Catering for Difference
The digital citizenship journey

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Beware of the send button. That click is the start of a student, teacher and school’s digital footprint and reputation.

At a Glance

- Educating the community about technology
- Getting started with technology
- Technology for social justice

Understanding your Digital Footprint

A digital footprint is the record of your activities in a digital environment. In life, which includes our digital world, we would like to be treated well and be fairly represented in what people say about us to others in person and online. Schools and teachers would benefit from actively developing their understanding of issues like digital footprint, digital reputation and digital citizenship in order to help students and parents in their school community.

The Student

It is formative to understand the typical day of our student’s digital life. As educators we need to enter into their world in order to understand how we can guide their journey. Students ‘look for stuff and download stuff’ which develops searching skills and appropriateness, having implications for their digital footprint, safety and legal considerations every day. In the digital world they ‘read, view and interact’, which involves an understanding of bias and media persuasion; students ‘go places’ in the real and digital world and they interact online. Students also ‘publish and contribute’ in some way each day by doing a presentation, a citation, a status update, blog post.

There is a lot of solid learning happening in a typical digital day. (Ohler, 2012)

Parents sometimes do not understand the value of this learning and it is increasingly becoming the role of the teacher to guide both students and the parents,

We have a duty to educate whole families in a digital age. It is not just digital citizenship and social media. Most of our mistakes are analogue …are not rewindable …the kids need us. (Ohler, 2012)

At what age do children have the ability to understand the consequences of their online behaviour? Children naturally focus on ‘me’ to a certain age and prior to this stage they will not necessarily know how their behaviour can be hurtful to others or reflect badly on themselves.

Some young children we teach are not cognitively developed enough to know what can be misinterpreted online. Let’s not overlook the more cognitively developed students. Do they get it right all the time? Have you seen the nods of agreement of Year 10-12 students when you talk to them about their digital footprint? They are confident they are managing their Facebook privacy settings well. Then look at how their expression changes when you ask them to look at the photos they put on My Space four years earlier. Students still suffer the consequences of ill-considered digital behaviour. It is baffling why this still can be the case, though some of the answers are a reflection of brain development, an existence or absence of an ethical compass and perhaps a lack of understanding about how one’s digital presence develops.

The teacher

It might be prudent for teachers and schools to have a greater understanding of their digital footprint and reputation. The effect of clicking the send button can be permanent. For example, if people are using RSS feeds such as Google Reader, even with an immediate delete of a blog post the original will still be migrated to a follower’s RSS feed. Likewise a deleted Twitter or Facebook update can still be viewed through an email alert. It can take years to build a digital reputation and one click can set you back many years.

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The School  As an educational institution do you keep technology outside of the doors of the school? Or are you a school that opens the door to technology, doing so with a high level of management, perhaps at the expense of deeper learning? Are you a school that uses technology more widely and keeps parent/student issues outside of the school doors? Or are you a school in partnership with the whole school community working together to enhance learning and developing digital skills for life within and beyond the school gate. If your school would like to move towards the final scenario one suggested starting point is to encourage teachers and students to learn how to manage their digital reputation and in doing so becoming active digital citizens.

Digital Reputation Management and becoming an effective digital citizen

The first step in managing your digital footprint is to undertake a digital audit by monitoring your digital reputation. The obvious method is a Google search. This can be finessed by searching in the specific categories especially images, news and videos. More sophisticated searches can include the use of Google Alerts or Technorati feeds into your Google Reader. If you have a common name make sure those with your name are not confused as you. Their reputation is not yours though it could be misrepresented as you, especially if you have no digital presence.

It’s time to take a proactive approach to getting your name (individual and school) out there the way you want to be perceived. We need to move beyond being a digital lurker by collaborating and connecting with other friends and colleagues online. There are several tips and tricks to help you achieve this with safety, develop your own experiences and then be in a position to guide your students:

1. Start a blog or a wiki where you share teaching resources or exploring your personal interests and hobbies. Make sure you have your name present and over time, especially if people read your ideas your blog will come up the ranking in Google searches of your name.
2. Facebook does not have to be completely locked down and private. Consider having a couple of public picture albums. In this you can have pictures of geography fieldwork or plays you have experienced and scanned copies of awards you have received.
3. Increasingly LinkedIn has gained a lot of traction as the professional meeting place. LinkedIn is a safe introduction to social media and serves as a digital space where you can present your resume and professions interests and involvement.
4. Make sure your profiles are up-to-date and factually correct. Use your real name, a recent photo and think carefully about what you write in the personal section. Ensure it is up-to-date and an accurate reflection of what you are doing now.
5. Engage in digital communication. Think about making constructive comments on an online article or a blog post, adding value and providing insight. Use Twitter, it is a think tank of people and resource in your back pocket.
6. Shares resources and collaborate with other like-minded educators in projects. Create a professional Slideshare or Prezi account and distribute useful ideas and resources for other teachers. Link your slides in your blog or twitter feed. Consider a YouTube or iTunes account and create audio or video units of work or motivational messages for your students.
7. Purchase a domain name and develop a simple website or blog. This drives all traffic to one place, creates a one stop shopping venue and you have greater control over your digital reputation.

Once you have your digital reputation under control you might like to become a more actively involved digital citizen.
Personal, participatory and justice oriented

Citizenship also involves personal, participatory and justice oriented digital citizenship. Personal digital citizenship involves individuals acting according to their beliefs, values and ethics. As participatory citizens you can work in building collaborative online communities with Web 2.0 tools. Justice oriented citizenship raises the bar even higher and challenges students and teachers to devise solutions to problems in communities using digital tools to spread a message and improve the quality of life in a community.

In this personal, participatory and justice based digital citizenship journey an individual or a school passes through several stages. Initially your digital life starts out as a consumer of information. As your confidence grows you start to share with others, perhaps even becoming a critic offering constructive suggestions. This is where the majority of people sit in the digital world; however, there is room for you to become an editor of content on the web shaping and curating information and ideas in a way that which may lead you to producing content.

Students, teachers, parents and schools would benefit from a more structured approach to understanding and managing their digital world. Reflection on the why, how and implications of an individual or school’s digital footprint raises the notion that we all need to work in partnership to prepare our students to function and survive in their digital world.

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For Discussion
Where are the points of interaction using technology between your school and your community? Who in your school might have ideas about improving the effectiveness of these interactions?