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Submission Number: 172
Date Received: 15/4/10

Open letter to Julia Gillard and the House Standing Committee on Education and Training.

Re: Inquiry into school libraries and teacher librarians in Australian schools.

Internet search skills have gained both depth and a degree of simplicity.

I am concerned you will make planning decisions unaware the landscape of internet search skills is about to mature.

I summarize my thinking thus:

- 1) Internet search skills and information literacy are significant to an information economy. I wish to take this position as a given – as my starting point. Just how significant, how economically significant, is a matter of opinion. However, as we shift to a world where value arises from access to knowledge instead of captured and contained knowledge, it follows that an ability to actually find knowledge (as well as generate knowledge and work with knowledge) becomes more valuable. Search skills are part of these ascendant skills.
- 2) Traditional internet searching typically bears little resemblance to library search skills. Few of the techniques and little of the mindset of a professional researcher comes through with what is currently and commonly discussed as internet search skills. There are good reasons for this gap. Primarily it arises from the newness of the medium, a paltry amount of research into bridging this gap and social closure arising from the computer science origins of the internet. There are expensive costs in letting this situation persist. I am convinced this gap between what is known of searching away from the net and what is known of searching on the net is artificial and transient.
- 3) The search skills of library science and professional research **can** be bridged to the internet environment. These bridged skills are substantial, significant and at times, surprising. I have spent over 15 years working on this and the bridging is largely complete. Topics like context/format/source, endorsements and anticipating resources work online in much the same way as they work offline. There are significant differences but the basics translate well.
- 4) Many of these skills are painfully easy to understand. I have taught them to librarians, professors, and more to the point – to students of a couple high schools and a primary school. Topics like context and quality and prominence can be easily grasped by younger minds. Heather Fidge, the teacher/librarian from Elwood Primary School and the friend who urged me to write this letter, can vouch the content is suitable for young minds.
- 5) As these new internet search skills are introduced to the wider community, someone will be called upon to teach them to the students. This can be the IT staff ... or librarians. Since most of these skills are largely bridged from library science, and since some are familiar in a library setting, I tend to think they 'belong' best in the hands of librarians. Librarians may treat them in a more appropriate manner. However, if school librarians are unable or become absent, someone in the schools will still need to dedicate time to learning then communicating these better ways to search.

- 6) If, however, nothing is done, then five years will pass where we continue to rely heavily on Google's page-rank style prominence to answer our questions and we will continue to provide universities with students well capable of answering many questions with ease but miserable at answering those questions which require a bit of struggle – questions like those that trouble search engines most. And remember, such questions usually have the most value.

Since this is a topic best understood by someone who cares about the quality, value and bias of information, I worry that people with common misconceptions like “everything's on the internet” or “searching better is about using quotes and finding synonyms” will be called upon to make decisions about preparing students for an internet-enriched future. If you have the concept that Google and Yahoo are wonderful and sufficient then I urge you to move away from such a naïve and superficial concept of internet information.

Seriously, the tossing of a couple words at a search engine should not even be called a search. It is a recommendation. It is a few suggestions drawn from millions of possible answers. A dictionary defines search as “careful and thorough”. A few of the most prominent sites drawn from a list of several million does not quite catch the flavour of the words “careful and thorough”.

But again, the purpose of this submission is not to educate the reader in how use the internet with finesse. I merely wish to impress upon you that what we currently and generally consider as internet search skills is rather pathetic.

Many people in our community do not need good information skills. Many more people would benefit from them but still get by without. (If you don't know what you don't know, it is hardly cause for concern).

This is especially so with primary school students since almost by definition, they do not require high-quality information skills to answer primary school questions. High school is perhaps a little different but a superficial understanding of quality, bias, depth won't jeopardize learning about the respiratory system, for instance. It will not damage a student learning the carbon cycle. Blunt use of Google answers such questions well.

But learning of facts is not our only aim anymore. If we are trying to prepare students for a time when decisions matter? If we seek to prepare students for a time when unrecognized bias could cost their future employer dearly, or when answers based on a superficial understanding will cost them time and effort? A time when having information skills makes them money? Then it is not that information skills are needed to learn to use a computer or to learn about the Krebs cycle but that we need our students to learn information skills because we want them to use information well later in life.

“Google will help us find everything.” “Who needs more than Google?” Such questions are blind in two ways. Firstly, Google is a horrible tool for finding quality answers to many questions that matter most. Controversial questions, for instance, are not handled well by just listening to the loudest voices.

Secondly, there are better ways to find information – you probably just don't know of them yet. Once someone learns them they usually wonder why they kept tossing words at Google for so long.

Who will teach these search skills to the students?

Supportive Details: