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HELPING STUDENTS MAKE THE MOST OF THE WEB

by **MariRae Dopke-Wilson**

Better understanding the attitude and behaviors of students using the Internet for school work can provide valuable insight for today's school librarian. The Pew Internet & American Life Project conducted a qualitative study of Internet-using public middle and high school students drawn from across the country ranging from 12 to 17 years of age. For starters, Pew learned that 78% of these children go online. Pew's study on 'Internet Savvy Kids' offers information that can only be helpful in your pursuit to help students make the most of this vast and powerful information resource. To follow are some key findings from the study:

Internet-savvy students rely on the Internet to help them do their schoolwork. Students told Pew the Internet allows them to complete their homework more quickly; they are less likely to be confused by material; their papers and projects are more likely to draw upon up-to-date sources;

The way students think about the Internet in relation to their schooling is closely tied to the daily tasks and activities that make up their young lives. Students surveyed use five different metaphors to describe how they use the Internet for school:

- The Internet as a virtual textbook and reference library. Much like a school-issued text book, students think of the Internet as a place to find source material for their reports, presentations and projects.
- The Internet as a virtual tutor and study shortcut. Some students think of the Internet as one way to receive instruction on material that interests them or about which they are confused. Others view the Web as a way to complete schoolwork as quickly as possible with minimal effort. For some, this includes viewing the Internet as a means to plagiarize material.
- The Internet as a virtual study group. Students use the Internet as a way to collaborate on group projects with classmates, study for tests and trade notes and class observations.
- The Internet as a virtual guidance counselor. Students look to the Internet for guidance about life decisions as they relate to schools, career and post-secondary education.
- The Internet as virtual locker, backpack and notebook. Students think of the Internet as a place to store their important school-related materials and as a way to transport their books and papers from place to place. Some use online tools for keeping track of their class schedule, assignments, notes and papers.



As a middle school LMS at CW Driver in Marcellus, NY, Steve Nabinger cautions students about the dangers of the Internet with every Web research class he teaches.

"I find that most students are certainly aware that there are inappropriate images on the Web, or that there are viruses. What most of them don't realize is that there are hate sites and revisionist history sites out there that seem entirely reasonable and objective when you first encounter them. I always make the

point to my students that it's a lot easier to make a Website that looks 'professional' than it is a book, that anybody with a PC and a little know-how can put any junk he wants out on the Web!"

In Steve Nabinger's middle school library, 4th - 6th grade students may only use the Internet with direct supervision, while parents of 7th - 8th graders must sign an Internet usage waiver. Nabinger encourages the use of information sources such as subscription databases in addition to Web searches. "When it comes to the Web itself, even young kids will often automatically turn to Google. It's the search engine of choice, yet for many reasons its use can be problematic for schools. It's difficult to use correctly, and its contents are unfiltered and unchecked. To be frank, it's too easy to get inappropriate or inaccurate information through Google. Instead, teachers should cultivate a knowledge of other search engines and Web databases. There are many out there that are more regulated than Google and thus safer for students to use. Once you've settled on one or two search engines that you're comfortable with, take the time to really learn all of their features. Learn how to use advanced search or phrase searching to get exactly the information you're seeking without having to wade through extraneous information that overly general or inaccurate searches can generate."



Knowing that teachers have 'so much on their plates,' Nabinger suggests that fellow LMS think of themselves as the building 'information experts'. "Start by making sure that they all know how to get to and how to use the subscription databases. Then pick one or two great search engines or search indexes and make sure the teachers know how to use them well. Most teachers, like most students, will fall back on Google by default. I prefer CERF, which is in itself a subscription search index. I teach my teachers how to access and use CERF every time I can. But even when a teacher insists on using Google, you can still make sure they know how to use the phrase searching on the advanced search page to help pinpoint exactly what information they need."

For interesting student viewpoints on Internet behavior, check out the new SOS for Information Literacy video feature, "Internet Insight: How Students are using the Web. Do you have lesson tips or suggestions worth sharing regarding the Internet? We welcome your ideas and comments at mparnone@syr.edu.

About the Author



MariRae Dopke-Wilson is a veteran media producer. She is the feature story writer for the *Educators' Spotlight Digest* and producer of many video clips for the *S.O.S. for Information Literacy* project. In the past several years, she has interviewed dozens of library media specialists and captured their stories in both print and video.