Chapter 5
Pro-Active Digital Citizenship:
Strategies for Educators

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ABSTRACT

Technology advances, particularly in terms of information access and sharing, give rise to complex ethical issues that youth need to grapple with. Digital citizenship necessitates gleaning electronic information and participating actively and ethically in cyberspace to act wisely on that information for social and personal improvement. Today's youth tend to avoid traditional politics; instead, they get their information about the public sphere from social media and engage in lifestyle causes. This chapter explores the role of digital citizenship, civic engagement and the impact of technology on it, current issues in pro-active digital citizenship, conditions for teaching proactive digital citizenship, its curriculum and instruction, and the potential of citizen journalism as a mechanism for facilitating youth-centered proactive digital citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

A current adage asserts that "information is power." The direction and impact of that power lies in the hands of those with influence, and educators realize that instructing students in information and digital literacies is only part of the picture. Educators should also teach students how to use and create digital information ethically to contribute to society, to pursue social justice. Thomas Jefferson asserted that an informed citizenry is needed for a sound democracy, and that instruction is needed as a condition for that assertion. Informed citizens can make better decisions and act on them. Extended to the cyber environment, digital citizenship necessitates gleaning electronic information, and participating actively and ethically in cyberspace to act wisely on that information for social and personal improvement.

This chapter explores the role of digital citizenship, civic engagement and the impact of technology on it, current issues in pro-active digital citizenship, conditions for teaching pro-active digital citizenship, its curriculum and instruction, and the potential of citizen journalism as a mechanism for facilitating youth-centered pro-active digital citizenship.

BACKGROUND

Today's technology has substantially changed the face of society. First, technology significantly expands and speeds up access to the world of information, as well as its creation, processing, organization, and dissemination. Moreover, people can respond to each other and share group information much more easily than in the past. ICT (Information and communication technology) has led to knowledge-driven economies.

However, Floridi (2010) contended that ICT also prompts challenges about inequity of access, quality and control of information, globalization, the de-physicalization of objects and processes, the Internet of Things, human and data privacy, social behavior, and ultimately the nature of human beings and their digital alter egos.

Floridi specifically discussed information ethics, particularly in light of technology's influence. The quantity and quality of information that one accesses impact the generation of new information, which in turn impact the information environment or ecosystem. As individuals encounter digital information, the concomitant accelerated change of pace can result in information overload or silos of thought. More than ever, the user needs to interpret the format of information as well as its content, and its context. Furthermore, although mechanically value-neutral, technology's tools may be used ethically or non-ethically. The reach and impact of technology-enhanced information and communication can have global consequences never before so powerful (e.g., hacking, stock market crashes, terrorism). The use of information technology both in information consumption and production carry ethical weight, which needs to be addressed by its users. To that end, educators have an ethical responsibility to teach students information ethics.

Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship may be defined as the ability to use technology safely, responsibly, critically, productively, and civically. This definition uses follow Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and points out the developmental aspects of citizenship (Huber & Potter, 2015). With digital agency comes digital responsibility, which speaks to Floridi's (2010) fourth universal law of ethical stewardship of information: that the infosphere (that is, the environment that is populated by informational entities) should be protected, expanded, and improved.

The first treatise on computer ethics was Wiener's 1950 book *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society*, which was targeted to computer scientists and philosophers. He saw the potential of machines to adapt based on feedback, with the goal of freeing people to enrich their creative lives; however, humans need to monitor automatons with a values-centered perspective.

While the Association of Computing Machinery created a code of ethics in 1973, it was in the 1980s with the growth of the Internet and expanded access to it that the need for computer ethics was identified as a public concern (Ess, 2009); issues such as people's convenient access to sources such as pornography, facileness of software piracy, and expanded ease of banking fraud revealed how legal and ethical accountability lagged behind technological advances and users' abilities.

The International Society for Technology in Education standards of the 1990s included a section on technology ethics to address students' behaviors when using computers (Ribble, 2015). The term "digital citizenship" thus started largely as a measure to counteract technology abuse.

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