



# DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP in the Curriculum

*Educators can support strong visions of citizenship by teaching with and about social media.*

**Daniel G. Krutka and Jeffrey P. Carpenter**

**R**ecently, several schools in the Madison, Wisconsin, school district enacted a social media ban to “test whether student behavior, school safety, and grades improve with fewer online distractions” (Rivedal, 2017). It’s not uncommon for schools to implement policies that limit, heavily filter, or block internet content, and we understand impulses to restrict social media to reduce distractions and prevent harmful activities. However, if a central aim of schools is to help students grow as 21st century citizens, do we want to implement school practices that resemble the social media policies of authoritarian states like

China and Turkey? When schools ban social media in the name of controlling behavior, maintaining safety, and improving short-term productivity, educators are absolving themselves of the responsibility to educate students for today’s world. By contrast, teaching with and about social media offers an approach that can help students grow as digital citizens in a democracy.

Social media platforms have provided a microphone to the “people formerly known as the audience,” who can now interact around common interests, including civic activities (Rosen, 2012, p. 13). However, the effects of social media on democracy have been mixed. Some citizens use social media to

© BRIAN STAUFFER/THE SPOT

advance democracy and justice, while others use it for frivolous or even harmful purposes. But whether educators are ready for it or not, young people currently spend significant parts of their social, communal, and civic lives on social media platforms.

Citizenship today is digital. During the 2016 U.S. elections, social media did not just spread the news, it became the news. As users shared “fake news” stories, platform algorithms created partisan echo chambers, and candidates used Twitter to appeal to voters, national conversations erupted about the digital citizenship roles and responsibilities of people from Mark Zuckerberg to Jane Citizen. If education is to be a safeguard of democracy, then recent events suggest tweets and other social media must be part of the curriculum.

### What Kind of Citizens?

Educators cannot foster citizenship without first asking, *What kind of citizens does our 21st century democracy require?* Schools often proudly display mission statements that include the aim of preparing citizens without always articulating what this means in daily practice. Whether as part of the hidden or official curriculum, all schools convey messages about participation, power, and parity. Students’ power and voice in student government, mock elections, and school policies reflect values about whether schools encourage participatory and inclusive visions of citizenship. And educators have long sought to enact different models of citizenship through character education, service learning, democratic classrooms, and curriculums focused on social issues.

In their influential study, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three visions of citizenship represented in democratic education programs:

■ *Personally responsible citizens* who act responsibly in their communities,

act as informed voters, and generally obey laws.

■ *Participatory citizens* who understand government, know how it works, and actively organize community efforts as a regular part of their lives.

■ *Justice-oriented citizens* who critically appraise social, political, and economic structures; tackle injustice; and seek systemic changes.

accurately branded as supports for digital literacy or online safety.

Of course, curriculums that teach individual responsibility in digital realms are important. Students should learn how to avoid online predators or cyberbullies, understand intellectual property laws, and appreciate possible consequences of an unwanted digital footprint. However, lessons that focus primarily on such matters of safety and

In the 21st century, students cannot just dissect frogs, sentences, or documents; they must be able to dissect tweets, snaps, and posts.

For example, personally responsible citizens are likely to contribute to food drives, participatory citizens might organize food drives, while justice-oriented citizens investigate why people are going hungry and seek to address the root cause. These three interpretations of citizenship can help educators and school leaders think about how digital citizenship is, and can be, taught and practiced in schools.

### What Kind of Digital Citizens?

Some of the most popular “digital citizenship” instructional materials, literature, and standards used in schools, such as Common Sense Media’s Digital Citizenship Curriculum, Ribble’s (2015) *Digital Citizenship in Schools*, and the International Society for Technology in Education (2016) Standards for Students, offer necessary advice for avoiding mistakes and ensuring online safety. However, these resources have a tenuous connection to democratic citizenship and might be more

appropriateness do little to prepare students to practice strong versions of democracy by taking on active roles in governance (Barber, 1984). So how can educators prepare students for different kinds of citizenship in digital spaces?

### Personally Responsible Digital Citizens

Personally responsible digital citizenship has dominated what is taught in schools, as students are encouraged to be responsible, obedient, and productive “netizens.” Acting as an informed voter is an important component of this kind of citizenship, but it has been complicated by the information glut in online spaces. When there is an abundance of information, knowing where to focus attention is a crucial skill for informed citizens (Rheingold, 2012). With the weakening of the traditional gatekeeping responsibilities of journalism, digital citizens must do more to evaluate the validity and credibility of online sources. Unfortunately, Stanford



researchers have found that students from middle school to college often trust sites lacking credibility because of high search-engine rankings, slick websites, or misleading “about” pages (Wineburg & McGrew, 2016).

Digital citizens should be able to distinguish between credible and untrustworthy news sources and sites; corroborate information across websites or accounts; contextualize stories; and understand the perspectives, methods, and evidence that authors use in multimodal texts. Twenty-first century educators cannot teach media literacy as they did in the past. Citizens used to be able to read articles from top to bottom (“vertically”) and determine credibility, but on unfamiliar websites, digital citizens should start by opening new tabs (“laterally”) to learn more about the aims of those who fund and run the websites before reading further (Wineburg & McGrew, 2016).

For example, students researching Martin Luther King Jr. might find a site like [www.MartinLutherKing.org](http://www.MartinLutherKing.org) because an algorithm ranks it highly in the search engine results (Rheingold, 2012). However, critical consumers of information would open new tabs to investigate the organization behind the site and find that it is run by a white supremacist organization.

Students need practice analyzing social media content to identify accurate claims and understand the strategies used to persuade via social media or online sites. English teachers might ask students to analyze the rhetorical strategies employed in politicians’ tweets, while science educators can help students analyze the veracity of online scientific claims. Numerous media literacy organizations (for instance, the University of Rhode Island’s Media Education Lab) provide resources that can help students make more accurate judgments of online content (see related article, p. 26). Educators can also teach specific strategies, such as the C.R.A.P. test, which has readers analyze the currency, reliability, authority, and purpose/point of view of sources. For example, a math teacher might require students to apply the test when retrieving statistical data to check the accuracy of politicians’ claims about correlations between demographic and economic trends.

### *Participatory Digital Citizens*

Examining both the power and limitations of social media can help students leverage platforms more effectively for democratic aims. Citizens who might have previously been limited to passive consumption of political messages can now organize quickly, challenge dominant discourses, and demand changes. But some young people may be hesitant to engage in political or community



activities online because of the visibility of posts, the perceived unpopularity of their opinions, or the potential threat of derogatory or aggressive responses.

Instead of avoiding such spaces, educators can provide safe ways for all citizens to engage in democratic dialogues online, particularly citizens whose views or identities might be marginalized. By creating class Twitter accounts, for example, teachers can work with students to carefully craft messages and talk through which responses are worthy of reply, given their aims. While educators will need to prepare students for such participation and choose platforms wisely, these online discussions can shape democratic habits and provide spaces for students to practice voicing their concerns and negotiating with other parties within and beyond the walls of their school.

Online political activity can sometimes be characterized as low-commitment “slacktivism,” but meaningful social media exchanges can offer an effective entry point into other civic activities. As young citizens identify causes that are important to them, educators can help investigate questions like, *Which platforms or networks are most conducive to affecting change? Whose voices are represented or marginalized in different networks? Which methods and strategies can be completed online, and which activities require offline action?* Social studies teachers can also teach about social media by investigating how social protests have changed with the rise of digital networks and what it means to redress grievances in the 21st century. Furthermore, educators can work alongside students to compare and contrast the structures of formal debates with the written and unwritten rules that exist around social media discussions (such as time and character limits, acceptable behaviors and

Digital citizenship lessons, curriculums, and programs should pull from all three visions of citizenship.

tone, shorthand devices, and broadcast or post audience).

#### *Justice-Oriented Digital Citizens*

Throughout U.S. history, justice-oriented citizens have interrogated social, political, and economic structures to fight systemic injustices, from slavery to a lack of access for those with disabilities, and social problems like homelessness or lack of access to quality health care. Citizens continue such work in social networks to organize against oppressive regimes and share firsthand accounts ignored by the mainstream press. Helping students grow as justice-oriented citizens requires raising their consciousness of oppression and identifying an array of adaptable strategies that are often needed in the face of institutional resistance.

Social media hashtags allow young citizens to participate in larger dialogues about issues that concern them, such as student voice in education (#StuVoice) and systemic racism (#BlackLivesMatter). Educators and students can create their own hashtags, too. For example, several high school teachers challenged their students to identify sexist messages in advertising and create tweets with #NotBuyingIt as

a way to raise awareness and pressure companies to make changes (Flores, Pazdan, & Pikelnny, 2013).

However, for these conversations to happen, citizens must ensure that social media platforms are inclusive and that they are neither biased against difficult dialogues nor likely to create echo chambers where people have little exposure to different views. For example, in 2014, Facebook algorithms amplified feel-good posts related to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge while simultaneously burying #BlackLivesMatter posts, and Twitter has been criticized for doing too little to address violent threats against women (Tufekci, 2017).

Although some critics might advise simply switching platforms, people are unlikely to leave popular social networks because their connection with friends, family, and organizations is what makes these services valuable. Digital citizens can, however, lobby social media companies to enact policies that make online spaces more supportive of healthy democracy. Much like politicians or governments, companies should be responsive to users' demands.

Within school settings, educators can help students understand how social media platforms work, whom they benefit and marginalize, and how digital citizens can affect changes. Students can interrogate biases in social media services by asking, *Who invented the medium, for what purpose, and how has it changed? How do platform algorithms tailor content to users? What data do the mediums collect, and how are they used? Which voices are privileged or marginalized* (Krutka & Carpenter, 2016)? Questions like these can help young people unpack financial, political, social, or corporate aims associated with these technologies and better understand that mediums are not simply neutral conveyors of information, but carry the biases of their

creators, algorithms, and users.

For instance, students studying the 2016 presidential election might examine which candidates and interest groups benefited from online activities and why, and even write emails or blog posts to different media companies advocating for the promotion of a democratic dialogue.

### Democratic Digital Citizenship

Of course, none of these visions of democratic digital citizenship are mutually exclusive. In one lesson, 5th grade students can investigate homelessness by studying how the


are distributed widely enough throughout society. As this lesson illustrates, digital citizenship lessons, materials, and programs should pull from all three visions of citizenship.

When defining social media policies, school leaders and educators should consider which visions of digital citizenship those policies promote. For many schools, promoting digital citizenship for democracy will require moving from primarily teaching students to make safe and responsible online choices toward preparing for active and conscientious participation in digital spaces. In the 21st century,

## Citizenship today *is* digital.

issue is represented across different media, including mainstream print news stories, social media posts, and advocacy-group videos. (These media can be selected by the teacher and posted in a Storify “story.”) To exhibit personally responsible citizenship, students and teachers can discuss how messages vary by different media forms and interrogate the credibility of each source. After synthesizing and summarizing the different stories, students can “remix” the stories by creating their own greenscreen newscasts where they detail not only the current realities of homelessness, but also how different media portray the issue (Krutka, 2017). By posting their videos and other media creations online, students can contribute as participatory digital citizens to important public conversations about 21st century media literacy.

Moreover, like good reporters, students can raise justice-oriented questions about the homeless population as a marginalized group and ask whether systems, resources, and opportunities

students cannot just dissect frogs, sentences, or documents; they must be able to dissect tweets, snaps, and posts. They must also understand how to leverage the positives of new technologies to strengthen their communities and fulfill their civic responsibilities. When school leaders ban social media and fail to develop powerful visions for digital citizenship, they neglect to educate students for our digitally connected world, where citizenship is digital. 

### References

- Barber, B. (1984). *Strong democracy: Participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Common Sense Media. (n.d.). Digital citizenship. Retrieved from [www.common-sense.org/education/digital-citizenship](http://www.common-sense.org/education/digital-citizenship)
- Flores, C., Pazdan, K., & Pikelný, M. (2013, November 25). *Twittering at the gates: Using social media for social justice*. Presentation at the Annual Convention of the National Council for the Social Studies, St. Louis, MO.
- International Society for Technology in Education. (2016). Standards for students. Retrieved from [www.iste.org/standards/standards/for-students](http://www.iste.org/standards/standards/for-students)

- Krutka, D. G., & Carpenter, J. P. (2016). Mediating democracy: Social media as curriculum. In C. Wright-Maley & T. Davis (Eds.), *Teaching for democracy in an age of economic disparity* (pp. 227–246). New York: Routledge.
- Krutka, D. G. (2017). Remixing current events: Navigating the transmedia terrain with fifth graders. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 29(4), 27–31.
- Rheingold, H. (2012). *Net smart: How to thrive online*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ribble, M. (2015). *Digital citizenship in schools: Nine elements all students should know* (3rd ed.). Eugene, OR: International Society for Technology in Education.
- Rivedal, K. (2017, May 8). Madison students required to disconnect from social media apps in pilot program. *Wisconsin State Journal*. Retrieved from [http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local\\_schools/madison-students-required-to-disconnect-from-social-media-apps-in/article\\_d622c932-3aa6-513b-a517-a6ff8715d8b8.html](http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/madison-students-required-to-disconnect-from-social-media-apps-in/article_d622c932-3aa6-513b-a517-a6ff8715d8b8.html)
- Rosen, J. (2012). The people formerly known as the audience. In M. Mandiberg (Ed.), *The social media reader* (pp. 13–16). New York: New York University Press.
- Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 41(2), 237–269.
- Wineburg, S., & McGrew, S. (2016, November 1). Why students can't Google their way to the truth. *Education Week*. Retrieved from [www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/02/why-students-cant-google-their-way-to.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2016/11/02/why-students-cant-google-their-way-to.html)

---

**Daniel G. Krutka** ([dankrutka@gmail.com](mailto:dankrutka@gmail.com)) is assistant professor of social studies education at the University of North Texas. **Jeffrey P. Carpenter** ([jcarpenter13@elon.edu](mailto:jcarpenter13@elon.edu)) is associate professor of education and director of the Teaching Fellows Program at Elon University, North Carolina. Follow them on Twitter @dankrutka and @jeffpcarpenter.

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.