Exploding the ‘Myth of the Digital Native’

The most alarming finding in the ERIAL studies was perhaps the most predictable: when it comes to finding and evaluating sources in the Internet age, students are downright lousy.

Only seven out of 30 students whom anthropologists observed at Illinois Wesleyan “conducted what a librarian might consider a reasonably well-executed search,” wrote Duke and Andrew Asher, an anthropologist at Bucknell University, whom the Illinois consortium called in to lead the project.

Throughout the interviews, students mentioned Google 115 times -- more than twice as many times as any other database. The prevalence of Google in student research is well-documented, but the Illinois researchers found something they did not expect: students were not very good at using Google. They were basically clueless about the logic underlying how the search engine organizes and displays its results. Consequently, the students did not know how to build a search that would return good sources. (For instance, limiting a search to news articles, or querying specific databases such as Google Book Search or Google Scholar.)

Duke and Asher said they were surprised by “the extent to which students appeared to lack even some of the most basic information literacy skills that we assumed they would have mastered in high school.” Even students who were high achievers in high school suffered from these deficiencies, Asher told Inside Higher Ed in an interview.

In other words: Today’s college students might have grown up with the language of the information age, but they do not necessarily know the grammar.

“I think it really exploded this myth of the ‘digital native,’ “ Asher said. “Just because you’ve grown up searching things in Google doesn’t mean you know how to use Google as a good research tool.”

Even when students turned to more scholarly resources, that did not necessarily solve the problem. Many seemed confused about where in the constellation of library databases they should turn to locate sources for their particular research topic: Half wound up using databases a librarian “would most likely never recommend for their topic.” For example, “Students regularly used JSTOR to try to find current research on a topic, not realizing that JSTOR does not provide access to the most recently published articles,” Duke and Asher wrote in their paper, noting that “articles typically appear in JSTOR after 3-5 years, depending on their publisher.” (JSTOR was the second-most frequently alluded-to database in student interviews, with 55 mentions.)

Years of conditioning on Google had not endowed the Illinois Wesleyan students with any searching savvy to speak of, but rather had instilled them with a stunted understanding of how to finely tune a search in order to home in on usable sources, concluded the ERIAL researchers.

Regardless of the advanced-search capabilities of the database they were querying, “Students generally treated all search boxes as the equivalent of a Google search box, and searched ‘Google-style,’ using the ‘any word anywhere’ keyword as a default,” they wrote. Out of the 30 students Duke and Asher