

Citizens are Digital Citizens

Michael J. Yakubovsky

Lamar University

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Our digital world is intertwined with the physical world. As Ribble (2015) points out, technology is advancing at a breakneck pace. We cannot hope to fix the problems as they arise. New technologies are moving into the hands of children so fast that we must teach them how to properly incorporate them into their lives from a young age. If we do not address the basic tenets of citizenship in the digital realm with children and young adults, they start to normalize improper behavior in that area of their life and will eventually suffer dire consequences.

Curran (2014) showed the power of social media through an activity with her class. I have seen many teachers replicate this over and over again. Students can see very quickly how a single statement can spread not only around the world but grow exponentially. I do a similar type of activity with my class, but in an unplugged, offline way. We have everyone stand up, give themselves the value of 1. People pair up with someone standing, compare numbers, add them together and reassign the new value to themselves. One person sits down, and the process repeats until only one person is left standing. The value that person holds is the number of people in the room. The time to complete the activity does not grow at the same rate as the size of the room grows. The rounds count everyone exponentially. This simple activity shows students quickly the power of online communication.

There is no difference in the features of citizenship in the digital and they physical worlds. Treating people with empathy and respect is equally important in both worlds. Trust can be broken, tensions rise, and distrust grows from the words and actions we use both online and digitally. Because something is stored in a digital format does not immediately mean that it is free to use by anyone in any manner. These lessons are taught to pre-kindergarten children, but only in relation to their behavior with physical people and objects. Children grow up in a world

surrounded by digital technology. They know how to work mobile devices and streaming video. It is not much of a step to include the digital world in discussions on proper behavior. It is vitally important to the health and well-being of all people to not diminish the importance of proper behavior in the digital world. At the same time, it is the responsibility of everyone to have a solid, working understanding of use and functionality of digital technologies. The technology is changing too quickly to rely on prior knowledge.

We cannot slow the pace of technological change. What we can do is teach everyone how to use technology in a safe, ethical, and informed way. The way we teach citizenship needs to include both the physical and digital world together. When we treat our actions in the digital world with the same gravity as the physical world, we will start to see a lessening of the problems that spring from our actions.

References

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