

Walling Off the Cloud = Dumbing Down Digital Skills

By Margo Pierce

In the digital age, filtering is the “garden wall” designed to keep bad stuff and dangerous people away from children so they are free to focus on learning (not video games). But this “protection” is achieving the opposite of what many educators claim to want for students. The [New Jersey Association of School Libraries](#) presents the stark reality in *School Libraries: A Lesson in Student Success*. The infographic includes this summary of statistics about the skills of first-year college students:

- 75 percent have no idea how to locate articles and resources they need for their research.
- 60 percent don't verify the accuracy or reliability of the information they find.
- 44 percent do not know how to integrate knowledge from different sources.

“We talk about preparing kids for being college and career-ready, and yet we have kids walking into institutes of higher ed who are not prepared for the rigor of a college curriculum, who do not know how to ask researchable questions, who walk into their college libraries and are just befuddled by the resources,” said Susan D. Ballard, president of the [American Association of School Librarians](#) (AASL). “They turn in a paper and quote Joe’s Shakespeare Site instead of the [Folger \(Shakespeare\) Library](#), and the professor hands it back to them, ‘What’s wrong with this?’ Ballard continued, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice, practice, practice. How do you get to be a good digital citizen? You’re given ample opportunities to practice, practice, practice.”

That practice is what teaching is all about, according to Ballard. “There’s an instructional responsibility at the school level for teachers who are delivering content and school librarians who are very familiar with the world of resources and information to collaborate to design instructional experiences that are authentic for kids and appeal to their passions and interest so that they are engaged,” she said. “Kids need to know how to use the information ethically, to give credit where credit is due.”

Access = Information = Education

For learning to happen, educators and students both need unfettered access to all kinds of resources. Filtering is hampering access, and the result is digitally illiterate kids, according to the 2012 update of the AASL national longitudinal survey [School Libraries Count!](#). The informal survey asked librarians to voluntarily respond to 14 questions “ranging from whether or not their schools use filters, to the specific types of social media blocked at their schools.” The results won’t surprise those who rely on unfettered cloud resources.

- 52 percent indicated that filtering impedes student research when completing key word searches.
- 42 percent indicated that filtering discounts the social aspects of learning.
- 25 percent stated that filtering impeded continued collaboration outside of person-to-person opportunities.

One school district that moved from extensive to minimal filtering is [Homewood](#) in Alabama. According to Annalisa Keuler, a school librarian at [Homewood High School](#), teachers’ frustration over their inability to access resources and an update to the district’s five-year strategic plan mandating more technology in the classroom were two powerful forces behind the change.

Early on, the filtering was very strong. All blogs and sites where anyone could post a comment were blocked. No social media sites were accessible, and sites that had links accessing social media were off limits. The filtering parameters were so broad that access to legitimate information was blocked, according to Keuler. “In the past, what we were doing was a more proactive protection of students out of fear of parents coming back and saying,

'My student came home and said they saw something inappropriate.' The chances of that actually happening were slim to none because (of) the guidance of the teachers," she said.

"We definitely were having difficulties with students not being able to find information. We had an economics teacher doing a project where (students) had to look at stock prices (and) they couldn't get to stock quotes because it was blocked."

While sensitive to the concerns of educators who wish to protect children, Keuler believes it is the role of the educator to prepare children in age-appropriate ways to filter information on their own. Teaching digital skills, not walling off access, is the way to do that. She points to the contradictory positions articulated in [Children's Internet Protection Act](#), which requires filtering while also requiring schools to teach critical online skills for "appropriate online behavior, including interacting with other individuals on social networking websites and in chat rooms, and cyberbullying awareness and response."

"You can interpret that in a lot of different ways," Keuler said. "So many of the schools filter so much more than the law requires. In my perfect world, there would not be filters, because I believe teachers have the reasonability to teach students how to access the Internet appropriately. How can we really educate our students if we're saying we're going to shut down all these things when you get to school to try to protect you?"

'Research = Googling'

The [Pew Internet and American Life Project](#), a program of the [Pew Research Center](#), exists to do research with the aim of being "an authoritative source on the evolution of the internet through surveys that examine how Americans use the internet and how their activities affect their lives." A report published in November 2012 entitled How Teens Do Research in the Digital World illustrates how important it is for teachers to guide students, not keep them separate from digital resources.

The report stated, "According to the teachers in this study, perhaps the most fundamental impact of the internet and digital tools on how students conduct research is how today's digital environment is changing the very definition of what 'research' is and what it means to 'do research.' Ultimately, some teachers say, for students today, 'research = Googling.' Specifically asked how their students would define the term 'research,' most teachers felt that students would define the process as independently gathering information by 'looking it up' or 'Googling.' "

The results that come up from a commercial search engine are what Ballard calls the "surface web." It is where most students go for information, but relying on that kind of resource means most kids don't know how to access the "deep web."

"Everybody thinks, 'Everything's free,' " Ballard said. "So they use the surface web not realizing there are vetted, authoritative resources in deep web, the difference being (that) you have to have connections to them through interagency cooperation and/or you pay a fee. This kind of content is the coin of the realm right now. If you want the stuff that's vetted, authoritative, quality, you may have to pay something for it and you need to have people on board who are able to say, 'These are the resources that we want to cultivate, collect, curate, make available to our kids.' "

She continued, "This is from the point of school librarians, and someone would say, 'Well, of course they're going to say that. They're a critical component because they want to remain employed.' We're also part of an altruistic profession and this is what we do. This is our DNA. We help people learn how to get at information so as to be able to construct their own leaning and knowledge as a result of engaging with that information. We get a real kick out of that. We love it."

About the Author: Margo Pierce is a Cincinnati-based freelance writer.

Published: March 5, 2013

http://thejournal.com/Articles/2013/03/05/Walling-Off-the-Cloud.aspx?sc_lang=en&Page=1&p=1