

# Becoming Net Savvy

*All of us bear responsibility for learning to be net savvy and supporting the members of our campus communities in the same lifelong process*

By **Diana G. Oblinger**

People want to *know*. We want to know how to do things, from completing simple tasks to solving complex problems. We want to know information—how many plays Shakespeare wrote or how a supernova is formed. We want to know people—those we encounter face-to-face and some we’ve never met. And, we want to know why things are as they are.

In agricultural societies, life and livelihood depended on “knowing how.” In an industrial society it became more important to “know what.” Our educational system changed to ensure as many people as possible would “know what” so that they could be productive citizens. Today’s flat, rapidly changing world requires “knowing how” and “knowing what” but also places a premium on “knowing who” and “knowing why” (decision-making capacity).<sup>1</sup>

Increasingly we gain know-how, know-what, know-who, and know-why from the Internet. Whether we use a search engine to find information, socialize with others in a virtual world, create a video for YouTube, or become a member of a distributed community, the Internet is an essential enabler. Thriving in today’s world requires being net savvy—knowing not just how to find information but how to upgrade know-how, find experts and collaborators, synthesize a complex array of information, make decisions, and take action. As Christine Susan Bruce wrote,

Using information to learn is essential to *learning to know*, as learners seek out knowledge from



the exploding range of resources available to them and develop a critical appreciation of the relative value of those resources. Bringing the information practices of the real world into the curriculum supports *learning to do*, as learning experiences are designed to introduce learners to the kinds of information practices that will support professional and civic and personal life. And, the emphasis on critical and creative thinking, communication, teamwork, and

wisdom that are integral to an information literacy education support ... *learning to be*.<sup>2</sup>

## Why Become Net Savvy?

More than 3,000 books are published daily. The amount of technical information is doubling every two years (by 2010 it is predicted to double every 72 hours).<sup>3</sup> A new blog is created every half-minute; 50 million blogs were created in the second quarter of 2006.<sup>4</sup> Six million photos are uploaded to Flickr daily.<sup>5</sup> Podcasts, videos, machinima, and digital

archives further expand our information sources, and 2.7 billion Google searches are performed each month.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly, we need to know how to find and use information, yet only 31 percent of information searches succeed.<sup>7</sup> Google and Wikipedia are not the only providers of answers, although they are often our first stops for information—only 2 percent of college students report using a library database as the starting point for a search.<sup>8</sup> We all know how to open a Web browser, but can we assume everyone knows how to search effectively for information? Do we understand how the different search engines work, what their biases are, and how their business models might influence the search results? What about searching for non-textual information (images, audio, and so on)?

Because we can find information doesn't mean it is reputable or truthful. Now that we've become a do-it-yourself culture, finding information for ourselves online, have we acquired the skills necessary to vet what we find? Do we understand the context in which the information is situated and adjust our interpretation accordingly? Are we net savvy or just net users?

Once found, what use is made of the information? In a cut, copy, and paste culture, do we fall into bad habits? Will anyone ever know the information was clipped from a Web site? And, if everyone is doing it, what is really wrong with plagiarism? Finding information is easy; respecting intellectual property and using information ethically is much harder.

### **Learning to Be Net Savvy**

Libraries are not the only organizations with responsibility for ensuring our students—or the rest of us—can find and use information. Faculty, student-life staff, writing centers, help desks, and others share responsibility for ensuring that being net savvy is part of the institution's culture. By constantly reminding students of relevant issues and asking productive questions, all personnel can help information fluency become a habit of mind instead of an isolated library requirement that is checked off in the freshman year.

## **What constructive uses of blogs, wikis, or podcasts will help advance the reputation and visibility of an emerging professional?**

Much more is at stake, however, than information. We find people online, some of whom we know face-to-face but many we don't. The anonymity of the Internet makes many things easier. Is posting a Facebook profile that one's friends wouldn't recognize (the binge-drinking party animal, for example) just fun? A way of trying out a new identity? Who's watching except friends, anyway? The assumption might be that childish pranks will be forgotten, but the Internet is not easily erasable. Whose responsibility is it to help students be thoughtful in their use of the Internet? Where in the curriculum or in student life can we discuss these issues? Can our students afford not to be net savvy?

What about the positive aspects of getting to know people online? Developing a professional network of peers—close and far away—is part of the college and university experience. In what ways do we model the development of these virtual networks? Are our students exposed to the opportunities, behaviors, and tools that will help them grow their networks? What constructive uses of blogs, wikis, or podcasts will help advance the reputation and visibility of an emerging professional? In what ways can students benefit from becoming net savvy?

Beyond finding people and information, we need to know how to do things. Although most education has been predicated on learning about something (physics, history, art), perhaps it is time to reprioritize our methods and put "learning to do" and "learning to be" on a par with "learning about." In the process of solving a problem (learning to do), students will learn about many things. As they identify information or skills they need, they will pause, research

the information, contact those in their network who can help, and assimilate what they need—mostly working online or with technology. Such just-in-time and situated learning improves retention and transfer. Isn't that being net savvy, as well?

### **Committing to a Lifelong Process**

How does such an ideal learning environment align with reality? Consider the use of technology. Do our students have the requisite technical skills? Or do we assume that because they have no fear of technology, they know how to use Excel or PowerPoint or CAD software? Do we assume that because a high percentage of students own a computer, their PCs are capable of the tasks we ask them to complete? And, do we assume that because we imagine better ways of learning, faculty and staff have the skills, confidence, and rewards to make the needed changes? What will it take for our institutions to become net savvy?

Knowing "why" is the ultimate reason for achieving information literacy—figuring out why things are the way they are. Why was there a Civil War? Why do people say the next century will belong to China? Understanding "why" implies we go beyond what we're told in textbooks or in newspapers to reach an understanding based on evidence, critical thinking, values, and dialogue. Knowing why enables better decision making. In understanding why, context becomes critical. Although it might be easier if there were right and wrong answers, nuance matters. Depending on the situation, there may be a better solution and a worse solution but no "right" solution. And dialogue is vital. The interchange of different opinions—the inquiry, reasoning, engagement, and disagreement of open discussion, often enabled by the Internet—helps us know why. More than ever, the Web provides access to resources that allow us to examine evidence and draw our own conclusions rather than accepting the assertions of others. Knowing why isn't just being net savvy—it means being a responsible citizen.

Becoming net savvy isn't a library course. It isn't an online unit that is completed before college. It isn't a few pages in the student handbook. Becoming net savvy isn't a one-time affair—it is a lifelong educational process and something that should be integrated into all aspects of our lives.

Ensuring that we are all net savvy will require a team effort involving libraries, IT, faculty, student life, parents, and others. It calls for a protracted effort, starting in the early years and extending throughout life. It must be situated in a real-life context, not isolated in the curriculum or co-curriculum. Being net savvy is no longer an option—it is an imperative in the age of information and a responsibility we must all share. *e*

### Endnotes

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