Internet Safety and Responsible Behavior Online: A *Threshold* Forum

Education leaders discuss the challenges to promoting Internet safety and digital media literacy to today's teachers, students, and parents.

PARTICIPANTS

DAVINA PRUITT-MENTLE, MODERATOR, is a researcher and policy analyst at Educational Technology Policy Research & Outreach. She has spent more than a decade conducting research on K–12 cyber-ethics, safety, and security-awareness programs. Pruitt-Mentle's research and development interests have focused on the role of distance learning in education, particularly cultivating the Internet as an environment in which to conduct professional-development opportunities, and cultural differences towards technology use. She has acted as consultant to a wide number of technology and education-related organizations and teaches graduate courses to practicing educators on a wide range of technology-related topics. Pruitt-Mentle serves as K–12 principal investigator (PI) for the National Science Foundation-funded CyberWATCH Center, as PI for the CyberWATCH/UMD Digital Forensics Lab, and as an external evaluator on a number of cyber-ethics and Internet-safety programs.

RENEE HOBBS is one of the nation's leading authorities on media-literacy education. She is a professor at the School of Communications and Theater at Temple University in Philadelphia, Penn., and holds a joint appointment at the College of Education. Her book, *Reading the Media: Media Literacy in High School English,* was published by Columbia University Teachers College Press in 2007. With the Media Education Lab, she also developed My Pop Studio, an online multimedia-learning environment to introduce media literacy to adolescent girls. Hobbs is currently working on a book designed to clear up copyright confusion for K–12 and college teachers. She is a co-founder of the National Association for Media Literacy Education.

MATT LEVINSON has been an independent school educator for 16 years. A graduate of Teachers' College, Columbia University, he is the assistant director and head of the middle school at the Nueva School in Hillsborough, Calif. Levinson also directs the Nueva School's 1:1 laptop program and consults with Common Sense Media. He has written about education for *Teacher Magazine, Teachers College Record,* the *New York Times,* and the *San Francisco Chronicle.*

BETTE MANCHESTER joined the Maine Department of Education in 2001 to lead the largest 1:1 laptop project in the world, the Maine Learning Technology Initiative. For seven years, she helped develop the statewide initiative to include all students and educators in grades 7–12 in all schools in Maine. Recently, Manchester left the Department of Education to develop the Maine International Center for Digital Learning where she currently serves as executive director. Housed at the University of Southern Maine, the center's focus is research, professional development, effective educational practices, innovation, and international collaboration.

JAYNE MOORE is director of information technology and school library media in the Division of Instruction at the Maryland State Department of Education. Her office is responsible for implementing the Maryland Technology Plan, School Library Media Programs, and Virtual Learning Opportunities Program; administrating the federal Educational Technology Funding; and approving local school system technology plans. Moore is co-chair of the Maryland Instructional Technology Advisory Council and is vice chair of the State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA) board of directors. In 2008, she received the International Society for Technology in Education Making It Happen Award and the SETDA State Leader of the Year Award.

DAVINA PRUITT-MENTLE: When we talk about tech standards and Internet safety and cyber awareness, there is a lot of new lingo out there. Two more commonly used terms are *digital literacy* and *media literacy.* I thought it would be helpful to begin our conversation by defining these terms and talking about how they're similar or different.

RENEE HOBBS: The best way to understand the emergence of these different terms is to appreciate that they reflect different communities. So let's start with the oldest one: *visual literacy.* Visual literacy represented a community of folks interested in the designs and composition process with visual media.

Then came *information literacy.* Actually, information literacy came about not with a focus on electronic or digital media but with a focus on print media and the skills involved in accessing and evaluating especially informational media used for solving problems. The community of folks who gathered around that were the librarians.

Then came *media literacy,* and that was the community of folks who were concerned about media's influence on society, and everything from how we do our politics to the economic system that drives the large transnational media companies and shapes the kinds of messages that we get over and over again.

Then came *digital literacy,* and that community is mostly interested in understanding the interactive nature of online communication. So that's how that field is becoming defined, but we can't understand all of these as new literacies until we define *literacy.*

Literacy is the sharing of meaning through symbolic form. We can share meaning digitally through interactive media. We can share meaning through images. We can share meaning through printed word or spoken word, so what we're really talking about is new literacies.

MATT LEVINSON: Working in schools and dealing with children and parents, I think these words are troubling and difficult for parents to define. They're hard for teachers to define and for kids they don't necessarily resonate with meaning. The challenge for schools is to find a way to connect with kids to be able to tackle some of these issues.

The most compelling issue that we're dealing with now is digital literacy. Parents are terrified about the interactivity of some of these online sources, a lot of teachers are unsure about how to use the sites, and the kids just do it. We're trying to make sense of that. We recently had someone in to work with our faculty on how to use Wikipedia effectively, starting at the bottom of the articles in terms of the resources outlined and using that as a starting point to then cross-reference.

These are really challenging terms to make sense of for a school community. The parents, the teachers, and the students all have very different visions of what they mean.

BETTE MANCHESTER: For nine years I've worked on the 1:1 project in Maine. As we moved forward, we paid attention and tried to simplify the complexity of the language so that both the students and the adults would feel comfortable dealing with the various areas that are new to what we know as learning.

I found a brilliant description of seven literacies that are necessary for working in the knowledge society. They were identified through a group of researchers and include the areas we've just discussed. We created our Center for Digital Learning around the notion that it is about learning. It's important to have the discussion and reflect around the various changes in literacy over the years so that the adults in the school and the adults out of the school can better understand the importance of working with these literacies with students.

As Matt brought up, I think it's really important that there be a discussion in school about this because it's new to everyone and things keep changing. We also need to bring resources to bear on helping people better understand how to incorporate these new literacies in classroom practices.

Many of our schools began seeing the librarian as a key person on information literacy, and in 2001 when we initiated our 1:1 project across the state, the first thing that happened is we began to see many of the students go to the library less and stay in their classroom because they had their resources there. There was a transition, and the librarians spent more time directly educating faculty around information-literacy practices. That was a huge sea change for us.

To introduce these other areas, we've brought in people such as Donald J. Leu, who directs the New Literacies Research Lab at the University of Connecticut, to help content teachers at the secondary level understand how to begin to work in these digital literacies and deepen the learning that both students and staff have around content knowledge.

PRUITT-MENTLE: The theme for this call is promoting Internet safety, so why don't we tackle Internet safety within the realm of digital literacy? Can someone share how you see Internet safety embedded within digital literacy and what the role of our schools is in promoting that?

LEVINSON: We started with the premise—maybe mistakenly—of fear, and we brought in a cyberbully expert who talked about Internet safety with our students and parents. He was a police officer and had worked on cyber crimes and framed several scenarios that resonated with the kids and signaled to them that this is something that we're paying attention to. They learned who to go to in the school to talk about these issues if something comes up.

We have Internet filters in place like many schools, and are dealing from the "keep it all out" [position] as opposed to letting it in a little bit and then trying to work with kids in

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different scenarios and settings where they encounter challenging issues. Our parents and faculty were not ready to work with that conversation, but over the course of the two years we've had our laptop program, we're now just beginning to shift toward letting more in because our parent and teacher community are ready and have the ability to talk with kids about challenging situations.

HOBBS: I think that we are moving away from the original, or first generation of Internet safety, which was very much built on the mass media hype that came up around genuine problems that involved sexual predators and bullying. I think we're beginning to move into another phase in which we're talking more broadly about the unique characteristics of the Internet that create opportunities for responsible or irresponsible behavior.

I think this is an important shift, and so it's a much more positive and balanced way to examine the question. The question is: what are the unique features of the Internet that make it possible to be a responsible, or an irresponsible, communicator? And we know what those are, right? We know it has to do with identity, privacy, truth telling, and integrity.

PRUITT-MENTLE: And what do you feel is the role of the schools in this realm?

HOBBS: The role of the schools is to provide a context for meaningful discussion about the impact of privacy—how living in an online environment feels private, but is very, very public. It's the school's responsibility to help children understand how people can play with identity online and, while there are lots of positive and healthy things that come from that, there are also some dangerous and ugly things that come from that.

The reason why schools are charged with that responsibility is that we spend six hours a day with children and parents don't. We're charged with helping them enter the 21st century, and most parents are struggling with not having the kinds of skills that they need to understand these new technologies. On top of their busy lives with their jobs and raising children we can't expect them to do that. But teachers can do that, because it's our obligation to prepare kids for the world they're entering.

JAYNE MOORE: I would like to say too that I think in schools we have to find ways for every child to have not only instruction but conversations about how to wisely use the Internet and other electronic resources. It is not the responsibility of one teacher—a media specialist or a technology teacher or the English teacher. It really is the responsibility of everybody in that school community to have these conversations with children.

MANCHESTER: I agree. As a former principal, my experience

is that it is the responsibility of all staff. I think it's really important to provide students and staff with lots of opportunities to use the new tools and resources and offer guidance and support. But learning about using the new tools needs to be taken to a different level, because so many adults need as much education around this as the students do. School is a great and important place for students to use the tools and learn about Web etiquette and the Web's importance and potential dangers.

MOORE: I think Bette's absolutely right, and this brings up another responsibility of schools and school systems to provide professional-development opportunities for teachers to understand Internet safety and then communicate it. I don't think a lot of the teachers are comfortable with that.

MANCHESTER: We found that we needed to do staff development with technology coordinators as well because we have many folks who work in the schools in the technical realm who are not educators but come from the business community or the military. We wanted to educate all of the staff so that when there is a decision about having something turned on or off, it's an educational decision about learning and not a technical decision only.

LEVINSON: One of the issues that we're struggling with quite a bit is this whole notion of lying as a new social norm. We just worked with a panel of kids and one of the questions we asked them was, "How many fake identities do you have online?" Across the room, in grades five through eight, the average was 10.

And you know, on one level that's a safe thing to do, and one of the kids said, "I don't want some creep tracking me down, being able to find out where I live or my personal information on my phone." We had a parent evening that same night, and we asked the parents about their fake identities and only one hand went up in a room of 100. There is a gulf between the kids and the adults in terms of the culture they're entering with this new world that we're in.

HOBBS: That is a great example, and it also illustrates why it's important to frame the discussion in a way that isn't biased. It is a problem to even use the fake identity and to frame it that way, because if I have a Gmail account and my university e-mail and another e-mail I use when I go on eBay, I don't think of those as fake identities. I think we want to talk about how we present ourselves online and the idea that identity is complicated by the fact that we have anonymity. We have a non-face-to-face situation and the other characteristics of the Internet that make it easy for deception to become normative.

We want to ask kids when lying is OK and when lying is not

> 'In schools, we have to find ways for every child to have not only instruction but conversations about how to wisely use the Internet and other electronic resources.' —Jayne Moore

OK. And then there's another ethical dimension that's not so much an Internet safety issue; it actually has to do with copyright and attribution. The new norms of sharing are developing because of the digital media culture, and that raises a balance question: When is it OK to share and when is it not OK?

When one's moving away from the fear-based approach [to Internet safety] and into a more balanced execution of these ideas, we can really engage kids and meet them where they live.

MANCHESTER: I think you can do the same with parents and adults by comparing it somewhat to people learning to drive a car. There isn't anyone who would deny that's not an important thing to do, and we know that dangerous things can happen with cars, but we need to approach it from the importance of being able to drive a car while knowing that it has the other side.

PRUITT-MENTLE: I'd like us to now try to address Internet safety in the media-literacy theme.

HOBBS: Let's take the two examples we've just explored and put them through a media-literacy perspective. The one issue that we talked about was this idea of the anonymity that's possible in online environments. And anonymity actually is a key characteristic of both the power and the pitfalls of online communication. And it directly addresses a key media-literacy concept that to be effective communicators we must have a deep understanding of authors and audiences.

We always ask: Who's the author and what's his or her purpose and who's the target audience? Playing with identity invites us to think about why an author might want to disguise his/her identity, for what motives or purposes? Some of those motives could be good and healthy and others could be dark and disturbing.

> '*Media-literacy concepts like author and audience are very powerful for helping kids understand the challenges of identity and privacy in a digital age.*' —*Renee Hobbs*

Then let's take another dimension of Internet safety—the idea of public and private. One of the unique characteristics of a digital environment is that it blurs the line between public and private. When we chat online or Twitter, for instance, it's sort of public and private at the same time. It leaves a footprint that is absolutely undeniable and is not possible to erase.

The blurring between public and private directly relates to this issue of the invisible audience and the intended audience and unintended audience. So media-literacy concepts like author and audience are very powerful for helping kids understand the challenges of identity and privacy in a digital age.

Another set of media-literacy concepts that are relevant to Internet safety are the concepts of representation and reality, because online environments create unreal realities. When we go into Second Life or *World of Warcraft*, for instance, we enter worlds that have many characteristics that feel like face-to-face communication, but we're sitting in front of a screen.

We have to help kids understand how it is that an environment—a set of zeros and ones—essentially can be constructed to create the strong emotional feelings we get when we play *World of Warcraft* or when we play that cool Scrabble game with the guy in Finland. Or at least we think it's the guy in Finland. In some ways the media-literacy concepts are really useful tools for kids to think through their responsible behavior online.

LEVINSON: In trying to tackle these issues, and somebody made this point earlier, it's not the responsibility of the librarian or the media specialist. It's the responsibility of the teachers teaching in context. So in the course of a research project, kids are looking at print and online resources and moments come up about a questionable piece that they find online, about who the author is or what the motivation behind that authorship is.

They need to learn how to make sense of the bias that's inherent in some of those sources. But unless there's professional development for teachers about how to enter into those conversations, then the teachers leave the classroom having missed that moment and they come to me or they go to the librarian, and how am I supposed to handle this situation? They've lost that teaching opportunity that arises in that moment, because those come up in every discipline over the course of the day from every age group, starting as young as kindergarten and first grade.

HOBBS: That's a really great point, Matt. I've seen that over and over. Teachers will say they could see there was an opportunity to introduce a powerful concept but they didn't know how to do it or they weren't confident enough. Teachers learn when they see stuff modeled, so it's important for teachers to have professional-development experiences where they get a chance

R E S O U R C E S

Maine International Center for Digital Learning. www.micdl.org

Maryland Attorney General: C.L.I.C.K.S. Initiative. www.oag.state.md.us/clicks.htm

National Association for Media Literacy Education. www.amlainfo.org

Renee Hobbs's blog. mediaeducationlab.com/blogs/renee-hobbs

University of Connecticut: New Literacies Research Team. www.newliteracies.uconn.edu

to see that kind of use of critical concepts deployed in a real-world context.

MANCHESTER: At the beginning of our project, the professional development we focused on was the use of e-mail with students and teachers, because back in 2001 there were still teachers who were not comfortable using e-mail. But as teachers progress in their use of tools and resources they need ongoing professional development, opportunities that are embedded in their work, and the chance to work with their colleagues to better understand new resources as well as how to use the resources they have before them. They also need ongoing development around things that may be out there that no one is aware of, things that are coming through the pipeline.

PRUITT-MENTLE: I think everyone has hit on professional development as the real key to our students' online education and social development. I'm interested in what we can do to proactively make sure that students are media literate and digitally literate when we can't really define it or measure it.

> *'[Teachers] need ongoing professional development to better understand new resources as well as how to use the resources they have before them.'*
> —Bette Manchester

MANCHESTER: I think there are things that can be done at the local level, the district level, and the state level, as well as nationally. What we found to be extremely helpful was to first make sure that we have tools available for the teachers—in their professional development or in their work with students—that can help them learn about the resources available but actually scaffold both the teacher's experience and the student's experience. For instance, using ePals as a method for teaching, or giving kids safe e-mail or blogging opportunities.

At the same time, it's important that we have clear policies in schools around the use of computers, the use of cell phones, etc. What we found to be helpful was to work with people at the state level, at the federal level—working with the folks that developed NetSmart—working with our Attorney General's office and with our Internet task force. The leaders in these organizations worked with the principals or associations, superintendents' association, and school boards association to develop a set of policies that would help guide schools to have better practices. We put a group together that worked for a year to develop these policies and that has encouraged schools to use or adapt the policies and incorporate professional development along with the policy implementation.

What we found in some cases is that if people didn't have helpful policies in place, they could get into real trouble. This was a way of doing both—having the policies but at the same time supporting the new learning with professional development.

LEVINSON: One of the comments made earlier was about parenting and that some of the responsibility may be shifting toward the schools in terms of educating and talking with kids about digital literacy and ethics. We've done a lot of parent education over the last two years. We had an evening in April with some parents about how to manage Facebook. A lot of parents are looking to the school for guidance on social networking, and they have no idea how to talk to their kids.

We've found that we've chipped away a little bit at the ability to communicate effectively with kids through the parents by teaching them. Some of them didn't even know how to get on Facebook or what it looked like. We started by explaining it in such a way that they could then have a conversation with their kid.

MOORE: One of the other pieces of this is looking at how we've evolved from the knee-jerk reaction of several years ago to just block everything. In some cases, what's really critical is that the IT people are talking to the educational staff and thinking about why some things should be used instructionally, why it makes sense, and then figuring out a way to safely be able to stop blocking many of these applications.

I work with the chief technology officers in our 24 school systems, and one of the things I see them doing is trying to figure out how to create safe environments with some of the Web 2.0 tools for kids. Some of it is using these tools on their [internal] Internet so the students aren't going out to the world, sort of simulating what the applications would be like if students were allowed access beyond the school walls. They're also looking at their school networks and figuring out how they can make those tools safe. They're also talking with the educators and working on how to safely allow the students to communicate with kids in China without the students communicating with everybody in the world.

I'm really encouraged by the conversations I'm hearing and by the ways people are trying to figure out how to do all of these things in our environment. I think that's another critical piece for school systems to think about.

MANCHESTER: We have 240 school districts and a constantly changing group of folks who may be working in those technology roles. It's a matter of continual conversation, continual workshops, to help people make those decisions as part of the school-based team. We found that many of the districts thought that the technology coordinator should be making all of those decisions, and now it's moved to a shared responsibility. But I think that change has happened as a result of ongoing conversations and collaboration to make it more about the learning that needs to go on in schools.

PRUITT-MENTLE: Several of you have brought up social networking. I'm sure our readers would like to hear about the

positive aspects of students using these tools as well as the flip side or the drawbacks and some of the legal concerns.

LEVINSON: A colleague of mine teaches high school in Washington, D.C. She used Facebook in a 10th grade world history class. Actually, her students came up with the idea for their 20th-century China topic to set up a page for Mao Zedong, a page for Chiang Kai-shek, and a page for Deng Xiaoping. They posted pictures, created friend lists, posted things on the wall, and ended up having conversations and doing all sorts of research using Facebook.

To even do that project, she checked in with the head of the school to see if this was something that the school was comfortable with. The teacher said the kids spent more time on this project than anything else she had done all year. It was a tool that they're using all the time, but it had an instructional purpose tied to it.

'A lot of parents are looking to the school for guidance on social networking, and they have no idea how to talk to their kids.' —Matt Levinson

MANCHESTER: The more the work is tied to instructional purposing the better chance you have of making it successful. If it's not tied directly to an instructional purpose, there's a real danger of having it become just a place for kids to play.

HOBBS: I agree that having a clear instructional purpose is really important. That's why, instead of emphasizing the use of Facebook or MySpace, I like to encourage students and teachers to think about the other kinds of social-media tools that make it possible to engage in a wide range of activities that are related, for instance, to citizenship.

Last fall I was delighted to be able to create a set of curriculum materials related to the presidential campaign of 2008 in which we looked explicitly at social-media tools for building civic engagement. I think it's probably more productive, and I guess I'm underlining Bette's point about focusing on how social media can be used for instructional goals.

PRUITT-MENTLE: Before we end, I wanted to make sure we talk about what needs to be done to send the messages or to help promote digital and media literacy in the schools and at home.

HOBBS: Why hasn't the TV industry gotten into the business of helping parents understand the complicated world their children are living in? We really haven't seen many programs targeting parents from the mass media, and they are the most powerful educator of all. I'm sure a series exploring digital media and the lives of young people would be of interest to parents.

MANCHESTER: I would agree. I think any information that can come from other agencies or institutions is helpful. I know our experience in working with the attorney general's office, working with the crimes task force, and working with the police helps parents understand that it's a community issue or responsibility. I think anything that can be done in that realm is really to the benefit of our children.

HOBBS: That's a nice way to put it—a community responsibility—because if it's just pushed down to the level of parents and teachers, that is antithetical to how we solve problems in our culture, how we address big educational shifts like the one we're living through right now. Everyone's a stakeholder and everyone has to be part of the solution.

MOORE: In Maryland, and I know other states have had similar initiatives, our attorney general has started a program that's called C.L.I.C.K.S., which stands for Community Leadership in Cyber Knowledge and Safety. He's done a series of forums around the state and we have representatives from the state police talking about the safety issues, but really the emphasis is instructional. It's for community leaders and parents and teachers to take on the charge of helping our kids become safe and be able to use the tools. I think programs like that are good.

I also think we must make sure to get it into the curriculum. We have technology and information-literacy standards in Maryland, but they're not intended to be standalone; they're intended to be embedded into all content areas. To do a better job of that and to create some best practices and some models for that would also go a long way.

And I think we can't ignore what every one of us agreed on: the professional-development piece. We have to make sure our teachers feel comfortable having the conversations with kids, and that they model the behaviors.

LEVINSON: I just want to say that we have a great opportunity right now because we have our first digital president. Obama made such use of technology in harnessing his campaign and his election and he's a parent and a lot of people look to him as a role model. It would be great if there were some way to highlight the positive uses he's made of technology and how he formulates his own family in terms of the guidelines that they use. That would be a great platform for people to follow. ● ● ●