




American Association of School Librarians  
12th National Conference and Exhibition  
October 6-9, 2005  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

# Experiences of High School Students Conducting Term Paper Research Using Filtered Internet Access


Lynn Sutton

Saturday, October 8, 2005  
1:30-2:45 P.M.  
David L. Lawrence Convention Center  
Room 326




Experiences of High School Students  
Conducting Term Paper Research Using  
Filtered Internet Access

AASL  
Lynn Sutton  
October 8, 2005




Purpose

To study the experiences of high school students conducting term paper research with filtered Internet access in a suburban high school media center.




Statement of Problem

- Students are heavy Internet users
- Media Center is site for Internet access in schools
- Computers in Media Center are filtered
- Filtered access raises intellectual freedom concerns



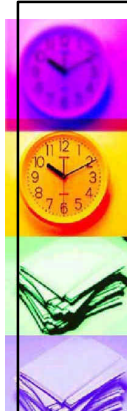
Qualitative Methods

- Site
  - Suburban high school
  - N2H2 filter on computers
- Participants
  - Purposeful selection
  - 2 classes, 28 students
  - 2 teachers, 2 librarians
  - 1 technology administrator




Data collection

- Participant observation
- Semi-structured interviews
- Focus group interviews
- E-mail journal entries from students



Class Profiles

- Rhetoric Class
  - Experienced teacher
  - Top students
  - Preparation by librarian
  - Argumentative research paper
  - Databases as well as Internet




### Class Profiles

- Basic Composition Class
  - Independent teacher
  - Average students
  - No preparation by librarian
  - Casebook assignment
  - Reliance on Internet




### Central Issues

- Overblocking
  - [www.ncaa.org](http://www.ncaa.org), [www.ama.org](http://www.ama.org), [www.mpaa.org](http://www.mpaa.org)
  - Lack of effective unblocking procedure
  - "Why should you have to go out of your way to get to something that's harmless?"




### Central Issues

- Underblocking
  - [www.crackwalker2tripod.com](http://www.crackwalker2tripod.com)
  - Less frequent than overblocking
  - "Just what I need, 10 reasons to be a transsexual!"



### Central Issues

- Getting around the filter
  - Use different search engine
  - "Refresh" button
  - Page translators
  - Change in terminology
  - Use home computer
  - "You can get into any site if you go about it the right way."




### Central Issues

- How students feel about blocking
  - Frustrated
  - Annoyed
  - Angry
  - Not trusted
  - "It's not fair, we can handle this stuff."




### Central Issues

- Overall assessment of filter
  - Rhetoric: 12 of 13 students said it hinders research
  - "How could anything that restricts information be helpful?"
  - Basic Comp: 3 positive, 1 negative, 8 qualified responses
  - "It's annoying, but necessary because of the bad stuff."



### Central Issues

- Alternate Solutions
  - Pop-up blockers
  - Vary filter by age level
  - Trial period
  - "Every teacher could get a certain password to turn the filter off to use in a class."




### Research questions

- Nature of Internet use
  - Rhetoric: trained by librarian, cautious on "biased" sites, used databases
  - Basic Comp: no training, naïve searching, no databases




### Research Questions

- Who are the actors?
  - Rhetoric: cream of the crop
    - "Our time is precious"
  - Basic Comp: community college bound
    - Confident in ability to handle the real world



### Research Questions


- What is the setting?
  - Middle class, suburban
  - 94% white
  - All students had computer at home



### Research Questions


- What are the activities?

	Rhetoric	Basic Comp
Database Usage	72 %	0 %
Internet Searching	10 %	98 %
E-mail	18 %	2 %




### Research Questions

- Presence of digital divide?
  - Every student had home computer allowing less restrictive access
  - Students saw *potential* for digital divide
  - "Kids wouldn't get the whole story, only what the filter lets through."




### Research Questions

- Barriers to legitimate information with filters?
  - Overblocking
  - "Sites that were blocked actually were reputable sites that would have been useful for my research."




### Research Questions

- How do students overcome barriers?
  - Alternate search engine
  - Change terminology
  - Page translators
  - Use home computer




### Research Questions

- Outside influences?
  - Administrator: parents complained
  - Teacher: political correctness, pressure from parents
  - Student: it makes the school look bad




### Research Questions

- Infringement on 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment Rights?
  - Students have rights
  - Protected speech filtered out
  - School filters unlikely to be ruled unconstitutional, post-CIPA.




### Research Questions

- Harm to students?
  - Students: no big deal
  - We can handle it, but other "immature" students cannot.




### Implications for Policy

- Upper level high school students can be capable of using the Internet wisely
- No evidence of harm from inappropriate sites




### Implications for Policy

- Education programs may be more effective than filtering in teaching critical thinking skills
- "It is difficult to teach young people self-control and judgment by denying them access to those things about which they need to exercise judgment."




### Implications for Policy

- Guidelines for Decision Making
  - Implement educational programs
  - Ask if filtering is necessary
  - Require instruction by librarians
  - Seek broad input before filtering
  - Filter at lowest settings
  - Effective disabling feature
  - Feedback from users




### Limitations

- Mostly white
- Suburban
- Limited range of social classes
- No digital divide
- Particularly bad implementation of filtering




### Further Research

- Replicate study
  - Where digital divide is reality
  - Where filters are set at lower levels
  - Where filters are not used



### Conclusions

- Filtering can seriously hinder Internet research by high school students
- Communication critical to minimize negative effects of filtering
- Keep overblocking to minimum



### Conclusions

- Do not filter based on viewpoint
- Ensure equal access to information – especially in presence of digital divide



Finale

- "It's more a freedom and ethical issue."

...well-intentioned but misguided  
technology administrator



Contact Information

Lynn Sutton, Ph.D.  
Wake Forest University  
Z. Smith Reynolds Library  
Winston-Salem, NC 27109  
336-758-5090  
suttonls@wfu.edu