



*For Membership as a MirandaNet Fellow*

## Online safety and digital literacy: how do they feature in schools?

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### Summary

This article about the teaching of online safety and digital literacy has grown out of a shared concern amongst education technologies experts that the development and learning of issues related to online safety and aspects of digital literacy have stalled in UK schools. We have based our views on wide and valuable experience of educators who responded to our preliminary survey from two professional organisations, Naace and the MirandaNet Fellowship, as well some schools. The results indicate how many issues are still to be resolved and identifies areas for urgent research, and so we conclude, not with answers, with more research questions.

### Why is digital literacy important?

It is some years since we woke up to the idea that schools should protecting children whilst they are in their care and educating them for when they are not.<sup>2</sup> This article is born of a concern that the acquisition of the skills of digital literacy might not be as well understood as we would hope. If “the web is the dominant medium of society.”<sup>3</sup>, we are right to be concerned. A key question is whether teachers are sufficiently engaged to see the solutions.

A post on the JISC website says, “We define digital literacies as the capabilities which fit someone for living, learning and working in a digital society.”<sup>4</sup> (2015) The article goes on to define subsets, but the one of immediate interest refers to information literacy. The American Library Association (ALA) say, “Digital Literacy is the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills.”<sup>5</sup> We might see this as an aspect of online safety in general which concerns itself with users’ safety and well-being, both physical and mental. We are well used to talking about online grooming and cyberbullying but this sort of literacy is also one that is a life skill. The ability to evaluate and use online information well, to put it simply, is one that enhances the accuracy of schoolwork, protects from things as

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Tanya Byron (Safer Children in a Digital World: The Report of the Byron Review)

<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Alan November

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/developing-students-digital-literacy>

<sup>5</sup> <http://connect.ala.org/node/181197>



diverse as dietary fads and radicalisation and, for adults, avoids the purchase of a non-existent timeshare.

Why are some educators oblivious to the dangers? Firstly, if there is a lack of engagement why might this be? Lack of engagement does not imply a lack of care, rather a lack of internalised understanding. An explanation might lie in the contexts we draw on to learn. Typically our behaviours are acquired from the collective experience of society. In this instance online life is so recent a phenomenon that the collective experience does not really exist. Children, teachers and parents can often talk about risks and dangers but are still making sense of the web themselves so that the examples they use seem detached from their reality. Parental engagement is a good example. I spend plenty of time in classrooms and my supposition is that if you go into any classroom in the country and ask who has been told not to talk to strangers you will most likely get 100% responding positively. This is the result of the care parents take with their children in the physical world. It is the same sort of advice they were given by their parents and so on. But very few parents engage with a chance to hear about keeping their children safe online. School staff, like everyone else, come to the online world with no background.

In the same vein it is interesting to ask primary school children who they talk to online, and then take them back to their definitions of strangers – the realisation begins to dawn. Only recently a teacher expressed how well her pupils were able to articulate online risks, but how poor they were at taking the very precautions they described. Alternatively we might ask parents about the precautions they take when their children go out to play only to discover that they are nothing like as rigorous when it comes to knowing where their children are off to online and who they are there with.

#### **‘Fake news’ is an element in the phenomenon**

Despite this apparent lack of resonance with the wider world there are agencies such as the Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) of the National Crime Agency (NCA), South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) and numerous children’s charities who have produced excellent resources for young people, parents and schools who have a tight grasp of the issues. Well worth a look is the *Digital Classroom* work of Dr Jane Reeves<sup>6</sup>, Professor of Teaching, Learning and Innovation in Child Protection at the University of Kent. Her designers had developed scenarios in applications like Facebook so that the pupils and students go through the simulated process of being groomed in order to see how it was done and analyse the processes in groups. This is a powerful tool to combat these cruel strategies. Some experts in this field also responded to a short survey by MirandaNet and their views add weight to this article.

Good practice suggests that online safety is best taught with a range of approaches with special assemblies and visitors supplementing a planned scheme of work. Currently, with National Curriculum requirements it is largely the preserve of the computing department or teacher who tend to be reliant on special events. Encouragingly there seems to be a shift from a focus on technologies to behaviours, helpful when the ‘flavour of the month’ app changes so frequently. Another shift is towards seeing online safety as more of a whole school issue and one with implications for other subjects. A common view is that it fits well

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kent.ac.uk/sspsr/staff/academic/n-r/reeves-jane.html>



into the Personal, Social, Health and Economics (PSHE) curriculum with important implications for emotions and appropriate behaviour. Another reason for this shift is that curriculum time for computing is being squeezed.

But these shifts in attitude are painfully slow and meanwhile some students are struggling with the realities of online engagement. One respondent to the survey cited the difficulty a young person on the autistic spectrum had with managing behaviour because it was online. This illustrates the kind of challenge that young people encounter: admitting to behaving differently online is not uncommon

Some experts recommend that allowing users safe access to the Internet is in a way analogous to introducing children to road safety. Advice needs to be age appropriate, but is vital in helping them learn about being in a virtual environment just as we do in training them about their physical environment. One way to do this is to web publish schoolwork or to encourage blogs which opens them up to an audience greater than just one teacher. Steve Gillian is a MirandaNet Fellow at Thurlbear Primary School who has promoted the value of pupil blogging.<sup>7</sup>

Steve's greatest concern is the impact of the press and social media, on parents' and pupils' views of the world, "The press often twists the truth and it is hard for the audience to know which voice on social media to believe and which journalist to trust. I fear most the constant diet of soundbites where the reasoning behind the idea is not clear, or not available at all. Parents and children soak up everything, good and bad, that is said about education in particular," says Steve, "The staff often have to convince parents that the school are taking decisions for the right reasons. Leading parents, children and staff through the forest of fake news and false information is a major responsibility that I feel keenly".

Steve's passion is blogging – an important tool in developing pupils' digital literacy and media awareness. He encourages the pupils to express their own passions using J2webby. He has found this tool from Just2easy, requires fewer clicks before the pupils get to the creative interface than comparative packages.

"My view is that when the pupils publish themselves they learn so much intuitively about how information arrives on the web and become more curious about who the author is. Blogging is also an excellent way to teach responsibility and safeguarding because the system is robust".

In this context Steve talks about 'fake news' as a current concern. The teaching of media literacy has been an issue ever since information began to appear online. A common response is that education, starting in the primary school, will solve this problem. However, this assertion is usually coupled with the observation that not much is actually happening in schools. One survey respondent stated that the Ofcom Media Use and Attitudes Survey (2016)<sup>8</sup> highlighted the fact that students judged veracity not on content but production and presentation values. If the resources 'look' professional young people regard them as reliable. They do not focus on the source of the information. The superficiality of these judgements when they are not challenged is a matter of concern because by adulthood a young person needs to have transitioned from being protected to being supported and,

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<sup>7</sup> <https://mirandanet.ac.uk/role-blogging-digital-literacy/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/childrens/children-parents-nov16>



finally, to independence. To do this, schools need to provide an environment where mistakes can be learnt from without damaging consequences. If it is the case that “...two in ten believe that if a search engine lists information it must be true”<sup>9</sup> there is much to be done. Departments such as History, English, Science and Geography, to name just four, could play a key role here.

If most schools have an online safety policy it is often the case that this policy does not translate well into practice due to complexity of the context or the lack of engagement of different parts of the school community in its construction. An online safety policy is a good starting point although to be successful it must be translated into wider good practice. An excellent report into the plusses and minuses of schools’ online safety activities is produced by the South West Grid for Learning (SWGfL) based on schools using their 360<sup>0</sup> resource highlights many of these issues.<sup>10</sup>

But one respondent warned that too many such policies are on paper only. Warning students of the potential issues around 'friending' might not be helpful if schools don't let them near social media. Again, they need supported access and teaching about how to cope with real situations rather than just discussions and warnings. Jane Reeves’ simulation on Facebook is a response to this need. Teachers need courage to tackle this simulation but the results indicate this is a very effective method of warning about online behaviours like grooming.

Copyright is another neglected issue and if touched upon at all is more likely to be with regard to plagiarism than intellectual property issues. It seems likely that not only are school students unaware of the existence and purpose of Creative Commons but the situation is further confused by a similar lack of knowledge on the part of content creators who would be happy for their content to be repurposed but do not know that they can label it - thus making anyone who is concerned by copyright unlikely to use it. In any case the downloading of copyright material through sites like Pirate Bay suggests that the issue is either widely misunderstood or simply ignored.

“The ability to re-edit copyright works in new and experimental ways is seen as an important learning and teaching exercise for creative skills.”<sup>11</sup> The document from which this is taken, *Exceptions to copyright: Education and Teaching*, is helpful but more definitive advice is needed. How many teachers who use copyright material all the time understand fair use?

Meanwhile SWGfL is currently working with the UK Council for Child Internet Safety (UKCCIS) on exactly these issues and are publishing a framework in September of age-related expectations from EYFS to Year 13 across eight strands with further work on a delivery mechanism and assessment outcomes to support educators in addressing those difficult areas that have been latent and diluted by poor online safety messages that are old and do not resonate with children and young people.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/24772/1/childrens\\_parents\\_nov2015.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/24772/1/childrens_parents_nov2015.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://swgfl.org.uk/360report2016.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/375951/Education\\_and\\_Teaching.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/375951/Education_and_Teaching.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.kencorish.info/bursting-the-bubble-why-online-safety-education-needs-to-evolve>



There is a risk, however, that a perceived focus on computer science will further dilute these important messages that were probably not well embedded in the first place.

## Conclusion

So the conclusion that we have drawn is that the topic of online safety is not registering with many teachers: others acknowledge the topic without any real internalisation. Issues such as information literacy are still very much in their infancy as is copyright in the Internet age. Work needs to be done to make all aspects of online safety a pervasive part of the background to everyday life. To return to a road safety analogy if motorised transport had developed in the same way as the Internet we would still have our modern cars, but in terms of safety would still have someone with a red flag walking in front of them.

I hope that readers do not recognise their own schools in this negative picture about schools' capacity to deal with online safety and digital literacy. But I have found in my work and in my first survey that those who are tackling these issues are probably in a minority.

## Further research

My small-scale research indicates that more needs to be done in this area. The survey questions were?

- What do you see in schools as the current balance between e-safety as the preserve of Computing and taught as a more general life skill? In which curriculum area is it also taught?
- Are you seeing an increase, albeit slow, of the online publishing of students' work and blogging? Is this helping pupils to spot the dangers?
- Facebook's intention to help users spot fake news is a specific instance of digital literacy. How do we best help our students to progress over their school life from using only provided links to complete independence? Do you have any examples?
- Are school safeguarding policies paying sufficient regard to the continuing safety of students into their adult life? Do you have any evidence?
- How widespread is an understanding about copyright, reuse of online resources and things like attribution?

Based on the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire I suggest some deeper questions need to be asked about the current situation:

- Is online safety and digital literacy as well addressed as corresponding issues in the 'real world'?
- What can be done to embed online safety and digital literacy as part of life in all schools?
- What are the most successful models for effective teaching and learning with regard to staying safe online?

- How might students be safely allowed to interact with the risks of the online world without danger?
- What benefits are there in the online publishing of students' work and what do they need to understand to do this safely?
- What is the national picture with regard to students being able to search for information efficiently and what strategies do they have for recognising rogue websites?
- What needs to be done to ensure wider ownership and more unconscious use of safety policies?
- What are the main issues regarding copyright for schools and their students?
- How widely recognised as important is copyright?

We hope that members of organisations like Naace and MirandaNet will share their evidence so that we can develop guidelines about how to proceed. It is a rocky road for teachers at the moment with no clear guidance. Sharing expertise in a professional organisation can help to lead us all in the right direction.

