

THE GOOGLE GENERATION . WHERE ARE THE SKILLS GAPS?

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Much has been said recently about the apparent expertise of children using electronic resources, and there are claims that young people are using the Internet more creatively and are becoming more proficient in their use than their teachers, that they tend in any case to be more proficient using information technologies than are their parents or teachers and that they are, in short, 'technologically savvy'. Indeed, this is the popular perception of young people and information technology generally. But there is no evidence in the serious literature that young people are expert searchers, nor that the search skills of young people has improved with time. Studies pre-dating the widespread public use of the Internet have reported that young searchers often display difficulty in selecting appropriate search terms, and research into Internet use has consistently found similar difficulties. One issue that has persisted throughout the period of electronic searching is the prevalence of full-phrase searching (e.g. "What are the three most common crimes in Ukraine?") by young people. It would be tempting to attribute this activity to the rise in the accessibility of the Internet. The Web, of course, may be searched with impunity using natural language. This is taken to its logical conclusion in 'Ask.com', which encourages users to enter such full phrases as search terms. However, a scrutiny of the literature shows that the practice of formulating queries in this way pre-dates the web. Thus the wider availability of technology and the near blanket exposure to it in recent years does not appear to have improved search performance in any significant way. A persistent theme in the information literacy literature is that we need a fully developed mental map to make effective use of Internet search tools. We need not only a broad understanding of how retrieval systems work and how information is represented within bibliographic or full text databases, but also some appreciation of the nature of the information space, and contribute to effective searches. Paradoxically, children (under 13 years) and older adults (46 and older) are often unable to construct effective searches and evaluate the results. In the case of children, this is very largely due to their lack of knowledge of the kinds of information content that exist in a particular domain, as well as struggling to a greater or lesser extent with the other elements: a mental map of how search engines work, difficulties in moving from natural language to search queries and less command of vocabulary required to consider synonyms or other alternatives. In the case

of the older generation, the key problem of course is that many lack a useful mental map of how the Internet 'works'. One area of current interest, and, indeed, concern, is the way young people evaluate - or rather fail to evaluate - information from electronic sources. Here, too, there is little evidence that this has improved over the last 10 to 15 years. Early research suggested nearly fifteen years ago (and pre-dating the Internet) that teenagers did not review information retrieved from online databases for relevance (e.g. from online databases) and, consequently, undertook unnecessary supplementary searches when they had already obtained the information required. Internet research has shown that the speed of young people's web searching indicates that little time is spent in evaluating information, either for relevance, accuracy or authority and children have been observed printing-off and using Internet pages with no more than a perfunctory glance at them. Researchers have similarly found young people give a consistent lack of attention to the issue of authority. In one study, many teenagers thought that if a site was indexed by Yahoo it had to be authoritative, and so the question did not arise. Other studies have also found little attempt to check the veracity of information retrieved. The most significant finding was that, although the teachers interviewed were information literate, their skills with and attitudes towards information literacy were not being transferred to their pupils. There is little research in Ukraine into the information skills of young people in and entering higher education. This is symptomatic of a lack of strategic government support for information literacy programmes. A much fuller research picture is available in the USA, however, and it paints a picture of a large minority of freshmen entering college and university with low levels of information literacy and high levels of library anxiety.. There are two particularly powerful messages emerging from recent research. When the top and bottom quartiles of students - as defined by their information literacy skills - are compared, it emerges that the top quartile report a much higher incidence of exposure to basic library skills from their parents, in the school library, classroom or public library in their earlier years. It seems that a new divide is opening up- with the better-equipped students taking the prizes of better grades. At the lower end of the information skills spectrum, the research finds that intervention at university age is too late: these students have already developed an ingrained coping behaviour: they have learned to 'get by' with Google. The problem here is that they simply do not recognize that they have a problem: there is a big gap between their actual performance in information literacy tests and their self-estimates of information skill and library anxiety. The findings of these studies raise

questions about the ability of schools and colleges to develop the search capabilities of the Google Generation to a level appropriate to the demands of higher education and research. The key point is that information skills have to be developed during formative school years and that remedial information literacy programmes at university level are likely to be ineffective. The big question is what form that training should take: perhaps we should go with the flow and help children to become more effective information consumers?

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