the foundations of good citizenship in the physical world and in the digital world, parents must bear some responsibility.

Links

- **Boulder Management Group**
- **Childnet International**
- **Digital Citizen Project**
- **Digital Citizenship: Using Technology Appropriately**
- **Internet Engineering Task Force**
- **Motion Picture Association of America**
- **Recording Industry Association of America**
- **"RFC 1855: Netiquette Guidelines"**
- *Weekly Reader*

"To me, it comes back to the basics and the golden rule: Treat others as you want to be treated," he says. "If something isn't yours, don't take it. If you aren't sure, err on the side of caution. These lessons have to start somewhere, and it's essential for kids to learn them at home."

But because there's no knowing whether those lessons are being taught at home, Elzy believes schools have to aggressively instill in students proper online behavior. Research from the Digital Citizen Project indicates that piracy and questionable digital habits among young people today begin in the K-12 years-- a reality that she says makes it imperative for kids to hear the right messages loudly and frequently early on, in an environment where they're used to learning new things.

Elzy's approach is simple: Evoke change with a trickledown effect. According to her calculations, if the Digital Citizen Project trains 3,000 teachers about digital citizenship annually, and each teacher passes the lessons on to 20 students apiece, 60,000 students will be learning how to practice good digital citizenship every year.

"Educators can have a ripple effect," she says. "If we can start saying to kids 'This is not the right thing to do' before they get started down a particular path, we have a better chance of getting on them before [those habits] become second nature."

Campbell County's Downey recounts an instance when a student was disciplined for hacking into a computer as an example of what educators are up against. When she and her colleagues tried to

explain to the student's mother what her child had done, the mother had no idea what hacking meant, and no idea that her boy had perpetrated part of the crime from his computer at home.

"On one hand, the kid did something very wrong," she says. "On the other hand, the parent didn't have a clue, which made it that much harder for anything we taught the student here in school to carry over at home."

The ultimate obligation rests with the parents, argues Manhattan-Ogden's Ribble. He says parents can't let their children "be locked up in their bedrooms behind computers all night long." They have a responsibility to stay abreast of the capabilities of the technology in their homes and must be willing to reinforce good digital citizenship.

"We can set all of the acceptable use policies in the world, but as soon as the bell rings at 3:05, these kids go home and get online," he says, adding that the notion of a general good governs cyber citizenship just as it does real-world citizenship. "We're all in this together, and the only way out of it is to cooperate and grow as a whole."

::WEBEXTRAS ::

If you would like more information on digital citizenship, visit our website at www.thejournal.com and enter the keywords **digital citizenship**.

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