

# 4

## Who Am I Online? Cultivating Students' Digital Identity Practices

**Tammy B. Salman**

### **Abstract**

Citizenship, or the participation and engagement of individuals within communities, is a cornerstone of democratic society. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, increasing access to, and the proliferation of, digital tools has allowed new forms of social, political, cultural, and global connectivity. This connectedness has given rise to new forms of community discourse, often defined collectively as digital citizenship. Discussions about digital citizenship are more prevalent in elementary and secondary classrooms, often emphasizing safety and privacy, but are no less important in higher education. Because digital citizenship is a broad topic, this chapter will emphasize a facet relevant to higher education: digital identity. It will explore strategies for using digital tools to encourage higher education students to

contribute as digital citizens in their chosen professional fields. College, university, and other adult-learning educators are in a position to help students – whether digital natives or digital immigrants—understand and cultivate a digital professional identity.

## Digital Citizenship

*“Modern technology has become like a phantom limb, it is so much a part of us.”*  
–Sherry Turkle, TEDxUIUC 2011

Citizenship is a founding principle of democratic societies. While citizenship is defined within a variety of contexts, it generally involves the rights and responsibilities people have with regard to participation or engagement in cultural, social, regional, national, or global communities. In the 21st century, civic participation and engagement includes a digital dimension, often referred to as digital citizenship. Digital citizenship is defined broadly as the appropriate use of technology and the set of related behaviors associated with working and participating in a digital society (Ribble, 2011). It is an evolving concept that blends a traditional understanding of what it means to be an engaged citizen with new methods for societal collaboration and participation.

Digital citizenship is often discussed in elementary and secondary education, with an emphasis on children’s safety and security, but educators at colleges and universities have the opportunity to continue the conversation by connecting digital citizenship practices to career or professional pathways.

While digital citizenship is a broad topic, this chapter is more narrowly focused on a facet of digital citizenship: digital identity. As employers increasingly look for workers who have the ability to think critically, solve complex problems, and understand how to participate in a globally-connected environment, college and university educators are in a position to imbue students with a sense of social responsibility regarding ethical practices and service by encouraging them to cultivate professionally appropriate digital identities.

## Employers Consider Digital Identity in the Hiring Process

Employers and recruiters increasingly use social media, such as LinkedIn, and search engines, such as Google, to learn more about job seekers and to eliminate potential candidates based on posted information that might be deemed inappropriate. In a poll conducted by Harris Poll on behalf of CareerBuilder (2014), 43% of hiring managers and human resource workers surveyed said they search for information and photos posted by job seekers, and 51% of those employers who look for additional information reported not hiring based on content candidates posted. Among the reasons employers reported for eliminating candidates were posting indecent photos, indications of drug or alcohol use, and negative comments about previous employers (CareerBuilder, 2014).

## Leverage the Social Media Platforms Students Already Use

Adults across generations are more digitally present, contributing content, opinions, images, videos, and more across multiple online platforms and social media (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Because of this, higher education should embrace digital forums and social media as means for cultivating students’ awareness of, and contributions to, digital social discourse. Leveraging social media in conjunction with the classroom experience (in person or online) helps to set expectations for participating and contributing in meaningful ways. If critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving are among the top skills sought by employers, in what ways can educators help students develop awareness of what digital participation means and help them develop a digital identity to demonstrate key skills?

Cultivating a professional digital identity with the support of educators who are practitioners and experts in their fields is a way to build confidence and expertise, as well as to shift from awareness of social media to knowledge of social media to “social media intelligence,” which Lyle

Wetsch, a marketing professor and globally recognized social media expert, deems the pinnacle of comprehension of what social media is and how it can be effectively leveraged by individuals (Wetsch, 2012, p. 31).

### **Online Reputation Matters in a Digitally Archived World**

Online reputation management is an essential component of digital identity and online participation, because what someone says about himself or herself, and what others say, shows up in his or her online digital footprint. Because information and photos posted for a few minutes and deleted may still exist on servers or in archives such as the Internet Archive and may never truly disappear (Internet Archive, n.d.; LePore, 2015), there is a need for users of social media and devices such as tablets and smartphones to monitor online contributions. Reputation management includes having an understanding of what social media sites offer, using search engines to monitor identity, and understanding how privacy and location settings are used (Madden & Smith, 2010; Rainie, Kiesler, Kang, & Madden, 2013).

### **How Can Higher Education Encourage Students' Participation as Digital Citizens?**

Current higher education classes, whether face-to-face or online, or a combination thereof, typically include some sort of online component. Educators can facilitate digital identity development by leveraging a variety of tools already used in the classroom or by students for personal reasons. What follows are some ideas educators should consider to encourage and model digital participation and digital identity development. There are unlimited ways of incorporating digital tools and social media into courses, particularly since digital tools and preferences are prone to change. However, these ideas and current practices may help spur creative curriculum connections.

### **Learning Management Systems and Digital Identity Creation**

Colleges and universities which emphasize online education, or make heavy use of learning management systems (LMS) as a complement to their courses, are in a good position to model appropriate digital behaviors and integrate relevant activities or assignments into courses. The nature of online learning provides a structure for digital interactions and a safe environment in which students can develop or enhance their digital identities relative to educational pursuits. Faculty can model and encourage students to create robust profiles within their online course systems and within university-hosted portals and forums (Snart, 2010).

### **E-Portfolios as Springboards to Digital Engagement**

Participation in digital communities can begin with students engaged in higher education and adult-learning programs. Faculty can help students understand the connections between learning outcomes, assignments, and their professional goals through focused use of tools such as e-portfolios. The concept of e-portfolios as a digital collection of student artifacts is not a new one in higher education. By using e-portfolios, particularly those that are available to the public via websites, blogs, or other tools, students can showcase their schoolwork, internships, and work experience, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities. E-portfolios can serve as an initial launch for students' professional identity (Graves & Epstein, 2011).

Colleges and universities are helping students develop more focused e-portfolios and making them accessible outside of closed university systems (as an example, see Virginia Tech University's Gallery of Presentations). Developing and showcasing e-portfolios using blogs or other publicly accessible tools and websites is a way to increase the visibility of students' work and provide students with a springboard from which they can continue to build their online presence as they acquire new skills, develop professionally, or change careers.

## Microblogging, Pinning, and Shared Images: Digital Equivalents of the Elevator Speech

Businesses and career sites encourage job candidates to hone their “elevator speeches,” or short statements that quickly sum up the kind of job they want or the jobs they perform. The concept is that you should be able to describe a function or skill concisely to a stakeholder in the time it takes to ride an elevator (Mind Tools, n.d.). In the digital world, this holds true as well, and there is no shortage of ways to quickly capture attention through use of short bursts of text, images, video, or a combination of these techniques.

According to the Pew Research Center’s 2014 social media survey, Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter ranked among the top social media sites after Facebook and LinkedIn (Duggan et al., 2015). Tools such as these make it easy to join conversations, collaborate, and hone visual and digital literacy skills, and they are good starting points for developing a digital identity.

### Tweet it

According to Acosta (2014), higher education should play a larger role in incorporating instruction on the effective use of tools such as Twitter. Twitter offers a platform in which students can practice distilling their knowledge and ideas into short bursts of conversation in a digitally connected environment. In one example, researchers at Boise State University studied mobile microblogging as an authentic form of learning, using a mixed-methods approach to analyze tweets from students in a master-level instructional message design course (Hsu & Ching, 2012). Students applied learning theory and design principles to their Twitter messages and interacted with peers and others on a regular basis. The study reported benefits to students such as improved social learning and enhanced connections to course material in an authentic, real-life way.

### Pin it

Electronic bulletin boards such as Pinterest allow users to post, or “pin,” digital objects such as photos, videos, and other web content. It is a

social place in which to gather ideas about how to build or create and to share with those who have similar interests. In higher education courses, e-bulletin boards serve multiple purposes in terms of digital identity, because they allow students to curate visual and multimedia objects in an authentic environment, engage with peers in class and beyond, deepen understanding of a subject, and invest in their learning in ways not possible within the strictures of a class environment (Beebe, 2014).

### Blog it

Sharing ideas, stories, research, and other content online through blogs is a fairly established practice in the digital world. There are many ways blogging can help develop digital identity. Students need not establish their own blogs, though some may already have blogs, or may prefer to use blogs as part of, or in lieu of, an e-portfolio. There are established blogs to which students can contribute knowledge, stories, and experiences. Examples include professional organizations, media sites, university news sites, research sites, affinity groups, and others. Over time, professionals who blog may develop deeper understanding, increased comfort level with digital contributions, new perspectives, and increased expertise (Luehmann, 2008).

## Digital Identity and Personal Branding

Another method for facilitating students’ digital identity includes guiding them through exercises in which they develop a personal brand with an eye toward career aspirations. Having a personal brand or identity, no matter where a student is in his or her career trajectory, is important for professional advancement (Wetsch, 2012). While the concept of branding is a term often associated with business and marketing, the idea is applicable across disciplines.

To bridge the gap between students’ personal and professional identities in the online sphere, Memorial University of Newfoundland developed a course that guides students through development of their personal brand (Wetsch, 2012). Through the use of personality tests, worksheets, and self-reflection exercises, students identify their strengths and

weaknesses and begin to develop a unique professional identity. The course engages students in dialogue about tools, such as LinkedIn, which can deploy a personal brand, and assessment of a brand using the tools' embedded analytics (p. 34).

## Conclusion

With the proliferation of digital tools, and use of social media across generations, educators in colleges, universities, and adult-learning settings are in a position to help students develop a professionally acceptable digital identity and make contributions as citizens in digitally connected democratic societies. Educators can achieve this by developing students' capacities to meet employers' needs, leveraging currently used social media platforms, learning management systems, e-portfolios, and other tools, and by promoting or modeling appropriate engagement through development of digital identity.

## References

- Acosta, D. M. (2014). Tweet up? Examining Twitter's impact on social capital and digital citizenship in higher education. *About Campus*, 18(6), 10–17.
- Beebe, A. (2014). Pinning pyrotechnics and phrenology: Using Pinterest to teach nineteenth-century American novels. *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*, 6(2/3), 1-15.
- CareerBuilder. (2014). Number of employers passing on applicants due to social media posts continues to rise, according to new CareerBuilder survey [Press release]. Retrieved from <http://www.careerbuilder.com/share/aboutus/pressreleasesdetail.aspx?sd=6%2F26%2F2014&id=pr829&ed=12%2F31%2F2014>
- Duggan, M., Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2015). *Social media update 2014*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet &

American Life Project. Retrieved from [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/01/PI\\_SocialMediaUpdate20144.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/01/PI_SocialMediaUpdate20144.pdf)

- Graves, N., & Epstein, M. (2011). Eportfolio: A tool for constructing a narrative professional identity. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 74(3), 342-346.
- Hsu, Y-C., & Ching, Y-H. (2012). Mobile microblogging: Using Twitter and mobile devices in an online course to promote learning in authentic contexts. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 13(4), 211-227.
- Internet Archive. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://archive.org/index.php>
- LePore, J. (2015, January 26). The cobweb: Can the Internet be archived? *The New Yorker* 90(45), 34. Retrieved from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/26/cobweb>
- Luehmann, A. L. (2008). Using blogging in support of teacher professional identity development: A case study. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 17, 287-337. Retrieved from <http://www.studyplace.org/w/images/c/cb/LuehmannTeacherPD.pdf>
- Madden, M., & Smith, A. (2010). *Reputation management and social media: How people monitor their identity and search for others online*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2010/05/26/reputation-management-and-social-media/>
- Mind Tools. (n.d.). *Crafting an elevator pitch: Introducing your company quickly and compellingly*. Retrieved from <http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/elevator-pitch.htm>
- Rainie, L., Kiesler, S., Kang, R., & Madden, M. (2013). *Anonymity, privacy, and security online*. Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/09/05/anonymity-privacy-and-security-online/>

Ribble, M. (2011). *Digital citizenship in schools: Nine elements all students should know*. Eugene, OR: ISTE.

Snart, J. A. (2010). *Hybrid learning: The perils and promise of blending on-line and face-to-face instruction in higher education*. Westport, CT: ABC-CLIO.

Wetsch, L. R. (2012). A personal branding assignment using social media. *Journal of Advertising Education*, 16(1), 30-36.