# Introduction

*Remembering My High School Library*

Some of my high school experiences during the late 1960s are burned so indelibly into my psyche that I can easily relive them decades later—a kind of HDTV TiVo of the mind. One experience in particular is very clear and present as I write this book around the theme of citizenship: sitting in my high school library.

Two librarians were in charge of my high school library—Miss Phelps* and Mrs. Hoover. Perpetually hovering around age 65, they both had a kind of unapproachable, mythological status, due in no small part to the fact that their hair was always lacquered into standard issue old lady hairdos that resembled pottery projects gone awry. As students walked into the library, Miss Phelps and Mrs. Hoover would stand in position behind a polished oak counter, nodding and smiling with just enough nuance to let everyone know that they would use whatever means necessary to maintain order. Today, we would call them ninja librarians, I am sure.

To them, the library was an extension of the military, and as good soldiers they ran a tight platoon. Each book was upright, standing at attention, its spine reading from top to bottom. The card catalog was an imposing series of wooden cabinets they had arranged in a ring in the center of the room. Whenever they lectured us about entering the fortress of information that was the Dewey decimal system, their message was clear: Finding information was only for the brave.

Above all, I remember the library being filled with an excruciating silence that amplified the slightest sounds into gushers of distraction. The sound of a dress rustling or a fly trapped inside a porcelain light fixture filled the

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*Miss Phelps was the sister of another Miss Phelps whom I hope I immortalized in an earlier book of mine called *Then What? Everyone's Guide to Living, Learning and Having Fun in the Digital Age* (Brinton Books, 2002).

room utterly, absorbing everyone's complete yet silent focus. I distinctly remember the sounds of Miss Phelps and Mrs. Hoover licking their index fingers to help them turn the pages of whatever they were reading while they stared, from behind their oak turrets, at the enemies of quiet in their midst.

Yet despite their most intimidating efforts, there were always a few naïve freshmen who could not resist taunting authority simply to see what would happen. You didn't have to do much to elicit a reaction. Just coughing in a suspicious manner could cause lockdown. Whenever someone directly challenged their authority, Miss Phelps and Mrs. Hoover would pierce them with the words that never failed to immobilize, "Young man, if you persist in talking, I will have to call your parents and tell them that you are simply not a good citizen." Recall that this was the 1960s, when threatening to call someone's parents actually meant something.

It was incredible how those words could reduce the most hardened juvenile delinquents to stammering idiots. I remember only one time when a student actually countered, arguing that it didn't say in any dictionary anywhere that a library had to be quiet. Ah, said Mrs. Hoover on that one occasion, but if there were an entry in the dictionary for *school library*, it most certainly would. And, she continued, it would most certainly go on to say that those who invaded the sacred silence of a school library were not only selfish, rude, un-American hooligans with no sense of responsibility but they were also bad citizens, pure and simple.

## ISSUES OF DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

For many of us, the concept of traditional citizenship is still closely linked to the kind of good behavior Miss Phelps and Mrs. Hoover pledged to protect and defend. Simply put, citizenship represents doing what is right and responsible within a given social context, such as being silent and afraid in a high school library.

Yet as we fast-forward to 2010, we wonder whether our notion of citizenship accurately reflects our needs. After all, a new perspective of citizenship has entered the public narrative that feels so different that we have given it its own name: *digital citizenship*. This term arises from the need to reconsider who we are in light of the globally connected infosphere in which we find ourselves. That is, given that citizenship seems to be directly related to behavior and social organization, and given that the Digital Age facilitates new kinds of both, we need to update our perspectives about citizenship to provide a more complete picture of who we are.

I frequently talk to teachers informally to gain an "in the trenches" perspective about the educational issues that arise in popular media. I have had the pleasure of engaging many teachers in discussions about digital

citizenship over the years and have learned one thing above all others: It tends to inspire more of a sense of fear than opportunity.

The fear—about which I will have more to say later in the book—is quite understandable. After all, while the rest of the world pontificates about what education ought to do, classroom teachers are left to figure out what they can do. Most teachers respond to my inquiry about digital citizenship by citing the aspects of the Digital Age that worry them. The issue they most frequently identify only slightly updates something Miss Phelps and Mrs. Hoover might say: students illegally downloading material and disrespecting copyright laws in an online environment. While they identify other issues as important to the discussion of digital citizenship, such as cyberbullying and accessing inappropriate material on the web, copyright is the issue that is often mentioned first as creating the most anxiety.

The issue of using downloaded materials has emerged as a flagship digital citizenship issue for many educators largely because it serves as a metaphor for our confusion about balancing our rights, responsibilities, personal boundaries, and pursuit of the social good in the hyper-connected, disembodied ether of the digital domain. A few short years ago, it was too difficult to include an image created by someone else in a school report. Now it is too easy. The qualities of ease and opportunity, as well as the absence of immediately perceivable impacts, breathe momentum into copyright as such an important issue.

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| *Changing Times* |
| *Since the time I wrote this about a year ago, cyberbullying and sexting have surpassed copyright as the new flagship issue, shifting our priority from respect to safety.* |

And where there is momentum and the possibility of legal entanglement, concerns run high, beginning with the school board and cascading downward, to administrators and eventually to classrooms, where teachers and students receive the brunt of our collective anxiety. Most teachers want to do "the right thing," they just honestly don't know what that is. And given there is very little agreement in the legal community about this issue, teachers are often left to fend for themselves.

The other issues teachers cite, such as cyberbullying, sexting, and posting and accessing inappropriate material on the web, share many of the qualities of the copyright conundrum. The ease and opportunity of acting and reacting in the infosphere amplifies what we do, spreading our impacts far and wide with very little effort. At the same time, these impacts are produced without many of the mitigating effects that are present when interacting in public. The result is that one needs to see with the mind's eye in order to imagine the impacts on the receiving end of an e-mail,

YouTube post, or file download in order to interact effectively in the online global community.

But our concerns should be set within the larger arena of hope and opportunity. After all, the web gives us many wonderful things. The real challenge for each of us is to balance the connections and the disconnections offered in digital community and to develop a personal ethical core that can guide us in areas of experience that are in many ways unfamiliar. Because digital community is global, distributed, and in many cases asynchronous, older notions of "right and wrong" need to be revisited, expanded, and refreshed. Doing so requires not just developing an understanding of moral action but also of more abstract notions of ethics that frame interaction within the context of a digital, global, multicultural community.

The bottom line is that children now have to begin to think more abstractly at younger ages, challenging previously held notions about neurological and emotional development. Wisdom, once seen as the domain of the elderly, is now becoming a survival skill for kids who spend a good deal of their day in the infosphere. Clearly, it is the role of schools to help them cultivate the skills and perspectives they need to participate in the infosphere safely and responsibly, as well as boldly and with a sense of hope and adventure about the future.

## CITIZENSHIP IS A TIME FOR REIMAGINATION

Currently, digital citizenship is being defined largely in terms of the issues that seem to confuse and confound our sense of what's right. There is a serious problem with this approach: We miss an opportunity to reinvent ourselves.

After all, citizenship has always been about so much more than doing the right thing when faced with morally ambiguous circumstances. It is an all-encompassing consideration of who we are and wish to be, individually and as a society.

Historically, the issue of citizenship comes under active discussion whenever society is shifting so dramatically that it is trying to redefine itself. Shifts in citizenship accompany large-scale transformational events, such as revolutions or historic elections. So it was following the American, French, and Russian revolutions. So it is whenever new political administrations significantly shift direction away from their predecessors. What eventually emerges is not just a redefinition of what it means to be virtuous but also a recasting of what society feels is truly important and how individuals need to view the new, emerging social order in terms of rights,

duties, and participation. In the process, changes in citizenship redefine who is included in the new dream and who is excluded, politically and culturally. So it will be with the digital revolution and the new kind of citizenship that emerges.

Above all, redefining citizenship should redefine our hopes and aspirations, both in terms of who we want to be as well as who we don't want to be. As the term *digital citizenship* gains momentum in public discussion, we need to seize upon this opening to ask ourselves not just how we want our kids to behave but also what we want our education systems to accomplish. Until recently, asking, What do we really want for our schools? has had as much reality as asking, How many angels fit on the head of a pin? But our technology is so powerful, connective, adaptable, scalable, and promising, that this is now a very real question. We have the tools to create any kind of society, and thus educational system, that we want. The question is, *What do we want?* At the heart of our answer to that question is how we define citizenship during a time of unprecedented opportunity and how we approach developing it within the context of a school community.

## WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is for anyone with an interest in the future of K–12 education in a digitally deluged world. This includes parents with school-age children, taxpayers who want to support schools intelligently, businesses that are concerned about the future of their labor pool, community members who want what is best for their neighborhoods, and policy makers seeking to understand the challenges of a new era of education. Above all, it is for students, teachers, and administrators who compose the immediate school community population and are on the front line of trying to negotiate a path with the future of technology and learning that is socially, educationally, and ethically sound.

The perspective employed in this book reflects the many hats I have worn during my professional life as a teacher education instructor, online teacher, researcher, writer, speaker, and educational technology developer. I have spent most of my years developing new approaches to teaching and learning, onsite and at a distance, using emerging technologies and the new kinds of social learning they empower. In addition, I have spent many wonderful hours working directly with teachers and K–12 students on a number of technology and media development projects. Thus, the reader will find everything from policy perspectives to professional development exercises, all aimed at helping anyone who is

interested in understanding the realities of digital citizenship within the modern educational environment.

## THIS BOOK IS IN THREE PARTS

I have approached the issue of digital citizenship from three perspectives, each of which constitutes a section in this book.

Part I, The Call to Digital Citizenship, addresses how digital citizenship fits into the historical evolution of citizenship as well as the evolution of community. It focuses on the three kinds of communities and citizenship referenced in the International Society for Technology in Education's (ISTE) refreshed standards—local, global, and digital—and how each plays a role in helping to define what it means to be a citizen in the Digital Age. This includes addressing the role that schools and teachers can play in exploring, understanding, and promoting digital citizenship within their profession as well as their classrooms. Also addressed in Section I is the notion of *citizen as learner* and how communicating, learning, and being a community member changes in the Digital Age. Of specific importance is how to manage learning in the digital domain so that we can help students become lifelong learners who develop perceptions, perspectives, and habits of mind that will allow them to navigate the Digital Age creatively and critically—*creatically,* as I like to call it.

Part II is titled Seeing Technology. A theme throughout this book is that in order to become more effective digital citizens, we must first be able to see more clearly the technology we take for granted and the invisible mediascapes in which we are immersed. Cultivating this ability will allow us to evaluate the impacts of our technological lifestyles so that we can reimagine and rebuild our communities and our sense of citizenship.

Part II considers Seeing Technology in a few different ways. It focuses on trying to understand what often results when we don't try to see technology clearly—fear. Understanding what bothers and even scares us about technology will help us understand the emotional barriers we face when pursuing innovation in our schools, communities, work places, and personal lives. Part II presents tools and activities designed to help teachers and students become "de-tech-tives" so that they can see and evaluate the tEcosystem—the technological ecosystem we have come to depend on that is largely invisible to us. The goal is leadership. That is, if we can see and evaluate technology, then we have a better chance of helping students become informed citizens and effective leaders.

Part III is titled Character Education in the Digital Age and the Case of the Ideal School Board. I imagine an "ideal" school board whose

members are willing to take on the many issues of digital citizenship—from digital literacy to cyberbullying—by placing their efforts within the context of character education. Part III begins with considerations of "Party-Cipation"—that is, the party that participation inspires—and then addresses the role that moral education and ethical perspective building can play in the challenges that face digital citizenship in education. It also explores a series of "inputs" to inform the school board's work, such as brain research, moral development in children, and discovering one's "ethical core." All of this is intended to help our ideal school board understand how teachers and kids think, grow, and interact in the infosphere. Our school board then looks at how character education might be employed as a means to infuse digital citizenship throughout a school community. Finally, our ideal school board considers the nature of digital literacy and its implications for citizenship as well as how to reconceive the school district's IT department so that digital citizenship can be pursued effectively within a realistic context.

It is my greatest hope that readers walk away from reading this book humming this mantra about living in the Digital Age: Technology connects us and disconnects us. It is up to us to understand how this happens so that we can become the best human beings we are capable of becoming. Technology amplifies. Let it amplify our greatest hopes for ourselves, our communities, and our planet.

## AN INVITATION TO READERS TO PARTICIPATE IN THE DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP RESOURCES WIKI (JASONOHLER.COM/DC)

I wrote this book knowing that the subject of digital citizenship was in its infancy and that research and resources in this area would continue to grow quickly and in abundance. That is why I created the Digital Citizenship Resources Wiki. Through it I invite readers to participate in developing a knowledge base related to the

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| *You can follow Jason on twitter at jasonohler.* |

many areas of digital citizenship addressed in this book by adding links to resources they have either created or simply find useful. The Digital Citizenship Resources Wiki is already up and running and provides links to many of the resources referenced in this book. But it needs your participation in order to be truly responsive to our collective needs in this area. To participate, go to jasonohler.com/dc. I welcome your involvement.