

Digital Citizenship: Human Controlled Access in Community

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When I began looking into digital citizenship, my perception of the study could essentially be summed up as “don’t be a jerk online.” While of course that is a significant portion of digital citizenship, examining Ribble’s 9 elements—digital access, digital commerce, digital communication, digital literacy, digital etiquette, digital law, digital rights and responsibilities, digital health and wellness, and digital security (2015, pp. 16–17)—has given me a more expansive view of what is involved.

Digital Citizenship Defined

There certainly is no shortage of definitions of digital citizenship. In this course, we have been using one of the broader definitions, “the norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regards to technology use.” (Ribble, 2015) Dowd and Green use a much simpler working definition, “what it means to behave well online” (2016), while Mossberger, Tolbert, and McNeal restrict the definition of a digital citizen much further as “those who use the Internet regularly and effectively – that is, on a daily basis.” (2007) Heick comes to the following definition: “the self-monitored habits that sustain and improve the digital communities you enjoy or depend on.” (2013)

In their simplest forms, citizenship and digital citizenship are about being part of a larger community and the responsibilities that entails. Of course, as the context and community change from physical to digital, so too does the application. Digital community is marked by some sort of abstraction, some element of human interaction that is missing or replaced by a digital alternative--camera as opposed to in the room, text as opposed to spoken word and facial expressions, time-shifted as opposed to in the moment, etc. In those circumstances, it is easy to forget or overlook the humanity of the other person.

Human Controlled Access in Community

In looking at how to sum up all the aspects of digital citizenship for my context as Dean of Information and Security at Sauk Valley Community College, four key aspects emerged: humanity, privacy and security controls, access to resources, and a supportive community. This can be summed up in the memorable phrase, “Human Controlled Access in Community.”

While each major word in the phrase conveys an individual concept, there is much overlap, and each word gains more meaning by being in the phrase. Exploring it as two conceptual pairs gives a clearer picture of the individual concepts in context.

Human Controlled

It may seem to be the most obvious facet of digital citizenship, but there is no shortage of evidence that, particularly in digital media, people’s humanity is all-too-often overlooked. One of the most obvious examples of this is the toxic way discourse is handled in our current media environment. Monica Lewinsky, reflecting on her own experience with this toxicity, summed up this environment, “A marketplace has emerged where public humiliation is a commodity and shame is an industry. How is the money made? Clicks. The more shame, the more clicks. The more clicks, the more advertising dollars.” (2015, 16:30) While that the shame industry was alive and well (the currency was Nielsen ratings or newspaper subscriptions) before the Internet entered the scene, it should be no surprise that the seedy underbelly of gossip, pornography, and hate were equally—if not in outsized proportion—amplified by the explosion of information starting in the mid- to late-1990s. Blogs, hailed as the democratization of the media became just that—hatemongers were able to spread their hate, hateful people found a community, and those people gave the hatemongers power.

Growing up in this type of environment, is it any wonder that children learn to dehumanize and bully each other in our schools? According to Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross, common elements of both in-person and cyberbullying are aggressiveness, intentionality, repetitiveness, and power imbalance. (2009, p. 183) School environments have long been breeding grounds for this type of activity. However, with the advent of “online harassment” (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007, p. S57) and its combination with in-person bullying, it has the ability to extend the bullying outside the school or other environment. (Mitchell, Jones, Turner, Shattuck, & Wolak, 2016, p. 194)

In light of this, a multifaceted approach to addressing cyberbullying will address both in-person bullying and online harassment to address the one-two punch of cyberbullying. It is imperative that students begin to see each other’s humanity both in in-person and online interactions. The dehumanization inherent in online interaction—which allows harassers to be even more cruel than in person—makes this even more imperative in the age of cyberbullying. However, regrettably, this cannot be waged exclusively—or even most effectively—in schools alone. When politicians, news media, gossip websites, and countless others use these same harassing and bullying tactics, can we be surprised that our children model that type of behavior? A change in our discourse is the only way to really stem the scourge of cyberbullying, something that needs to be taught and modeled.

Access in Community

One area that has been of particular interest to me is digital access. Access to information and digital resources is more ubiquitous than ever, but we are far from the ideal of equal access for all. While it is unlikely that we will ever see true equality of access, where everyone has the same level of equipment, internet connection, and training, but we should nonetheless strive

toward that goal. While one-to-one laptop programs and the like seek to address this problem, they are definitely not the whole solution to the problem. For example, the best computer with an inadequate or no internet connection is only so useful.

An area of more promise, though, is through increased access to resources—primarily through open source and freely shared resources. It is not an exaggeration to say that this concept—perhaps more than any other—has revolutionized the software development world and had a significant influence in other realms as well, initiated by Richard Stallman’s concept of copyleft—“a general method for making a program (or other work) free (in the sense of freedom, not ‘zero price’), and requiring all modified and extended versions of the program to be free as well.” (Free Software Foundation, Inc., n.d.)

Copyleft uses the structure of the copyright system (a license) to ensure that software can be freely used, studied, distributed, and adapted. (Lessig, 2005, p. 48) Works in the public domain can be adapted and then released as closed source; however, under copyleft, those modified versions have to remain open source under the terms of the license. If this sounds like to a Creative Commons Share-Alike license, that’s because Lessig based it on the work of Stallman and others in the Free Software Movement and provided a mechanism to apply the concept to other types of works. (Lessig, 2007)

Open source software is incalculable in its effects. Many devices, including Chromebook, Android, iOS, macOS are built on an open source framework. The vast majority of websites are hosted on a Linux-based server. Many use an open source content management system, WordPress, built using the open source language PHP and open source MySQL database. The ability for software developers to take existing code, take it apart, and then modify it to suit their

(personal or commercial) needs is what has built so much of the technology we now enjoy and rely on.

It is this same approach that undergirds the “maker mindset” (Dougherty, 2013) and constructionism (Papert & Harel, 1991), which is why copyright and access to information are such an important part of learning in the 21st century. Intrusive controls to copyright such as digital rights management (DRM) threaten that by giving publishers more power to limit how content is used and disallowing them from studying and remixing content to better understand it. (Lessig, 2005, p. 52)

Making sure students have access to high quality, open source materials available in a community where they can share, remix, and build on each other’s work in a supportive environment will create next-generation digital citizens with an ability to create a new world of possibilities.

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