Teaching Students to Be Good Digital Citizens

The internet is vast, full of much information, possibility and—for many individuals, especially young people—room for error. As technology becomes increasingly mobile and further permeates students' lives, it's crucial for these Generation Z'ers to understand the consequences of their actions on social media, the permanence of their digital footprint, and the dangers of being too nonchalant about privacy—both personal privacy and privacy of data—online. Rather than leave online citizenship up to students to learn from their own experiences in today's digital world, many believe this skill is one that should become a steadfast part of the education system. This view is expounded upon in a recently released white paper from NetRef, a telling document that encourages schools to incorporate digital citizenship instruction and provides recommendations for the implementation of this curricula.

The Digital Lives of Students Today

NetRef's report defines digital citizenship as "the practice of defining the norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use." To understand what is indeed "appropriate" behavior for today's online teen, it's helpful to examine how much technology is actually being consumed.

Teens today are digital natives—in other words, these young people have grown up around digital technology and tend to instinctively understand its intricacies. According to Pew Research Center, 92 percent of teens report going online daily, and 24 percent report being connected "almost constantly." Much of that activity is spurred by the prevalence of mobile technology, as almost three-quarters of teens age 13-17 either have or have access to a smartphone.

What are these teens doing with all that time online? A significant number reported logging into social media sites such as Facebook (71 percent), Instagram (20 percent) or Snapchat (11 percent) regularly—and a whopping 71 percent of teens say they have accounts on multiple social platforms.

With all this online activity, what is the best way to teach students good digital citizenship? The aforementioned NetRef report provides ways in which educators can deploy that knowledge.

Report Recommendations

There is not a one-size-fits-all solution to teaching students how to have meaningful and safe online experiences, but there are digital citizenship education implementation techniques that can help schools navigate the process. NetRef's report, for example, lists seven of them:

- **Design a robust digital citizenship curriculum.** A digital citizenship curriculum should encourage conversation about real situations teens face online and provide guidance on how to best navigate them.
- **Counsel students that "what goes online stays online."** Students often aren't aware that simply deleting a piece of data—i.e., a regrettable status update on social media—does not mean it is gone forever. They must be taught about the permanence of their digital footprint.
- **Craft an empowering acceptable use policy for students.** Students will ultimately control what they do or don't do online. Crafting an acceptable use policy that is empowering to teens, though, can encourage good decisions.
- **Teach students their digital rights**. The digital citizenship curriculum should include information about digital rights, including how to best handle private data.
- **Advise parents of new social media and online trends.** Parents are often out of the social media loop, so bringing them back into the conversation can allow them to proactively monitor their child's online activity.

- **Provide an easy-to-understand guide for online behavior.** Creating a simple set of guidelines for students to follow can eliminate guesswork in unfamiliar circumstances.
- **Equip teachers and parents with EdTech programs and practices to manage children's Internet use.** Especially for younger students, both teachers and parents should monitor internet usage and offer guidance if needed.

The question is no longer whether or not students will go online on their own. They clearly are, and in large numbers. The focus, then, is how to teach these connected kids to be good digital citizens—and that starts in the classroom.