

21ST CENTURY SCHOOLS NEED DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

by Jeffrey Jordan & Simon Belanger

Four years ago, our high school began dealing with a new type of issue. As the popularity of social media grew, so did the number of incident reports our administrators had to handle. To complicate matters, a disproportionate number of these incidents were starting outside of school hours, via a social network. Sparks would fly during online chats or insulting content would be posted, and school became the place to meet and resolve the situation. Given that Heritage Regional High School has over 1700 students, the increasing amount of online disputes began consuming a majority of our administration's time.

Issues with technology were arising in our classrooms as well. It was quickly becoming apparent that students were very tech-savvy, but primarily in the area of social media. When it came to concepts such as digital privacy, appropriate online behaviour and communication, and plagiarism, their knowledge was quite limited. Students were unaware that they had, at times, been using technology irresponsibly. Even though our current generation of children has grown up with digital gadgets in the palms of their hands, we cannot assume that they fully comprehend the plethora of potential risks and consequences lurking behind their screens. This new social reality is what sparked the creation of our school's digital citizenship program.

Simply put, digital citizenship focuses on educating students about how to be smart, safe and responsible with technology. As adults, teachers and parents alike, we are responsible for raising our children to become well-prepared citizens. Now that technology has infiltrated almost every facet of our daily lives, we are equally responsible for preparing them for the digital world.

Our mission at H.R.H.S. was to raise awareness about online safety in an attempt to lower the amount of cyber-issues present in the school. Now, four years later, we have managed to create a small digital citizenship curriculum that reaches out to every grade level in the building. Last year was the project's first year of full implementation and it was incredibly well-received by both students and staff. Our mission with this article is to share this process with other educators—to explain what worked at our school, in order to help others with similar ideas. Digital citizenship and technology are now, without a doubt, crucial elements in the world of education.

In the Quebec system of education, high school covers grades seven to eleven. Our first step was to assign one digital topic to each of the five years. Our objective was to create interactive lessons that would be easy for teachers to present, ignite classroom conversations, and teach students about digital safety. The idea was to start with something simple as students enter high school, and then gradually introduce them to a new topic in each grade. Here is the project's approach:

Grade 7 – Citizen .vs. Digital Citizen

Students explore the idea of being a citizen in both the "real" and online worlds. We also examine why knowing about both worlds is important.

Grade 8 – Digital Footprints (or Tattoos)

Introduces students to the fact that everything we do online leaves a trace. Then they explore the importance of digital reputations in the world of social media. What do your online activities tell people about you?

Grade 9 – Cyber Bullying & Harassment

Students discuss the realities of bullying in the digital age and explore strategies on how to help prevent it. We emphasize the importance of being an "upstander" instead of a bystander.

Grade 10 – Online Security

Introduces information about online privacy, security settings, password creation and general cyber-safety. This topic also links back to their digital footprints; in terms of the information they share online.

Grade 11 – Copyright & Plagiarism

Before heading into post-secondary education, students explore the realities of plagiarism and copyright laws. Now that information is easily accessible online, students learn about how "copy" and "paste" can hurt their academics.

A team of four teachers (Simon Belanger, Jeffrey Jordan, Dominique Lemaire and Lesley Webb) collaborated over a total of four days to create three lessons for each grade level. Using ideas and information from the educational technology organization Common Sense Media, each lesson included interesting facts, video links, discussion topics and class activities.

Since the delivery of these lessons depended on the cooperation of our colleagues, we wanted the process to be smooth and simple. First, we ensured that none of the lesson content required major digital knowledge—we wanted our teachers to feel comfortable presenting and participating in the discussions. Second, we asked a different course subject (English, French, Ethics, etc.) to deliver the lessons at each grade level. This way, we were not asking only one group of teachers to take on the full load. We also delivered the lessons with a point form plan and spread them out over the school year; one at the beginning, middle and end.

Lastly, to reinforce the delivery of this information, we held a parent information session at school. As the concept of digital safety grows, parents are becoming more aware of the fact that the online world contains potential risks and dangers, just like the "real" world. They too need to be made aware of digital citizenship and how it relates to their families. When parents buy new devices for their children, they need to be aware that these are powerful tools that give the children 24/7 access to the online world with all the people and information in it. Furthermore, a lot of this access is unsupervised.

If, as parents and educators, we teach our children about social skills and interactions, then digital citizenship is a must as well. Interactions are no longer limited to face-to-face encounters but are now happening all the time via social networks. Digital citizenship is now crucial in today's society and it is time for schools to do what they do best—educate our future citizens.

Jeffrey Jordan is currently working on his M.Ed. in Educational Leadership. His research focuses on educational technology and digital citizenship. He is an English teacher and Junior English coordinator at Heritage Regional High School. For more information, follow @HRHSDigCit on Twitter.

Simon Belanger is currently working on his M.Ed. in Educational Leadership. He is a Special Education teacher and coordinator of a work-study program, at Heritage Regional High School. For more information, follow @HRHSDigCit on Twitter.

