

Embedding Digital Citizenship In A Higher Education Institute

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Abstract

This paper presents an account of the genesis, rationale and implementation of an initiative to promote responsible Digital Citizenship in Higher Education settings. The genesis was concern about the negative impacts of inappropriate online activity within the DKIT community. The norms of virtual interaction appeared to be different to those which shape our face to face, physical interactions. Therefore, our rationale was to create a dialogue within our HE setting that sought to challenge this false division. The initiative's theoretical underpinning synthesised literature from Community Development, Republican Citizenship and the Social Psychology of online communications. We implemented a two strand response: firstly an awareness raising, train-the-trainer model of peer-led workshops, which is now embedded as part of the first year students' formal induction. Secondly, a proposed mediation process based on Restorative Justice principles to allow those harmed by the Social Media actions of others to be heard and their concerns addressed. The evaluation of our initiative indicates the emergence of cultural change within our institution in relation to online behaviour. Furthermore this knowledge and experience will contribute to and inform discussions about how best to shape the norms of online interaction within and across our HE communities.

Keywords: Digital Citizenship, Restorative Justice, Social Media

1. Background.

Digital Citizenship can be described as the norms of appropriate, responsible behaviour when engaging with others via Information Communication Technology. Digital Citizenship requires us to treat each other with respect and dignity in our online interaction. This paper describes the development of an initiative, which aimed to promote Digital Citizenship in Dundalk Institute of Technology (DkIT). The objectives were to encourage online interactions that respect the dignity of all others; to raise the consciousness of our members as to what may constitute acceptable and unacceptable online behaviours, and to ensure that our community is aware of the procedures that could be applied in the event of inappropriate online usage and behaviour.

At the time of writing (June 2018) the Digital Citizenship Initiative has been running in DkIT for three years. This September will see its fourth iteration. By the end of that month, upwards of three thousand members of the current DkIT Community will have engaged in the peer-to-peer, discussion based Digital Citizenship workshops. The reflective piece below is the first of in a series across which we will present an account of why and how this Digital Citizenship Initiative came about, its guiding principles and the two aspects of its implementation. We begin this first of the series with a brief account of the origins of the initiative. We then explain the concept of Digital Citizenship and provide an overview of the two-part process of embedding it as an integral feature of our community's practice. These two parts comprise: firstly, the Digital Citizenship workshops the aim of which is to increase, across the DkIT community, awareness of online rights and responsibilities; secondly, a forum for mediation aimed at redressing the harm done as a consequence of Social Media misuse.

The initial impetus for what became the Digital Citizenship Initiative was the felt need by a now-retired member of faculty 'to do something' in response to some painful events that took place in the Institute. This member of staff felt that social media commentary might have been a factor in shaping these events. The authors of this reflection were among a group of people, students and faculty, approached to be part of an informal working group exploring how best to respond to social media misuse. As so often happens, participants came and went until, after about four months, we three remained. Our disciplinary and practice backgrounds: Youth and Community Work, Social Care/Political Sociology and Digital Humanities and Digital Marketing are reflected in how the initiative subsequently developed. We moved away from the initial inclination to respond to a specific event in favour of a more community-based approach towards awareness raising and cultural change. We were aware of the Institute's

formal and quite robust Social Media Policy. However, in our view, such policies are reactive rather than proactive, focused on the punishment of rule breaking rather than the restoring of relationships.

Subsequently, through the early months of 2014 we explored with our students, peers etc. (though not at all systematically) their perceptions and experiences of Social Media activity. This was done through informal focus groups and drop-in cafés. It became apparent quite quickly that most of the examples we saw of potentially inappropriate commentary / postings were not the result of a deliberate intent to hurt. Rather, there appeared to be little thought given to the reality of digital commentary: the gulf in subtlety between spoken, face-to-face, communication compared to that which appears in hastily punched in 'textspeak' for example. In addition, there seemed to be little awareness of the replicability of online communications, which can be replayed and disseminated endlessly. The permanency and traceability of online commentary give digital interactions a profoundly different quality to that of school yard, staff room, intra-group, 'banter'. A lack of awareness around simple safeguards such as privacy settings surprised us. The whole issue of what constitutes privacy appeared to not have been given much consideration. These initial, and admittedly anecdotal, findings surprised us. We had taken at face value Prensky's (2001) conventional division between Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants assuming, erroneously, that our students would be natives and therefore much more aware of the hazards inherent in online spaces. In developing the Digital Citizenship Initiative therefore we took as our starting point that Social Media misuse was largely the result of a lack of awareness. Addressing this required a different kind of response to that which focused on the punishing of rule breaking. Firstly, we felt we needed to get members of the community to reflect about online behaviour, about their own agency and its potential consequences. Secondly we felt we needed a positive mechanism for dealing with instances of Social Media misuse if and when these occurred. Thus developed the two-part Digital Citizenship Initiative: Part 1: the peer-to-peer workshops which would highlight the points above, namely: Unthinking v Thinking Behaviour; Concept of De-individuation; Replicability of Online Content; Permanency of the Digital Footprint; Digital Literacy. Part 2: the creation of a forum for mediation modelled on our reading of key principles of Restorative Justice.

1. The Concept Of Digital Citizenship.

Digital Citizenship is of course not a new concept and its development is observable in a number of contexts. However, our interpretation and application of this reflects our disciplinary biases drawing upon the literature on: Community Development (Powell and Geoghegan, 2004; Ledwith, 2011; Jackson and O'Doherty, 2012); Civil Society (Castles. & Davidson, 2000; Edwards, 2014), Citizenship and Civic Republicanism (Marshall, 1950; Honohan, 2002; Bellamy, 2008). Whilst distinct, these share an elective affinity that together inform our assertion that DkIT, for these purposes, is best understood as a community made up of active agents, conceptualised collectively, as a 'citizenry'. From Community Development, we took the emphasis on the collective identifying and responding to communal needs; from Civil Society, the emphasis on voluntary association and from Civic Republicanism the emphasis on active engagement and mutual interdependency. The Digital Citizenship Initiative emerged, not from management, but from concerned members of the community. And, while we interpret and present DkIT as a community, it is a community of a particular sort. Like other third level institutions, it is a form of association. There is no compulsory requirement to attend DkIT therefore anyone who does so we interpret as having consented to being an active agent whose actions help shape the social fabric of this association. What our fellow 'citizens' do affects our wellbeing and what we do affects theirs. We all have the right to be treated with dignity and we all have the reciprocal obligation to treat others similarly. Put simply, we all, to some extent, have consented to be in this place, for greater or lesser periods of time, and our wellbeing therefore is inescapably interdependent. Moreover, the interactions and interdependency of DkIT's 'citizenry' encompasses both physical and virtual spaces.

1.1 Part 1: The Digital Citizenship Workshops.

Our first iteration of these workshops was during the induction week for the 2015/16 cohort of First Year Students. Initially, we had intended that every student in the college take part in one of these workshops during Semester One of that academic year. Resource constraints meant that if we were to engage even one year's cohort (approx. 1427 students) we would have to elicit the help of the students themselves. Our experiences as learners and educators have shown us the transforming potential of peer-to-peer reflective engagement; these were key to how we structured the one-hour workshops, eight of which we ran over two days during induction week. The participants with whom we worked were Programme Directors, Stage Convenors (Faculty) and Student Ambassadors (current students). Student Ambassadors in DkIT are volunteers whose role during induction week is to help their incoming peers orientate

themselves to their new environment. Part of this is to work with the Programme Directors and Stage Convenors in delivering the workshops to the students newly registered to their particular programmes. Necessity being the mother of invention has resulted in the combination of a train-the-trainer model with an effective pedagogy to reach at this stage thousands of members of the DkIT community.

The structure of the workshops is uncomplicated and easily replicable. Spatial organisation is important. What has worked best for us is about between 20-25 participants, broken up into (usually) self-selecting groups of four/five. We decided very early on when designing the workshop structure to draw upon the work of Benson (1987) utilising his insights on group work principles. These would include the promotion of productive, creative and healthy experiences to ensure an authentic and powerful encounter both for us as educators and for the participants in the room. We created an atmosphere where two-way dialogue was established and encouraged. We had been careful and conscious throughout this whole process that the instruction 'not to misbehave online or else' was not our primary message. Consequently, we had to ensure that those participating in any workshop on a voluntary basis would feel that their input and knowledge was valued and considered. The over-arching principle is that the group have a shared and understood purpose and that is to ensure conversation around, and awareness raising of, digital citizenship in a higher education setting.

The workshops were split into three distinct parts: An overview of the development of the Initiative, Workbook Groupwork and Case Study Groupwork. We begin with an overview of the genesis of the Digital Citizenship process; its core values: respect, responsibility, reciprocity; a brief description of the two parts of the Digital Citizenship process; an introduction to the programme's VLE (Moodle) and a brief run through of the rest of the workshop, all of which usually takes about 10 minutes. We then move on to the completion of the workbooks. These are very simple but are the catalyst for quite animated conversations between the participants. We attempt to engender some light-hearted competition: which group can identify and list the most Social Media platforms. Consistently and unsurprisingly perhaps, the platforms identified the quickest and the most frequently were Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, WhatsApp, Instagram and Tinder. But very many others are listed, the record so far is 52, many of which we have never heard! The serious aspect of this exercise is the phenomenal growth in easily accessible Social Media platforms all of which hold the potential 'dangers' we are seeking to raise awareness about: the permanency and traceability of digital footprints and the potential for unwitting harm to self and others. The workbook is the pivot of the workshop, usually taking about 20-30 minutes and, in the three iterations of this process, we have found it to really

stimulate discussion.

Having completed the workbooks, the participants being energised and interested, we explore examples, taken from publicly available media sources (and hosted on our VLE) of real-life social media activity. How we guide this aspect of the workshop is to focus the discussion on the general issue of the unintended consequences of posting without thinking. The intention is not to rehash examples of salacious headlines, there are so many, but, rather, to prompt a realisation of how easily social media commentary takes on a life of its own, morphing and spreading in ways the initial posters had not intended or imagined.

It is during this part of the workshop we have witnessed those kinds of 'ah ha' moments educators strive to achieve. We would not want to claim these have resulted in quantifiable, even observable, behavioural changes. That would require evidence of causal impacts we do not yet have. We would claim however that these moments of realisation resonate with those conceptualised in the literature on Threshold Concepts, liminality etc. Realisations after which a participant would not be able to say convincingly he or she was unaware of the potential consequences of Social Media commentary. Again, this is not to say that all workshop participants experience this epistemological breakthrough, or that there is uniformity of changed awareness among those who do. However, within the Institute, given that around three quarters of the student body, many lecturers, and support staff have taken part in these workshops the concept and practice of Digital Citizenship are now part of the wider conversation¹.

1.2 Mediation.

The next 'step' in how we envisage the embedding of Digital Citizenship was conceived in response to the question: what happens if people do actually behave in ways that might harm or has harmed others? Our hope is that increased awareness of the pitfalls in cyber space should have some impact, but what if it doesn't get through to some people or they act inappropriately anyway? Moreover, there is also the problematic issue of who decides what constitutes inappropriate behaviour anyway? Some might claim that the blurring of the lines between joking and jeering, banter and bullying, free speech and hate speech has had a chilling effect, silencing debate and diversity of opinions. Admittedly, the lines may not always be clear and unambiguous. And, there are Social Media campaigns that offer ample evidence

1 A key challenge for us as the initiators of this process is to measure its impact and influence. It would be especially interesting to identify, differences, if any, across genders, ages, disciplines, etc. Even identifying, let alone operationalising, relevant variables is a challenge for qualitatively orientated people like us.

of the tyrannical potential of the collective voice (Ronson 2015). HEIs around the world are wrestling with these issues, always have been and Social Media have only exacerbated the challenges (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2018; Choski, 2018). Having said that, it could also be argued that it is generally the more advantaged, the more powerful, who advance free speech as the most fundamental of all rights. Therefore, if a community is to be inclusive and just, there is a requirement to hear the voices and address of the needs, if any arise, of those who feel they have been harmed through Social Media.

Addressing these needs would be based on an adaptation of Zehr's (2004) guiding questions: Who has been harmed? How have they been harmed? What do they feel they need? Whose responsibility is it to meet these needs? What is the appropriate way to meet these needs? Who else has a stake in this? For this, suitably trained mediators are essential. Straight away there are fiendishly difficult questions, some alluded to above, as well as issues around data collection exacerbated further perhaps by GDPR. Moreover, given that this process has, as yet, no statutory status, or buy in from management (beyond the timetabling of workshops during induction week) the invitation to mediation can be only that. If it is ignored, the process is de facto over and the complainant has either to let it go or take their chances with Institute's formal procedures, modelled on the Bullying and Harassment Policy. One of our number has completed the formal training on Bullying and Harassment, but the emphasis in this part of the Digital Citizenship process is different. We envisage this mediation as beginning not with an assumption of perpetrator guilt/victim innocence but, rather, with a willingness to hear the voice/s of those who feel themselves treated unjustly and to seek to embed the ethos of Digital Citizenship amongst all involved.

2. Concluding Thoughts.

Our intention in this piece is to present to colleagues across the HE sector the genesis of, the philosophy underpinning, and our efforts so far, to engender positive changes to our community's online interactions. If we were asked to explain what we think we have achieved, we would claim that, notwithstanding the limited resources available, we have made a positive start. Virtually every student in DkIT, by the end of this September (2018), will have engaged with one of the Digital Citizenship workshops. The 'rolling out' of the workshops has only been possible with the involvement of the Student Ambassadors. We would consider this to be a further positive. We have established that peer-to-peer, group-based learning is the appropriate method to encourage debate and foster transformative changes. We think also that the approach we propose to be taken in implementing the Mediation process is also

appropriate. Restorative rather than retributive responses, in our view, are more fitting to the changes that we hope become embedded. However, we are realistic, if not pessimistic, as to how this will unfold. The implementation of the mediation process requires the availability of suitably trained, willing, mediators.

In the next 'instalment' of this series of explorations of DkIT's Digital Citizenship Initiative, we will present a detailed, more quantitatively orientated, analysis of the data generated in the workshops. This will include analysis of participants' initial understandings of what Digital Citizenship means to them; how they perceive the boundaries, if any, between the online and face-to-face spheres; their awareness and reactions to publicly available examples of social media misuse.

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