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Internet Realities: 'Amazing But Time Consuming'?

A Case Study of Student Teachers' Interpretations of the Internet

Robyn Smits
1997

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education at Massey University

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Abstract

The Internet has the potential to foster significant changes in the way education is organised and conceptualised. The problem underlying this study is that of the role of the Internet in education. This study aimed to describe and analyse the experiences of a group of student teachers as they used the Internet during independent study time. The research questions focused on the thoughts and feelings that the student teachers had about their Internet use, the ways that they made use of the Internet and their interpretations of the Internet for their professional use, for children's learning, and the future of education.

An evaluative case study approach was chosen using a combination of questionnaires, interviews and diaries to gather data. The case for the study comprised the cohort of students in their second year of a two year training programme for a Diploma of Teaching. All members of this group were invited to participate and sixteen students chose to do so. The research was carried out in three phases over a six month period from March to September 1997.

The results indicate that the participants' skills in searching the Internet developed during the project, at least to beginners level. However, skill development using e-mail was less apparent. The major problem identified was that it was very time consuming to use the Internet. Usage patterns showed that the students were either 'low', 'medium' or 'high' users, with a third of the group in each category. 'Low' users tended to choose not to use the Internet, mainly due to its time consuming nature. 'Medium' users tended to be strongly focused on using the Internet as a professional tool and 'high' users tended to make recreational as well as professional use of the Internet. When considering the classroom use of the Internet the student teachers tended to stress its value as a tool for research by children, however they expressed concern about classroom management issues. With respect to the place that the Internet might take in education the future, these student teachers tended to support its use as a tool in a conventional classroom but argue against the Internet taking a major role in the organisation of education.

The results suggest that while providing student teachers with independent access to the Internet has some benefits, many student teachers are likely to need support in order to become competent Internet users. One of the conclusions of this study is that support for learning Internet skills in independent study time should be provided so that compulsory teacher education courses can focus on pedagogical issues. However, this study also concludes by arguing that an understanding of both the concept of the 'information age' and its implications for education, are necessary if teachers are to be leaders in debates on the role of the Internet in education. While this was a small scale case study it is clear from its findings that a great deal of further research into the pedagogical issues associated with the Internet is needed.

Acknowledgments

This research would not have been possible without the co-operation and participation of the student teachers involved. Thank you all for your time and your thoughtful comments. Carrying out this research, thinking through the ideas associated with it and writing up this thesis has been a deep learning process for me. I have appreciated the opportunity to use the Staff Tertiary Scholarship from the Wellington College of Education to take study leave. I owe particular thanks to my colleagues: Ann Bondy, Mike Drain, Douglas Ferry, Joanna Higgins, Damian Woodhouse and Ian Wride. I have also appreciated the constructive feedback I have received from my supervisors: Mark Brown and Tracy Riley. Completing my MEd had been a five year process. Thanks to Peter Aagaard for his continuous support for this project over the past five years and to Nicholas, my seven year old son, who has unknowingly given up lots of time with me. Finally, thanks to Jane Gilbert for stimulating my interest in post-modernism and for her support as a critic and an editor during the completion of this project.

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