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Teaching Screenagers

Character Education for the Digital Age

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Should we teach our kids to have two lives, or one?

Our current technological trajectory promises unfathomable, roller-coaster innovation with no braking system. While the ride is exciting, it moves so quickly that we typically don't have time to think about the possible unintended consequences that might accompany it. The result is that we find ourselves unable to effectively respond to hot-button issues like cyberbullying and sexting because they seem to come out of nowhere.

Our challenge is to find ways to teach our children how to navigate the rapidly moving digital present, consciously and reflectively. How we meet this challenge depends on how we address the following fundamental question about teaching our digital-age children: Should we teach our children as though they have two lives, or one?

The "two lives" perspective says that our students should live a traditional, digitally unplugged life at school and a second, digitally infused life outside school. It says that the digital technology that kids use quite naturally is too expensive, problematic, or distracting to use effectively and responsibly at school. It says that issues concerning the personal, social, and environmental effects of a technological lifestyle are not important in a school curriculum, and that kids will have to puzzle through issues of cybersafety, technological responsibility, and digital citizenship without the help of teachers or the education system.

In contrast, the "one life" perspective says the opposite, that it is precisely our job as educators to help students live one, integrated life, by inviting them to not only use their technology at school, but also talk about it within the greater context of community and society.

If we want to pursue a future that celebrates success not only in terms of abundance but also in terms of humanity, we must help our digital kids balance the individual empowerment of digital technology use with a sense of personal, community, and global responsibility. School is an excellent place to help kids become capable digital citizens who use technology not only effectively and creatively, but also responsibly and wisely. But we can only do that if we help them live one life, not two.

Linking the Past and Future

In retrospect, history seems to have been gentle. We were allowed a few millennia of relative downtime between the agricultural and industrial revolutions, and then a couple of centuries of respite before the information age urged us into overdrive. Now, the changes come so quickly we speak not of ages but of waves, which last only as long as it takes to pass from peak to trough and open up space for the next, unpredictable development that will change everything. Recent history boasts an Internet that has reached a virtual citizenry of two billion members, cell phones that know exactly where you are and where you'd like to eat, and the creation of the first self-replicating life form whose parent is a computer (Venter, 2010). We may not know what's next, but we do know this: The future will be filled with exponential change.

But one thing hasn't changed—what Dertouzos (2001) calls "the ancient human" in each of us. That is, although we can think of wireless bits of information flying through the air and landing on someone else's screen half a world away as something entirely new, we can also view it simply as our latest effort to use whatever tools are available to expand communication with other people, a basic human desire that dates back to our earliest ancestors. Both perspectives are accurate and important in constructing a complete picture of the human condition in the digital age.

The tie that binds us to our ancestors is that both ancient and digital-age humans crave community—and all the things that make community possible: survival, effective communication, cultural stability, purposeful education for our children, and creative expression. Achieving these things has always depended on developing a citizenship covenant. But today, that covenant needs to cover a much broader area of social endeavor than before. It needs to embrace many cultures, time zones, and online communities. It needs to be built on an expanded notion of behavior that transcends the physical and embraces the virtual.

To teach our children this new citizenship, we need to fold their digital tools into the general flow of school. We need to not only help students learn to use these tools in smart, productive ways, but also help them place these tools in the larger context of building community, behaving responsibly, and imagining a healthy and productive future, both locally and globally. We can't do this if we banish technology from their school lives.

The Need for Character Education

Currently, K–12 schools react to concerns about digital-age behavior, from cyberbullying to copyright infringement, in one of two ways: on a case-by-case basis or by arbitrarily blocking large portions of the Internet and expelling students who cross whatever digital lines the school district draws in the sand. The first approach fails to acknowledge that all digital issues are connected and are best approached that way. The second approach does nothing to teach students how to be digital citizens. Both approaches reaffirm to students that they should pursue their digital interests outside school, while adults are not around.

A third approach awaits us: establishing proactive, aggressive character education programs tuned to digital youth. Such programs will place digital activities within the context of community rather than banish them to our students' private lives.

Character education has been with us, formally or informally, for millennia (DeRoche & Williams, 2001; Likona, 1991; Tatman, Edmonson, & Slate, 2009). From Plato to Eisenhower, we assumed it was OK for teachers to tell kids "the right thing to do." Then, somewhere around the 1960s, many Western societies shifted into a period of moral relativism and values clarification in which each individual got to figure out what was right for him- or herself. Regardless of how we view this development, it constituted a major step into the ethical unknown. In the absence of community-defined, broadly applied values, life became more complex and less predictable.

Since the 1960s, broad-based public support for integrating moral instruction into schools has waxed and waned. But now that our socially disruptive digital technologies promise to forever challenge our sense of stability and community, the time for vacillation is over. Because of the extreme freedom, anonymity, and pervasiveness that characterize cyberspace, concerns about values and character education have now shifted into overdrive.

Schools have already started unofficially addressing digital character education in the form of acceptable Internet use agreements that specify virtual behavior standards for students. Although these are important, they are not enough. We need to create formal digital citizenship programs that deal with character education in the digital age deeply, directly, and comprehensively.

The Ideal School Board

Imagine an ideal school board whose members are committed to addressing the needs of the digital generation in a holistic sense. In addition to replacing subject-centric and test-oriented approaches to teaching with project-based, inquiry-oriented, and collaborative approaches, the board is determined to create a character education program for digital citizens. The board understands that this program must be districtwide, embedded throughout the curriculum, and under constant review.

Recognizing that schools cannot guide students to become digital citizens unless their technologies are incorporated into their routine school lives, the board retunes the district's information technology department, charging it to open up the Internet and make room for a number of personal communication devices that students use. The board provides teachers with training they need to effectively address issues of digital citizenship. It empowers teachers, librarians, and school counselors to become ethical coaches to help students navigate the many ethically charged issues associated with a digital lifestyle (see "[Issues of Digital Citizenship](#)").

How would our ideal school board develop a values framework for its character education program? How would it identify values that are universal and solid, yet apply to issues that young people face in the digital age?

Traditional Values Adapted for Digital Needs

A bedrock belief guiding traditional character education programs is that they must be based on community-generated values. This means holding public meetings in which community

members discuss and debate the values most important to them. Typically, the end result is a values inventory—a list of 6 to 12 values, accompanied by definitions and perhaps behavioral expectations and skill sets that clarify each value.

Even before the digital era, this process was often contentious (although rewarding). The fact that values must now be adapted to the new realities of the digital domain makes it even more challenging. Schools should explicitly invite students to participate in such efforts for three reasons: students know far more about opportunities and perils in cyberspace than most adults do; their involvement gives adults and youth a chance to talk about a world in which the two groups rarely intersect; and, like adults, students will be more committed to living up to values they develop themselves than to values imposed on them by others.

Although there are no rules for what values a school or school district's character education framework should include, a good place to start is by checking whether the state department of education has already adopted a values mandate. Many inventories created by other organizations can also provide a foundation for discussion. For example,

- "The 12 Guiding Principles of Exceptional Character," developed by the International Center for Leadership in Education, are *adaptability, compassion, contemplation, courage, honesty, initiative, loyalty, optimism, perseverance, respect, responsibility, and trust-worthiness* (www.leadered.com/guiding_princ.html).
- "The Seven Universal Ethical Attributes," developed by the Heartwood Institute, are *courage, loyalty, justice, respect, hope, honesty, and love* (<http://heartwoodethics.org/1-approach/framework.asp>). The Heartwood website also includes links to "Other Ethical Attributes" and "Other Ethical Frameworks."

These values seem acceptable for any age, but they need fine-tuning to be fully applicable to the world of cyberspace. For example, the value *respect*, common to many inventories, might be restated *respect within local, global, and digital communities*. Or the Heartwood Institute's definition of honesty as "the quality of being honorable in principles, intentions, and actions" might be modified as follows: "the quality of being honorable in principles, intentions, and actions *in any community, including those that occur in cyberspace.*"

Some traditional values might require greater emphasis in the digital age. *Empathy*, for example, has become increasingly important because the disembodied ether of the web provides few social cues to let us know how our communication is being received and interpreted. Thus we have to try harder, using different skills, to imagine what others are feeling and perceiving. Other values might require refined, specially articulated definitions in the digital milieu. For example, issues of theft and safety, which seem so clear in RL (real life), are not so obvious in VR (virtual reality).

The point is this—much of the work of fine-tuning a character education program for the digital age is already done. Intelligent, caring people have created values frameworks and materials that are eminently useful; much of the wisdom they embody is eternal. The next steps are to discuss these frameworks publicly; modify them so they are relevant to behavior in any venue, real or

virtual, digital or analog, local or global; and infuse them throughout the school curriculum (see [Resources for Digital Character Education](#)").

Putting Technology in a Broader Social Context

Bringing our students' two lives together means that we need to set goals that require them to *see* the technology that is largely invisible to them and to evaluate that technology in terms of its opportunities and responsibilities. Thus, part of our job is to help students not only use technology, but also question it. Imagine how differently a school district might behave with the following goal in place: *Students will study the personal, social, and environmental impacts of every technology and media application they use in school.*

Expanding technology's role from mere tool to an area for study and inquiry runs counter to two decades of education technology planning, which has been devoted to simply integrating technology into curriculum and instruction. Yet if we want our students to be not only skillful technology users but also good neighbors, informed voters, and involved citizens, that is what we need to do.

Issues of Digital Citizenship

Here are just a few of the issues that a comprehensive digital citizenship curriculum should address.

Balance. Understanding past, present, and possible future effects of technology. Cultivating a sense of balance that considers opportunity as well as responsibility, empowerment as well as caution, personal fulfillment as well as community and global well-being.

Safety and security. Understanding how online actions might lead to harm to yourself or others. Includes protecting your own privacy, respecting that of others, and recognizing inappropriate online communications and sites (such as sexual material and other resources intended for adults).

Cyberbullying. Understanding the potentially devastating effects of cyberbullying and how it violates ethical principles of personal integrity, compassion, and responsible behavior.

Sexting. Understanding the negative consequences of using a cell phone to take and transmit pictures of a sexual nature of oneself or others.

Copyright and plagiarism. Respecting others' intellectual property rights and reflecting on the legality and ethics of using online materials without permission (a complex and murky area of

the law, bounded by "fair use" guidelines).

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Resources for Digital Character Education

My digital citizenship wiki at <http://jasonOhler.com/dc> provides links to many digital citizenship resources. Here are a few:

- **Common Sense Media** (www.commonsensemedia.org/educators) provides free digital literacy and citizenship curriculums for elementary and secondary students, covering three areas: safety and security, digital citizenship, and information literacy. Also available are free media education materials for schools to use with parents.
- **Character Education Partnership** (www.character.org) offers many resources and publications, including *Character Education Quality Standards: A Self-Assessment Tool for Schools and Districts* (www.character.org/uploads/PDFs/Pub_Quality_Standards_.pdf).
- **Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use** (www.cyberbully.org) contains resources addressing nearly every aspect of cybersafety and responsibility. Materials target students, teachers, parents, and administrators.
- **TeachersFirst** (www.teachersfirst.com/safety.cfm) offers a comprehensive collection of Internet safety lessons and materials for use with students of all ages.

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