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Assignment 2-

Element 2: Promoting Internet Safety Through Student Responsibility (1397 words)

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Promoting Internet Safety Through Student Responsibility

Whether it is locating information on a topic of interest or creating wikis, the usefulness of the internet towards student learning is clearly recognisable. Unfortunately, along with the benefits of the internet there exists online material and technologies considered potentially harmful to students. Schools are confronted with contrasting educational responsibilities when integrating the internet into their curriculum. They are required to expose students to a broad range of ideas, issues and knowledge pertaining to the world around them. While at the same time, schools are required to act in *loco parentus* and protect students from inappropriate online material. This tension has fuelled the debate as to the best way to protect students while online. In one camp, sits the group that advocates filtering information from students. In the other are the advocates that insist the best way to protect students is to educate them about responsible and safe internet activity.

The objective of this article is to promote the position that educating students about responsible and safe internet use is the most effective form of internet protection. First, a discussion highlighting the ineffectiveness of internet filtering will be presented. Second, evidence will be provided to support the position that educating students in safe internet use is more effective than blocking internet content. It will be highlighted that such an approach promotes attitudes and skills that enable students to act appropriately when confronted with questionable online material now and in their future.

The myth factor of filtering

Pornography, explicit language and even adults preying on children through chat rooms are potential threats to student internet access. PC's n' Dreams (2008) is a website dedicated to archiving the myriads of news articles that serve to justify the fear factor pertaining to student internet use. Educational bodies and governments traditionally respond to this fear by implementing internet filtering. For example, Education Queensland uses Secure Computing Smart Filtering software (Queensland Government, 2003). This fear seems very real, especially when inflated by the media and huge commercial rallying from software manufacturers. However, from a critical perspective, this fear for student safety is a myth (Callister & Burbules, 2004; Pownell & Bailey, 1999). In reality, filters are a way of protecting teachers from having to deal with student's internet misconduct or nuisance topics that may arise. Pownell and Bailey

(1999) also suggest that some schools uphold certain values or agendas and fear losing control of what information students can access. In light of this, internet filters in educational settings are more to protect adult interests and relieve the fears that educators have towards student internet use.

Filters vs. savvy students

Do filters block all explicit content? Does the blanket approach employed by filters over-block legitimate content? Engaging in such a debate is not the purpose of this article. Yet there remains the solid fact that if a student is determined enough to access information on the internet, including explicit material; they will find a way around the filters (Huffstutter, 1998 as cited in Pownell & Bailey, 1999). Filters have little effect on determined computer savvy students. For example, the high-school sophomore in Phoenix, in 2006, who used his knowledge of web proxies to by-pass the school filter while ‘doing homework’ in the computer lab (Olsen, 2006). Such tasks are made easier for students due to the amount of ‘filter bypass’ information freely available on the internet.

The most important argument against internet filters is that they do little to promote responsible safe internet behaviour (La Rose, Rifon, Enbody, 2008). Schools teach effective ‘stranger danger’ programs, to educate youngsters in what to do when confronted with threats from real-live predators outside the school gates. Yet, for some reason putting blinders on students is considered by some an acceptable approach to preparing students for possible internet dangers. Something doesn’t add up. Teaching students to make responsible and ethical decisions when confronted with questionable internet content is the most effective means of providing safe internet navigation. The remainder of this article will confirm this position.

The value of personal responsibility

Students who learn to take personal responsibility for internet safety are more likely to take appropriate action in risky situations. Recent research by La Rose et al. (2008) discovered that college students who are encouraged to regard internet safety as a personal responsibility are more likely to take preventative measures online, compared to students who are encouraged to believe that internet safety is somebody else’s job. These findings show that it is possible to improve student safety on the internet by encouraging

students to develop self-efficacy and a personal responsibility toward internet safety. In young students this may involve learning how to make sensible choices regarding which internet sites are safe. For older students it might entail addressing issues regarding safe use of social networking sites. Personal responsibility is an integral part of student internet safety.

Strategies for the outside world

Providing students with strategies to responsibly deal with inappropriate internet content prepares them for living in an uncensored world. In a perfect world, every computer has a filter that blocks sexually explicit material and stops internet predators in their tracks. But, as we know, this is not the case. It is simply naive to think that students won't be unexpectedly confronted with inappropriate internet content during the course of their life outside school. In the US 42% of 1500 internet users aged 10 to 17 surveyed have seen online pornography over a 12-month span. Of those, 66% said they did not want to view the images and had not sought them out (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). Such an astounding percentage leaves no doubt that students need to know how to safely deal with questionable material and situations on the internet. It is imperative that students be educated in strategies that they can implement when the inevitable arises.

Constructing knowledge in an open internet

If the internet is to be a tool to assist in meaningful learning, then it must allow students liberty in exploring, interacting and inquiring about the environment around them. Free access to information is essential if students are to construct understandings about cultures, values and information in their world. Callister et al. (2004) describes the quest for knowledge as a journey, where a student needs to grasp the relationship between different ideas, information, ethics and cultures. Internet sites are not just segmented rooms of information; instead they are pathways to further discovery. For example, if a student starts to explore breast cancer, there exists the possibility for discovering information to the human body, medicine, and community health support. Free access does not mean letting students run wild. A positive amalgamation is required between meaningful, focused learning experiences and students being educated in responsible and safe internet use. Internet filter companies and government bodies must have a very narrow-minded concept of how information and knowledge pertain to learning, if they think blanket filtering of content will somehow assist in students developing meaningful

understandings. Allowing external software companies to determine what is legitimate information is like inviting students to the museum and locking certain rooms because there are photos of topless natives in them.

Plan of action

It makes sense to train students as the first line of defence in internet safety. Inevitably, students will function in an internet environment outside of school, where the sole responsibility for safe internet use is placed on their shoulders. In light of this, it is up to policy makers to establish Acceptable Use Guidelines (AUGs). AUGs must educate teachers and parents about student's use of the internet. In doing so, AUGs will refocus the internet safety issue away from educators embellished fears to the real issue of educating students. AUGs must enhance student's personal responsibility towards dealing with the potential risks associated with using the internet. AUGs must encourage students to pre-empt and deal with online risks in a responsible manner. AUGs need to ensure that the internet is used for enhancing a meaningful learning environment and discourage activities that jeopardise the student wellbeing ("Acceptable Use Policies", n.d.). Effective AUGs will provide 'rules of the road' for students as they navigate the information super highway (Callister et al., 2004). Educating students in safe internet use builds a level of trust and maturity between educators and students, which is becoming increasingly more essential in the learning environments of the 21st century.

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