



‘It’s time to teach students about the internet as a force for good and not evil’

Reuben Loewy

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Digital citizenship education is too geared towards warning young people about the dangers of the internet, so we need to develop a new approach to digital literacy says this American teacher

Today, children are largely living their lives online. So, how have we allowed our schools’ [curricula](#) to fall so far out of step with the world that we are not fully preparing young people for this reality?

This paradox struck me when I started teaching journalism and media studies at a secondary school in New Jersey, USA, four years ago. As a former foreign correspondent, I am neither geek nor techie, and while my students may not have had much knowledge about the internet, they had a huge appetite to learn and discuss their online experiences.

However, the bulk of the classroom material available was (and still is) on [cybersafety](#) and digital citizenship. In other words: rules about what not to do online, and rules about how to be a well-behaved user of the internet. This spurred me on to develop my own curriculum to teach a more general course about the internet, while also setting up a non-profit organisation, Living Online Lab, to promote and support the teaching of internet studies everywhere.

A holistic approach

The Living Online curriculum now counts more than 30 lesson plans with accompanying online multimedia resources concentrated on five areas: about the internet; the internet and us; digital and media literacy; the dark side of the web; the web we want. Lessons cover topics such as privacy, cyberpsychology, algorithms, remix, big data and metadata, reading and writing in the digital era, online empathy, and the business models of the internet. The curriculum is based on a holistic approach to teaching about the internet and digital technology as an



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unparalleled opportunity, rather than primarily as a threat. *The Atlantic* has described the curriculum that I, and a growing number of colleagues in a number of countries, have been teaching for close to two years now as “the liberal arts of virtual living.”

Knowledge and awareness of the crucial role of the internet in our society, and how we should interact most appropriately with digital technology, is key to helping students thrive, both in social, work, and academic environments. Blocking, filtering, and scare tactics are certainly not constructive approaches to helping them learn to navigate the new digital ecosystem and become true citizens of the wired world. Our students are certainly relishing the opportunity to learn both about the nuts and bolts of the internet, as well as about internet culture and to discuss their own online experiences in a non-judgmental environment.

Digital citizens

Fortunately, there is a growing recognition that in limiting ourselves to teaching a predominantly negative and reactive view of the digital world, we are in fact doing students a disservice. The “fake news’ epidemic amply demonstrated that students (as well as adults) urgently need guidance. And as the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications succinctly pointed out in its March 2017 report, *Growing up with the Internet*: “Digital literacy, that is, the skills and knowledge to critically understand the internet, is vital for children to navigate the online world...no child should leave school without a well-rounded understanding of the digital world.”

Our goal should be to educate students so that they may function as responsible, ethical, informed and critical members of society, both on and offline. How else can they take full advantage of all the opportunities that the internet has to offer, as well as protect themselves against the inevitable pitfalls?

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