

Digital Citizenship Requires Active Participation

Michael Yakubovsky

Lamar University

### Digital Citizenship Requires Active Participation

I teach app development and cyber security in high school. Digital citizenship is more than just something I believe in. It is something that I study and push my learners to teach to others. Anyone who spends any amount of time with will learn that I don't take digital citizenship lightly or passively. We are all responsible for creating a cohesive, encouraging, and accessible digital environment. The pervasiveness of digital technologies requires that we give it the same importance as all other manners of citizenship.

A recent Dallas Morning News article (Repko & Vestal, 2019), showed the impact and problems that come with a lack of consistent and widespread access to broadband internet. The article highlighted one learner who has technology devices provided by her school but lacks access at home. In her neighborhood, it is too expensive for her family to afford. She takes advantage of the WiFi at school and library when possible, but then has to struggle later in the evening or weekends. Another part of the article detailed how the access for another learner changed drastically when their family moved three miles away. Her previous home had affordable coverage, but the new home was forced to have much slower access for a higher monthly rate.

For teachers, this kind of disparity in access creates difficulties in the classroom. My school is like so many. We provide devices in a 1-to-1 capacity to all of our learners. While we have given them the tools to use at home, we cannot control their ability to use them. Last year, the district was going through the process of reviewing our 1-to-1 devices and exploring possible alternatives to continuing to use iPads. Many on the committee pointed to the initial cost savings of switching to Chromebooks. The problem of access to internet was a sticking point for the committee. If learners do not have reliable internet access after school hours, then we are doing

them a disservice. We had been testing WiFi on the busses, but with limited success. We eventually stayed with the iPads but took on the added cost of providing Smart Keyboards and Apple Pencils as well. We are now working with teachers to develop learning activities that can be fully downloaded at school, and do not solely rely on internet access after school hours. We have to make sure that all of our learners have the same ability to be successful. That success should not be dependent on their household income.

Ribble (2015) labels access as “Element 1” of his nine elements of digital citizenship. Without this primary component, the rest of the facets of digital citizenship are mostly moot. The digital divide eliminates a huge segment of the population from society. We have to provide equitable access to all of our learners before we can hope to work on other facets of digital citizenship in a sustainable way. Until then, we will constantly be fighting the same battles over and over again as new groups of people gain access slowly over time. The net result will be that we as a society will not progress much beyond where we are now. That sense of futility only furthers divides between groups of people on both sides of the digital divide. Early adopters and long-time users can easily forget what it was like to be learning digital citizenship. It is easy to think that everyone understands because we already do.

Providing access has ripple effects throughout the society. I have an acquaintance from London who has worked with schools in rural India in the past. He related a story of one school he worked with that opted to provide all of their learners with iPads instead of getting new roofs for the school. This was a huge cost for the school. In addition, the only internet access was a limited capacity at the school. The end result was huge for the community. The students took the iPads home every day. In spite of no internet access, the family members could still use the devices and learned new skills such as word processing. Soon, family members were more

technologically literate and able to seek work in the nearby larger city. Over time, the economy of the village rose. All of this was made possible by just providing equitable access to everyone in the community.

As the access to digital tools increases, the need for literacy, Element 4, increases. We have to teach everyone how these technologies work and how to use them properly. Given enough time, people will eventually learn to use them, but it will not always be with the best outcomes. Additionally, frustration will grow between groups of people who are learning on their own and those who already know. This is a huge part of the push in my own classroom. I do more than just teach my learners to use technology wisely and safely. I require them to teach others what they have learned. We create books, podcasts, and other media to help inform our larger community. Digital literacy is not an individual endeavor. Like all of the facets of digital citizenship, affects all members of the society. It even affects those who do not have access. Buildings and services around the world are impacted by digital technologies. Once we have provided access, we have to ensure that all users have a strong digital literacy foundation.

This is one of the things I really feel strongly about with my work in the Community Engagement Initiative. I have been fortunate to work with Apple and other educational groups, including Lamar University. The goal is to build up communities to be a viable part of the digital world. Apple is not just donating a chunk of money and then leaving schools to fend for themselves. They are partnering with the schools, universities, and local businesses. Over the course of a year or more, the program will help build literacy and capacity around these digital technologies. The teachers are getting support in learning how to infuse technology within their classrooms in authentic ways. Communities are learning to partner with the schools to build up digital communities. At the same time, students and parents are being given the tools and

training to take part in the digital economy. It all starts with literacy and a commitment to building relationships, not things.

After building up a digital literacy, elements 6 and 7 come into play. A constant phrase I use in class is, “just because you can doesn’t mean you should.” Digital users need to understand their legal and moral rights and responsibilities. It isn’t enough to just know how to use things. They have to understand that there are responsibilities that go with the rights. Copywrite laws inform us of how to properly make use of the wealth of information at our fingertips on the internet. The ways we interact with each other is also covered by these rights and responsibilities. Sometimes, there are things that are legal, but not necessarily moral. Over and over, we see this play out in the news. Facebook has been in the news a lot for being on both sides of the legal and moral lines when it comes to digital rights and responsibilities (Byers, 2018). Social media provides me a great opportunity to help my learners in class understand these issues.

As users become more confident and experienced with the digital world, their participation in digital commerce grows. Element 2 comes into play at this point in my classroom. We move past rights and responsibilities and into how to be an informed, safe, and satisfied customer. Digital commerce and the digital divide are creating debates across the country about the equity of the access (Newcomb, 2019). Stores that are cashless and retailers that only exist digitally are creating access issues that municipalities are grappling with. At the same time, keeping our economy and its users safe is an ongoing struggle.

All of this work to this point is leading up to a huge need for all users. Communication and etiquette are critical in the digital world. Elements 3 and 5 cannot be ignored, but at the same time, they don’t have the same meaning for users until they are really using the technologies.

Social media, digital commerce, communications, and environments create a huge need for everyone to understand how to treat each other. Additionally, they need to understand how their actions impact others. It is easy to not think about the person on the other end of a tweet or blog post as being a human being. We have to actively work to remind each other of that fact. If we leave this out, all of our digital work to this point will start to crumble. The positive gains will be overshadowed by the negativity.

Health and security are brought up last in this situation, not because they are any less important, but because their importance is not evident to my learners until now. While we have been mentioning physical health, wellness, and digital security all along, it doesn't hit home until now. Cyberbullying, cyber crime, and the negative health effects that can come from life imbalances now become very clear and evident. People don't understand the impact of protecting their digital footprint and fingerprint until now. Those things tend to be lost in the clutter and noise. Only after they become entrenched in the digital world, do they understand how much privacy can be given away by just browsing the internet (Briz, 2018). Again, I have my learners not just internalize the things they are learning about digital citizenship. I require them to educate others in their community. They have a responsibility to share, inform, and build up each other.

I can't say which of these is most important. As I have shown here, they all have a huge impact in my class. The impact, though comes at different times and in different measures. We are never at a point where one of the elements is not needed any more. They cycle around, ebbing and flowing. As time goes on, different elements come to the forefront of importance in our lives. For a moment, the others take a back seat, but never go away. It is important that we infuse technology and digital citizenship in all of our classes for every learner. The ubiquity of

technology within our world requires us to infuse it into our teaching and learning every day.

When we make digital citizenship a part of our daily life and a part of the fabric of our community, we will be able to better enjoy the benefits that technology can bring.

Studying digital citizenship is something that I partake in daily. It is also a daily part of my classroom. It is too easy to be lulled into a sense of complacency. When that happens, it is too easy for the negative parts of the digital world to start to overtake our lives. Together, we can help each other hold back the negativity and bring the positive aspects to the forefront.

## References

- Briz, N. (2018, July 26). This is your digital fingerprint [blog post]. Retrieved from <https://blog.mozilla.org/internetcitizen/2018/07/26/this-is-your-digital-fingerprint/>
- Byers, D. (2018, April 11). Senate fails its zuckerburg test. CNN Business. Retrieved from <https://money.cnn.com/2018/04/10/technology/senate-mark-zuckerberg-testimony/index.html>
- Digital citizenship (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://esafety.gov.au/education-resources/classroom-resources/digital-citizenship>
- Newcomb, A. (2019, February 28). When stores go cashless, is it discrimination? *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/when-stores-go-cashless-it-discrimination-n973676>
- Repko, M. and Vestal, A. (2019, August 30). Dallas' digital haves and have-nots. *Dallas Morning News*. Retrieved from <https://interactives.dallasnews.com/2019/dallas-digital-divide/>
- Ribble, M. (2015). Digital citizenship in schools (3rd ed.). Eugene, OR: International Society of Technology in Education.