

# **Ethics in a Digital World**

Guiding Students Through Society's Biggest Questions

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# Introduction

In 2018, I wrote a tweet that is still pinned to my Twitter profile. It says that our definition of digital citizenship must expand beyond a list of digital missteps to avoid because what we really need are “thoughtful, empathetic digital citizens who can wrestle with the important ethical questions at the intersection of technology and humanity.” I also asserted that “digital citizenship is the humanities curriculum of today and tomorrow.”

As with most good ideas or aha moments, I cannot remember exactly how or why these words popped into my head one day, but when they formed, I knew I needed to get them out into the world. Two years later, I still go back to this tweet as I read about technology in schools and in the world, develop professional development and conference presentations, work with students and parents, and write about the topic of digital citizenship. Perhaps it is my background as an English teacher and school librarian that has colored my lenses this way, but I believe that digital citizenship belongs just as much in a humanities classroom as it does in a technology one.

When I wrote *Digital Citizenship in Action* for ISTE in 2017, my stance was considered progressive by many who had taught digital citizenship for years. I argued that instead of using digital citizenship curriculum as an attempt to correct or prevent misbehaviors online, we needed a proactive approach to equip students with the necessary skills to be active, engaged citizens in their digital communities. This shift meant encouraging educators to set aside the once-a-year assembly on cyberbullying, conduct purposeful work in classrooms year-round, and create opportunities for students to practice digital citizenship skills under the guidance of educators. The ideas presented in that book do not seem so radical anymore, thanks to the work of scholars, educators, and various organizations that have continued to re-define digital citizenship into something more meaningful than a behavior

management curriculum. For example, a coalition of these organizations including ISTE and Common Sense Education, and for-profit companies in the edtech space like Google, Facebook, and NewsELA, have formed an initiative called DigCitCommit ([digcitcommit.org](http://digcitcommit.org)). This partnership focuses on five competencies to shift the conversation from don'ts to do's: Inclusive, Informed, Engaged, Balanced, and Alert. Centered around these competencies, DigCitCommit strives to provide educators with resources that empower and engage students as digital citizens.

As I have watched an evolution in the conversation around digital citizenship education, schools have simultaneously been encouraged to step up their game in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), even with our youngest learners. Educators have witnessed the rise of the Makerspace, Hour of Code, robotics kits in elementary classrooms, and professional development around design thinking and computation thinking. High schools across the country are adding electives in cybersecurity, game design, app development, and computer repair, as well as creating opportunities for students to earn recognized tech industry certifications before they graduate high school.

School curricula continue to adapt with an understanding that technology will play a huge part in the future of work. This progress is amazing. These steps are important. But because of who I am, my brain wonders what we might be missing, and I am always looking for the “what’s next?” in education.

If we turn our eyes away from education toward the technology sector, we might have a possible answer to the “what’s next?” question. More people are waking up to the notion that the technology they hold in their hands each day is not a neutral tool that individual users have ultimate control over. The facade began to publicly crack after accusations of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The general public was introduced to the complexities of hacking, the concept of bot accounts, and the larger threat of information warfare. The rise in rhetoric around “fake news” has social media companies examining their role in the spread of misinformation, the public asking who checks the fact-checkers, and everyone from politicians to tech conglomerates wondering if, when, and how information regulation needs to happen.

I've spent the last few years reading up on the topic of tech ethics and exploring the human side of the digital tools that are all around us. My eyes have been opened to the amazing victories and unfortunate pitfalls of technology that I had never considered before. Each time I learned something new, I couldn't help but tuck it away into the "things we should be talking about with students" file folder in my brain. Eventually that file got so full, I could not help but begin a new book.

Writing a book like this, just as consuming a book like this, is not easy. It is not easy because there are no clear right or wrong answers to the ethical issues presented inside these pages. For each issue I ask you to examine, the pros and cons lists are equally long. So why bother to continue reading if you won't find answers to the questions presented within?

Well, in writing my learning down, my first intention is to help build your background knowledge on the various ethical issues being debated in the tech sector today. Once you have been exposed to these ideas, it is my hope that you—like me!—will feel inspired to engage the young digital citizens in your classrooms in conversations around these concepts. If you ascribe to the idea that technology is not neutral, if your students are already users of various technologies, and if you understand that many of our students will go on to make careers in a technology-related field, is it ever too soon to begin talking about the ethics of technology with them?

## What Is in This Book

This book is divided into chapters based on six big ethical questions discussed in the technology sector and larger society today. Because each of these questions is so complex, I will be breaking them down by presenting you with:

- key vocabulary and definitions you and your students will come across in your investigation of each topic
- a short summary of the current research and viewpoints on the topic from leading experts in their fields

- news articles that serve as examples of the ethical questions playing out in society today (these articles can be easily accessed online and brought into your classroom for students to read)
- additional, focused research questions that students can use to explore the various aspects of the ethical dilemma
- stories of educators that are engaging students with lessons around tech ethics
- a “Try this” section with instructional strategies for helping students navigate open-ended questions
- QR codes that will link you to additional, curated content on each topic presented

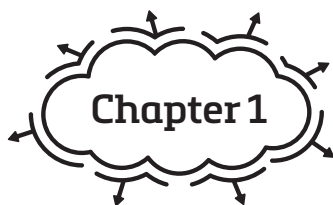
## Who This Book Is for

This book is written for middle and high school educators that are using technology with students in the classroom. It is not only for educators teaching skills like computational thinking, coding, design thinking, and problem solving, but it is also for educators who are not specifically tasked with teaching technology. The topics and questions presented in this book are perfect for teachers who specialize in the humanities—the English teacher, the social studies educator, the school librarian.

There can and should be an all-hands-on-deck approach to helping students consider the human side of the technology they use each day. There is not a single content area that should carry this burden alone, nor a single subject area that would struggle to find connections between these big questions and their content.

If you are ready to dive into the world of tech ethics, you have come to the right place! I cannot promise you’ll find the answers to our current ethical dilemmas within these pages, but I can promise to educate you on the issues and help you find a way to talk about them with your students too.

Enjoy,  
Kristen



## Ethics in the Curriculum

**E**thical conversation in the classroom is nothing new. Ethics, by the most basic definition, is the study and examination of the moral principles that govern a person's behavior. Our schools set and promote certain moral principles in mission statements, handbooks, school songs and pledges, and the chosen curriculum. Teachers, counselors, and administrators have ethical conversations with students when we attempt to understand the impetus for their choices or correct their misbehaviors.

Questions of humanity and morality come up in every novel we read. *To Kill a Mockingbird* forces us to examine where community standards end and the individual rights begin, as well as how we must wrestle with our own personal beliefs when they come into conflict with our community's ethical codes. In *Lord of the Flies*, we must confront two instincts that live within man—one that is completely self-centered and seeks only to satisfy his own needs, and another instinct to follow a set of rules and values so we can live in peaceful community with others. As teachers guide students through these and countless other novels that deal with morality, they are helping students examine their own ethical codes and belief systems too.

Just as novels can be a vehicle for helping students examine their personal morals, our government, sociology, and psychology courses help students wrestle with ethics through a larger, societal lens. Controversial topics such as privacy, censorship, the death penalty, and minimum wage are often analyzed through current events, prior Supreme Court rulings, and the impact of decisions on large groups of the population. Humanities teachers



are not the only ones having ethical conversations in the classroom. Science and math teachers frequently talk about the professional ethics that guide work in data collection, experimentation, ecology, astronomy, medicine, and more.

As technology becomes a greater part of our society, educators must consider the role that innovation, global connectedness, and unlimited access to information play on the moral and ethical underpinnings of society that we have long discussed with students. How is technology changing our culture? How is innovation making us question aspects of our society that we may not have before? And whose ethical and moral principles will guide future innovation, lawmaking, and community living?

## **Frameworks to Situate Digital Ethics Amongst Other Ethical Questions**

Digital ethics, also referred to as tech ethics, are a unique set of ethical dilemmas that can be examined through a variety of frameworks. In the same way that people approach social issues such as gun control or personal issues such as marriage infidelity from different perspectives and viewpoints, individuals will bring their varied backgrounds, experiences, and belief systems into conversations around tech ethics.

It is not vital for your students to understand all these frameworks in depth, but you may find it helpful to familiarize yourself with them. Understanding the various groundworks from which people approach ethical thinking can help you be a more empathetic guide and aid you in helping students see various perspectives too.

Let's examine five ethical theories that have served as a guide to philosophers and scholars over time:

1. **Virtue Ethics** – This ethical theory, typically associated with Aristotle, emphasizes the importance of developing and refining an individual's character rather than developing and reinforcing a strict set of societal rules. Virtue ethics argues that if we can focus on being good people, the right actions will effortlessly

follow. Therefore, our goal as humans is to be as virtuous as possible.

2. Natural Law Ethics – This ethical theory, often credited to Thomas Aquinas, forwards the idea that God created man with natural inclinations toward things that are good, such as avoiding danger or ensuring the reproduction of the species. Aquinas believed that ethical standards have their ultimate origin in God’s divine plan for humanity.
3. Social Contract Ethics – Thomas Hobbes forwarded the idea that there are more benefits to living under social contract with one another than living in a society of no rules to govern our collective behaviors. “Right” acts are ones that do not violate the implicit and explicit agreements that we have made with one another as humans in community.
4. Utilitarian Ethics – Founded by Jeremy Bentham, this moral theory focuses on the results, or consequences, of our actions and treats our intentions as irrelevant. Actions should be measured in terms of the happiness or pleasure they produce, and humans should act in ways that always produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people.
5. Deontological Ethics – Immanuel Kant’s theory of ethics is the most popular example of deontological thinking. He argued that it was not the consequences of one’s actions that made them right or wrong, but the motives of the person who carried it out. We can only evaluate the will or character of a person based on his or her motives and intentions (Mizzoni, 2017).

Consider how a typical digital citizenship topic like cyberbullying could be taught depending upon the ethical frameworks we, or our communities, ascribe to:

- **Virtue Ethics:** Be the absolute best person you can be online. If everyone acts with kindness, cyberbullying will disappear.