everyone does It:

FEATURE

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From sharing embarrassing photos of friends to impersonating a teacher online, young people need to be aware of their rights and responsibilities as digital citizens. Using anonymity to avoid face-to-face contact, misrepresenting oneself on a social network, and even participating in libelous or fraudulent activities are increasingly common practices of teens in social network situations.
Both the insecurities and rebellious nature of young people are accentuated online. Although students have the right to free speech and expression, they are also ethically and legally responsible for their online actions. For instance, some young people use social networks to threaten, harass, or embarrass other students. Known as cyberbullying, this type of activity can rise to the level of a misdemeanor charge.

Freedom of expression provides the foundation for some of our most important human rights, including freedoms of speech, press, and association. The introduction of social technologies has expanded opportunities for the free flow of information. With these freedoms and technologies, however, come responsibilities of protecting individual privacy, confidentiality, and intellectual property. When our freedoms or responsibilities conflict with our values, ethical dilemmas emerge.

Ethical Use of Social Technology

From sharing embarrassing photos of friends to impersonating a teacher online, young people need to be aware of their rights and responsibilities as digital citizens. Using anonymity to avoid face-to-face contact, misrepresenting oneself on a social network, and even participating in libelous or fraudulent activities are increasingly common practices of teens in social network situations.

A recent study found that more than half of teens post false information in online profiles (Lenhart and Madden 2007). The Associated Press–MTV survey on digital abuse (Knowledge Networks 2009) polled young adults about their Internet use. More than three-quarters of respondents indicated that digital abuse such as harassing, impersonating, or embarrassing others online is a serious problem, and 34 percent felt that digital abuse affects them personally.

"I’m sharing a hilarious photo of my teacher with my bff on Facebook. No one else will see it, so it’s okay."

"I’m overweight, but I made my avatar skinny. It feels good to look thin."

"I lied about my age on Facebook, but everyone does it."

Children and young adults go through several stages of moral development as they become more self-aware. While some researchers believe that individuals have a single, environmental-independent moral character, others believe that a person’s actions are situational and influenced by contextual factors rather than internal traits. Regardless of the psychology, it’s clear that young people need guidance in their development as digital citizens.

The AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (2007) list skills related to legal and ethical use of social technologies, including the following:

"1.3.3 Follow ethical and legal guidelines in gathering and using information."

"2.3.3 Use valid information and reasoned conclusions to make ethical decisions."

"3.1.6 Use information and technology ethically and responsibly."

"4.3.4 Practice safe and ethical behaviors in personal electronic communication and interaction."

Social Technology and Moral Development

Many resources are available for teaching digital citizenship; however, it is important to keep in mind the developmental stages of young people, as well as their ability to deal with the deeper ethical issues. In other words, just because a student provides the socially acceptable answer to a dilemma does not mean the child understands the underlying moral issue being discussed.

According to Piaget (1953), as children develop, they are increasingly able to understand different perspectives and put themselves in the place of others. They move from an egocentric perspective to a place where different points of view are respected.

Kohlberg’s six stages of moral development (1981) reflect the increasing ability of humans to respond to moral dilemmas as they develop:

Stage 1 - Obedience. What solution avoids punishment for me?

Stage 2 - Self-Interest Orientation. What solution helps me?

Stage 3 - Conformity. What solution best fits with social norms?

Stage 4 - Authority. What solution best fits with the laws of society?

Stage 5 - Human Rights. What solution best addresses human rights?

Stage 6 - Universal Human Ethics. What solution addresses fundamental human principles?
At the preconventional level, young children move through stages one and two. Adolescents moving through stages three and four are at the conventional level, comparing their own behavior to society’s views and expectations. At this level, peers and teachers play an important role in the lives of young people, but teens may also rely on social norms to justify their actions with statements such as “my friends will think it’s funny” or “everyone does it.” Finally, some adults reach the postconventional level where an individual can separate himself or herself from society and live by more abstract principles of right and wrong.

In his studies, Kohlberg was interested in how individuals would justify their actions in a particular situation rather than on the actions themselves. In other words, he was interested in the moral reasoning displayed.

Information, Choices, and Action

Because each learner is at a different stage of his or her moral development, teaching these concepts in the context of social technologies is difficult. Rather than focusing on the “right” and “wrong” behavior in particular situations, it may be more useful to help young people develop their moral reasoning through practice in decision-making situations. The decision-making process involves a series of mental exercises, leading to the selection of a course of action. The goal is to help young people act with integrity, respecting themselves and others.

As students explore examples, scenarios, case studies, and dilemmas, ask them to think about the information shared through social technology, the choices they have about sharing information, and the potential impact of their actions (Lamb and Callison 2011).

Teaching Strategies and Methods

To address the AASL’s Standards for the 21st-Century Learner (2007), school librarians can use a variety of approaches to discuss ethical issues related to social technology. Instructional strategies include examples, scenarios, case studies, and dilemmas.

A number of teaching methods—such as brainstorming, debates, discussions, lectures, role-playing, and simulations—can be applied to these instructional strategies. When selecting a teaching method, keep in mind that some students may feel too self-conscious or even threatened to participate. Using small groups, providing clear instructions, and applying generic situations rather than personal events can reduce stress. As students feel more comfortable, deeper and more personal topics may be used. Many resources are available for teaching digital citizenship. A few are listed below:

Common Sense Media <www.commonsensemedia.org>
CyberSmart <http://cybersmartcurriculum.org>

Conclusion

An important aspect of the ethical use of social technology is helping young people learn to make good choices about the information they access and share. Teaching students to be ethical and responsible users of social technology requires much more than simply providing guidelines for acceptable use. It is the responsibility of the school librarian to guide young people through the process of making ethical decisions.

Works Cited:


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ETHICAL USE OF
SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY

Youth should analyze and evaluate the information they receive from others or create themselves through social technology. They must distinguish between truth and lies.

TRUTH

QUESTIONS:
+ Is it true or false?
+ Is it fact or opinion?
+ Is it accurate or inaccurate?
+ Is it legal or illegal?
+ Is it exaggerated, distorted, or biased?
+ Is it fabricated or invented?

FALSEHOOD

QUESTIONS:
+ Is it omitting, teasing, or sarcastic?
+ Is it misleading, misdirecting, or misrepresented (i.e., propaganda)?
+ Is it fraudulent (i.e., lying for personal gain)?
+ Is it misconception or misinformation?

EXAMPLES:
+ A rumor that a classmate is pregnant
+ A photograph modified to look like a peer is shoplifting
+ An exaggerated story about a personal sexual exploit
+ An illegally downloaded song

EXERCISE.

Youth must make choices about their use of information in social networking situations. They should consider their reasons for sharing information, as well as issues of privacy for themselves and others.

USE

QUESTIONS:
+ Will sharing the information be helpful or harmful?
+ Is it intended to cause damage or disruption?
+ Is the underlying reason for sharing this information revenge, self-promotion, personal profit, or monetary gain?
+ Could this information be misinterpreted or misunderstood?
+ Could this information negatively impact the reputation or feelings of others?
+ Is use of the information malicious or intended to defame?

EXAMPLES:
+ A friend has been posting poems about suicide on his Facebook account. Only his friends can see these postings. I’m concerned. Should I tell the counselor, knowing my friend might get mad?
+ I could just share the photo with my friends for fun, but if others saw the image it might hurt my reputation. Should I post the photo to my friends?
+ I don’t think Pete’s parents know he’s gay, so I’m concerned about sharing the video on YouTube where everyone can see it. I don’t want to “out” him without permission. Should I edit him out of the video and post it?
+ Beth didn’t say anything about keeping her new job a secret, so is it okay to tell everyone or should I ask first?

MISUSE

QUESTIONS:
+ Is it intended to trick or deceive?
+ Could this information be threatening, intimidating, or harassing?
+ Could this information be used in a negative way?
+ Was this information obtained by invading someone’s privacy?
+ Was this information intended to be confidential?
+ Is this information intended for self, friends, or everyone?
+ How likely is it that the information will be shared beyond the intended audience?
+ Has permission been given to share this information?

EXAMPLES:
+ When I received the photo on my iPhone, I thought it was hilarious. Because it’s embarrassing for my friend, though, I’m not going to forward it to my friends.
+ My friend’s health is more important than our friendship. I’m going to get her some help.
+ I think the proposed ATV trail will be harmful to the environment. Although my conservative friends might be mad, I’m posting the cause on my profile because I think it’s important.

ACTION.

Youth should take action based on moral reasoning. They must determine the value they place on honesty and privacy.

RIGHT

QUESTIONS:
+ What’s the issue and what’s at stake?
+ What are the elements of the dilemma?
+ What are the potential actions?
+ Who will be affected by my actions? How?
+ What are the potential consequences of my action?
+ Who would be impacted by my decision?
+ Is the decision influenced by peer pressure or outside factors?
+ Is this situation unique to social technology? What if technology weren’t involved?
+ Why is this problem hard to solve?
+ What is right and what does “right” mean?
+ What is the decision?
+ What are the reasons or arguments for making this decision?

EXAMPLES:
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WRONG
**Examples** and non-examples are important because they help students learn defined concepts. Individual instances are used to help students distinguish characteristics and classify elements of a concept.

Zach set up a YouTube account using his teacher’s name and personal information. He sent a text message to his teacher threatening to post a video showing the teacher smoking pot unless his grade is changed to an A. This is an example of fraud.

**Scenarios** are descriptions of situations that provide a context for discussion or debate. They help young people visualize a series of actions, and can be used to test out ideas and strategies. Unfortunately, they can also be overly simplistic, leading to inappropriate generalizations.

Susan notices that Ben left his computer without logging off. She opens his e-mail and sends embarrassing messages to his friends. She thinks it’s okay because “he didn’t log off and it’s a free country.” Do you agree or disagree with her reasoning?

**Case Studies** are in-depth examinations of specific situations. While they are useful in exploring complex situations, they can be time-consuming to prepare and may not meet the spectrum of needs.

Rebecca is twelve and a seventh-grader at Richmond Middle School. She has a computer with Internet access in her room and knows her parents keep track of her use. She isn’t allowed to have a cell phone at school, but she hides it in her pocket. She lied about her age to get a Facebook account. In which situations is Rebecca acting responsibility and irresponsibly?

**Dilemmas** are situations where multiple options are provided, but none are acceptable. For instance, a dilemma may address two moral principles that require different courses of action. When students are asked to determine and justify a course of action, they learn to act on the principles of justice and fairness rather than on self-interests or social norms. Students need to be aware that there may be many conflicting opinions. Although this approach can be overwhelming for some students, it is effective at addressing the core issues.

In my social issues class, our team has been documenting through photographs the increase in homelessness in our community. While going through the digital photos team members took of homeless people, I realized many photos included a student from our school. I’m supposed to upload our photos to Flickr before class today. What should I do?