

Don't Feed the Trolls

Using Blogs to Teach Civil Discourse

BY KAREN WORK RICHARDSON



Educators in K–12 and university settings have begun to embrace blogs for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways. Blogging provides technical advantages that paper diaries do not, including the elimination of the notebooks themselves and the possibility of linking to relevant materials online rather than just citing them. In addition, the use of blogs gives students the ability to read and comment on each other's drafts.

As with any technology tool, there is room for students to abuse it. We all know the horror stories. But other, less dramatic abuses—spreading gossip and innuendo, leaving mean-spirited, ugly comments in social networking sites, or posting inflammatory information about a school or teacher—contribute to a general sense

that incivility is just part of the culture of the Web.

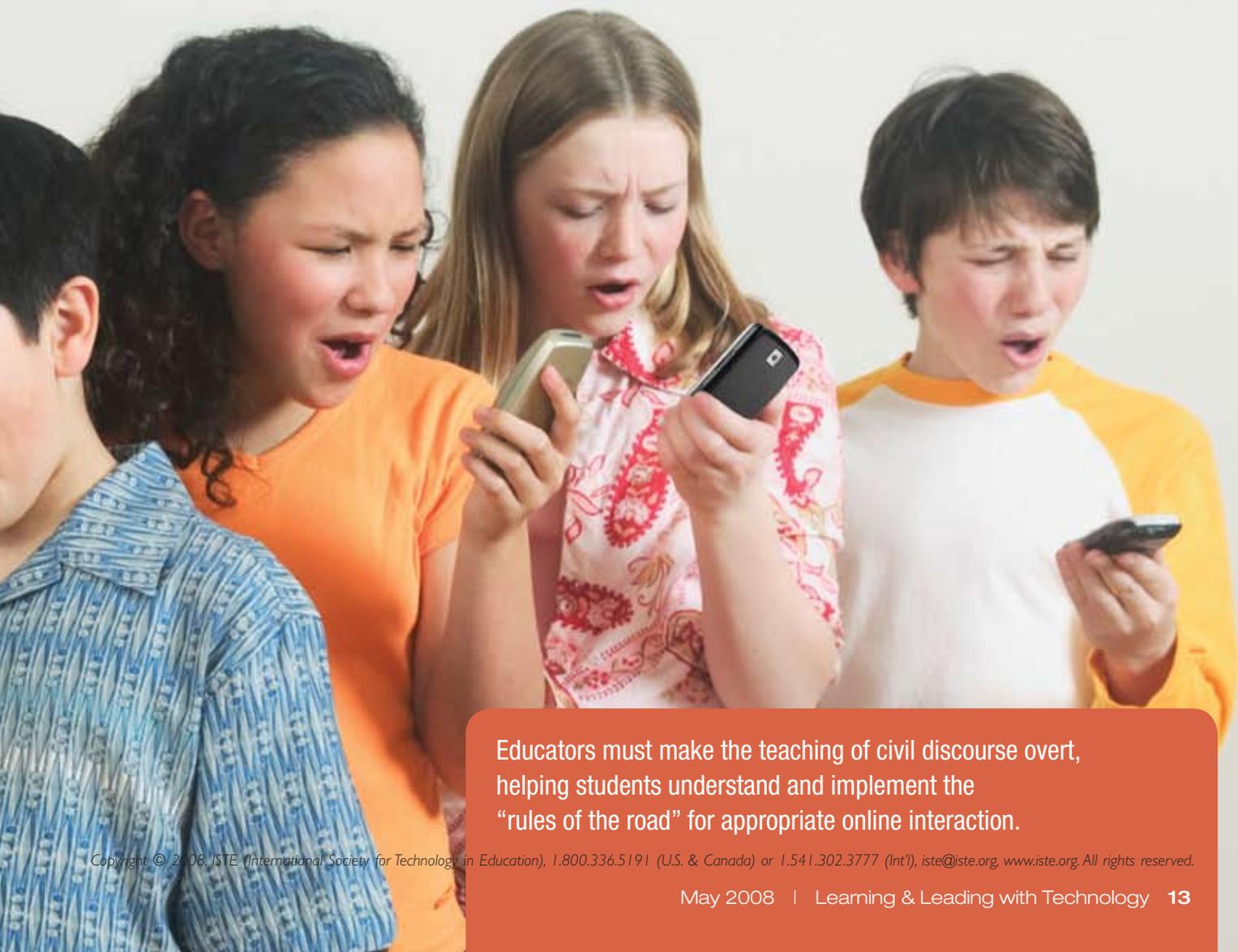
Perhaps it shouldn't come as a surprise when such incivility is part of the everyday vernacular, making for snappy soundbites designed for the quick putdown rather than the well-crafted argument.

How do we harness the power of this potentially collaborative technology and use it to further productive conversation? How do we use it to help students understand that push-button publishing of any kind—discussion forums, chat rooms, blogs—requires constant reflection and self-restraint? One way is by making students aware of already existing guidelines for discourse that are posted at many sites.

Guidelines for Civil Discourse

Although guidelines for civil discourse vary to some extent, they all share an essential message: personal attacks are never acceptable as part of public discourse in which the goal is to discuss ideas rather than people. These guidelines often recommend also that forum participants are careful not to “feed the trolls.” According to Wikipedia, a troll is “a person who posts rude or offensive messages on the Internet, such as in online discussion forums, to disrupt discussion or to upset its participants.” In a 2001 article for AOL forum users, Timothy Campbell suggested that the only way to deal with trolls is to ignore them.

In an increasingly uncivil world, how do we teach civility so that we can realize that vision of a safe, sup-



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portive “conversation space” for teachers and students? Educators must make the teaching of civil discourse overt, helping students understand and implement the “rules of the road” for appropriate online interaction.

Review the Rules

In opening the conversation about civil discourse, a good first step is to review examples of rules that are already in place. Because the concept of rules is familiar to even the youngest of students, we can broach the subject with almost any age group. MOOSE Crossing is an online interactive learning environment for kids ages 9 to 13, designed to help them learn creative writing and programming skills. Its code of conduct suggests, “Most of the rules are just like rules for how to behave in the real world.”

Although we should make our students aware of the existing rules, we must understand that mandating good behavior in general and civil discourse in particular is often ineffective in the end. In addition, stated rules are often too general, failing to specifically define abusive or violent language. We must show our students what the rules look like in practice, by teaching and modeling civil discourse online and face to face.

Put the Rules into Practice

By practicing civil discourse throughout their daily experiences, students can internalize the externally imposed rules, identifying specific instances of appropriate conversation in different contexts. MOOSE Crossing developers frame this in a way that younger students will understand, saying: “Don’t do anything you wouldn’t do at recess at school.”

What does civil discourse look like? How can we disagree without being disagreeable? We can begin with au-

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thentic examples of civil disagreement from the Web. Some guidelines for civil discourse do go beyond general statements about avoiding personal attacks or abuse by providing specific suggestions, such as:

- Use “I” statements to make it clear that you are speaking for yourself.
- Don’t use name calling.
- Avoid labeling groups of people.
- Discuss ideas, not people.
- Don’t respond to provocations.
- Stay on topic.
- Be willing to really listen to points of view that are different from your own, recognizing that others are allowed to have opinions different from yours.
- Realize that what you say and what others think you said may be two different things. If there is misunderstanding, try to clarify your position.

Students can add to these specific suggestions, developing their own civil discourse examples to which they can refer as they engage in both face-to-face and online dialogue. Face-to-face or online roleplaying that allows students to consider how they will respond to provocations would be a helpful way to assist students’ learning about civil discourse.

Encourage Self-Monitoring

Most guidelines for civil discourse assume that participants will engage in self-regulation. Developing their own examples of civil and uncivil discourse can help students move toward self-regulation. Since self-monitoring is an important piece of the civil discourse puzzle, we must continually engage students in that process. The code of conduct for MOOSE Crossing encourages students’ reflection to this end by saying, “If you think maybe you shouldn’t



do something, you probably shouldn’t.” That is good advice to guide behavior in many different situations and an effective way to get early elementary students to think about actions and consequences. Think first, then post.

Blogs are particularly effective when teaching about civil discourse because unlike in face-to-face conversations, the interaction is captured online, allowing for review and reflection. Students should be asked to reflect about selected segments of online conversations, both alone and in groups. What happened that helped make the conversation richer? Where did the conversation falter? How did the group handle disagreement? What else could have assisted coming to consensus or agreement to disagree? This process of self-monitoring can also help students grow beyond being simply civil to identifying ways to engage in more effective conversations overall.

Model Civil Discourse

Finally, as the MOOSE Crossing code of conduct suggests, possibly the most important part of helping our students learn about civil discourse is to engage in it ourselves. The developers address adults, suggesting that we model appropriate interactions online: “As an adult, your conduct needs to be not merely acceptable but exemplary.”



Classroom interaction—both online and offline—must demonstrate and embody civil discourse. How we talk to each other is important, and if students see examples of appropriate conversation in action from both adults and their peers, they will learn and apply much more than by simply reviewing rules.

Provide Opportunities

Why, with everything else teachers have to do these days, should we focus on civil discourse? The answer is simple: Civil discourse forms the foundation of a democratic society.

Incorporating blogs into classroom discourse and curriculum-based learning offers opportunities for students to evaluate and engage in civil discourse. It also demands that we help our students learn and behave according to a simple yet powerful notion: Responsible, productive citizens don't always agree—but when they disagree, they always do so civilly. Helping our students come to a clear understanding of what that kind of conversation sounds like will help them become more productive citizens who practice and promote civil discourse throughout the various communities—both real and virtual—in which they participate.

Resources

- Campbell, T. (2001). Internet trolls. <http://www.briland.com/wwwboard/messages/4749.html>
- Civil Discourse guidelines: <http://groups.msn.com/WhatsNews/civildiscourse.msnw>
- Establishing Forums Guidelines (Delphi Forums Community Support Zone): http://forums.delphiforums.com/clc_forum/messages/?msg=349.1
- MOOSE Crossing Code of Conduct: <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/elc/moose-crossing/parents.html>
- U.S. Politics discussion forum at tribe.net: <http://uspolitics.tribe.net>



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