

Beyond Digital Citizenship...Let's Teach our Students to be Digital Leaders

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Abstract

“Disruption, innovation, turbulence, change, and competition are words that define our world today.” (Brett, 2019). Part of why this is true is due to the rapid growth rate of information technologies. In the information technology area, we teach our students about digital citizenship and the subjects of privacy, data security, and professional ethics. All students, no matter their major, should also learn about these issues.

I argue that our students do not need to be only good digital citizens. They also need to learn to be digital leaders. The article, *Digital Student Leadership* (2017) cites a participant in the study as saying, “I have always been told what not to do online. But no one has ever told me what I’m supposed to do on social media.” Students need to learn to take charge of their data security, demonstrate ethical use of technologies, and ensure the content they contribute to the digital world is reliable, verifiable, and researched. Diversity and inclusion in digital communications and accessibility of digital content students create are topics that all students should understand and implement. Students need to communicate with respect and integrity. Above all, they need to lead by example in the digital world.

Employers are looking for many skills for working in the digital age. This presentation will outline why those skills, and others, are important to digital leaders in all fields and what we can do, as educators, to help instill those skills in our students.

Introduction

I am sure that most people reading this article have seen their good friends and family share social media posts that contain false information. I am also fairly sure that most of you let it get under your skin a little bit. My particular nemesis is a post about fifty-two thoroughbred horses that needed new homes because their owner died. My well-meaning Facebook friends have shared this post with me, and tagged me in it about every twelve to eighteen months since 2011. This post started out as true, but the horses all got new homes, and now it is just cluttering up the Internet with more garbage.

This is just one minor, but irritating, example of well-meaning people using technology; but not understanding it. It ranks up there with people sharing those fake giveaway posts hoping to get something for free. I can promise you, Elon Musk is not going to give you any Bitcoin for sharing his Facebook post.

The problem is, as minor as these infractions are in the grand scheme of what is currently going on in the world, false social media posts have led to more major transgressions. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, well-meaning, but naïve people, have been sharing misinformation posts about the virus and vaccines. In the past two years, Facebook has removed more than 20 million COVID misinformation posts from Facebook and Instagram (Wong, 2021).

For more serious subjects like this example, the sharing of misinformation causes more people to re-share that information without checking the accuracy.

In his book “Evolving digital leadership: How to be a digital leader in tomorrow’s disruptive world”, James Brett says, “Disruption, innovation, turbulence, change, and competition are words that define our world today.” (Brett, 2019). I agree with this statement, as I am sure many others do, but let us look at just the pandemic. Over the past two years the United States has had fluctuating safety standards. We have had employees leave the work place and go home to telecommute. They have gone back to the work place and then home again with the progression of the Omicron variant. This has opened up a wide variety of security issues. We have had students and teachers leave the classroom and go home for virtual learning, then back to the classroom and back to virtual learning multiple times. Most of these students and teachers have had little to no technical support to assist them.

Do we need leaders? I believe we really do, especially digital leaders. Leaders cultivate their own growth and those of the people they lead. Is this not what we, as educators, are supposed to do? We should be instilling these same traits in our students.

In a study performed by Josie Ahlquist (2017), she quoted a young woman she interviewed about social media, saying, “I have always been told what not to do online. But no one has ever told me what I’m supposed to do on social media.” As educators, we should be showing our students what they are supposed to do. We should not just be teaching digital citizenship but giving our students the tools to become great digital leaders. Our students need to be able to take charge of their data security and learn to use the technologies available to them both ethically and responsibly. They need to be able to ensure the content they contribute to the digital world is reliable, verifiable, and well researched. Our students need to understand the importance of diversity and inclusion in their online communication, and how to make their digital content accessible to everyone. Our students need to learn to communicate with respect and integrity. For those of us who teach them, we need to show them how to lead by example in the digital world.

Digital Responsibility

There are so many different areas that impact digital citizenship and digital leadership, but I will reflect on just a few. The first one is digital responsibility. Digital responsibility is made up of many parts, one of which is security. Students need to know how to protect their data, information and hardware. Once they reach the workforce, those skills translate into knowledge of how to protect company data, information, networks and hardware. If you teach in areas such as accounting, business, criminal justice, and many others; your students will need these skills. An accountant at a small firm must know how to protect the company’s network so client data is not compromised. Students also need to learn how to be responsible with their money, banking and online shopping. Once they reach the workforce, the skills that they learn from us will translate into knowledge of how to protect company online assets. Do you think your finance, accounting, business majors, and others need these skills?

Another area of digital responsibility is privacy. Our students need to be able to think critically about their privacy and what they share online. If we show our students how to be responsible with what they share online, that skill will eventually translate into knowledge of how to protect company intellectual property and knowledge of HIPAA and FERPA laws. So, if you are teaching health information management, or nursing, or education; your students are going to need these skills.

We tell our students, “Don’t cheat, don’t cheat, don’t cheat.” But, do we show them how not to cheat, or explain the actual consequences of cheating. It is so easy with today’s technology to grab an image off the Internet and create a meme to share. Do we really talk to our students about intellectual property rights, the damage that can be done by violating those rights, or the consequences that they may face? This is important information for our students no matter what subject they are taking. Building knowledge of all these issues for students translates into future employees who can innovate, think critically, be agile and use ethics in the real world.

Information Literacy

Information literacy is a key element that we are teaching our students every day, regardless of the subjects we teach. We show students how to find, evaluate, organize, use and communicate information. Those same areas that make up information literacy also apply to digital literacy.

Hopefully, you are guiding your students through using the library resources and databases your institutions provide. But, are you showing them how to navigate what can be a huge garbage heap of information on the Internet for the nuggets they need? If I had a quarter for every time a student asked me a simple question that could easily be answered with a 30 second Google search, I would be a rich woman. So, I walk my students through how to word an online search to get specific results and then evaluate the information they retrieve.

Speaking of evaluating information, this goes back to my Facebook pet peeve I spoke of earlier. In my example, my well-meaning friends who repeatedly tagged me in that post over the years did not bother to look to see if the information was still accurate. They did not even bother to look at the date on the original post. Do our students know how to evaluate the credibility of information, or distinguish a subject-matter expert? Do they know how to look for the bias in a set of search results or an article? Can they use an open mind when they are confronted with information from a viewpoint that is in opposition to their own? We, as educators, should make sure they can do those things.

Students also need to know how to use and communicate information in the digital age. Do you need to read another research paper? Maybe you do, but if not...and this is going to take some of you out of your comfort zone, but...can your students communicate to you through video, audio, or images? Maybe they could develop a spreadsheet, or build a web site, or write a computer program. Students should be equipped with the necessary skills to communicate by creating multimodal content.

All of these concepts are as equally important to digital literacy as they are to information literacy. Do we explain to students the importance of finding, evaluating, using and communicating digital information, or do we just tell them, “Do it my way.”? These concepts are all connected to every subject area for every student enrolled in our institutions.

Digital Communication

I am sure we all have experienced how toxic the current Internet culture can be. The Internet lacks empathy, civility, responsibility, and kindness, in addition to the lack of open-mindedness and recognition of diverse backgrounds. This leads to concerning issues, such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying can start as early as in grades kindergarten through twelfth grade, and studies have shown that social media addiction and cyberbullying are correlated (Giumetti, 2022).

Let me give you a couple of examples. You may, or may not have heard the term Gamergate (Mortensen, 2018). A few years ago, an independent female game developer had an ex-boyfriend who posted allegations on social media and gaming sites accusing her of sleeping around to get positive reviews for her games. Many male gamers in the community began to pile on with inflammatory posts against any female gamer they encountered. This evolved and became widespread to encompass a large portion of the gaming community. These women were threatened, intimidated, doxed, and some of them were driven from their homes because they felt unsafe.

A less threatening, but equally misogynistic example comes from personal experience in a course I teach. This past fall, I taught a course called Implications of Information Technology. In one module of the course the students and I were discussing how to recruit more women and minorities into information technology careers. More than one man in the class made statements like; “Women don’t like the nerd label that goes along with gaming.” And “Women who go into STEM careers go into medical fields because they are more nurturing.” Stereotyping groups of people leads to many problems in online communication and can quickly get out of hand.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

This year, I belong to a faculty learning community at the university. I needed to have a project for the community for the year. I teach online, and after I thought about it for awhile I decided that I needed to up my game on making my courses more inclusive and equitable. The project I chose was to update the outdated Netiquette rules that many online courses use, and replace them with more D, E, & I based standards.

To give you a short history of Netiquette, it began in the 1970s when there were only a few companies and educational institutions connected to it. Most of the users were also system administrators as well. The technology of the time was very limited, and most of the rules were geared toward saving computing resources because of the limits of the hardware technology. As you move to the end of the 1990s there was much better technology and more of the general public connecting to the Internet. As I was doing my research, I came across a quote from George Margolin (Gornstein, 1999) that really stuck with me. He said, “All of a sudden you have

this enormous influx of people who are not computer people. Try a 17-year-old druggie and tell me how he is going to behave on the Net. The etiquette of the Net will be no greater than the etiquette of the general population.” That quote puts the current toxic Internet culture into perspective.

As I began to plan my project, I realized this was an opportunity to practice what I preach, so I got my students in all of my classes involved in the project. I detest the terms “Netiquette” and “Rules”. I feel they are demeaning to the adults we are supposed to be. I began to call what we were developing “Online Communication Standards”. We began with a Netiquette history lesson, and then we had a week-long discussion about their feelings regarding online communication, what their experiences have been, and what they would like to see in the standards. I was surprised by how deeply they had thought about the subject without realizing the importance of what they were thinking. I have just recently completed compiling their posts and writing the Online Communication Standards from what they wrote. Some of the prevalent concepts that came out of their writing were:

Respect and kindness were the overwhelming topics the students wanted to see addressed.

They talked a lot about being able to respectfully disagree with someone and leaving emotion out of it.

They believe that the anonymity of the web emboldens people to act differently online than they would face to face.

Believe it or not, students understand that poor grammar, spelling, and punctuation lead to not being able to communicate your points; and in some cases, this can lead to misunderstandings.

Another thing I found in my research is that most academic research that has been completed on Netiquette comes from the faculty point of view and not the student point of view. My plan is to recruit other online faculty for a research study this fall where we have students compare traditional Netiquette to the new Online Communication Standards and get input from a larger body of the student population across other curricular areas.

Digital Wellness

There have been many recent news stories about the negative impacts that Facebook and Instagram have on young people, especially young girls. Both Facebook and Instagram contribute to the negative body image issues these young girls are experiencing, and both have known about these issues for years. Image editing apps and filters have had a major impact on this issue. A 2017 Harris poll found that two-thirds of Americans edit their photos before posting them to social media (Jain, 2017). This creates a distorted view of the world in which these young people compare themselves.

As I said earlier, studies have shown a correlation between social media addiction and cyberbullying. Studies have also concluded that social media addiction is prevalent among college students (Steers, et. al., 2016). This has a critical impact on the mental health of all of our students, and

that needs to be addressed. But, if you are teaching courses in areas such as psychology, counseling and allied health; aren't the skills to deal with this something your students need to know? When they get out into the work force they will be confronted with people who deal with this social media addiction. They need to know how to address it because social media addiction leads to concerning issues like cyberbullying, isolation, and harassment.

Retention

As educators, we understand that we first have to keep students in school in order to be able to help them be successful in their courses. This retention affects all of our students regardless of the subjects they are studying. Some of the things that affect student retention are finances, health, academic success and a sense of belonging. The topics I have addressed in this paper, and many more I haven't, have an impact on all of these areas.

Conclusion

In their article, Sousa and Wilks (2018) address the traits that employers are looking for in employees when they hire. Employers want people who can think critically, collaborate, be adaptable, take initiative, communicate, analyze information, and who show curiosity and imagination. All of these traits are impacted by the twenty-first century digital skills our students acquire.

In conclusion, I offer you a challenge. It can be daunting to think about major curricular changes at one time, instead, pick one manageable digital topic a semester that applies to your subject-matter. Study up on that topic, and then deeply engage your students in the topic. Don't say things to your students like, "Don't do that." Show your students how to become a digital leader.

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