

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

A digital dilemma is a tricky situation that can occur in digital life—and it doesn't always have an obvious right or wrong answer.

## What is a Digital Dilemma?

## How can I use dilemmas with students?

## What dilemmas can I use with students around relational issues?

## What dilemmas can I use with students about civic issues?

## What is a Digital Dilemma?

A digital dilemma is a tricky situation that can occur in digital life—and it doesn't always have an obvious right or wrong answer. Even when someone has been hurt or wronged, the right way to respond in a digital dilemma is often unclear. Acknowledging this complexity helps students dig in to the messiness of real issues they face, and come up with thoughtful and realistic action steps. When using dilemmas as teaching tools with students, we encourage educators to use the strategies below.

## How can I use dilemmas with students?

Educators can use digital dilemmas to spark powerful conversations with middle and high school students, recommended for grades 6-12, about digital life. You can choose any dilemma based on a digital citizenship topic you'd like to cover. Dilemmas may focus on one or more of the Rings of Responsibility, whether the Self, one's Community, or one's broader World.

## What dilemmas can I use with students around relational issues?

The following dilemmas address issues related to how young people interact with others in a known community, such as with family and friends. Use the key questions from the **Feelings & Options routine** to guide students through these dilemmas with four steps: *Identify* (what's the dilemma and who's involved?), *Feel* (what might each person be feeling?), *Imagine* (what are different options for handling the situation? which option might lead to the most positive outcome?) and, *Say* (what could the people involved say?). These prompts support students' social skills and thoughtful decision-making. They scaffold perspective taking, empathic problem-solving, ethics spotting, and communication skills. Each dilemma is also accompanied by "Complicate questions" at the end which are additional prompts you can use to deepen thinking.

1. **"Finding Boundaries"**: Jason's classmate Tim started texting Jason a lot, every day. Jason and Tim were friendly, and Jason had always liked Tim. At first, Jason was happy to be talking to Tim outside of school. But Tim was having a hard time—Tim's parents were fighting a lot, and Tim's life

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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at home had gotten really stressful. Jason wanted to be kind and supportive and always tried to be when Tim texted. Then the texting became overwhelming for Jason. Jason cared about Tim and didn't want to make his situation any worse by not being a good friend. Jason was also worried about Tim's mental health. At the same time, the texting felt burdensome and was also starting to take a toll. Jason thought he needed to set some boundaries, but he wasn't sure how and didn't want to make things harder for Tim.

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- What if Tim and Jason were best friends?
- What if Tim shared that the fighting was escalating to violence?
- What if Jason and Tim's parents were good friends?
- What if Jason became worried that Tim might harm himself?
- What if Tim started texting in the middle of every night, when Jason needed to sleep?

(This dilemma is in the **Rewarding Relationships** lesson for 10th grade.)

2. **"Missing Out"**: For months, Aida and her three closest friends had been waiting for a new movie to come out. The movie was based on one of their favorite books, and they promised they would see it all together and then go out for pizza. On the movie's opening weekend, Aida had a last-minute emergency and wasn't able to go. The others decided to go anyway because they had been really looking forward to it. That night, they posted constantly about their fun and new inside jokes. Aida wanted to keep connected but seeing the constant posts bummed her out. She felt like no one even cared that she had missed out on their plans.

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- What if it was the last night that the movie was playing in the theater?
- What if it was a regular sleepover rather than a movie outing? Should the friends reschedule or stick with their plans without Aida?

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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- What if the friends posted comments and captions on their pics saying that they were sorry Aida was not with them (e.g., *@Aida wish you were here*)?
- Does it make a difference why Aida couldn't attend?
- What if Aida's emergency was that her mom was in the hospital?
- What if it was that she had been grounded for sneaking out of her house?

(This dilemma is in the [My Social Media Life](#) lesson for seventh grade.)

3. **"Embarrassing Story"**: Derryl recorded a humiliating video of Jared and posted it on his story for everyone to see. Jared was mortified and asked Derryl to please stop and take the video down. Derryl didn't listen. He thought the video was really funny. Plus, a lot of people were commenting and saying Derryl was hilarious for posting it. By the next day, it seemed like everyone at school had seen the video. Jared tried to act like it didn't bother him, but he was really embarrassed and went straight home after school instead of going to the big basketball game he and all his friends had been looking forward to.

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- What if Jared had posted a rude comment or embarrassing pic of Derryl the week before? In other words, what if this was a "revenge" post?
- What if Derryl shared the video with only a group chat of four to five close friends instead of on his story?
- What if Derryl posted a public apology to Jared right after sharing the video?

(This dilemma is in the [What You Send in "That Moment When ..."](#) lesson for ninth grade.)

4. **"Fake Account"**: John and Cat had been close friends since elementary school. One day, Cat discovered a private Instagram account with John's picture on the profile. Cat already followed John on Instagram, and although a bunch of other kids from their school were listed as followers, she immediately suspected that this wasn't one of his actual accounts. Cat requested to follow the account. Once she was approved, she saw what had been posted: a series of memes that showed pictures of John with anti-gay captions and comments on each post. Several of their classmates had even joined in and were also posting hurtful comments about John.

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- Does it make a difference if John is gay? Why, or why not?
- What if Cat immediately unfollowed the account and pretended she had never seen it?
- What if Cat reported the account to Instagram and it didn't get removed?

(This dilemma is in the **Responding to Online Hate Speech** lesson for eighth grade.)

5. **"Exposed in Group Chat"**: Juan's close friends had a group chat that they'd used for a while. Normally, their conversations were about sports, people from school, memes, and other random things. His friend Marcos recently started dating Sasha, who was in their grade at school. One day, Marcos forwarded a screenshot to the chat with the caption, "Score!" Juan could tell from a quick glance at the screenshot that it was a mostly naked picture of Sasha. Juan and Sasha had been friends since elementary school, and he immediately felt uneasy knowing Sasha definitely wouldn't have wanted the picture shared.

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- Does it matter where/how the picture is shared? (What if the picture were sent on Snapchat? What if it were sent by text?)
- Does it make a difference how many other people are in the group chat? (What if it's two other people? What if it's 20?)
- What if Sasha had been pressured and hadn't even wanted to send the picture in the first place?
- What if Marcos showed his friends the picture on his phone but didn't send it to them? Would this still be breaking Sasha's trust?

6. **"Digital Dares"**: Donelle's group of friends had recently gotten into dares. At lunch or during class, they would dare each other to say something strange or funny to a classmate or teacher, or do harmless things like wear their shirt inside out. Sometimes the dares got pretty intense, but his friend Gabe would get mad if everyone didn't go along with it, so they usually did. One night

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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over group chat, Gabe dared everyone to message some of their classmates sexual words and comments. Donelle knew it was a bad idea. Even if he didn't get in trouble, the messages might offend his classmates. But Donelle also didn't want to risk Gabe making fun of him or being angry for not doing it.

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- What if Gabe threatened Donelle if he didn't do the dare?
- What if Donelle had already been suspended from school for something else and worried that he might get in serious trouble if he sent the messages?
- What if the person whom Gabe wanted Donelle to message was Donelle's crush?
- Does it make a difference what the dare is?

7. **"Hurtful Meme"**: Maya saw that one of her friends, Luke, had "liked" a meme. The meme showed a picture of diamonds next to a picture of immigration officials. It said, "Mexicans are worried about the wrong ICE right now." As soon as she saw the meme, Maya felt uneasy. There were tons of Mexican students at her school, including Maya herself. Many of them were U.S. citizens, but some were not. The meme hit close to home. Plus, everyone could see that Luke had "liked" it. Luke was their class president, and the students had elected him to represent them. Maya also considered him one of her close friends.

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- What if Luke had reshared the meme instead of just "liking" it?
- What if you learned that Luke was actually the creator?
- What if Luke was himself an undocumented student?
- Does it make a difference whether Maya is undocumented? Why, or why not?
- What if this were part of a pattern of Luke liking memes like this all the time?

8. **"Risky Chat"**: Sara loves taking pictures and posting them to Instagram. A few months ago, she noticed alex\_eastwest13 liked several of her photos and commented, "you are so talented!" Sara

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

was flattered. Then she received a private message from alex\_eastwest13 asking if she was a professional photographer or if she wanted to be one someday. Sara responded that it was her dream to be one when she grew up. Now they talk a lot through private messaging. Sara also posts comments on alex\_eastwest13's photos, which are mostly of random objects and nature scenes. Last week, alex\_eastwest13 asked if she would post more selfies because "i think u r beautiful." Then alex\_eastwest13 also messaged her a cell number so she could send more personal pictures. "Just don't tell anyone I gave you this," alex\_eastwest13 wrote.

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Feelings & Options thinking routine and handout: **Identify** → **Feel** → **Imagine** → **Say**.

## Complicate questions

- What if Sara tries ignoring alex\_eastwest13 but this person keeps finding ways to communicate with Sara?
- What if Sara politely says no to alex\_eastwest13's request and alex\_eastwest13 gets upset?
- What if alex\_eastwest13 says he has met some of Sara's friends before?

(This dilemma is in the **Chatting Safely Online** lesson for sixth grade.)

## What dilemmas can I use with students about civic issues?

The following dilemmas address issues related to civic issues and interactions with a broader community online. Use the [Take a Stand Educator Guide](#) with these dilemmas. **Take a Stand** is a thinking routine designed to be used alongside digital dilemmas that lack clear right or wrong answers, particularly dilemmas relevant to privacy, community, and civic life. It's a four-step routine that gets students in the habit of considering and reconsidering their own and others' perspectives. Students explore each dilemma using a 4-step process: Take a Stand (what do you think?), Stand Back (listen to others' perspectives), Look Again (what ideas did others raise that weren't originally on your mind? how (if at all) has your thinking shifted?), and Look Beyond (how does this dilemma remind you of other situations you've heard of or experienced?). Each dilemma is also accompanied by "Complicate questions," which are additional prompts you can use to deepen thinking.

1. **"The Protest"**: At a protest, people were chanting and rallying to express hate for another group of people. Someone later gathered pictures from the protest and started sharing them on social media, asking people for help identifying the protesters. Once protesters were identified, people

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

publicly shamed them for their hateful views and pressured their employers to fire them. *Do you agree with the practice of calling out the protestors' identities online? Why, or why not?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: **Take a Stand → Stand Back → Look Again → Look Beyond.**

## Complicate questions

- Does it make a difference what the protestors' jobs are? What if the protester was a teacher versus a truck driver?
- What if the protester were a teen? Should they face lifelong consequences?
- What if you (students) were in the picture, either because you were participating in the protest or just standing nearby, observing it? What if I (teacher) were at the protest and in one of the pictures?
- What if the people on Twitter identified the protestors but didn't take the extra step of trying to get their employers involved?
- What if the protestors were rallying to support stricter gun control laws? Or to advocate gun ownership rights?
- Is free speech "protected" if protestors face consequences?

2. **"Streaming Fights Online"**: The school day had just ended, and Aruv was storming through the halls looking for Drew. During last period, a classmate told Aruv something rude Drew had said about Aruv's sister, and Aruv was ready to fight him. Indira pulled out her phone and started following Aruv, recording him as he searched through the halls on his hunt for Drew. She was sharing live, and there was already a growing audience watching online, egging Aruv on. When Aruv found Drew, they started fighting and a large crowd gathered in person. All around them, people stood behind their phones, recording the scene. Eventually, a teacher realized what was going on and broke up the fight. Over the next few days, the school investigated what happened and decided to suspend both Aruv and Indira. *Was it OK for people to record and stream or post the fight? Why, or why not? Do you think that Indira deserved consequences, as well as Aruv? Why, or why not?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: **Take a Stand → Stand Back → Look Again → Look Beyond.**

## Complicate questions



# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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- What might be Indira's motivation for recording the fight? Does it matter?
- What if Indira just wanted the video to go viral so she would get famous?
- What if Indira said she was scared of Aruv and didn't know what else to do since there were no adults around?
- Are there situations when recording violence can be helpful?
- Are there situations when recording violence can be harmful or make the situation worse?
- What if there were one student recording the fight versus 20 students recording the fight?

3. **"College Admissions"**: Alex was recently accepted to a prestigious college and joined a private online group made up of other accepted students. In the group, students were exchanging inappropriate jokes. Some jokes were hateful toward certain groups of people. Alex was taken aback by what the other students were sharing, but also unsure of what college would be like and anxious to make new friends. After reading some of the other students' posts, Alex contributed a joke that mocked a minoritized group. A few weeks later, the college's admissions team learned about the online group and decided to take back admissions offers from students who contributed hateful content, including Alex. Alex was no longer welcome to attend the university. *Do you agree with the college's decision to take back Alex's admissions offer? Why, or why not?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: [Take a Stand](#) → [Stand Back](#) → [Look Again](#) → [Look Beyond](#).

## Complicate questions

- What if Alex was a member of the minoritized group that he mocked?
- What if the joke were shared in a private text rather than in an online group?
- What if Alex "liked" a post that mocked the minority group, but didn't post it himself?
- What if it were too late to apply to any other college and all the students would be forced to take a gap year?
- What if Alex were a middle schooler and it was a special high school he had been accepted to, rather than a college?

(This dilemma is from [The Consequences of Online Hate Speech](#) lesson for 12th grade.)

4. **"Photo Evidence"**: Sarah had strong feelings about politics and they had gotten even stronger over the last year. She was in a group chat with some other kids from her grade who were also into politics, and they often texted or traded memes about different political issues. Sarah mostly enjoyed the chat, though there was one person in particular, Julian, whose political opinions



# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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always conflicted with hers and felt borderline offensive. Julian was also the captain of the basketball team. One day, Julian crossed the line, posting a pic of himself smiling in front of a [racist symbol/swastika]. Outraged, Sarah saved the photo to her phone and weighed her options. When she tried confronting Julian directly, he told her to get over it. She debated sending the incriminating photo to the principal or his coach. *Would you agree with the decision to show the photo to the principal or coach? Why, or why not?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: [Take a Stand](#) → [Stand Back](#) → [Look Again](#) → [Look Beyond](#).

## Complicate questions

- What if Julian had done this kind of thing before versus it being the first time?
- What if Julian were [Black/Jewish]?
- What if Sarah and Julian had dated and recently broken up?
- Imagine that Sarah doesn't send the picture. Thirty years go by and Julian is running for political office. Should Sarah release the photo? What if, instead of running for office, he is the vice principal of a school? What if he's just a regular community member?

5. **"Violent Videos"**: Monica was actively involved in civic issues at her high school and in her town. She also followed a number of activist accounts on Instagram and Twitter. She was especially concerned about racial profiling by police officers. When a video of a violent interaction between a police officer and a young Black teenager surfaced on Twitter, Monica debated whether or not to share the video across her social media pages. She wanted to use every tool she could to raise awareness and show people how bad she thought this problem had gotten. At the same time, her younger cousins and some of the campers from when she was a camp counselor all followed her on social media and would see whatever she shared. Monica watched the video again: There was no doubt that it was incredibly graphic and scary. She hit "share" and waited for people to respond. *Do you agree with the decision to share the violent video footage online? Why, or why not?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: [Take a Stand](#) → [Stand Back](#) → [Look Again](#) → [Look Beyond](#).

## Complicate questions

- What if Monica knew for sure that her younger campers would see the video and be scared or harmed by it?

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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- What if the video featured someone dying?
- Does Monica's motivation for sharing the video matter? What if Monica thought sharing the video would help bring justice?
- What if Monica shared the video on the public social media account of the social justice group she led at her school?
- What if, instead of posting a video, Monica made flyers with an image from the video and posted them all over her town?

6. **"Social Distance?":** As the coronavirus pandemic unfolded, people across the country and world were encouraged to stay at home and practice social distancing. Although they were low-key concerned about the virus, Kaden and his friends were psyched when their school shut down for three weeks. On the second day school was closed, they all slept in until noon and then met up at the park. They recorded a TikTok together. In the video, they were laughing, high-fiving, and eating pizza. When Tali, Kaden's classmate, saw the video with tons of likes and supportive comments, she was pretty surprised. She was also worried about the message Kaden, one of the most popular kids in her grade, was sending to her peers and his wider audience of teens on TikTok. *Was it OK for Kaden to share his TikTok? Does Tali have a responsibility to do anything?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: [Take a Stand](#) → [Stand Back](#) → [Look Again](#) → [Look Beyond](#).

## Complicate questions

- What if the video were actually recorded before the coronavirus pandemic?
  - What if they were clearly violating shelter-in-place rules when they recorded the video?
  - What if they didn't actually high-five or share food, but were just hanging out together and not social distancing?
  - What if Kaden was Tali's younger brother instead of her classmate?
7. **"Lunch Lines":** Dr. Davis is the principal of Fairview High School, one of the biggest schools in the state. At the beginning of the year, Dr. Davis sent around a survey to learn about the things students wanted to improve about their school. Most students said they wanted to make the lunch lines more efficient so that everyone could eat without having to rush to make it to their next class. While looking for solutions to the issue of lunch lines, Dr. Davis received a pitch from a facial recognition company. The company said it could create a system that allows students to pay for their lunch using their faces. That way, students would not have to wait in long lines to get their lunch and then pay for it. *Do you think Dr. Davis should get the facial recognition technology to improve the lunch lines?*

## Thinking Routine

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: [Take a Stand](#) → [Stand Back](#) → [Look Again](#) → [Look Beyond](#).

## Complicate questions

- Does it make a difference where the technology is installed (hallway vs. cafeteria)?
- What if the school administrators also have access to the facial recognition information?
- Would it make a difference if this technology were already in use in a place like a grocery store?
- What if the facial recognition company were owned by another company, like Facebook?
- What if the facial recognition company shared data with police and law enforcement?

(This dilemma is in the [Risk Check for New Tech](#) lesson for 10th grade.)

8. **"New in Town"**: Tavis, who is 10 years old, recently moved to a new town in a different state for his dad's work. At his new school, he feels like everyone stares at him, and some people even seem to whisper as he walks by. He's lonely, doesn't feel like he fits in, and wishes he could go back to his old friends and school. His parents just got him his first phone but made it very clear that he should only use it to text and call them or other family members. One day Tavis was feeling so lonely that he decided to join social media to see if he could find old friends there. He also started posting videos, including some where he talks about how he feels like an outcast in his new school. *Do you think it's OK, or not OK, that Tavis joined social media?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: [Take a Stand](#) → [Stand Back](#) → [Look Again](#) → [Look Beyond](#).

## Complicate questions

- Would it be different if Tavis's parents had given him permission to join social media sites?
- What if Tavis makes new online friends who are supportive, but spends less time face-to-face with potential new friends at school?
- If Tavis is going to use social media, are there any things he or his parents should do?

(This dilemma is in the [How Young Is Too Young for Social Media?](#) lesson for 11th grade.)

9. **"Whose Fake News"**: John makes his living by hosting several fake news sites. The names of the sites look and sound legitimate, but they're completely made up and filled with untrue stories written just to get people to click on them. He buys ad space on other sites and places the stories as clickbait. Every time someone clicks on one of his stories, he earns money in advertising

# Digital Dilemmas to Teach Digital Citizenship

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revenue. Some of his headlines have been shared millions of times on social media and have gotten even more in clicks and impressions. *Does John have the right to make money spreading false information, or should he have a responsibility to be accurate and not spread disinformation?*

## Thinking Routine

Have students use the Take a Stand thinking routine and handout: **Take a Stand** → **Stand Back** → **Look Again** → **Look Beyond**.

## Complicate Questions

- What if the revenue from the fake news site was being used to support a worthy social cause or charity?
- What if John's popular false articles help change public opinion on a topic?
- Should the websites or platforms that place John's stories as ads be held accountable for helping spread disinformation?

(This dilemma is in the **Clicks for Cash** lesson for 11th grade.)