Discussion Topics

Children as Digital Citizens: insights from classroom research with digital dilemmas

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Dear Editors,

this special issue of the journal focuses on "Children and the Digital" and, importantly, is grounded in the Reggio Emilia-based editors' image of the child as a knowledgeable, curious, and capable agent and citizen. This view is highly relevant as we consider the opportunities at youths' fingertips in a connected world and, crucially, the ways educators can support digital citizenship.

For over a decade, we have been careful observers of young people's experiences as they grow up in an age of radical connectivity. Our studies have spanned the ways digital life intersects with adolescents' mental health and well-being, close relationships, civic development, and moral and ethical decision-making, among other topics. We are based at Project Zero, a research center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education where designing powerful, student-centered learning experiences in partnership with educators is a central focus.

Our own latest round of research has focused on digital dilemmas. We study dilemmas by investigating young people's perspectives. Our multi-generational research team includes youth as co-researchers. As we do this research, we often struggle ourselves to find satisfying answers to the digital dilemmas that youth (and indeed all of us) may encounter: *If someone participates in a hateful protest, is it fair game to use social media to expose personal information that might in turn compromise their physical safety or employment? Is it okay to share violent videos online to call attention to what is happening in the world, even if the content is triggering to some viewers? When is it reasonable to expose people's past posts and private messages?*

For many adolescents, social media use is now a routine aspect of everyday life. Interspersed with social updates and casual sharing on apps, young people encounter weighty civic posts and decision points about what to share, re-post, "like", and screenshot, as well as what content to follow, unfollow, mute, and block. We believe that good citizenship in a networked world requires knowledge, skills, and dispositions to recognize and grapple with digital dilemmas.

Although digital citizenship has been on schools' agendas for some time, it often takes the form of cautionary tales and a list of "Don'ts" *Don't* cyberbully. *Don't* believe everything you read. *Don't* post anything

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that could get you in trouble, kicked out of school, or denied a job opportunity.

Supporting young people in a networked era requires approaches that meet the complexity of our times. We therefore advocate intentionally educating *with* and *for* digital dilemmas, using pedagogies that lean in versus skirt the complexity.

Dilemma scenarios have long been used as signature tools in moral psychology and in education – going back at least to Lawrence Kohlberg's model of just schools (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975). When our team started working with educators to use digital dilemma scenarios in the classroom, we found that they immediately sparked students' engagement and interest, in no small part because they are provocative and often directly relevant to students' lives.

But we also saw how youth (and even adults) can get stuck on their initial or "gut" reactions. We wanted to design prompts that help push past first reactions to support deeper consideration of one's own views and intentional dialogue with others' views. This is all the more important because digital life can itself trap us in echo chambers where we only engage with perspectives that reinforce our existing views. Good citizenship certainly requires broader consideration, and classroom discussions are an apt context for discussing dilemmas with others and debating pros and cons of different paths forward.

Good thinking is foundational to digital citizenship and to citizenship more broadly. Pedagogies that invite reflection and intentional listening to different perspectives are recognized as best practices in civic education (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Much of our work has converged around the aim of helping students develop dispositions that guide reflective, responsible, and ethical use of technology (James, Weinstein, & Mendoza, 2021). These essential *dispositions for digital* life include *slowing down* to recognize dilemmas as they arise; *self-reflecting* on responsibilities to self, close relations, and wider communities; *exploring perspectives* (especially those that differ from one's own); *seeking facts and evidence* to make informed decisions; and building agency through *envisioning options and impacts, and taking actions* that are both self-protective and socially responsible.

How do we get there? In classroom practice, thinking routines are an established powerful pedagogy to support dispositions (Ritchhart et al., 2011; Tishman et al., 1993), Taking direct inspiration from our Project Zero colleagues' long-standing work on thinking routines and dispositions, we created classroom routines like *Take A Stand*.

Co-developed with our collaborators at Common Sense Education, *Take A Stand* is designed for use in conjunction with dilemma scenarios. This four-step protocol gets students in the habit of considering and reconsidering their own and others' perspectives. It especially directs consideration to tensions between responsibilities to individuals and responsibilities to the wider world and civic life.

In brief, the Take A Stand protocol prompts are:
Take a stand: What do you think?
Stand back: Listen to classmates' perspectives
Look again: Think back to your initial response. What considerations did others raise that you hadn't considered?
Look beyond: How does this dilemma connect to real world situations?

When paired with a digital dilemma that feels relevant to students' lives, *Take a Stand* can be a powerful structure for reflection, listening, and learning. In a public middle school in Los Angeles, California, USA, a teacher paired *Take a Stand* with a dilemma scenario about the ethics of streaming fights online. The topic was timely: a recent public incident at nearby Disneyland had led to viral videos of a fight that erupted between two people. The videos had received widespread attention online and from the police, who used the video as evidence to arrest one of the aggressors. The fight was local news for students. This incident and concerns about a larger "record everything" culture among students sparked the teacher's interest in bringing the scenario into her classroom. The school district's recent launch of a 1:1 iPad policy, which gave students ongoing access to their own recording devices throughout the school day, was another motivator.

Take a Stand prompted stances across the spectrum from approval to disapproval and created space for students to give voice to different considerations on the ethics of recording and streaming violence on social media. Students discussed instances when recording violence is for entertainment or done to attract more views on one's posts versus instances when recording is carried out as an effort "to serve justice" (for instance, in cases of police brutality). Whether and when to use mobile devices for recording purposes – a thorny dilemma – became an accessible topic for rich, purposeful classroom learning. Importantly, the thinking routine provided a way to scaffold deeper awareness of one's own values and authentic listening and engagement with others' perspectives.

Digital dilemmas offer opportunities for talking with students about hard situations *before* they arise in students' own lives. When we pair them with thinking routines like *Take a Stand*, we can build students' sense

of agency by supporting dispositions to envision options and possible impacts. Such dispositions can then help them make informed decisions in their real, radically connected lives. Students share reflections like:

- "You have to be aware of the implications of your actions, not just from where it takes you but where it takes other people"
- "You need to look from multiple perspectives and make sure you know every outcome"
- "One thing I took away from today's activity was that if something big and negative is happening nearby, and [if] we have the power to try to stop it, we should, instead of posting it on social media."
- "We have to take in consideration of others and posting may ruin their reputation."
- "Once we take out our phones and start filming the problem we've automatically become part of it"

We share this vignette from classroom-based research in the U.S. in order to highlight the power and potential of leaning into digital dilemmas. As readers consider the topic of this special issue – "Children and the digital" – we advocate consideration of an approach that centers dispositions for digital life and pedagogies that may support it.

Note

An earlier version of this comment appeared as a blog post on The Good Project Blog
https://www.thegoodproject.org/good-blog/2021/8/5/taking-a-stand-on-good-citizenship
Educators interested in using the *Take a Stand* routine to bring digital civic dilemmas into their classrooms are invited to access the following free resources: Take A Stand Educator Guide and Student Handout.

References

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