

Assignment #3

Craig Todd-Langille (207)
FIS 1325
Prof. J. Cox
April 18, 2006

It is difficult not to come across as maudlin when championing the rights of children and young people in the information age. It is a seemingly obvious notion. The new vision of a world information society has become intertwined with the new generation of digital learners, who are projected to take on the cultural shift with, thus far, little input into their inheritance. The Tunis Commitment adopted in November of 2005 explicitly mentions the role of information and communication technologies for the protection, enhanced development, and defense of rights for children.¹ This is a contemporary reminder of something, in the information sector, we should already know: young people represent a distinct, yet large end user group. The information needs for many falling within this age bracket will be dependent on the public library service. These users, through no choice of their own, will be subject to the use, or lack thereof, of online search services. Unless there is change, most of these users will employ services that have not duly considered them and their own specific needs.

Public libraries are tremendous stakeholders in this matter and are uniquely situated to help the younger members of society navigate their way through this murkily defined future. Moreover, the public library is best suited to adapt to this need because “libraries are many things to many people. We don’t sell one product to one client type.”² Flexibility can only help us. Dixon & Shenton (2004) remark that “today’s youngsters are exposed to information from more sources and in more formats than ever before.”³

At the same time we are seeing the forms of media proliferating, Dresang (2005) reminds us that the digital environment is becoming ubiquitous and permeating everyday

¹ Sec. 23.

² Anonymous in Hughes-Hassell & Miller, 2003, 151.

³ “The development of young people’s information needs,” 25.

life. She points to the generation “born after 1977...who have experienced a life in which computers are commonplace.”⁴ This shift in perspective is but one of the challenges that face those of us operating out of an institution that has created its name through the distribution of print.

The WSIS declaration demonstrates that the growing engagement of ICTs by young people is no secret. The emphasis on introduction and increase of ICT use in schools is tied to and reflects government views on national economic opportunities and potential.⁵ We are coming to the realization, however, that it is not just by merely handing over our tools to children that we create a meritorious information society. There is a growing recognition that we need to have technologies considered for children, which augment and support their abilities to challenge themselves and explore their world.⁶

The development of criterion for, assessment, and ultimate selection of collected reference sources is a role already aligned with the traditional role of the public librarian. The adoption of this additional duty is crucial to the continued relevance of public libraries to not only the mentioned core user group: it is a standard that ensures we grow with our clientele and can provide matured, developed service when they return as adult patrons. Online information services for young people are a fundamental bridge to the transition of public libraries into the information age.

As of yet we cannot claim to meet the baseline of required service. There are too many questions of operation that we cannot provide adequate answers to. Without evidence, we can only make assumptions about information behaviour. These

⁴ 179.

⁵ Pickard, 2004.

⁶ Nettet & Large, 2004.

assumptions do us as much good as worrying about the “built-in ‘uncool’ stereotype” of librarians.⁷ A concern that warrants our attention more is the idea that the use of the Internet has become a fourth basic skill - “the ability to handle the great flow of information in our society” - after reading, writing, and arithmetic.⁸ We know too little of young people’s information habits for us to claim to have any knowledge if this skill is being adequately developed. Dresang (2005) finds consensus in recent literature of fears “young people are missing much of the richness of an environment saturated with information because of poorly developed information-seeking skills or a propensity to take the easiest path possible.”⁹ This suggests even those immersed in use are falling short of their potential. What about those whose experience does not meaningfully reconcile with the post-1977 generation Dresang (2005) dubs “cyberkids?”¹⁰

The association of youth with technology requires some distanglement to uncover the reality. Pickard (2004) notes how media hype has created an image of a fashionable, clean, information gateway available specifically to the young. This mythology is a double-edged sword - desirable because it does encourage use, but negative because it leads to the supposition “young people are familiar with new technology and have the intellectual ability to apply it.”¹¹ This schism leads to feelings of personal failure in young users, due to the internalization of the misaligned self-expectations versus lack of experience and actual system capabilities.¹²

⁷ Ried & Mediatore, 2003.

⁸ Enochsson, 2005.

⁹ 181.

¹⁰ 179.

¹¹ Pickard, 2004, 33.

¹² Pickard, 2004, 33.

The self-blame and doubt doubly marginalizes a young person whom has lacked access to online information tools. The disturbing aspect of this trend is how it is reinforced by the acceptance that technological skills are self-evident and simply a reflection of intelligence. Underlying this is an uncritical view of technology as a given.

Based on observation, one paper speculates that between a study in 2000 and the follow up three years later, there has been both a notable development in Internet awareness and an increased blasé attitude to its non-functional elements, such as showoff graphics and animation.¹³ Hughes-Hassell & Miller (2003) also note high technologies' blending into the landscape, stating "on its own, technology doesn't particularly excite them."¹⁴ The perceived inert and indifferent reception to technology has raised concern young people are becoming over dependent on its employ.¹⁵

Such concern is valid, but their may be an over perception of the degree to which online information retrieval services are being used in the way we envision them. It is desirable that youth wish the technology they use do something, in response to their input, rather than just accepting without thought. Use may be over reported, overestimated or different in nature to what we may conceive of. One study, whose users had had very little formal instruction, uncovered as a "general opinion...access and using electronic information was quick and easy, and no structured teaching was required."¹⁶ In fact the users possessed little knowledge of standard search procedure.¹⁷

Being cognizant of the complexities of youth interaction with technology is one step closer to appreciation of their needs. Young people are typically lumped together as

¹³ Large, Nasset, Behesti & Bowler, 2004.

¹⁴ 145.

¹⁵ Shenton, 2005.

¹⁶ Pickard, 2004, 33.

¹⁷ Pickard, 2004, 33.

disperse 'other' category. But for good service the online information needs of all the different groups within, and the individual patrons that make up those groups, must be paid heed. Among other things, age differences, gender and economic disparity need to be on the minds of access providers. Known factors must be weighed and suspicions need to be supported by evidence. For example, users between the ages of four to nine were found by Dixon & Shenton (2004) to be more avid CD-ROM users due to the greater ease of parental supervision, while users moving up in age abandoned CD-ROMS in order to find the less general treatment of information required of them.¹⁸

Alternatively, assumptions about gendered use of online resources was strengthened initially in conversation with young users, as females undermined their own skills in contrast to the confidence males recounted. Pickard (2004) then admits that in observation these males often had a difficult time applying the knowledge claimed, and are prone to blaming the resource in turn, rather than themselves.

Pickard (2004) also points out the value of online information "is not only concerned with the resource itself but also intrinsically linked to the environment in which use occurs."¹⁹ We must consider the public library as a critical access point for young users. Pickard (2004) found pay per use inhibiting, and the level of affordability and the subsequent advantage of home access to be huge factors in predicting information skill. Dixon & Shenton (2004) find users without home access to be at a grave disadvantage, and suggest these are the users keen to exploit opportunities for use available to them, such as friends, school computer clubs, and frequently, public

¹⁸ The development of young people's information-seeking behaviour.

¹⁹ 34.

libraries.²⁰ The demand is greater than simply to those without, as home users have also been shown to want expanded use, taking advantage of options at school.²¹

Public libraries need to help equip young people, for either work or leisure pursuits, for participation in interactivity, connectivity, and access - features Dresang (2005) set as watermarks of the radical change she posits the digital experience to signify. Enochsson (2005) found that basic skills information were accepted, but not applied, in schools because teachers were unprepared to teach them. We must not fall into the same trap. Familiarity with these users' methods in the library must be attempted. Furthermore, familiarity must be maintained by library staff on the current research conducted on the information seeking behaviour and needs of young people. This will better inform and prepare those responsible for these services.

As educators, librarians must do more to pass knowledge of information literacy on to this user group, emphasizing problems are a part of information activity and are not specific to, or represent failure, of the patron.²² Libraries should recognize that, just as there are different styles of learning, inclusion for different information seeking styles need to be accommodated.²³

A lack of such care is demonstrated by recent investigations into websites created for the use of the youth sector. Despite representing a quarter of all American library users, one survey found young adults could only count on 20% of public libraries to have developed websites to meet their needs.²⁴ Most of the libraries incorporated young adults in the website, but with widely varying degrees of involvement, and only 29% were

²⁰ The development of young people's information-seeking behaviour.

²¹ Shenton, 2005.

²² Dixon & Shenton, 2004, The development of young people's information needs.

²³ Dresang, 2005.

²⁴ Hughes-Hassell, 2003, 143.

shown to have addressed inclusionary need criteria.²⁵ A U.K. evaluation of websites for “disadvantaged young people” found the lack of proactively engaging with their users meant most servicing bodies “did not fully understand the significance or implications of having moved their services into a digital environment.”²⁶ The investigation led to an outline of issues that specifically bar information retrieval for the websites’ targeted users, including: the reluctance, inability to recognize, or denial of a condition or need for action; problems with issues of anonymity, confidentiality or disclosure of sensitive information; and the basic mishandling of information queries.²⁷

The nature of those websites, and the manner in which they can fail their service targets, should raise our awareness of the grave repercussions of not reaching out to our young users. While the burden of education and skill development is placed on them in this role, it is important to acknowledge young people exist outside of school and student life. Conversely, school assignments are one example of information needs of young people not felt by adults.²⁸

A key is to strive to understand youth information related actions from their own perspective. “In comparison with matters in relation to which older people seek advice, they may seem trivial...to the youngsters they are serious.”²⁹ Expediency is held dear. “A portal,” says Large, Nettet, Behesti & Bowler (2004), “must seek efficient information retrieval for the school student as much as for the business executive.”³⁰ Chen, Wu, Rau and Hung (2004) claim an unbalanced focus on business considerations

²⁵ Hughes-Hassell, 2003, 150.

²⁶ Nicholas, Williams & Dennis, 2004, 35.

²⁷ Nicholas & Williams, 2005.

²⁸ Dixon & Shenton, 2003, Just what do they want?

²⁹ Dixon & Shenton, 2004, The development of young people's information needs, 27.

³⁰ 65.

only robs the young of their information rights. Deciding a young person can wait or does not presently need access to online information retrieval is a threat to frequent demands of currency indicative to their information needs.³¹ This can take the form of a current affairs assignment,³² a job search,³³ a health concern,³⁴ or postsecondary planning.³⁵ Finally, privacy, security and safety concerns are central to youth involvement in online activities, a factor they are well-aware of, and which requires occasional subordination of their freedom.³⁶

Research involving children in order to discover their information seeking behaviour and needs is still in its infancy. The literature is sparse, repetitive and incomplete. The difficulty of synthesizing different studies that use different terminologies, methods, and criteria has been noted by Shenton (2004). We have, however, come a long way from comments on the topic from 1999:

usability research with children has often been considered too difficult to carry out with unruly subjects or not necessary for an audience that is satisfied with gratuitous animations and funny noises.³⁷

Previously, even when studies were done, Dresang (2005) found they tended “to focus largely on the deficiencies and the need for improvement rather than ferreting out the potential of new and exciting ways of knowing in the digital age.”³⁸

The dispute in the research lies now not in the inclusion of children, but the manner and degree of their participation.³⁹ The disagreement centres on the extent to

³¹ Shenton & Dixon, 2005.

³² Shenton & Dixon, 2005.

³³ Dixon & Shenton, 2004, The development of young people's information needs.

³⁴ Teenagers struggle to find useful health data online, 2004.

³⁵ Dixon & Shenton, 2004, The development of young people's information-seeking behaviour.

³⁶ Large, Nettet, Beheshti, & Bowler, 2005.

³⁷ Hanna, Ridsen, Czerwinski & Alexander in Nettet & Large, 2004.

³⁸ 192.

³⁹ Nettet & Large, 2004.

which youth can be believed to assume the roles of full design partners. While there is much debate on that subject, the overall consensus nonetheless approves of the contribution and insights made by young contributors. Rather than making children subjects of adult design, Nettet & Large (2004) suggest a hybrid approach of the several models they discuss, wherein the best elements are picked and chosen from theories to apply in child research.

This integrative approach mirrors the favoured methodology displayed by young people in various ways. Pickard (2004) notes the significant role peer interaction may play, including both traditional tutoring but also the observed, preferred, (and reportedly discouraged from authority figures) collaborative work. Dresang (2005) also reflects on a perceived desire for “knowing together:” digital information framed in a context of a community of learners, on or offline.⁴⁰ Advocacy for personalization is “seen as a way of coping with age and gender differences,” as well as individual variation.⁴¹

Working together in an integrative way is also suggested for use of media. Dresang (2005) feels using new and old media interchangeably could yield rewards in skill development in approaching both. Due to the unsatisfactory breadth of information found in online resources, Shenton (2005) proposes presenting information literacy within the context of the whole of youth computer activities, including integration with paper sources. Research into interface design revealed the importance of reading skills.⁴² Enochsson (2005) found, while language skills placed limits on web searching, use of the Internet appeared to motivate reading: for the first time ever, grade one students

⁴⁰ 186.

⁴¹ Large, Nettet, Beheshti, & Bowler, 2005, 50.

⁴² Chen, Wu, Rau, & Hung, 2004.

participating achieved the second grade reading level. A teaching component on critical literacy also showed improved results compared to other classes.

Enochsson (2005) also noted the advantage of those who already made use of ICT tools such as instant messenger and bulletin boards. These users obtained a clearer view into the workings of the Internet through these gateways of learning by doing. Such devices may be useful as a more manageable learning environment for some users, and may be seen as more direct than approaching an adult intermediary.⁴³ Chat, email and discussion groups were intrinsic to Chen, Wu, Rau, & Hung (2004), who used designs of youth to successfully test a research interface against ones designed by Yahoo. Interactivity provides youth with a means to learn information technology in a context they have made clear is important to them, within the healthy sociability of their friendships.⁴⁴

Integration of online services with young people's living information practices requires more than simply providing interactivity. It goes further, demanding constant reevaluation and a system meant to utilize user feedback for improvement.⁴⁵ Finland's Kirjatti, the library cat, is an innovative example of a wide integration of a library's online portal for children. Kirjatti is involved with storytelling (in virtual and physical form), materials reviews and promotion, Internet instruction, and receiving mail. This is a model of focused user targeting that should be emulated. For his efforts, Kirjatti was selected for consideration in best practice and service quality national competitions, and may even receive his own national day.⁴⁶ Continued consideration of successes such as

⁴³ Shenton, 2005.

⁴⁴ Hughes-Hassell & Miller, 2003.

⁴⁵ Nicholas, Williams, & Dennis, 2004.

⁴⁶ Maki, 2005.

this and support of ongoing research will serve the public library, and its young patrons, well as further online services are planned, revamped and integrated with the whole of its information operations.

Bibliography

- Chen, C., Wu, F., Rau, P. P., & Hung, Y. (2004). Preferences of young children regarding interface layouts in child community web sites. *Interacting with Computers*. 16(2), 311-330.
- Dixon, P., & Shenton, A. K. (2004). The development of young people's information needs. *Library and Information Research News*. 28(89), 25-34.
- Dixon, P., & Shenton, A. K. (2004). The development of young people's information-seeking behaviour. *Library and Information Research News*. 28(90), 31-39.
- Dixon, P., & Shenton, A. K. (2003). Just what do they want? What do they need? A study of the informational needs of children. *Children and Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*. 1(2), 36-42.
- Dresang, E. (2005). The information-seeking behavior of youth in the digital environment. *Library Trends*, 54(2), 178-196.
- Enochsson, A. (2005). The development of children's web searching skills: A non-linear model. *Information Research*. 11(1), [n].
- Hughes-Hassell, S., & Miller, E. T. (2003). Public library websites for young adults: Meeting the needs of today's teens online. *Library and Information Science Research*, 25(2), 143-156.
- Large, A., Nasset, V., Beheshti, J., & Bowler, L. (2005). Criteres de conception de portails web pour enfants: Une comparaison de deux etudes. criteria for children's web portals: A comparison of two studies. *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*. 28(4), 45-72.
- Maki, T. (2005). Kirjatti, the library cat. *Scandinavian Public Library Quarterly*. (2), 14-17.
- Nasset, V., & Large, A. (2004). Children in the information technology design process: A review of theories and their applications. *Library & Information Science Research*. 26(2), 140-161.
- Nicholas, D., & Williams, P. (2005). Creating online resources for the vulnerable. *Library + Information Update*. 4(4), 30-31.
- Nicholas, D., Williams, P., & Dennis, K. (2004). Improving websites in the voluntary sector. *Library + Information Update*. 3(3), 35-37.

Pickard, A. (2004). Young people and the Internet. *Library & Information Update*. 3(1), 32-34.

Ried, K., & Mediatore, K. (2003). The 411 is now the shiznit. *Young Adult Library Services*. 2(1), 7-9.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Children's information needs: Why do we know so little? *Library + Information Update*. 3(1), 30-31.

Shenton, A. K. (2005). Integration of paper and electronic resources in school libraries: A look at issues and potential solutions. *School Librarian*. 53(3), 121-123.

Shenton, A. K., & Dixon, P. (2005). Information needs: Learning more about what kids want, need, and expect from research. *Children and Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*. 3(2), 20-28.

Teenagers struggle to find useful health data online. (2004). *Advanced Technology Libraries*. 33(1), 8-9.

World Summit on the Information Society. (2005). *Tunis Commitment (WSIS-05/TUNIS/DOC/7-E)*. Second Phase of the WSIS, Tunis: November 18, 2005. Accessed: April 17, 2006. <http://www.itu.int/wsis/docs2/tunis/off/7.html>