UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

THE JUBILEE CENTRE FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

PROMOTING CHARACTER AND WISDOM THROUGH DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Discussing challenges and solutions for policy

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INTRODUCTION

The <u>Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues</u> is currently undertaking the project, _Cultivating Cyber-Phronesis,_ which is based on the delivery and evaluation of a school programme that aims at cultivating cyber-wisdom – the quality of doing the right thing at the right time, when online – among secondary school students aged 13-16 in England.

In our work, we draw on the Aristotelian concept of phronesis (i.e., practical wisdom) to approach cyber-wisdom as a meta-virtue that enables users to deploy online multiple character virtues (e.g., compassion, honesty, respect for others, social justice) depending on context. We argue that such an approach overlaps with, and should be promoted more robustly through, digital citizenship education. This is concerned with the teaching of how to use digital technologies responsibly, especially when interacting with others and with a view to participating in society. As such, we believe that cyber-wisdom education is a necessary condition for empowering users to navigate both online opportunities (e.g., for learning, entertainment, socialization) and risks (e.g., misinformation, privacy, online abuse such as cyberbullying).

In this collection we have asked three experts in the field to provide a view on how character and wisdom might be promoted through digital citizenship education. The collection sits alongside a recording made by the three experts discussing their ideas and can be viewed <u>here</u>.

We hope the papers and the recording add to important ongoing discussions about how best to support children and young people to maximise the opportunities of being online and help them to flourish in the digital age.

Dr. Tom Harrison
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Developing character virtues and wisdom through a holistic approach to digital citizenship education.

JANICE RICHARDSON

Digital citizens can be described as individuals able to use digital tools to create, consume, communicate and engage positively and responsibly with others, respect human rights, embrace diversity, and become lifelong learners in order to keep step with evolutions in society. Digital citizenship education (DCE) must therefore strive to develop skills and knowledge to equip citizens for their life in today's digitally rich society, while fostering the values and attitudes to ensure that such skills and knowledge are used wisely and meaningfully. As the boundaries between life on– and offline are becoming progressively more blurred, and online actions have ripple effects on our offline lives and vice versa, DCE calls for a holistic approach that touches on every aspect of life.

For policy making to be effective in any area, and especially in education, it needs to be based on research that identifies the needs to be tackled and defines goals that are in the best interest of society. To ensure take-up by policy makers, the goals and the means of evaluation to measure progress towards those goals must be clearly described. The Council of Europe's DCE model is based on a set of 20 competences (2018) defined through extensive research as those required by every citizen within a democratic culture. They are divided into four categories: Values, Attitudes, Skills, and Knowledge and critical understanding. Character virtues and wisdom have a very large role in the model, since character is largely defined by the values and attitudes of an individual. Responsibility and respect (values), appreciation of human rights and dignity (attitudes), along with listening and observing (skills) and empathy and cooperation (knowledge and critical understanding), constitute the building blocks for a further 13 competences that make up this DCE model. Other competences include valuing justice, fairness, equality (values), self-efficacy, openness, civil mindedness (attitudes), adaptability, critical thinking and conflict resolution.

In November 2019, Council of Europe published a Recommendation (2019) for the promotion of digital citizenship at all levels of education, that was adopted by its 47 member states and embraced as a Declaration by the European Union. Providing 'how to' guidelines is a key factor to facilitate policy take-up, therefore the Annex to the Recommendation offers a set of 9 guiding principles to assist educators in the policy implementation. These define actions at 3 levels: contextual, informational and organisational. Contextual principles cover the basic requirements for getting started with DCE in schools, informational refers to pedagogical supports and resources for educators, and organisational focuses on ways to foster 'living digital citizenship' at school and community level. The Recommendation and the model further define 10 areas where the 20 competences are applicable, providing a framework upon which educators can build a cross-curricular programme, making digital citizenship an integral part of school life rather than an add-on subject.

Besides ensuring that digital citizenship programmes are evidence-based, and offer clear objectives and guiding principles for their implementation, availability of resources plays an essential role in turning policy into practice. The 'Digital Citizenship Education Handbook' (Council of Europe, 2019) is proving a successful resource for teachers, and 2,000 teachers in Ireland are currently using the activity book 'All aboard for DigiTown! (Insight, 2020)' with primary school pupils, with encouraging results.

Nevertheless, the impact of a DCE model that fosters character and virtues depends also on teacher education, and communication efforts to involve everyone in the approach. Citizenship can't simply be learned, it must also be lived, and this calls for participation by the whole community.

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Janice Richardson is the founder of Safer Internet Day, celebrated worldwide since 2004.

Janice is also a noted author, international advisor at Insight S.A, and expert to the Council of Europe, as well as a member of Facebook's Safety and Youth Advisory Boards and Twitter's Trust and Security Council.

How can a character-/virtue-based approach to digital citizenship be promoted through policy? What virtues should be prioritised in the context of digital citizenship education?

DR. TOM CHATFIELD

One cluster of problems that any approach to digital citizenship must address, especially in the context of education, relates to the discerning, critically engaged use of technology — and the question of what it means to use digital resources well.

This in turn begs several questions:

- What does it mean for our relationships with and through technology to be aligned with human flourishing, and with enriching rather than exploitative interactions?

- What does it mean for our use of online platforms and resources to support an informed, empowered engagement with society, rather than make us vulnerable to disinformation, misinformation and manipulation?

A virtue-based approach is well-equipped to address these themes, thanks to its focus on communities of practice and the texture of individual experience, rather than one-size-fits-all "solutions"; and its holistic interest in human thriving and dignity as ends in themselves. Virtue ethics is also an avowedly practical undertaking, and it's for this reason that this paper proposes a concrete approach to promoting virtuous digital citizenship.

In philosophy, the principle of charity suggests that you should always try to extract the maximum reasonable content from someone else's perspective.

This helps ensure that:

- You learn as much as possible from views other than your own

- You put your own views to the best possible test

- You are more likely to be able to persuade or collaborate with those who have a different perspective to your own, rather than simply burning straw men

- You maximise your ability to alter or adapt your own views in the face of new ideas

All of the above illustrate the virtues of charitable engagement as a practical technique for constructively exploring a diversity of perspectives – and, crucially, for pushing back against many of the most pernicious aspects of online interactions, which all too often can be hasty,

emotionally charged, performative, disinterested in truth-seeking, lacking in empathy, and divisive.

I thus propose the teaching and promotion of a five-part approach rooted in the virtues of empathy, compassion, modesty, self-control and curiosity; one that's expressly designed to facilitate the charitable, mutually respectful exchange of views:

- First, pause – and aim to build such pauses into your daily practice when it comes to work and leisure alike. It's the habit of pausing, examining your own thoughts and ideas, then moving beyond instant reactions that opens up all that follows – and that can and should be explicitly built into daily education practice.

- Second, practice confessing uncertainty – by admitting to those things you do not know, or aren't sure about; and where you might need or wish to learn more. There's a tremendous liberation in the habit of honestly admitting "I'm not sure…".

- Third, ask open rather than closed questions of those whose perspective is different to your own. Don't just assume or caricature others' views. Instead, explore their perspectives by habitually asking, "What do you think?" and "Why do you think this?".

- Fourth, attend closely to others' answers and ideas – and then try to reconstruct these carefully, in your own words, in as fair and thorough a way as possible.

- Lastly, explain whether, why and how you disagree only after doing all of the above.

I would suggest that explicitly embedding these habits and practices in education systems speaks to an urgent need in the realm of digital citizenship – and can directly translate into richer and more constructive engagements with and through digital resources, especially if this digital context is foregrounded as an integral part of the teaching process itself.

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Tom took his doctorate and taught at St John's College, University of Oxford, is currently technology and media advisor at Agathos LLP; an Associate at Perspectiva; a Master's Committee member at the Economics Research Council and a guest faculty member at the Said Business School, University of Oxford.

Finding the good.
Building better character online.

JOSH SMITH

In the weeks leading to the 2020 US presidential election, Stanford University ran a course examining how Silicon Valley technologies shape democracy. As part of this series, a short paper by Mariteje Schaake posed a simple question of our digital sphere: "what policies, if any, can best support the information conditions of a healthy democracy?" (Schaake and Reich, 2020). A few months later, as if to demonstrate the importance of Schaake's challenge, a group of rioters, impelled by a steady drumbeat of misinformation and manipulation, invaded the symbolic heart of US democracy.

The ability to remain resilient to misinformation online is an important part of digital citizenship, and events at the Capitol will only have strengthened the resolve of UK politicians already concerned about the involvement of Russia and others in our online spaces. If they are to help people build character, however, digital citizenship programmes must equip people with more than the ability to read critically. The key question here could be posed as a modification of Schaake's challenge: What policies, if any, can best support the development of the character traits required for a healthy society, and produce spaces which enable human flourishing?

The UK government's approach to online space has focused on minimising harms, protecting rights and enabling economic growth. This has been clearly laid out in the government's recent draft Online Safety bill, and the two years of consultation which preceded it. However, while ministerial lip service has been paid to the goal of 'maintaining a thriving democracy and society', the bill itself is silent on how this might positively be promoted (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Home Office, 2020). As Demos, Digital Action and other members of civil society put it in an early joint response to the white paper, education and training "must go beyond 'empowering users to manage their online safety' and toward digital citizenship education, equipping individuals with skills to practice forms of social participation that are respectful of the human rights and dignity of everyone, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups" (2020). While the Online Safety bill is clear on the harms it wants to combat, it sidesteps an opportunity to promote positive use of online space through policy – to ensure the internet is not only 'a great place to do business', but also to develop character.

It often seems that, as a western liberal democracy, the UK knows what it is against online. But if we are to promote spaces which allow people to exercise moral judgement, and practice the 'practical wisdom' of phronesis , it is crucial that we are able to provide an answer to a different question – what are we for?

We know there is an opportunity here, and that online spaces can encourage the development of good character. In 2019, Demos worked with the Jubilee Centre to examine, at scale, how moral virtues are discussed and enacted by UK Twitter users (Smith, Chauvet, Jones, and

Berry, 2019). The resulting report, 'Over The Character Limit', analysed the use of four terms related to moral virtue – 'courage', 'empathy', 'honesty' and 'humility' – to discuss and explore concepts of morality. We also measured moral behaviour on the platform; one of the great joys of conducting research on social media is that – with some experimentation – you can often go beyond listening to discussion, and start observing actions taken in online space.

In our case, we looked for evidence of virtuous action on Twitter in three areas: the charitable sharing of fundraising links, people expressing gratitude to others, and the use of hashtags, like '#100daysofart', which showed regular application to learning a skill. To make sure we weren't simply counting occurrences of words, we trained a series of natural language processing algorithms to help work out, for example, whether moral terms were being used positively or negatively, and to separate 'genuine' expressions of gratitude from conversational niceties and sarcasm – dividing 'thanks very much' from 'thanks for nothing.'

Our results suggested that social media is a vital arena for the development and performance of moral virtues in the UK. We found that Twitter not only provides people with a forum for applying moral concepts, but that there is a positive relationship between the use of moral language and virtuous action; people who regularly used one of our four 'virtue' terms were also more likely to share fundraising links and express gratitude online. Even more passive participation in the virtuous activities of others has an impact – we found that people were more likely to stick to learning a skill online if they received encouragement, in the form of likes or replies, to Tweets showing progress.

This research has a few takeaways for digital citizenship education. Firstly, and concretely, it suggests that helping students to explore and discuss concepts related to moral virtue may help encourage phronesis, and the practical application of virtue online. Secondly, it shows that online space should be seen by policymakers as more than arenas of risk, and that even trivial seeming actions – like hitting 'like' on a friend's sixth daily drawing of a bird – can have positive impacts which could help develop character. Curricula should recognise, and encourage students to consider, the moral impact and positive value of their actions online.

Finally, and this has been threaded through CASM's work since we were founded, any educational policy must reflect and speak to the actual experiences which students are in fact having in the spaces they inhabit. This can only be achieved by understanding how the design and content of social media platforms affect behaviour and the development of character online, both positively and negatively, and adding to our scant knowledge here is perhaps the clearest space in which academics and civil society can contribute to this debate.

Tackling this problem will have repercussions beyond education. At present, our online spaces are designed according to the principle of maximising profit, and regulated according to the principle of minimising harm. he technology companies know how to measure and fine tune the profitability of their products; regulators are increasingly able to draw lines around the content which poses the most serious risks. We do not yet know enough about how to design

for online spaces which enable humans to flourish, or how to encourage them to do so. The inquiries which will be necessary to build this curriculum may be crucial to the way we build, and police, the internet and those who use it.

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