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### Information alert

A recent survey shows many students from the so-called 'Google generation' lack the basic skills needed for online research

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In real life, Sheila Webber is a senior lecturer in information studies at Sheffield University. In Second Life, she is Sheila Yoshikawa, blue-haired babe and cultivator of a Japanese garden - Webber's avatar in the online virtual world populated by millions. "I see her as a digital extension of me. I do some teaching, some professional networking and some shopping. I have a huge wardrobe and I'm much thinner."

Webber's enthusiasm for this virtual world supports recent research deflating the myth that the "Google generation", born in or after 1993, is completely at home online, able to trawl for whatever knowledge they require, while older people fail to get to grips with it.

In what is proving a wake-up call for libraries, Dr Ian Rowlands and his colleagues at the Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (Ciber), based at University College London's centre for publishing, examined research literature on the information-seeking behaviour of the virtual scholar - and combined this with an analysis of the use made of British Library and Joint Information Systems Committee (Jisc) websites.

The report, Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future, found users "power-browsing" or skimming material, using "horizontal" (shallow) research. Most spent only a few minutes looking at academic journal articles and few returned to them. "It almost seems that they go online to avoid reading in the traditional sense," said the report authors.

But this behaviour was not restricted to "screenagers". "From undergraduates to professors, people exhibit a strong tendency towards shallow, horizontal, flicking behaviour in digital libraries. Factors specific to the individual, personality and background are much more significant than generation."

The research backed up Rowlands' own experiences. His 14-year-old daughter is "just like I was," he says "She rarely texts and spends most of her time reading." His 80-

LIBRARIES OF THE FUTURE

JISC

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www.jisc.ac.uk/librariesofthefuture

year-old father-in-law, by contrast, is "wired out of his head ... He didn't touch a keyboard until he retired at 65. But now he wants to be online wherever he is, even on holiday."

One report found that around 20% of the so-called Google generation are, like Hannah Rowlands, "digital dissidents". "They've dropped ICT at school like a hot brick and think computers are for dad," says Rowlands. Another 57% of the age group are "average joes", who may not boycott new technology but make no particular use of it either. "It's very unhelpful to stereotype. Demographics are not the point."

Many libraries have assumed young students have learned to use the internet for research simply by virtue of their age. But while many are proficient with Facebook and Wikipedia, they may not be information-literate. Many lack the skills to differentiate between authoritative information and amateur blogging. "They don't have the idea of different sources," says Rowlands. "There is no mental map." Tara Brabazon, professor of media in the school of computing, mathematical and information science at Brighton University, made headlines recently when she described Google as "white bread for the mind" and banned her media studies students from using it.

But Brabazon is enthusiastic about the potential for online study, once students know how to do it. As a specialist first-year teacher, she provides new students with extensive reading lists of materials to be found off- and online. "The advantage of my system is that, wherever they have come from, they are put on a level playing field. It enables them to read materials of the set level required of them. Because if they don't know the names of the primary theorists, what are they going to put in the search engine?"

### **Intellectual rigour**

While Sheffield University's Webber accepts the need for this kind of traditional intellectual rigour, she points to useful material on the internet and that's aside from the peer-reviewed journal articles that are the academic gold standard. Students can benefit from reading other students' essays, even if they don't cite them. The Google generation report itself, she points out, has not appeared in a journal.

Students of all ages need to learn to make independent assessments of the quality of material by looking at the authors' experience, funders, use of sources, and where published. "They have to be taught these skills explicitly," says Webber. "Some academics recognise its importance but don't see it as their job to teach it. University librarians do see it as their responsibility - but there aren't enough of them to do it. Academics must join in."

Rowlands suggests in his study that schools are failing to equip students for independent online study. Academics and librarians are debating nationally and internationally whether students should be taught information literacy as a separate, accredited, skill - as occurs in some American institutions. Or whether it would be better to teach them to navigate virtual libraries within their main subject-based studies - an approach favoured by many information specialists.

"Critical appraisal is needed," insists Peter Burnhill, director of the Edina national data centre at Edinburgh University. "There is too much stuff out there and, if you don't engage your brain, you won't get results."

Rowlands asked students doing masters degrees in publishing how much they thought London University spent in a year on its online academic journal collection. One guessed £10,000, another said £20,000. But the answer is closer to £2m, he says, highlighting the urgency of getting students up to speed on use of digital libraries. "The future is now. It is no use waiting.

There is a clear message that young people have not been taught to construct a proper search and evaluate the results. Libraries are spending a fortune on premium content, but fundamental skills are lacking."

### **Weblinks**

Information Behaviour (UCL) report:

[www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf](http://www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf)

Ciber: [www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slais/research/ciber)

Edina: [www.edina.ac.uk](http://www.edina.ac.uk)

Sheila Webber blog: [adventuresofyoshikawa.blogspot.com](http://adventuresofyoshikawa.blogspot.com)

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