

## Book review

### Digital Community, Digital Citizen

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Ohler J. B. (2010). *Digital community, digital citizen*. CA: Corwin (pp. xii, 241)

Our news headlines increasingly describe the tragic fate of cyber victims. Young people share horrific stories of text bullying and online harassment. A recent Harvard study conducted by Dr Carrie James concluded that most young people were devoid of ethical thinking or consideration of others when using the internet. Students reported alarming incidents of cyber bullying (Grove, 2010). Unfortunately parents are often unaware of their children's virtual lives and therefore unable to give guidance. Technology is becoming a ubiquitous part of the lives of children who have grown up digital, and current generations are born digital. Yet, for many parents, teachers, and policy makers the power of these new media and social networking spaces is often poorly understood. Digital citizenship was a very topical issue in 2010 and, appropriately, this complex subject continues to receive a great deal of attention.

In his latest book, *Digital Community, Digital Citizen*, Dr Jason Ohler casts some understanding on what can be done to address these issues. His book is divided into three main themes: the call to digital citizenship, the role of technology, and the importance of character education in the digital age. Dr Ohler explains many issues relating to virtual space, and sets guidelines for virtual behaviour and creating online learning communities. These recommendations are supplemented with many practical activities for teachers to consider. He uses straightforward language and engages the reader by complementing the text with suggestion boxes, tables, and prompts.

Because many educationalists and parents are less digitally literate than children they often don't understand today's digital playground, making them more defensive of traditional practices. Dr Ohler addresses many of the fears of technology including "invasiveness", "vulnerability", "indisconnectability", "resocialization", "dehumanization" and others. He examines the flip side of these fears, calling them "accompanying delights".

While calls for digital safety often result in locked down, restrictive policies on access, Dr Ohler focuses on developing discerning judgment and applying technology wisely. He suggests that teachers need to help students analyse their discoveries "creatically" by blending creativity and critical thinking in the development of students' unique perspectives. As well as making many practical suggestions for teachers, Dr Ohler describes the "ideal school board" and how it should navigate digital citizenship. He suggests the combination of "disinhibition", an underdeveloped adolescent brain, and lack of a moral compass can be a recipe for inappropriate online behaviour. Dr Ohler discusses the "outer edges" of online freedoms, warning that new policies and laws might not address the underlying issues associated with digital behaviour. He provides a comprehensive list of resources and background reading, and his five-step agenda for his "ideal school board" provides a useful framework for developing a school policy on digital citizenship.

The section on the adolescent mind explains moral development in children, and suggests how to help them develop character. The discussion and video links on the teenage brain are quite enlightening for those of us who battle to understand our teens. I found the supplementary resources to be an engaging diversion from the text, especially the videos of Michael Sandel at Justice Harvard where young people tackle justice and the right thing to do (Harvard University's Justice with Michael Sandel).

*Digital Community, Digital Citizen* is a compelling read because Dr Ohler writes with persuasiveness and humour. He looks to schools to “help students use technology not just effectively but also creatively and wisely, so they can balance technology’s opportunities and limitations in order to cultivate a life that involves critical thinking, creativity, hope, purpose, and a respect for themselves and their communities” (p. 149). Although its bias is North American, most of the issues and recommendations, which are based on democratic western values, are equally applicable to our New Zealand context—especially since new media is not confined by geographic or cultural boundaries. Extreme cyber bullying is a worrying trend that needs attention, and developing good digital citizenship is a starting point. I believe *Digital Community, Digital Citizen* could be a useful supplement for parents, teachers, and policy makers—together with other New Zealand-specific resources, such as those found on [www.netsafe.org.nz](http://www.netsafe.org.nz), Hectors World and the [www.mylgp.org.nz](http://www.mylgp.org.nz) hub.

## References

Grove, J. V. (2010). *Harvard study finds teens online lack ethics*. Retrieved from <http://mashable.com/2010/09/21/ethical-consideration-online/#>

Harvard University’s Justice with Michael Sandel. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.justiceharvard.org/>