Digital citizenship is an abstract, grandiose term, and incorporating it into curriculum can prove problematic for both educators and students. In layman’s terms, digital citizenship is the norms of responsible and appropriate interaction with technology. It requires a critical understanding that our responsibilities are no longer just the immediate, face-to-face community in which we live, but also include our ever-expanding digital communities. It also encompasses the world as we access global communities online. Digital citizenship requires that we update the more-traditional critical skills with an eye toward the digital as new tech tools are added at an alarming rate. These skills include plagiarism, copyright, and the increasingly complex source evaluation in ever-expanding formats, as well as the tools necessary to ethically and morally navigate cyberbullying, digital etiquette, security, safety, hacking, social networks, open source, knowledge sharing/communication, e-commerce, and technology balance (in daily life). This is not an all-inclusive list, as technology continues to evolve, and digital citizenship themes will need to be adapted as new technology uses bring up issues unknown to us today.

Having a freshman in high school and a freshman in college, I see firsthand the challenges inherent in growing up in a world where nothing is considered too private for public sharing. As BYOD and 1:1 become education standards, and personal, handheld smart technologies become more common, digital citizenship must be taught until it becomes intuitive for the next generations growing up. It is our responsibility to prepare our young people for the digital world in which they will live and work. School librarians play a critical role in developing awareness and understanding, informing and orienting staff, and institutionalizing student lessons and training.

My own students and my own children have struggled with this as they learn to navigate the social, cultural, and fiscal aspects of the online world. In the school setting, my daughter, during her middle-grade years, dealt with “mean girl” messaging in a class’s e-classroom environment. How easy it is to say what you feel in the heat of the moment, knowing, without a pause for thought or consequence, you are able to hit your intended target through a cold screen and the evidence disappears before a caring adult would ever be aware of the incident. And my son had his first encounter with financial literacy in the digital world when he learned some hard, personal lessons about how to manage the monthly auto-payments for his music and game subscriptions. Financial information can be hacked or shared with an untrustworthy online vendor, or a few unassuming clicks can set one up for the promise of a monthly subscription and payment that the buyer is unprepared for financially. We must prepare the next generations by integrating and continually revising and updating digital citizenship training into their education.

Digital citizenship provides a perfect opportunity to look for collaborative partners with the technology department and instructional technology staff to develop a robust and consistent curriculum.
For digital citizenship education to be successful, it requires a network of educators dedicated to collaboration, common language, and developing a horizontal and vertical alignment of gradually deepening skills. Our greatest hurdle to teaching digital citizenship is gaining buy-in and instructional time for these critical life skills. Many policymakers lack awareness of the importance of digital citizenship, not fully realizing its existence and not fully realizing it must be intentionally taught. Digital citizenship is not intuitive, especially in an age of screen anonymity. Many students and educators are unaware of what digital citizenship entails. Often state and local standards and guidelines have not caught up with the need and benefit to explicitly teach it, and teaching digital citizenship is a massive task requiring thoughtful integration into the curriculum.

Today’s school librarians must be seen as leaders in their buildings. Digital citizenship provides a perfect opportunity to look for collaborative partners with the technology department and instructional technology staff to develop a robust and consistent curriculum. Often our voice, by itself, will not be strong enough to lead this charge. Collaboration can help build a coalition to help other educators and administrators see the value and importance of digital citizenship. Often there is an assumption that students already know what to do online; however, we all know from our experiences in our school libraries and recent studies like those shared at the AASL 17th National Conference Closing Session in Columbus that this assumption is far from the truth. Young people today may be born surrounded by technology and entertained by technology, but they are not born with the basic instincts for interacting through technology in an intentional, thoughtful, and critical manner.

Just as we’ve spent time working with our teachers to infuse inquiry and research processes into their content instruction, we have to find ways to incorporate digital citizenship into those projects and lessons. As we expand the tools students use to communicate and share, we must also expand our instruction on how to ethically, effectively, and appropriately use those tools and life skills. We can’t wait for problems to arise, but rather we need to be proactive and on the forefront of helping our students avoid those pitfalls and navigate the online world successfully.

Think, too, about what digital citizenship looks like at the different educational levels. The concept of digital citizenship is important for all learners, no matter whether you teach students in primary, intermediate, middle grades, high school or work with those in vocational training or college. What you teach them and how it might look will be different, but it is important to start students off young and continue to reinforce these skills and lessons throughout their educational career.

Digital citizenship is a perfect example of how the role of the school librarian is so important. These are skills we can collaborate to teach our students. In this era when discussions revolve around the need for libraries and librarians, digital citizenship is a perfect example of the critical role we can play beyond our facilities and collections.

Resources like this issue of KQ and webinars on eCOLLAB are great places to start the conversations with your administration, your technology department, and your teachers. Your fellow librarians and personal learning network on Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and other online venues are all full of ideas ready to help us collectively come up with ways to present being good digital citizens to students.

This topic will continue to evolve and change as the technology does. Continue the conversations with AASL on the KQ website, with AASL’s social media outlets, on the AASL Forum listserv, and with AASL’s professional development offerings. These are the joys and benefits of a national professional organization. AASL expands your personal learning network as it builds a community of colleagues and friends you can rely on, whether face-to-face or digitally. These are the peers who understand you, share with you, and help you grow and evolve as a professional school librarian.

Leslie Preddy has been the school librarian at Perry Meridian Middle School in Indianapolis, Indiana, since 1992, and has served as an adjunct professor for Indiana University, Indiana State University, and IUPUI. She has presented webinars for edWeb, the Indiana Department of Education, and the American Library Association. She is a frequent speaker and consultant at local, state, national, and international education conferences and events. Leslie is a past recipient of AASL’s Collaborative School Library Media Award and School Library Media Program of the Year Award and ALA’s Sara Jaffarian School Library Program Award for Exemplary Humanities Programming. She is the president of AASL and is a past president for the Association of Indiana School Library Educators. Her books include SSR with Intervention: A School Library Action Research Project and Social Readers: Promoting Reading in the 21st Century. Her latest book is School Library Makerspaces.