

Research—

Report: Students struggle with information literacy

Many students know how to use technology, but fewer know how to apply it to find what they're looking for

We often think of today's students as technology-savvy—and while that might be true, to a certain extent, when it comes to using hardware and software devices, a recently published report shows how little know-how students display when it comes to information literacy, or the ability to use technology to find the information they're looking for.

The report, from Princeton, N.J.-based Educational Testing Service (ETS), found that the majority of high school and college students lack the proper critical thinking skills when it comes to researching online and using sources.

The report comes from an evaluation of the responses of 6,300 students from 63 institutions around the country to ETS's new ICT (Information and Communications Technology) Literacy Assessment. Students were given scenario-based items that were presented to them in 75-minute exams. These information literacy tests included extracting information from a database, developing a spreadsheet, or composing eMail summaries of research findings.

The tests are meant to measure students' abilities to overcome three challenges they typically have: The ability to identify trustworthy and useful information; the ability to manage overabundant information; and the ability to communicate information effectively.

The study found that 52 percent of those tested could correctly judge the objectivity of a web site, and 65 percent could correctly judge that web site's authoritative-ness. But only 40 percent of students entered multiple search terms when researching a topic, and only 44 percent properly identified a statement that captured the demands of the assignment.

"We have a kind of wake-up call that's being presented

to all of us at this time," said Mary Ann Zaborowski, executive director of product management with ETS. "When we think about students today, they're the millennium children. They've grown up around technology. They've been automated with all kinds of computers, cell phones, digital cameras, music. They're more well-versed than any of us who preceded them in terms of how to use these devices. But where there's a startling gap is in their ability to cognitively apply this technology in meaningful ways."

The results might be surprising to those outside the educational world, who might assume that students who grew up with the internet in their homes and schools are naturally adept at navigating their way around the World Wide Web; but to those in education, it is something they have either suspected or known for quite some time.

"I'm not surprised. I think it's not just a problem specific to a region," says Della Curtis, coordinator of library information services for Baltimore County, Md., Public Schools. "I think it's a national issue."

One of the problems, Zaborowski points out, is students' over-reliance on search engines such as Google when it comes to researching topics. The study found that students typically will type in a search keyword, then simply go to the first search result and use it as an authoritative source. The problem with this approach is that a number of top search results on Google are often slanted or biased. Through a process known as "Googlebombing," people can alter the top results for a search term. For example, when you type the word "failure" into Google's search engine, the top result that appears is the White House biographical page for President George Bush.

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ETS hopes educators can learn from its report. School leaders "can use the results to identify the misconceptions that faculty might have about the competency of their students," said Zaborowski. Then, she said, educators can "build a consensus on revisions to their curriculum to address those gaps."

Many school districts, such as Baltimore County, are already aware of the information-literacy challenge. To address the problem, Baltimore County has been producing a web-based curriculum that, according to Curtis, "raises the bar on student research and problem solving."

Through this web-based curriculum, Baltimore County has put together a number of research models for elementary, middle, and high school levels. Each research model has a different scenario and task that students must complete. Students are directed to resources the

school system has evaluated, which will help them answer key questions. These resources point students in the right direction when it comes to search methods.

"We feel that this is an effective strategy in integrating information literacy ... within the context of the curriculum," said Curtis.

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Legislation & Litigation— New copyright rules benefit film-studies classes

Film-studies educators will be allowed to copy snippets from DVDs to make educational compilations, under new copyright rules announced recently. Other copyright exemptions approved by the Library of Congress will let cell phone owners break the software locks on their handsets in order to use them with competing carriers, and they'll let blind people use special software to read copy-protected electronic books.

All told, Librarian of Congress James H. Billington approved six exemptions, the most his Copyright Office has ever granted. For the first time, the office exempted groups of users. Previously, Billington took an all-or-nothing approach, making exemptions difficult to justify.

"I am very encouraged by the fact that the Copyright Office is willing to recognize exemptions for archivists, cell phone recyclers, and computer security experts," said Fred von Lohmann, an attorney with the civil-liberties group Electronic Frontier Foundation. "Frankly, I'm surprised and pleased they were granted."

But von Lohmann said he was disappointed the Copyright Office rejected a number of exemptions that could have benefited consumers, including one that would have let owners of DVDs legally copy movies for use on Apple Computer's iPod and other portable players.

The new rules took effect Nov. 27 and will expire in three years.

In granting the exemption for cell phone users, the Copyright Office determined that consumers aren't able to enjoy full legal use of their handsets because of software locks that wireless providers have been placing to control access to the phones' underlying programs.

Providers of prepaid phone services, in particular, have been trying to stop entrepreneurs from buying subsidized handsets to resell at a profit. But even customers of regular plans generally can't bring their phones to another carrier, even after their contracts run out.

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