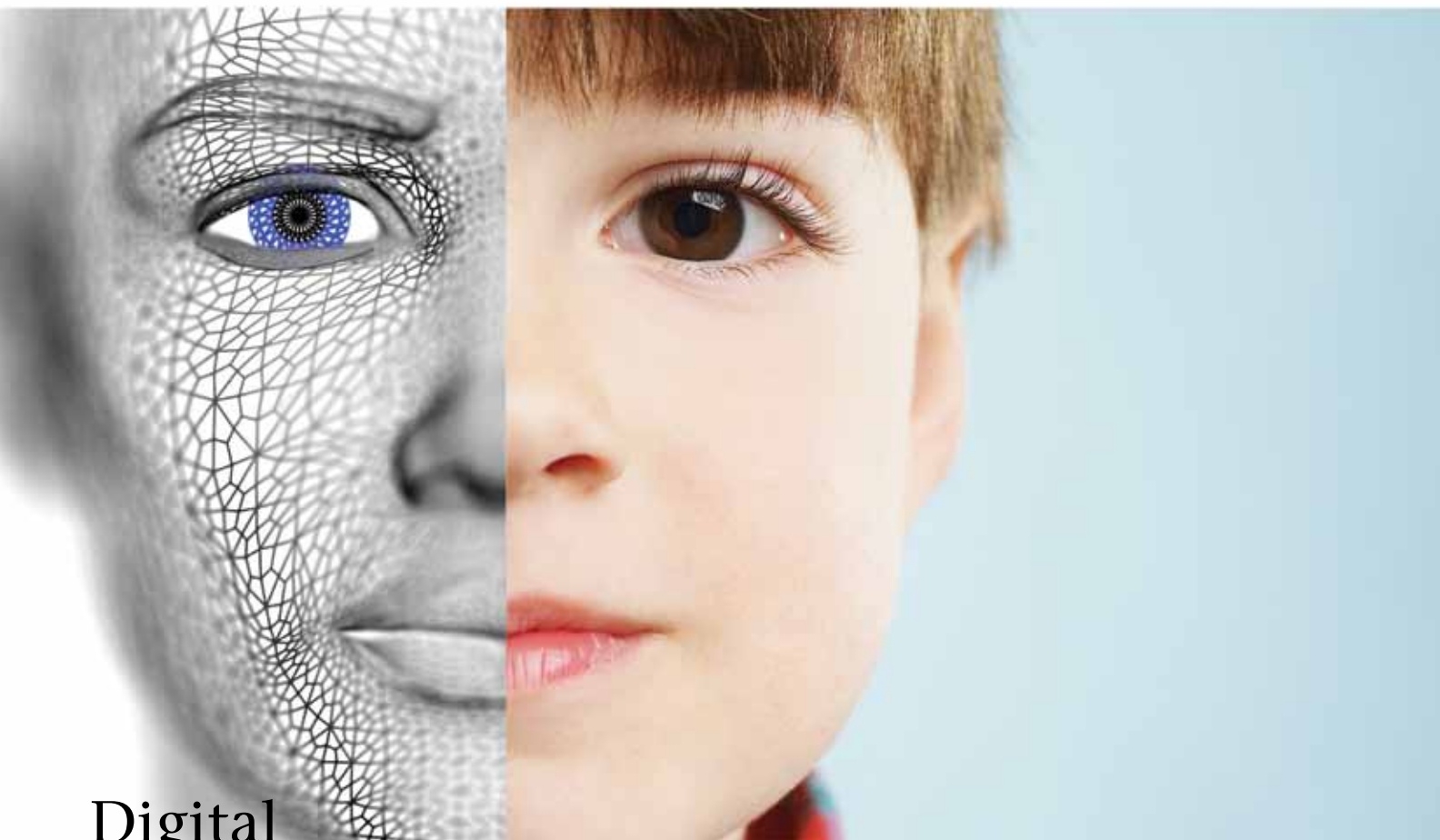


Digital Citizenship



Digital Citizenship Means Character Education for the Digital Age

by Jason Ohler

The digital age beckons us to usher in a new era of character education, aimed directly at addressing the opportunities and challenges of living a digital lifestyle.

Two lives or one? That's the question that should drive our desire to help our children develop a sense of perspective about living in the digital age, which views success in terms of community and humanity, as well as abundance and bandwidth.

The "two lives" approach assumes that our students should unplug when they enter school, and then plug back in when they leave for the day and reenter the zone of continual connectivity that had no place during the school day. This approach assumes that the digital technology so integral to their lives is too costly or distracting to use responsibly or effectively while at school. Most importantly, it assumes that studying issues related to the personal, social, and environmental effects of a technological lifestyle have no place in school. This approach leaves our children to



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fend for themselves as they come to grips with issues of digital citizenship, cyber safety, and the responsible use of technology.

On the other hand, the “one life” perspective assumes the opposite—that the most important job before us as a society is to help our students understand issues of digital responsibility, and to do so at school as part of a digital health initiative. Further, it assumes that such an initiative should be largely dedicated to helping our digital kids balance the individual empowerment of digital technology with a sense of personal, community, and global responsibility. Above all, the one-life perspective invites our students to bring their digital lives into our schools so that we can pursue these objectives in ways that are meaningful to them. But this can only happen if we help them live one life, not two.

Caught Unawares

For most everyone, hot button digital behavior issues such as cyberbullying and sexting seem to come out of nowhere. In fact, they are the result of technological innovation—which has entered a state of permanent, rapidly evolving overdrive, with no apparent braking system. In this technological environment, we tend to move ahead in “full-throttle forward-reactive” mode: we innovate, distribute far and wide, and then wait for the fallout. Anticipating unintended consequences of our innovation in this environment has become all but impossible.

Of particular concern in this scenario is that as issues such as sexting and cyberbullying emerge, educators tend to respond as though these cyber issues are unrelated. School systems tend to respond to all such issues either on a case-by-case basis, or by arbitrarily blocking Internet resources and punishing students who break whatever rules of digital engagement the school district has developed. While expedient, these approaches address symptoms, not issues. The first fails to acknowledge that all digital issues are ultimately related and are most effectively approached that way. The second does nothing to help students develop the skills and perspectives necessary to be digital citizens. Both approaches reaffirm for students that they are living two lives, not one, and that they should pursue their digital interests

apart from the help of adults, teachers, or the school system.

The reality of our students’ cyber lives has thrust upon us a third approach: creating character education programs tuned to digital youth that are both proactive and aggressive. Taking this approach will help integrate students’ digital activities within the context of the communities in which they live, both local and digital.

Character Education for the Digital Age

Character education, a foundational part of western education for many centuries, yielded to a period of morals clarification that began in the 1960s and has never really left us (DeRoche and Williams 2001). In a morals clarification environment, instead of learning right and wrong from teachers, students are encouraged to get in touch with their own sense of what is right and wrong in relation to the morals of their communities. Regardless of how one might view this posture, it has bred a certain amount of confusion as we struggle to understand what ethical perspectives public schools should advocate.

Even though we may not have all the answers, we can’t wait any longer to revive character education. The sudden emergence of a plethora of cyber issues that literally defines K–12 policy toward technology integration has created a dire need for ethical clarity and behavioral policy. The digital age beckons us to usher in a new era of character education, aimed directly at addressing the opportunities and challenges of living a digital lifestyle.

A true character education program is built upon community-defined values. To be clear, this requires town councils and school boards to talk openly and honestly about technology, not just in terms of costs and academic integration, but also in terms of cyber behavior, digital ethics, and other confounding issues. Typically, communities may benefit from developing a values inventory to guide their efforts. (See “Ethical Inventory Resources” for examples of values inventories.)

An effective community-based effort should include students, for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that they have more information about what happens in cyberspace than adults do.

Ethical Inventory Resources

Many high quality resources are available on ethics and character education. Here are four of them:

- The 12 Guiding Principles of Exceptional Character, developed by the International Center for Leadership in Education
www.leadered.com/guiding_princ.html
- The Seven Universal Ethical Attributes, developed by the Heartwood Institute
<http://heartwoodethics.org/1-approach/framework.asp>
- 11 Principles of Effective Character Education, developed by the Character Education Partnership (2010)
www.character.org/11principles
- The Morally Mature Person, from the ASCD Panel on Moral Education. 1988. *Educational Leadership* 45(8): 5.
www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_198805_p4.pdf

Another important reason to involve them is to allow students and adults to engage in important conversations about living digitally that simply aren't happening. In addition, asking students to actually help develop the values of a character education program that would guide their activities would encourage their participation and buy-in.

The Ideal School Board

Of course, none of this happens without a school board that is willing to take up the challenge. An "ideal school board"—the topic of Part III of *Digital Community, Digital Citizen* (Ohler 2010)—is ready to take on the task of creating academic and character education programs tailored for raising an intelligent, caring generation of students who understand the responsibilities and opportunities associated with living a digital lifestyle. This ideal school board engages in a number of processes to harmonize its mission and programs with the digital frontier. Here are just three.

First, and most importantly, the board identifies how the community's physical and virtual environments differ, and then tailors its values inventory to reflect both. The values inventory, for example, should consider differences inherent in a "digital community," where activities such as slander and theft aren't always very clear. Second, while balancing the need for safe and virus-free networks, the board considers how to provide access to the Internet—a prerequisite for being able to teach digital citizenship. Locking down the Internet precludes this opportunity. Third, it empowers librarians and teachers to actively train students in the opportunities and ethics of digital activities, from searching for reliable information to understanding and avoiding cyberbullying.

It's All about Balancing Opportunity and Safety

When I was attending school during the 1960s, one of the most ardently debated issues at public school board meetings was sex education. Two camps planted their flags on the moral high ground, one saying that sex should be taught in the homes to ensure parents were in charge of their children's moral perspective. The other camp advocated for it to be taught by health teachers to ensure that students would receive the information they needed to make informed decisions. More than 40 years later, sex education is a fairly well-established part of most high school health curricula. This development is due, in large part, to a concern for the safety of our children, who, without an informed understanding of the risks of sexual behavior, were clearly jeopardizing their safety in a number of ways.

We are at the same point with regard to teaching digital health. We need to talk to our children about how to live digital lifestyles that are informed, safe, and healthy. We need to set this discussion within the context of encouraging students to develop the many social and professional opportunities that the digital world provides. This discussion needs to happen at school as well as at home.

The inclusion of digital health and digital citizenship in our educational lives is inevitable. As we reflect on sex education, we look back and wonder why it took us so long to do something that makes so much sense today. Given that this will undoubtedly be the direction for helping our children live digital lifestyles in safe, positive ways, why not start our efforts in digital health and digital citizenship now? ■



References

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