

10-20-2010

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Recommended Citation

Rosenfeld, Barbara, "The Challenge of Teaching Ethics in Technology" (2010). *NERA Conference Proceedings 2010*. Paper 13.
http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/nera_2010/13

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The Challenge of Teaching Ethics in Technology

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Part of Symposium Session 1.5

Ethics Across the Curriculum:

Exploration by an Interdisciplinary Academic Community of Inquiry

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Northeastern Educational Research Association Annual Conference

Oct 20-22, 2010

Rocky Hill, CT

Abstract

This paper investigates some of the ethical issues related to being a good digital citizen and keeping users safe in an online environment. Parents and educators should teach their children about the dangers of cyberspace as well as the beneficial aspects of being able to access many resources and communicate with others. The trend toward using electronic communication devices both in and out of the school environment is one that many educators embrace, but key issues must be addressed to maintain both physical safety and good mental health.

Keywords: cyber bullying, cyberethics, cybersafety, digital citizen, electronic communication

The Challenge of Teaching Ethics in Technology

Technology use is ubiquitous in many schools at the beginning of the 21st century. Students are taught to use computers and other technologies, but all too often ethical issues related to computer use remain unaddressed. Recent surveys reveal that K-12 students receive little to no training in the area of cyberethics, while about a third of the teachers had not taught any topics related to cyberethics in the past 12 months (National Cyberethics, Cybersafety, Cybersecurity Baseline Study [NCCCBS], 2009; Survey of U.S. K-12 Cyberethics, Cybersafety and Cybersecurity Curriculum, 2010). Many teachers feel unprepared to go beyond teaching technical competency to teaching ethical implications (NCCCBS, 2009).

Although there are numerous ethical issues related to the use of computer technology, this paper limits the discussion to issues related to keeping digital users safe and being good digital citizens. How can we alert children to the dangers of the Internet and provide suggestions to prevent them from getting hurt?

Changing Identities – Honesty in Cyberspace

One of the attributes of exchanging information via email and the Internet is that you can correspond with people you have not yet met in person. Precisely because you don't know them and they don't know you, it is possible to fabricate your own persona to become someone else. I have a short, bald friend whose personal online data suggest that he is a six foot macho man. Is this creative or is it cavalier? Is he being ethical when he publicizes his personal information? Further, is this behavior generally acceptable?

Many people are aware that some individuals choose to fabricate their personal data. However, there have been too many instances of middle-aged men posing as

teenagers trying to entrap young, naïve girls. Most would agree that this is unethical and a negative aspect of exchanging information on the Internet. Preying on innocent youngsters is never in good taste; most would agree that this is unacceptable behavior.

Changing or fabricating identities occurs often in cyberspace. Video games and web sites such as Second Life allow the user to create an avatar that is manipulated by the user. The avatar can have a persona similar to the user or can be completely dissimilar, for example, having the opposite gender or having animal features. Creativity is assumed with these avatars and it is not surprising if the avatar's persona is completely different from the persona of the user in real life.

Although the social networking site Facebook is meant for people, some on Facebook have created accounts for their pets. In another instance, parents, hoping to "friend" their children, put up fake identities (Stein, 2009). Are these examples of ethical behavior?

The software that is presently available makes it easy to edit pictures and video. Anyone who knows how to use this software can put the head of one person on the body of another. Posting these kinds of pictures in public spaces could lead to false identifications and/or place people in compromising situations. This would probably also be viewed as an unethical behavior.

Strom and Strom (2007) cite a national survey of 1600 middle and high school parents who were asked to rank the relative importance of teaching 11 values related to character development. The value with the highest rating (chosen by 91 percent of the parents) was that their children should be taught to be honest and truthful.

There seem to be communication lapses between the values these parents have for their children and what is happening in cyberspace. Are children getting a mixed message: It's okay to state falsehoods when you are in cyberspace, but when one is not in cyberspace, one must be honest? Maybe the message is that it's okay to be dishonest wherever one is?

Teaching Children Good Digital Citizenship

Villano (2008) reports on digital citizenship projects to help students understand what it means to be a good digital citizen. A good digital citizen follows the same basic guidelines as a citizen on the ground, "Obey the law, have respect for others, act civilly and sensibly" (p. 47). Villano offers examples of a good digital citizen (one who protects personal information and turns off one's cell phone in class) and a bad digital citizen (one who misrepresents oneself on Facebook and forwards pictures of friends in compromising positions).

The Center for Education Policy and Law at the University of San Diego has collected model documents for school use of electronic communication devices (ECDs such as cellphones, computers, pagers, and other devices that permit direct communication and/or social networking.) These documents outline appropriate uses of these devices and provide sample agreements for student use (Quillen, 2010). This framework allows particular school districts to develop their own guidelines for their specific needs. It is of interest to note that these documents acknowledge the trend of using ECDs in schools and gives this trend legitimacy (Quillen). The documents address what an ECD is, when school rules are in effect, what inappropriate use is, when schools can punish students for inappropriate use outside school, and consequences of

inappropriate use. However, having guidelines alone are not sufficient, so various school districts have broached this need by providing organized parent/student workshops, parent/teacher conferences, workshops for students and/or online classes for teachers (Villano, 2008).

Cyber bullying, generally considered another example of a bad digital citizen, has become a hot topic for educators. Massachusetts and some other states have addressed this issue by passing laws that give teachers the responsibility to respond to, report, and address cyber bullying (Englander & Schank, 2010). Some researchers point out that although children may be comfortable using technology, they may not know much about its use and misuse (Braender, Kapp, Years, 2009; Englander and Schank, 2010). Therefore, the need is great for teachers to respond to and/or report inappropriate behaviors and to give their students information about safety and security issues.

Keeping Children Safe

What else should children know about using the Internet and email? Certainly children should be warned about people masquerading as someone else. They should be warned about going to private chat rooms with people they don't know. They should not be allowed to meet anyone they do not know without parental permission. The old warning about not talking to strangers is a good one and carries from real life into cyberspace. Parents should monitor their children's use of the Internet at home and teachers should monitor school use to make sure that children are not abusing or being abused. Children need to be taught appropriate cyber etiquette. As children get older and more mature, they should take more responsibility for their online work as good digital citizens.

Adults also need to beware of the dangers that abound in the online community. Everyone should be advised about privacy settings, especially on social networking sites. I just heard about a woman who lost her job because she vented on her Facebook page about her employers (some of whom were her “friends”). She had not set any privacy options on her Facebook page, something she later regretted. This brings to mind a well-known guideline about the contents of any cyber message or posting: If you wouldn’t mind seeing your message on the 6 o’clock news, then it is probably okay to send or post. If the contents are sensitive in nature, perhaps you should discuss the matter in a less public space.

Recent news of suicides due to cyber bullying and online invasions of privacy have shocked the public consciousness, so laws are being passed to address cyberethics. In November, 2010, the New Jersey state legislature passed an “Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights” that is awaiting the governor’s signature. This bill would become the strictest anti-bullying statute in the U.S. (Friedman, 2010). As states pass laws necessary to protect its citizens, perhaps students will receive the needed instruction to keep them safe when they go into the online environment. This is a trend that will hopefully continue so that all may benefit from the plethora of information that is available and the healthy communication that is possible when one ventures into cyberspace.

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