

Program shows schools how reputations are built and broken online

When students go online they're projecting a personal brand, a new program shows them how to do it like a professional, **ET Staff**

Social media has been getting a lot of stick and for good reason, the thing is it probably isn't going away any time soon.

You could ban social media in schools, but that does nothing to protect the kids outside of hours and so is probably futile, anyway social media is a social phenomenon and to deprive access is to deprive students of an incredible transformation in the way we communicate.

Rather than resist, it might be better to learn how to use social media and the online world to harness its considerable power for good.

Accessing the online landscape doesn't require any kind of training or strategy and maybe it needs to, what is done there can be surprisingly indelible and at its worst damaging. The professionals know this well and spend a lot of time and thought massaging how their clients appear online, those strategies are just as applicable and useful for children.

One of those professionals is founder of InsideOut Public Relations, Nicole Reaney, she has advised brands like LendLease, Mitsubishi and Dyson so she knows what she's talking about. Reaney recently launched a PR program for school students and a world-first pilot program was launched at Holy Cross Catholic Primary School on the Central Coast, NSW in March.

"I saw a lot of media around kids and the use of technology and a lot of it was painted negatively. In my mind, I was thinking it was more than technology, technology is just a facilitator, we're better off empowering children because technology isn't going away.

"When I was researching for the course I was surprised to find as many as 95% of eight- to 11-year-olds were accessing the internet. I work in PR and I see adults who are not equipped to contend with social media which led me to think 'who is supporting the children?'"

"It's better to be on the front foot so as kids embark on using various media, whether it's mobile phones, the internet or social media, they aren't compromising their own personal brands without realising," Reaney says.

"What students, and adults, don't

realise are the ramifications of what they say in texts or images that are used, so it's about being more mindful around language and being aware of how Google has a marvellous memory."

The course takes students through corporate brands that they would be familiar with at their age and introduces the concept that the students themselves are a brand. That brand is represented through everything from their words to their behaviour.

"We take those kinds of university level concepts but take them back to a level



they can relate to. We look at what a personal brand is and how it is formed and look at ideas like how we all perceive people differently.”

The students look at figures who have a public profile that they might relate to, whether it's in the political sphere or the celebrity sphere, and through that they can see how everyone has a different opinion of those public figures. That gets the students thinking about how image and reputation are formed.

“We break down the elements; what can lead to a positive image and reputation and what can lead to a negative brand. We introduce the concept that it can take many years to build a reputation but one single action can bring it all down.”

The course is very interactive, Reaney uses blocks as a visual representation of different elements of a personality or an image, the students role play, call out answers and enjoy a very fast paced introduction to how personal branding works. Role plays cover off on what to do when confronted with creepiness online.

“There might be a stranger situation where the child has been asked for information on their family or photos.

“Another concept that we touched on



Holy Cross Catholic Primary School

is that while it's fun to have a lot of friends or people following you on social media you don't really know who they are, you don't know where that information or those photos are going.

“It ends with a bit of inspiration, looking at where they want to be and what they want to be famous for and then paring that back down to a roadmap of some of the things they could do today to shape the future,” she says.

“When we did the pilot, 94% of students found it worthwhile, and looking

at the class it became evident that they did have access to technology, even at such a young age. They were aware of concepts that we really wanted them to understand like future bosses being able to google and research you and that bullying is not OK.

“They reported back a myriad of ideas which they received from the course which was great to see.”

Teachers and parents are provided with guidelines making sure everyone is mindful of how they can support children. It's critical that the parents check their own online behaviour as it can get back to the children.

The students were given further strategies to use when they found themselves in sticky situations.

“It's all about who they can trust in that space, whether it's a parent or a teacher or someone at school that they can relate to and making sure that they're not hiding what they have online from their parents, it's really important that their parents are across what they are doing online because that's where things can go wrong,” Reaney says.

Craig McNee, Principal of Holy Cross Catholic Primary School, Kincumber said, “It's easy to focus on the negative aspects of technology, however we want to take an alternate view and empower our students by educating them on the behaviours and actions that can lead them to a positive reputation.”

The PR program was put together with the Catholic Schools Office who provided feedback and recommended the site for the pilot project.

