

The Internet – Support or Threat to Learning Habits of the Younger Generation?

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Интернет – подкрепа или заплаха за навиците за учене на младото поколение?

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Бележки за автора

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Авторът няма известен конфликт на интереси, който да разкрива.

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Abstract

I've often heard young students say, "Let me check on the internet," when they're unsure of an answer. It's also evident that traditional paper dictionaries are rarely used nowadays, with foreign language words being automatically translated online. While the internet provides quick access to information, the accuracy of these answers needs research on sources and may require deep reading of different materials. This raises questions about the internet's role as a learning tool and how it's shaping our learning habits. Conducted in February 2024, a survey among 35 Romanian high school students aged 15-19 serves as the basis for this paper, which seeks to delve into students' internet usage for learning, their platform preferences, and their perceptions of how internet usage affects their learning styles. In conclusion, the paper will underscore the evolving learning needs identified and suggest ways educators can adapt to maintain students' interest in learning, guiding them towards focused research topics that align with their passions and future career aspirations.

Keywords: internet, learning, individualized learning, collaborative learning

Резюме

Често се чува ученици да казват: "Нека да проверя в интернет", когато не са сигурни в отговора. Също така е очевидно, че традиционните хартиени речници рядко се използват в днешно време, като чуждоезиковите думи се превеждат автоматично онлайн. Докато интернет осигурява бърз достъп до информация, точността на тези отговори изисква проучване на източниците и може да изисква задълбочено четене на различни материали. Това повдига въпроси за ролята на интернет като инструмент за обучение и как той оформя нашите навици за учене. Проведено през февруари 2024г. проучване сред 35 румънски гимназисти (15-19 г.) за използването на интернет за учене, предпочитанията им за платформа и възприятията им за това как използването му влияе върху стила им на учене, служи като основа за тази статия. Статията идентифицира развиващи се нужди от обучение и предлага начини, по които преподавателите могат да се адаптират, за да поддържат интереса на учениците, насочвайки ги към фокусирани изследователски теми, които съответстват на бъдещите им стремежи за кариера.

Ключови думи: интернет, учене, индивидуализирано обучение, съвместно обучение

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Various Perspectives on the Internet's Impact on Learning in the Modern Era

Each of us has probably noticed the fast-growing impact of technology and the internet in our lives. From smart to smarter phones to cleaning robots or automatic cooking pots, from performant washing and drying machines to online education and training, people adapted to and adopted this technologized environment, this new reality.

In this scene setting, let's turn a bit towards the young generation who has more exposure to technology and the Internet than the generation of their parents had, which means that they didn't have to change habits to adapt to the Internet, they have just created a way of living based on the Internet. If we speak about the young generation, then we speak about education and learning. Since families and the social environment support the creation of values in children and young people, lately those started to compete with the ones promoted on the Internet, this virtual support where more and more time is spent by the new generation.

Children and young people find immediate answers on the internet. Questions in their homework are sometimes copy-pasted into an internet browser to find quick answers without necessarily opening the notes taken in class or reading through the manual. If there is a topic of interest, multiple searches can be performed, but just a few will go to the source, read multiple materials, and draw their point of view. Or Internet can offer just a structured summary of a certain topic that will help students have an idea about the topic without going into details.

In recent years, numerous authors have delved into the impact of the internet on the brains, habits, and learning behaviors of young people. Below, we present a range of these perspectives to provide a broader spectrum of viewpoints on the internet's influence. These insights will serve as a foundation for the conclusions presented later in this article,

"The Net's interactivity gives us powerful new tools for finding information, expressing ourselves, and conversing with others. But it also turns us into lab rats constantly pressing levers to get tiny pellets of social or intellectual nourishment" (Carr, 2010). His statements suggest that online learning sits at a crossroads of efficiency and speed, yet often fosters a superficial curiosity. This may lead to a shallow understanding of various topics rather than establishing a solid foundation in a specific domain.

Barbara Oakley (2014), however, acknowledges the value of the internet while highlighting its drawbacks, particularly the distractions it poses. Advertisements, article *Postmodernism Problems / Проблеми на постмодерността* Vol.14 , No.2 , 2024, ISSN: 1314-3700, <https://pmpjournal.org> <https://doi.org/10.46324/PMP2402218>

recommendations, differing opinions, and the mix of resources such as reader comments and articles can divert a learner's focus from the subject at hand. Oakley states,

"The Internet is a double-edged sword. It can be a fantastic resource for learning, but it also brings many distractions. Learning to manage these distractions is key." (p.91)

Similarly, in her book, Barbara Oakley (2017) notes,

The Internet has democratized learning, but it has also made it more challenging to stay focused and motivated," emphasizing the cognitive challenges that come with navigating online learning environments (p.8)

In an era where we are all bombarded by information, the Internet could be the “savior” of our study time by filtering information and narrowing down the informational spectrum to what interests the reader. That is also the opinion of Daniel Levitin who states: “We can be overwhelmed by too much information, but the internet is also a tool for sifting through it all and finding what we need” (Levitin, 2014).

There are differing opinions about the benefits and drawbacks of the Internet. While it undoubtedly supports quick access to information, socializing, and finding inspiration, its role in learning is more complex. The question I would like to address is: despite the valuable opinions of various authors on the Internet's role in learning, do young people view the Internet as a tool for education? To what extent? Is it fostering genuine learning, or is it more inclined towards superficial engagement or even cheating?

Method

The main methodology used for writing the article is a survey created in Microsoft Forms. The survey included GDPR compliance and a brief description of its purpose. It comprised 17 questions, including one related to age range.

The survey explored internet usage among the young generation, detailing the frequency of internet use, the devices used, and the various online platforms accessed. It delved into the types and formats of information sought (articles, references, opinions) and asked respondents about the perceived advantages of online learning and how it has changed their habits (e.g., maintaining motivation, and time spent learning).

Additionally, the survey examined the disadvantages of online learning. Finally, respondents were asked to imagine learning without the Internet and identify the tools they would revert to in such a scenario.

Results and discussion

Internet – a simple filter of information or a genuine learning source? A survey is unveiling young people’s perspective

To answer these questions and to explore the reality, the survey of 15 questions has been answered by 35 young people, with ages between 14 and 19 years (50% of respondents being 14-16 and the other half 17-19), from the urban area of Bucharest. The questionnaire was completed anonymously, online in Feb 2024.

The vast majority of respondent use Internet on a daily basis on their smartphones, laptops, computers, or iPad and 100% of them consider the Internet on a daily basis. Additionally, with only one exception, all respondents consider the Internet as a source for learning. Which is well known, the internet isn’t just a powerful tool for communication. It’s arguably the most potent force for learning and innovation since the printing press. And it’s at the center of what is possibly America’s mightiest struggle and greatest opportunity: how to reimagine education for a transformative era”.

Even though the extract above speaks about America’s reality, Romanian students seemed to have the same opinion and consider learning on the Internet a valuable source of knowledge.

Let’s go a bit deeper into detail! Among those, 69% of respondents use Internet for educational purposes every single day (such as research for school assignments or study on daily basis while 31% limit the use of the Internet for learning to several times a week.

Questioned on what they consider to be the top three advantages of using the internet for learning, the vast majority of young respondents replied that:

- 1) it offers quick access to information,
- 2) it offers a variety of resources and perspectives on the same topic,
- 3) there is a high number of sources (different perspectives and also different formats: videos, quizzes, texts, etc.).

Some respondents have also mentioned that there is no associated cost and that learning on the Internet also offers a certain degree of comfort (you may find answers to your questions without having to ask in class or open a debate). Due to the wide range of information, elements learned in class can be easily completed by complementary ones in no time, offering real support to students.

The top 3 used resources mentioned by the respondents are Wikipedia, YouTube, and Google (with various usages: Google search, Google translate, etc) followed by various dictionaries (Oxford Dictionary, Cambridge Dictionary, Dexonline), Britannica, Historia, Brainly, News channels and newspapers (e.g. CNN, BBC, NYTimes), or tools to test knowledge (e.g. Kahoot, Brainily).

Watching videos is an online activity preferred by the majority of respondents (38%), followed by reading articles (32%), and online quizzes (22%) to check information and online courses, while only 8% consider using the internet to take online courses.

94% of respondents have noticed a change in their learning behavior since they started using the internet for educational purposes. Of those, 65% consider that there is a positive impact on their learning behavior – the learning is more efficient and also they are more self-directed in learning. On the opposite side, there are many young people (27%) consider that when using the internet for learning, they become easily distracted in the learning process, coming to the same conclusion as the authors of “The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in High Tech World” who states “Our brains are not well adapted to the constant bombardment of information and the multitasking demands of the modern internet society” (Gazzaley & Rosen, 2016).

To dismiss this risk of becoming distracted when learning on the internet, young respondents mentioned multiple methods they use:

- 1) setting clear goals,
- 2) rewarding themselves for completing a milestone
- or 3) using gamified learning platforms or join learning groups.

Apart from the potential distractions, the respondents have also identified some other negative impacts of using the Internet for learning. And those risks may be divided into:

- risks related to information (not reliable information, the Internet is down so no available information) and
- risks directly impacting the individual (people get easily distracted, their attention span shortens, people get lazy to search for information;)

On distractions, young people came also up with solutions. One example is the following: “When using YouTube you can see another video which you will find more interesting than the one you are watching. I would propose in order to help reduce distractions to use another YouTube account just for learning so that your recommended videos are only gonna be for studying and it

won't be mixed with gaming videos for example". Also, young respondents mentioned that they are aware of possible distractions while using on internet, but some have also mentioned self-education awareness to avoid distractions - closing social media while learning, setting specific time for study, etc.

The brief survey revealed a significant level of engagement from participants, highlighting the widespread utilization of the Internet for learning. It underscored the clear benefits but also shed light on the drawbacks associated with online learning.

Learning transformation under the Internet's wand

With the wide usage of the internet for learning, learning has become more individualized as people can get basic information in class and then, they can deepen their knowledge on the internet on specific areas connected with the main topics, without exposing them to the judgment of peers and without interrupting the class. This means that learning has become not only individualist but also personalized as learners can, on one hand, research a small part of the topic presented, the one that interests them more, and, on the other hand, they can personalize the format of learning according to their learning styles: more videos for the visual profile, podcasts, and broadcasts for the additive profiles, etc.

Also, as shown in the result of the questionnaire, the internet complements information obtained in class, it can't completely replace it entirely. That is why the information provided in-house or in class should be structured, and clear, and should offer the general context of the facts (position a writer in the social context of his century, explain the writing through the literature influences of the geo-political area, etc. This would be the core of what students will get, the nucleus on which they can build further. Students can get involved in building the lesson structure, can contribute with their own research and own point of view. They can develop analytical and judgmental skills by being part of the learning process. Learning grows this way from individual to collaborative learning (it supports learning from one another, from debates, from idea exchanges). Parents and educators can play the collaboration game and use groups to share information found on internet and debate, refine the judgment on what piece of information is true and which one is false, and help them identify valid sources and compare them. Though the original piece of information is still important to read and internalize through the own filters (e.g. literature).

Learning on the internet can affect our “neurological highways”. In classical learning, when studying with pen and paper, repetition supports the creation of highways and contributes to the neurological synapse. Learning on the internet offers easy access to information – one click and quick read-through or quick access to a video that can be watched while cooking which means that no repeats are available to make the information stick. Information becomes more fluid and easy to forget if not entered in a specific context. To mitigate the risk of fluidity, exercises may come in support of the learning – project in teams, kinesthetic approaches of topics (e.g. chemistry, science classes).

The Internet has become our main information and at the same time relaxation tool. It helps us get more efficient in our daily tasks, and have more free time. And what have we done with more free time?

A new study from the Technology Policy Institute helps highlight this phenomenon with a wealth of new statistics about what people with the Internet do with their free time. The report finds that among those who use the Internet for leisure, the average daily person spends 100 minutes relaxing online, about a third of the five hours of free time most people have. The more leisure time spent online, the less time subjects spent socializing offline, dropping from about 41 minutes in 2003 to 37 minutes in 2011. (Thomsen, 2013).

As our leisure time becomes less physically social, it becomes more focused on seeking and discovering, driven by an ironic sense of absence. It’s the nature of the Internet to confuse questions and erase the original intent one had in opening a browser window within three or four clicks. The feeling of being enmeshed in an aura of perpetually unfulfilled possibility emanating from one’s laptop screen is quickly becoming one of the hallmarks of our time and place, chasing after random story threads and trivial curiosities that wipe one’s memory clean for a few minutes or hours. What if this free time will become learning time? What if it will be dedicated to new skills creation as the power of our presence resides in knowledge and quick skills building for immediate adaptability to changes?

"Learning becomes more profound and enduring when it requires effort. Easy learning is akin to writing in sand—it fades quickly. Teachers and facilitators should ponder this quote and endeavor to make learning challenging. By harnessing the power of the internet, they can transform it into a tool that aids young people in researching complex subjects, conducting independent

research, engaging with diverse perspectives, and fostering debates. Thus, they may seek to redefine the Internet as a tool rather than merely a source of information

Conclusion

The rapid integration of technology and the internet into our daily lives has fundamentally transformed how we access information, socialize, and learn. Particularly among the younger generation, who have grown up in a technologically saturated environment, the internet has become an indispensable tool for both leisure and educational purposes. However, while the internet offers unparalleled access to a wealth of information and resources, its role in learning is nuanced.

Authors such as Nicholas Carr (2010) and Barbara Oakley (2014) have highlighted the potential pitfalls of excessive internet use, cautioning against the shallow engagement and distractions it can foster. Yet, despite these concerns, the majority of young people perceive the internet as a valuable learning tool, leveraging its quick access to information and diverse perspectives. However, there is a risk that reliance on the Internet for learning may lead to superficial engagement and a loss of focus, as highlighted by mentioned authors Gazzaley and Rosen (2016).

The survey conducted among young respondents revealed a high level of engagement with online learning resources, with many acknowledging its positive impact on their learning behavior. However, concerns were also raised about the potential distractions and negative impacts associated with internet-based learning. To mitigate these risks, strategies such as setting clear goals, rewarding milestones, and utilizing gamified learning platforms were suggested.

Ultimately, while the internet has revolutionized the way we learn, it is essential to approach online learning with caution and mindfulness. By harnessing the power of the internet as a tool for research, collaboration, and critical thinking, educators can empower young learners to navigate the vast sea of information available online and cultivate deep, meaningful learning experiences.

In this digital age, where the internet serves as both a beacon of knowledge and a sea of distractions, our journey of learning takes on new dimensions. As we navigate this vast landscape of information, it is crucial to tread mindfully, guided by a sense of purpose and direction. By embracing the internet as a tool for exploration, collaboration, and growth, we can unlock its transformative potential and chart a course toward deeper, more meaningful learning experiences.

Together, let us harness the boundless resources of the internet to illuminate the path to knowledge, curiosity, and lifelong learning.

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