

Excerpted from

Digital Citizenship in Schools

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Today, billions of people all over the planet interact using various technologies. This interaction has created a digital society that affords its members opportunities for education, employment, entertainment, and social interaction. As in any society, it is expected that digital citizens act in a certain way—according to accepted norms, rules, and laws. Most of today’s students are entirely comfortable with technology, but are they using it appropriately? Do they understand their roles and responsibilities in digital society? How can teachers help students become responsible digital citizens?

In this excerpt the authors discuss digital communication and its appropriate (and inappropriate) use.

Digital Communication

DEFINITION: *The electronic exchange of information*

Cell phones, instant messaging (IM), videoconferencing, and e-mail have changed the way technology users communicate. These forms of communication have created a new social structure governing who, how, and when people interact.

Digital communication provides users with instant access to others on an unprecedented level. Many prefer using e-mail over a phone call because e-mail provides a record of the message. But there are consequences to this built-in record-keeping feature. Users forget that even though they may delete a message it is usually stored on a server or is backed up for future review. This means users need to think about what they say when using e-mail. Likewise, e-mail technologies can be used inappropriately. Too often, e-mails are sent without considering who might see them or how they might be interpreted. It is easy to write the first thing that comes to mind in an e-mail and then send it before considering the long-term consequences. Sometimes speaking to someone face-to-face can solve a situation faster than multiple e-mails.

Cell phones allow for mobile personal communication. Many parents now believe their children *must* have a cell phone—they want to be able to reach their children at all times. But teachers and administrators see cell phones at school as a major distraction and catalyst for behavioral problems. This is a significant issue for schools and for society in general. Cell phone technologies provide many advantages and freedoms, but we need to weigh that freedom against the responsibility that comes with it, and carefully consider how we teach that responsibility.

Educators face difficult decisions concerning the use of these digital communication technologies in their schools. Cell phones, instant messaging, and blogs can be seen as inappropriate in schools. But are they? The question is, *how* do these communication methods fit in an educational setting? What positive outcomes do they enable? What potentially negative effects must be mitigated, and how? If these technologies are banned in schools, what message does that send to our students who have access to these devices outside of school? Sites and districts need to assess the extent of the educational values these communication methods and devices provide. Once technology leadership teams determine those values, they also need to decide how to teach students appropriate use of this technology.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Do I use e-mail, cell phone, and instant messaging technologies appropriately when communicating with others?

What rules, options, and etiquette do students need to be aware of when using digital communication technologies?

Do we need to be in contact with other people all the time? Do we understand what is appropriate when communicating with other technology users? These are questions that parents, teachers, and administrators need to work together to answer. These technologies are inherently neither good nor bad—it's only use that makes them so—so there is no universal solution to these questions. Digital citizenship provides the framework to help decision makers in schools, sites, and districts to better understand and address these questions.

Digital Communication Issues

- E-mail
- Cell phones
- Videoconferencing
- Instant messaging
- Text messaging
- Blogs
- Wikis

Examples of Inappropriate Digital Communication

- Students leave ringers on high volume and keep their phones on during class time.
- Students use instant messaging and e-mail shorthand for class assignments when asked to give complete answers.
- Students use text messaging to cheat on tests.

Examples of Appropriate Digital Communication

- Students and teachers use digital communication devices when they will not interrupt what is going on in the school or classroom.
- Digital communication technologies such as IM and blogs are used to support student activities in the classroom, such as sharing ideas or writings with others.
- Teachers use blogs to inform parents of classroom activities.

Digital Communication Scenario

Mrs. Baxter, a language arts teacher, explores new, innovative ways for students to write essays in class. She finds a Web site that describes how teachers can use blogs to help students post their thoughts and ideas on the Web. She decides to set up a blog for her students.

Inappropriate. Mrs. Baxter tells her students to navigate to her blog Web site and record their ideas. She describes the assignment as diary-like writing. After a couple of days, she finds inappropriate postings (e.g., discussions of boyfriends and girlfriends), but she cannot identify the authors. After a week, she shuts down the blog and decides that blogging was a bad idea.

Appropriate. Mrs. Baxter speaks to her class about the process of blogging. She illustrates examples of suitable comments and emphasizes the importance of appropriate use. After a couple of weeks, the students are responding almost every day, and they are coming to class with more in-depth questions that relate to concepts being discussed in class.

What could make a difference. Teachers need to research the use of technology before using it in their classroom. Just hearing about something that someone else has used in class does not always mean that it will work. Teachers should check around and ask questions about what the technology can and can't do.

Web Resource for Digital Communication

Additional research can be found on many topic areas related to digital communication at the Pew/Internet research site: www.pewInternet.org.

Digital Citizenship in Schools is an excellent introduction to digital citizenship and is essential reading for grade K–12 teachers, preservice teachers, technology coordinators, school and district administrators, teacher educators, library media specialists, and parents.

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