

Rethinking citizenship

Dr. Steven Van Zoost

So there I was, rethinking citizenship in The Shire (the nickname of my classroom). It was a warm day in May when Mrs. Matheson, a teacher from a nearby elementary school, brought her grade 5/6 class to meet with my grade 12 students and I admit—it was a lot for one classroom. Certainly, there were many people in The Shire and there were many intriguing conversations. The grade 5/6 class had been reading chapters from the grade 12 students' book *realfriends: stop cliquing, start connecting*, published earlier in the spring of 2011, and their teacher was interested in educating her class about cyberbullying. She contacted me to ask about connecting our two classes. We connected in The Shire by hosting a three-hour workshop about digital citizenship.

Let me tell you—it was fun. It was fun to plan a student workshop with a teacher from another school and grade level. It was fun to facilitate conversations among our multi-aged students. It was fun to learn from their ideas about digital citizenship. Let me provide you with a description of the workshop and samples of what students were able to collectively think about and produce in The Shire that day.

First, students individually recorded what they considered characteristics of good citizens. They read descriptions of this year's student recipients of the Premier's Power of Positive Change Award for inspiration. Then they met in triads (two elementary students with one high school student) to share their ideas and choose three common characteristics. Typically, students chose words such as "involved," "helpful," "caring," or "thoughtful" to describe a good citizen. Together, they thought about the following questions and the Grade 12 students recorded their group's responses:

- What does a person do to demonstrate these characteristics in the "real" world?
- What does a person do to demonstrate these characteristics in a digital world?
- What does a person do to undermine these characteristics in a digital world?
- What guidelines should be in place to encourage positive digital citizenship?

During lunch, and in a "fish-bowl" scenario, Mrs. Matheson and I modeled how to categorize the many guidelines that the students had created in their triad groups. Our goal was to produce five guide-

lines for digital citizenship that were written not by adult policy-makers, but by the multi-aged students in our classrooms. After all, problems are best solved by those who own them. I believe that young people need to learn and practice how they can contribute to their communities and the wider world as current citizens. Involving students in creating these guidelines was one way that young people could see how their perspectives can inform social expectations.

By the end of the working lunch, our workshop had produced five student-created guidelines for digital citizenship:

- Students should use technology to protect their online security.
- Students should represent themselves using positive values and beliefs.
- Students should be mindful of others in their online behaviour.
- Students should use technology to create and sustain community.
- Students should respect the privacy and property of others.

After lunch, the students reorganized into new groups and worked through a series of case studies that they co-created. Each group described a scenario that related to a specific guideline. For example, one scenario went as follows: "Jack logs into Facebook. As he is checking his newsfeed, he sees his name mentioned on Sean's status. Sean was calling-out Jack by saying he had a huge ego and was full of himself." The scenarios were passed to other groups who would offer multiple ways of responding to the situation. The

scenarios were returned to the writers who chose what they considered to be the best response.

I'm leaving parts out, you know. I did not mention how I primed my grade 12 class for working with younger students. How one of my colleagues, a guidance counsellor, came and observed the workshop to monitor students' levels of comfort in this unfamiliar setting and combination of students. How technology consultants from my school board and the Department of Education came to observe the workshop. How the students recorded themselves on video, responding to a series of questions such as, "Why is digital citizenship important?" How our classes later exchanged thank you cards. How I am still reflecting on our pedagogical practices from the notes I made about this collaborative experience. How digital citizenship seemed to be a topic that put students of different ages and interests "on common ground."

At the end of the workshop, the students completed an individual reflection that included two questions that sought advice for others beyond The Shire.

What should other students in Nova Scotia know about digital citizenship?

- They should know about how to go online and not hurt people's feelings. They should also know about digital citizenship guidelines. – grade 5/6 student
 - They should know to treat people the way you want to be treated. – grade 5/6 student
 - That citizenship is about more than protecting your information; it is about making the world a healthier, more positive place. – grade 12 student
- What suggestions do you have for teachers to promote digital citizenship?
- I think they should talk about it in class. – grade 5/6 student
 - Explain that it does not take long for simple things to turn into bad rumors online. – grade 5/6 student
 - Technology is an unavoidable part of the lives of younger children. All of

the grade 5/6 students I spoke to knew more about the digital world than I did. Teachers should promote things for students to help take social action and encourage online positivism and kindness. Students should make more face-to-face connections and then they will find that their online personality will become healthier. – grade 12 student

It is no secret that concerns about cyberbullying are heightened for many people in Nova Scotia. In fact, the Department of Education plans to release a report on cyberbullying later this fall. My concern is broader than cyberbullying. How can we, as educators, foster digital citizenship that is not only about following school rules, but about a greater awareness of consequences and opportunities in a digital world? How can we help students understand the context of online behavior and create positive uses for digital participation? Over the past year, we have witnessed how social media sites have allowed the world to respond to a tsunami in Japan, an earthquake in New Zealand, and political instability in Libya. We've also witnessed "flashrobs" in England and other group crimes that have been initiated in a digital world. Perhaps now, more than ever, students need to learn how words can be used for good or for bad, in person or more permanently e-fossilized in a digital world. Perhaps now, more than ever, students need to learn about how new guidelines for citizenship will be expected of them to participate in worlds that are beyond The Shire—guidelines for digital citizenship.

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