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Op-ed: Old-school job skills you won't find on Google

Young graduates might well be digital savvy, but employers are finding they lack the old-school research skills. Guest columnist Alison J. Head proposes some ways to bring them up to speed.

By Alison J. Head

Special to The Times

IN October, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan made headlines with his pronouncement for fast-forwarding learning in America's classrooms.

By putting a keyboard in every student's hands and replacing printed textbooks with digital ones, Duncan predicted that U.S. graduates would become formidable competitors against their digital-savvy counterparts from countries like South Korea.

But what really happens when the Google Generation joins the workplace? While we agree much stands to be gained, what may be lost as education goes digital?

Our research tells us the razzle-dazzle of all that techno-mastery masks some deep and troubling deficiencies.

For instance, deep reading and retention are most at risk when books are replaced with online texts, according to the Director of Tufts University's Center for Reading and Language Research, Maryanne Wolf.

And even though three-quarters of the teachers surveyed recently by Pew's Internet & American Life Project reported that digital technologies have a positive effect on learning, more than half of them said online learning does more to distract students than it does to help them master academic concepts.

Findings from our recent federal study at Project Information Literacy (PIL), conducted in collaboration with Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society and the University of Washington's Information School, add another dimension to the digital learning debate — a cautionary tale.

When we did in-depth phone interviews with 23 U.S. employers at Microsoft, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, KPMG, the FBI, the Smithsonian and other organizations, we found that bright new hires dazzle interviewers with their digital skills.

Once they were on the job, however, it became apparent that today's graduates lacked essential low-tech, traditional research skills like popping into a co-worker's office for help in interpreting results or scouring printed reports that were sitting on a shelf.

Employers were dismayed to find that most of these college hires were tethered to their computers. They rarely went beyond a Google search and the first page of results looking for "the" answer to a workplace problem.

"Going through old records and stacks of paper, they don't have enough patience to do that, to be able to decipher information out of an old book isn't there," said one employer, "but to find it on the Internet, find it on a website — it's quick, it's instantaneous, it's already put into a synopsis for them when they bring it up."

Our findings underscore the growing mismatch between what employers expect and need from college hires and what many of today's graduates actually deliver.

Moreover, they confirm a new instinct for "instant information" among the digital generation. Yet these online searching techniques are simply not enough.

As we face the challenges of educating today's students, we need to recognize that not all learning solutions are found online — and never will be.

In the race to bring ever more technology into the classroom we need to dial back and make sure students are also being taught old-school methods of communication and research that were second nature to previous generations.

Young people who are more comfortable texting than talking need to understand the value of conversation, whether by telephone or over the wall of a cubicle.

A conscious effort must also be made to introduce so-called "screen-agers" to the printed word, not out of some nostalgia for paper but because much pertinent and important information is still bound between covers.

A previous study by Project Information Literacy surveying 8,353 students from 25 campuses across the country, including the University of Washington, found that less than half had ever pulled a book from the library stacks or consulted a campus librarian when working on research papers.

We need to train students who consider all of the possible answers — not what comes up first in an online search that may call up dozens, hundreds or even thousands of results.

Such skills will go a long way to make graduates career-ready and the U.S. competitive in the 21st century. Or, as one employer we interviewed said, "those hires that are the most successful are the ones who can find that balance between the computing workplace and the person-to-

person workplace."

Alison J. Head is the founder and director of Project Information Literacy, an ongoing, national study about how college students find and use information in the digital age. She is a research fellow at Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society and an affiliate associate professor in the University of Washington’s Information School. The Institute of Museum and Libraries Services funded Project Information Literacy’s federal study, “Learning Curve: How College Graduates Solve Information Problems Once They Join the Workplace.”