Internet use: a study of preservice education students in Lesotho and Canada

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Abstract

How much do students take advantage of the wealth of information the Internet provides? In a cross-cultural study we discovered that students in teacher education faculties in Canada and Lesotho have similar patterns of Internet use but they do not use the Internet to explore the broader world and learn about alternative ways of thinking. Outside of school or work, their use of the worldwide Internet is extremely limited. This study surveyed over 200 pre-service teachers from Lesotho and Canada on their Internet use and found that the vast majority of them stay within their social circles and comfort zones. This implies that our prospective teachers are learning very little about diverse points of view about the world or even about local issues. The implication is that colleges of education need to help their students move beyond their daily Internet routines to find out more about alternative points of view.

Keywords: Internet, technology, teacher education, research, Lesotho, Canada, social media, preservice teachers, teacher candidates

1. Introduction

The Internet provides us with access to an incredible range of ideas and experiences that were previously unavailable to most people. But how much do students take advantage of this wealth of information? University and College students are heavy users of the Internet with more than 90 percent of the students we surveyed reportedly using the Internet for five or more hours each week. It is important to generate a broad, comprehensive portrait of

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Internet use among University and College students to understand what they are doing when they are online and what the impact of their use may be for. In a cross-cultural study we discovered that students in teacher education faculties in Canada and Lesotho have similar patterns of Internet use. They do not, unfortunately, use the Internet to explore the broader world and learn about alternative ways of thinking. Outside of school or work, their use of the worldwide Internet is extremely limited.

This study therefore examines how year one education (in a two year, post-baccalaureate program) students at the University of Manitoba (UofM) are using the Internet, and compares their use to that of Lesotho College of Education (LCE) students. To guide our comparisons we used a qualitative design and posed a broad and open-ended question regarding student Internet use:

“Keep a mental note of the sites that you regularly visit which are not related to your school work or job. This could be by looking at the ones in your Bookmark bar, or the ones that you need to check daily or pretty close to daily, and perhaps, if you have some that you check weekly. Provide a brief explanation of why you choose those sites, and if you are willing list them”

In responding to this many students were surprised by their own Internet use. As one UofM student put it: “I have been reflecting on which websites I check the most, and have resorted to double checking my internet history and my bookmark bar. Unfortunately, they only confirmed the sad truth: with over 1000000000000000000 websites available for me to browse, I only look at three.”

1.1. Preservice Teachers and Internet Use

A number of interesting studies illustrate how preservice teachers use the Internet. Cam and Isbulan (2012, p. 14) discuss how education students in Turkey use social networks to “make friends, exchange information, find partners, and to play games.” They suggest that social media like Facebook are changing their social habits: “Many people who feel lonely try to open instant conversations and to extend their circle of friends through social media” (p. 18). This leads some to a social media addiction, but still keeps them within their limited circles of friends and perhaps ‘friends of friends.’ Childs and Twiddle (2011) in their study of science preservice teachers mention a course, 21st Century science, in which some of the values are that students “read and understand the essential points of media reports about matters that involve science.” They asked preservice teachers to consider two activities around: “Do you believe this website?” and ‘Uses of the Internet’” (p. 153). These are essential for teachers and students to consider, but does this broaden their view of the world, of science, of government, etc.? “Trainees perceive the Internet to be potentially a ‘sea of information’ in which students could drown’ (p. 155). Generally when we ask students to search the Internet, we provide them with limited parameters and perspectives on a topic. We don’t effectively encourage them to move beyond their comfort zones. As a UofM student put it:

When I list the sites I use it kind of makes me sad. I mean there is a whack load of websites out there and I usually limit myself to a handful of them. That being said I did leave out a number of websites that I use on a regular basis for school purposes. My list is only a small one when looking at my own personal use.

Gibson, Moline and Dyck (2011) explored education students’ perceptions of technology in social studies pedagogy. They found that while almost all students felt they were comfortable with computers and are online frequently, they were getting very little instruction or modeling in how to use the computer in social studies. The students were interested in using the technology mainly in a local or familiar sense, but some were willing to partner with schools around the world.

Sterenberg and Hogue (2011) remind us that when western educators think of science we think of western, procedural science, but they cite Ogawa’s (1995) view that we all have three kinds of science: “Indigenous science, personal science, and Western modern science.” Indigenous science is the science of a particular culture, personal science includes our personal perceptions of the world and Western modern science is the dominant, procedural scientific we teach in schools. The point is that even in something that we often consider as ‘objective’ there are different views of the world and what to value that most of us are never exposed to and would not even know to seek out in our Internet searching.

Carr and Porfilio (2009) in a study of intercultural education take participants through a course in media literacy and find that they “start to understand the connection between propaganda, patriotism and media control, which raises a host of issues in relation to the divergent purposes of education … and start to critique the state of social
justice through the media.” They also speak to the fact that participants’ ideas of how much they knew about media literacy changed during the course. In this we can see how crucial it is that we assist students in expanding their ideas and worldviews.

Richardson (2006), a noted American blogger and technology-in-education promoter states, “Whether it’s blogs or wikis or RSS, all roads now point to a Web where little is done in isolation. The biggest, most sweeping change in our relationship with the Internet may not be as much the ability to publish as it is the ability to share, connect, and create with many, many others of like minds and interests.

And while Richardson is correct to be enthused about this potential, he also implicitly points to the fact that we tend to enter an ‘echo chamber’ on the Internet where we limit ourselves primarily to our current interests and like-minded thinkers.

A study by Hargittai, Neuman, and Curry (2012) provides some evidence that seemingly contradicts our findings. They sought to test the hypothesis of ‘information overload’ on the general American public. The questions in the study focused on newsgathering and perceptions of information overload. They conducted focus groups to discuss this topic and conclude that “although critical of partisan ‘yellers’ in the media, individuals do not report cocooning with the like-minded or avoiding the voices of those with whom they disagree” (p. 161). Participants were dissatisfied with TV news but found online news to be favourable. Some spoke of the ability to search out news items from different sources and thought they were able to get away from the bias of TV news. “When we asked participants explicitly whether they preferred news sources that agreed with them, most people said no” (p. 170). Also, “Overall, the response of participants clash with the academic notion that people will abandon consulting opposing views of news in favor of news that lines up with their own views” (p. 171). This assumes that they were consulting opposing views in the first place.

But in their use of social media they find, not surprisingly, that: “if you’re just browsing Facebook you see what your friends are reading or thought was interesting enough to post” (p. 169).

Hargittai, Neuman, and Curry also refer to Garret’s (2009) research on politically motivated reinforcement. Garret study of political reinforcement in American culture found that while reinforcement seeking happens, it does not exclude people finding challenging opinions, especially during election campaigns. Garret finds this reassuring: “Although seeking out reinforcement may produce deeper convictions and more passionate beliefs, such behavior does not necessarily reduce exposure to other perspectives. Avoiding other perspectives, on the other hand, presents a number of threats. Exposure to other opinions is important because it fosters political tolerance and can improve group deliberation processes. As this exposure drops, the evidence suggests that our society will become more polarized and politically fragmented, that political tolerance will drop, and that citizens will be less able to effectively deliberate over important political problems (p. 692).

Both these studies are encouraging in that they suggest that we don’t always choose to live in the Internet ‘bubble.’ However Hargittai, Neuman, and Curry do not reference actual Internet use, but only the conversations participants held in the focus groups. It would be helpful to know how these people actually used the Internet as opposed to having discussions about it. Garret interviewed people during a contentious time – a presidential election campaign – when people are perhaps more inclined to explore different opinions before they vote. This merits more study. Daily life pushes back into our routines. As one of our UofM students put it:

On a regular basis, I only use a handful of websites, which is kind of strange considering how many websites there are on the internet. Even though I am now conscious of how many websites I view on a weekly basis, I doubt that anything will change. I will most likely still visit the same sites each week just because it is habit. Too bad too, I bet there are some great sites on the internet that I have never seen.

2. Methodology

Students at both LCE and UofM were asked to consider the question mentioned earlier and to respond in an online discussion forum. They had a week to complete the responses. There were 120 responses from LCE students and 93 from the UofM. The UofM students were in their first year of a two year after-degree program.

The responses were open-ended and while some students provided lists of their main web pages visited, most gave a general overview of their use of the Internet and provided comments about their use. The UofM students had
been told the reason for the question before they responded so many of them commented on their Internet use in that context. This led to a rich data set.

The results were then collected and analyzed by each researcher looking for trends – particularly looking at the breadth and depth of how students engaged with the vast resources of the Internet. Results from both faculties were then compared to each other to see if the trends were similar.

3. Results

The summarized data set is found in Table 1 showing the total number of participants followed by those who were identified in each category.

| Internet Site Used         | UofM n. | UofM Users | UofM % | LCE n. | LCE Users | LCE % |
|---------------------------|---------|------------|--------|--------|-----------|-------|
| Social Network            | 93      | 84         | 91%    | 120    | 95        | 79%   |
| Entertainment             | 93      | 66         | 71%    | 120    | 84        | 70%   |
| Educational Sites         | 93      | 58         | 63%    | 120    | 37        | 31%   |
| News                      | 93      | 38         | 41%    | 120    | 26        | 22%   |
| Online shopping and others| 93      | 30         | 32%    | 120    | 2         | 1.9%  |

3.1. Social uses of the Internet

At the University of Manitoba, with the advent of social networking sites such as Facebook, and chat technologies like instant messaging (IM), students seem to be using the Internet for social communication quite frequently as they build and form social relationships online in an increasing way. Nearly all Canadian students (84/93) in this survey (91%) reported accessing the Internet several times a day for social networking. Most of the students indicated they spent more time online using the Internet to communicate than for any other purpose.

We found a similarly strong preference for social networking among the Lesotho College of Education students, where almost 95 out of 120 (79%) of respondents reported using Facebook when on campus (because of wireless networking) on a daily basis. For the majority of these students (70%) going online meant having access to a social network other than e-mail, browsing the www or phoning. It means maintaining relationships and communicating with other contacts in different geographic areas.

3.2. Entertainment

Entertainment has proven to be another popular Internet access reason with 66 students out of 93 at UofM (71% and 84 out of 120 at LCE reporting that they spent a lot of hours each day using different sorts of media (Sport, Music, etc…). Among the most sited were hockey games and rock music at UofM, while the LCE students only referred to pop and jazz music and very little on soccer games.

3.3. Educational Sites

At the University of Manitoba, more than half, 58 students out of 93 (63%) of respondents reported using the Internet for education purposes. The sites used included Wikipedia, YouTube and other educational sites. For the
majority of these users (90%) going online meant signing in with their UofM account. The College students however are frequent users of other sites since the College does not have a proper website with content and digital tools; and for those whose contents are uploaded by some lecturers, downloading from mobile devices is never easy. The bandwidth at the Lesotho College is also a major issue.

3.4. News

Despite the fact that news media go hand-in-hand with technology, only a relatively low number of students 38 out of 93 (41%) for students at UofM and 26 out of 120 (22%) view and use the Internet as a source of news. They get their news by using the Internet on local news channels not looking for a wider world view or a variety of opinions; some for weather and other for sports and political news.

3.5. Online Shopping

Although the main use of internet by students might be: social networks, Music, Books, Games, and Films, students at UofM have also reported 30 students out of 93 representing 32% using internet for online retailers like Amazon and ebay when they shop online. This aspect of internet usage is not well known and used by the LCE students, only two students (1.9%) of the surveyed students reported using online shopping in Lesotho.

3.6. Student Comments

Canadian students provided some comments about their own perceptions of their Internet use. They show a growing awareness of the limits of their Internet use and explain some of the reasons they remain within their limited space.

Most of the sites I visit regularly serve a functional purpose (online banking, e-mail, etc.) with the exception of Facebook.
I was unaware of how narrow my circle of frequently used websites is until this topic came up at U of M

And, that is it. I have my websites and I use them well; I don't go elsewhere to find other stuff very often. Yes, there are 98,376,856,001 websites out there, but the most useful and popular websites are out there for a reason: they do things better than others do. I view the internet as a tool that serves as a particular purpose; to serve me! I use the internet for very particular reasons, and that's what it does for me.

Sometimes I feel as though I spend too much time on the internet, however, when I make plans with friends or family I have no problem stepping away from technology to spend time engaging in conversation and activities. I have also spent time vacationing without access to cell phones or internet for weeks at a time without separation anxiety. I like that I am able to "unplug" if I desire to.

When asked to keep a record of the sites that I use regularly (that are not related to work or school), I knew that the list would be very short. The Internet is full of information and I am choosing to ignore most of it. Perhaps this is because of time constraints (school and work are filling my time and brain with other things) or perhaps because with so much content out there, I honestly just do not know where to start when it comes to using the web for casual purposes (if I do not have a pressing questions that needs answering). For my sources of information about the world, I still prefer to read a newspaper in hard copy than subscribe to one online.

Throughout this past week, I have been taking note of the websites that I have visited. I wish I could say that I use a variety of websites daily but, honestly, I realized this past week that lately I don't often use the internet for anything other than that which is related to school work. The sites that I visit most often are Google and MSN, which are my homepages.

Despite the vast amount of information and activities that today's Internet offers, I actually don't use the internet for reasons other than managing what I need to manage.

I will probably stick with my main websites for a long time however… I prefer to distance myself from the black hole of the Internet when possible; despite there being many educational opportunities and learning to be done
4. Conclusions

Table 1 shows that on average 85% of the students in both institutions use the Internet for social networking, and almost 50% for educational purposes, while 70% use it for entertainment purposes. From this finding, it is clear that Internet performed a positive part in providing students with reliable information for them to achieve their educational purposes. It also shows that students still create time to study, relax and entertain themselves using the Internet.

The comments and lists of sites indicate that our students use the Internet but not very broadly and are not seeking out different perspectives or worldviews. They are busy students and don’t necessarily have time for a lot of exploration beyond their studies and the daily tasks of life. Their lives as teachers will not be much less busy. And yet they will be working with a variety of students who don’t think all the same ways they do and who may come from different countries and quite different cultural backgrounds. Teacher education programs should be affording students ideas and opportunities to expand their online experience – whether it is being more aware of differing views in their own community or in the world. Do these responses by LCE and UofM students reflect their busy lives or is this something that teacher educators should (and Google, Bing, and Yahoo) address?

But it shouldn’t only be the education institutions. Major search engines should begin to play a role in expanding the possibilities for all of us. The study by Hargittai, Neuman, and Curry (2012) asked the discussants what they thought of search engines. The most telling comment is a participant who stated that rather than being overwhelmed by information, “I just trust Google” (p. 170). Another stated that, “I trust Google to do a basic search. And then it becomes my responsibility from there to say: Is this enough?” (p. 170). This is more reasonable but can we expect Google, Bing and Yahoo (and others) to do more. Should we be asking them to provide a second column of search results that presents us with alternate views? This is no easy task, but neither is searching all the world’s information. Are we, and they, up to the challenge?

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