



2024

Teaching Digital Citizenship in the UK:

London School of Economics
Evaluation of the Common Sense
Digital Citizenship Curriculum

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Credits:

An executive summary of **LSE-Common Sense Digital Citizenship Curriculum Evaluation Report**

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Introduction

Children are growing up with the power of digital media and technology to explore, connect, create, and learn in new ways. With this power, young people have great opportunities, but they also face challenges and dilemmas. Schools are dealing with the ramifications and working to create a positive culture around media and technology by incorporating digital citizenship education as part of their curricula.

Digital citizenship helps students build the essential tools and habits necessary to thrive in a digital world, like privacy, digital well-being, cyberbullying prevention, and news and media literacy. There has never been a greater need for media literacy skills, as in 2024, globally, more voters than ever in history will head to the polls. According to *Time* magazine, at least 64 countries (plus the European Union)—representing a combined population of about 49% of the people in the world—are meant to hold national elections, the results of which, for many, will prove consequential for years to come.

Elections often find voters bombarded by information, misinformation, and disinformation, and these millions of voters need to be prepared to make smart choices.

Media Literacy Interventions in the UK

In 2022 the UK Government Department for Science, Innovation, and Technology ('DSIT') launched the Media Literacy Programme Fund, making grants available to organisations undertaking media literacy activity projects in England that tackle a range of media literacy challenges set out in the Online Media Literacy Strategy.

DSIT invited bids for projects that met one or more of the following strategic priorities:

- Providing support to vulnerable users who are currently underserved by media literacy initiatives.
- Implementing new or robust approaches to evaluation that improve understanding of the effectiveness of media literacy interventions.
- Undertaking activity to effectively build audience resilience to misinformation and disinformation.

There is a need for more evidence to support the efficacy of existing media literacy interventions. Common Sense partnered with the London School of Economics (LSE) in a consortium proposal to address the strategic priority around evaluation and conducted a first-of-its-kind independent evaluation of the Common Sense Digital Citizenship Curriculum in the UK.

About Common Sense's Digital Citizenship Curriculum

At Common Sense, we believe that digital citizenship is a foundational skill for learning and life. As the lines between digital life and real life merge, we must prepare young people to harness the power of technology for responsible participation and active engagement. Today's students are our next generation of leaders, product designers, engineers, educators, and businesspeople. Without a firm grounding in the ethical and moral questions of digital life—our students' real lives—we cannot prepare them for the future.

The Common Sense UK Digital Citizenship Curriculum is a free resource of 72 lessons for learners age 5 to 18 that address topic areas based on academic research and concerns from children, teachers, and parents. The lessons are intentionally designed to cultivate both the essential skills and dispositions to help young people thrive in our interconnected world. Children and teens face many decisions and dilemmas as they live their lives

with and through media and technology, from what they're consuming and what they're sharing to how they're interacting and communicating with others.

The curriculum was developed in partnership with Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (now known as the Center for Digital Thriving), based on Project's Zero's research into how young people engage in moral and ethical dilemmas in real life. The curriculum launched in 2010 and was the first-of-its-kind set of lessons to address these issues in the classroom. Today, Common Sense educational resources have been accessed by more than 1.3 million educators worldwide.

Common Sense aims to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to navigate the digital world, as well as the dispositions and agency to apply those skills with intention in their everyday lives.

The core topics that our curriculum addresses are:

- Media Balance & Well-Being
- Privacy & Security
- Digital Footprint & Identity
- Relationships & Communication
- Cyberbullying, Digital Drama & Hate Speech
- News & Media Literacy

The Study

LSE's independent research evaluation aimed to assess:

- Changes in different cohorts of students' digital citizenship, media literacy, and dispositions toward misinformation and disinformation.
- Changes in students' digital citizenship, media literacy, and attitudes towards misinformation and disinformation after the teaching of the stakeholder's digital citizenship materials in primary and secondary schools in the UK. LSE piloted the materials as part of an intervention in four schools with a key focus on safeguarding, mental health, online hate, privacy, and the critical recognition and resistance of misinformation and disinformation. This evaluation included evaluation of the impact of different teaching styles and lessons on online versatility, knowledge, safety and digital ethics.
 - The LSE research team's goal was to evaluate the extent to which different lessons and styles of teaching during the aforementioned media literacy intervention cultivated and increased online versatility, knowledge, safety, and digital ethics among students age 6 to 16 in the UK.
- Identification of effective assessment methods for children's online civic and leisure habits and behaviours.
 - LSE's research and independent evaluation also aimed to identify effective methods for assessing changes in how children and young people's online civic and leisure habits and behaviours change following targeted digital citizenship interventions. In order to do this, the team at LSE developed instruments and a methodology tailored specially for evaluating both children's learning and aspects of the stakeholder materials that fulfil their mandate and that could be strengthened further.

Research Findings

- LSE found **consistent improvement across all schools and all age cohorts** after the teaching of the stakeholder's Digital Citizenship Curriculum for as little as six weeks.
- Both teachers and students were **broadly positive** about our curriculum and shared in their own words that the lessons were often **'engaging and interesting'**.
- Factors influencing resilience to misinformation and disinformation include cross-curricular prioritisation of learning about digital safety, digital health, online etiquette, online cultures, and media ownership; effective scaffolding by experienced digital educators and peers; and access to up-to-date and well-serviced technological resources.
- Teachers play a vital role in fostering enriching discussions amongst students' and supporting students who have lower initial knowledge about and/or interest in digital citizenship.
- Effective learning environments are characterised by the embedding, resourcing, and scaffolding of digital literacy at all key stages.
- Student and teacher dispositions such as curiosity, playfulness, and self-reflection, as well as democratic whole school cultures, influence the outcomes of teaching and learning with the materials.
- There is an existing digital divide in the schools between groups of students, and between the schools, regarding digital knowledge, access, and resources.
- The quantitative scenario-based assessment tools worked best when the evaluators removed questions that could be answered in many ways depending on parenting cultures, moral outlooks, and/or disciplinary regimes.
- Observations of lessons and interviews with teachers yielded rich explanatory data for some of the statistical outcomes. These included pedagogic and critical media literacy insights.
- Students of all ages consistently wanted more time to talk about and question adult digital habits and choices, several either acting as technology guides for their parents/significant adults or commenting on parental/adult tech health.

Conclusions

- A persistent digital divide affects digital citizenship: Students from 'media rich' and 'digitally experienced' households demonstrate a more intuitive grasp of how to navigate digital tools, while those from less experienced households face a steeper learning curve, impacting their engagement and the benefit drawn from digital citizenship interventions in schools.
- Prioritising content/information delivery over fostering open, exploratory discussions, particularly observed in rural classes and in lower sets in urban classrooms, neglects students' unique digital experiences and hinders exploration of complex issues like the environmental impact of technologies, online harms, artificial intelligence (AI), and disinformation, limiting the development of critical discussions and dispositions.
- Varied technological integration levels in secondary schools impact teachers' confidence and lesson delivery, and students' educational experiences.
- School culture and practices significantly influence lesson delivery, with schools that emphasise digital media literacy positively responding best to the intervention and showcasing exemplary practices such as student digital leaders and specialised teacher training.
- Evaluations of interventions should not be based solely on test scores and must combine qualitative and quantitative methods.

- The complexity of developing a scoring rubric and pre- and post-test materials lies in the evaluators' ability to assess not the (moral and practical) choices that might vary based on parenting cultures, but rather factual knowledge, universal indicators of understanding, and complex reasoning.
- While technical knowledge and playful dispositions were more evenly distributed across schools, the schools and students who understood digital environments in the context of wider social tendencies and an ethics of respect and care showed the most consistent learning in relation to misinformation and disinformation, with critical and curious dispositions supporting fellow students' learning.
- The gains of scenario-based critical illustrations of everyday problems in digital social encounters are significant for building resistance to bullying, misinformation, and disinformation amongst students compared to functional learning of technical features and facts.
- Digital citizenship materials themselves need to be updated regularly and cannot afford to become outdated or irrelevant. These materials should employ and explain the latest terminology to build trust and rapport with teachers and students.
- The introduction to the materials and some of the lessons need to be redesigned to take into account real-world UK classrooms; this means that they need to include more flexibility for the teachers to pace and deliver or to change the ordering and flow of lessons.
- The materials need to include a section that addresses the environmental impact of the proliferation of new and emerging technologies.
- The materials need to include a section that works holistically with schools, children, and parents/significant adults around adult digital habits, knowledge, and health.

Recommendations

For schools:

- Implement more in-depth explorations of digital citizenship topics in primary schools through regular age-appropriate lessons that are central to the school's curriculum.
- Hold annual half-day trainings and discussions on the digital and online sphere for parents and carers.
- Implement more in-depth explorations of digital citizenship topics in secondary schools through longer lessons that are central to the school's curriculum at both key stages.
- Spread the interventions across subjects throughout term-time in a creative workshop-style format.
- Maintain or constitute mixed-ability groupings to foster inclusivity and enthusiastic learning around media literacy and digital citizenship.
- Build in customised assessments in different subject areas that include some of the most challenging aspects of media literacy and digital citizenship.
- Emphasise the participation of all students and value how diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives approach new and emerging media and technologies.
- Work with the local authority and media literacy providers to ensure that all teachers have continuing professional development opportunities around new and emerging media and social media so that they are confident and knowledgeable about the ownerships and environmental impact of technologies, and about digital environments and digital habits.
- Make sure that teachers are confident to facilitate meaningful interactions and discussions about cutting edge digital issues such as the environmental impact of tech, privacy, data ownership, predatory behaviour online, AI, and misinformation and disinformation, contributing to a safe and credible classroom experience.

For organisations delivering media literacy/digital citizenship interventions:

- Utilise a combination of tailored quantitative and in-depth qualitative methods to capture a comprehensive view of the intervention's impact on behaviours, dispositions, and attitudes.
- Use critical thematic analysis of the qualitative data to reflect on potential mismatches between the curriculum and the needs of particular cohorts of children.
- Create an age-appropriate baseline evaluation organised into thematic areas to facilitate targeted analysis and comparison, enhancing insights gained.
- Develop a systematic rubric to assess knowledge around themes and dispositions, providing a structured framework for evaluating effectiveness and instilling essential qualities in students.
- Ensure that there are thorough annual reviews and updates to the evaluation materials in tandem with the digital citizenship intervention materials to include current online terms and nomenclatures that will engage children, and adapt to evolving tendencies and challenges in digital citizenship, ensuring that the content remains effective and relevant over time.
- Engage stakeholders, including teachers, governors, students, and parents, in the evaluation process to enrich outcomes.
- Engage in both short-term and longitudinal analyses to track changes in children's media literacy and digital citizenship over time, allowing for a deeper understanding of the sustained impact of media and digital citizenship interventions on students' digital citizenship skills, dispositions, and behaviours.
- Encourage critical media literacy researchers to work alongside teachers and media literacy providers to provide a holistic view of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.