

Children and the Internet:
The New Education Highway

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As an educator you see and hear terms like the Internet, Cyberspace, and information super highway daily; it sounds exciting, but what is it really? Is it useful and relevant to daily life and school curriculum? You want to understand it, maybe use it yourself and possibly teach it, but you're also hearing negative comments about it. Who should you believe? What possibilities, opportunities, and challenges does it present? The use of the internet for children can be effective, but on the other hand it can be very dangerous if not controlled properly.

Webster's New World College Dictionary defines information as, "Knowledge communicated by others or obtained from investigation, study or instruction" (Agnes 733). Today there is a new source of information that is available to all across the world that is relatively easy to us; The Internet. It can be accessed from home, and contains unlimited information in print or multimedia formats with world wide input and access.

The Internet is the information super highway and the term Cyberspace refers to the virtual reality that technology creates. The Internet is the world's largest network of computers, and as the name implies it is not a single network, but a network of networks ("Internet history"). The Internet was created by the United States Government as an experiment over 20 years ago by the U.S. Department of Defense; it was designed to support military research ("Internet history"). Over the years, the Internet has evolved into a gigantic database accessible by homes, schools, government and business.

One problem which is not unique is the question of Internet censorship. Because the information on the Internet can be viewed by virtually any group or individual, some of the information might be inappropriate for students. Restricting access to material in K-12 is certainly not a new idea. Clearly restricting access to material in K-12 occurs everyday at every level. Parents have been known to have books be removed from the school library and book

vendors screen what they consider inappropriate material from publication (“Censorship vs. Guidance”). The Internet has forced schools to take a new look at an old problem. Software can be put on a computer to block student’s access to sites containing potentially offensive materials, which is currently popular in some circles and in some school districts. It is tempting to install such programs to the judgment of outside panels. Once such things are installed, all students in the school, regardless of parental and family values, will then be blocked from such information. (“Censorship vs. Guidance”)

We all have read or heard about articles published in popular magazines such as Time Magazine or Newsweek that talk about "controlling" the Internet for young children in educational systems. Terms like “cyber porn” have a strong effect on community reactions. Every school district, community, or family must make an informed decision as to how they will handle the Internet and Internet censorship. Two fourth-grade students in Waldo, Florida were suspended from school after their teacher realized these two students were using a classroom computer to search for women’s breasts while having access to the Internet (Cromwell).

In many ways, using the Internet can be a great tool in educational systems K-12. A high school principal points out that, “Using the Internet in a classroom can be a beneficial tool to many students. By students having the access to the Internet they are able to explore further into certain areas of all major subjects that may not be covered during a class lecture” (Jackson). I also spoke with a current school teacher. The participating teacher I spoke to regarding Internet usage in schools is an elementary Spanish teacher. The teacher agreed using the Internet in her classrooms has a large impact on students learning ability with the foreign language Spanish (Zwerk). The teacher explained that there is an online translator students are allowed to use while working on in class homework (Zwerk). To further investigated the matter, “If children K-

12 should have access to the Internet” I spoke to a parent of an elementary child and high school child on her opinion and she replied with, “I think it is a good idea, as long as the child is being monitored by school staff (Cleinsmith).” The parent went on to say, “I do not think it’s a great idea for teachers to show the younger children how to get online and do things online though, that should be dealt with through parenting” (Cliensmith). Students agree using the Internet in and outside a classroom makes doing some homework easier in many ways (Wolfe).

The Internet, or World Wide Web, as it is sometimes called, is a vast collection of text, images, and ideas. There are countless potential benefits for using the Internet in educational systems, some examples include:

- Students have access to a great amount of factual things and they are presented in an exciting interactive way for students. (“Potential Benefits”)
- Acts of bringing the rest of the world directly into the classroom. (“Potential Benefits”)
- Provides practical web based resources to support for learning in any school subject. (“Potential Benefits”)
- Provides teachers with the latest advice and info. (“Potential Benefits”)

Using the internet in a classroom is a hands-on classroom tool, which can be a motivator for students, and also encourage the kind of independence that many teachers agree is important for students to achieve as they learn. (“Benefits of using the Internet in a classroom”). Because class, race, ability, and disability are removed as factors in communication while using the Internet, it is a natural tool for addressing the needs of all students; this varies from school district to school district (“Benefits of using the Internet in a classroom”).

Many schools now offer the opportunity to take a class and allow students to use the Internet as a class lesson. One such example is a high school history teacher who uses the Internet in his

classroom to further enhance students understanding of the subject of history. In the article, Andrew Wade offers his thoughts and ideas as to the use of the Internet in secondary school history teaching. According to Wade, the usage of the Internet by children can be helpful on two fronts.

On one level it can help plan, devise and resource lessons. However, prudent use of suitable sites and activities allows the Internet to be used to actually teach lessons. It is vital to assert that the Internet or indeed ICT in history is in no way a replacement for more traditional teaching methods. It is a further tool available to the history teacher, yet the interactive element of Internet activities mean they are able to have an extremely positive impact on the learning potential of students. It is this interactivity which is the key. While these aspects are clearly extremely useful for planning, my site also offers online quizzes and lessons together with links to similar activities on the Internet. I have also developed hangman games that test terminology, online word searches that familiarize pupils with vocabulary, online multiple choice quizzes that provide interactive assessment, drop down gap filling exercises and even “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” quizzes. All these activities serve to develop pupils' historical skills at the same time as allowing them to have a little fun. (qtd. in Wade)

The use of the Internet has become widespread across the nation in various school systems. Many teachers, as well as parents have seen a positive impact on students' learning through using the Internet in a school system. Children of all ages enjoy using the Internet in a classroom setting, so why must it be such a large debate to use the Internet in a classroom or ban the use of the Internet in classrooms?

The use of the internet for children can be effective, but on the other hand it can be very dangerous if not controlled properly. New sites are added to the Internet daily, the last figure cited by Internic was 5,000 sites per day (“Internet Staggering Facts”). Information, good and bad is being added at an alarming rate, so remaining informed is extremely important. Students need to be aware of the dangers and how to deal with them as they are encountered. Shielding them without guidance is not acting as responsible educators. Keeping both students and parents educated and aware of resources and problems; rather than protected, promotes education. Using the Internet in a classroom can be very beneficial to students as well as teachers. As time goes by it will be interesting to see how many schools K-12 adopt the use of the Internet in classrooms.

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