

Is It a Problem if Kids Don't Know How to Use Dictionaries?

When one of my younger siblings asked me the meaning of a word, my immediate response was: "Let's look it up in the dictionary."

Giving me a look like I had just suggested that we send someone a note via smoke signal instead of text, my sister replied, "*Patience*, you have your phone right there. We could just *google* it."

While I grew up using a dictionary, most of my younger siblings have spent their lives utilizing search engines and apps for their vocabulary homework. Naturally, my initial response was along the lines of: "Kids these days!"

But the more I thought of it, the more I couldn't help wondering if my insistence on using a "real" dictionary is simply old-fashioned and nostalgic. After all, I wouldn't insist on my younger siblings learning to use a card catalogue to find a library book. Could it be that dictionaries are becoming similarly obsolete? And if so, is this a change for the better?

Using paper books to look up information requires the reader to utilize an index and table of contents, scan a page for terms, and know when to skim and when to read deeply. A reader not only learns the information in the book, but also how to use the information. If we reduce learning to knowing how to use a search bar, will we end up with a generation that does not know how to search out or store knowledge?

Did you ever catch yourself skimming the dictionary page for new, interesting, or amusing words while doing vocabulary homework? Or perhaps you came across a topic that you hadn't studied before while searching an encyclopedia? This process is called [accidental learning](#) – stumbling on information that

you weren't specifically looking for while working on another task.

Using a search engine rather than an encyclopedia or dictionary changes the experience of accidental learning. Rather than stumbling across something because it is on the same page or because an illustration caught your eye, accidental learning on the internet is usually very closely connected to the original topic for which the reader was searching.

In fairness to my younger siblings, a couple of them have recently taken an interest in [Boolean](#) operators, a computerized form of accidental learning. So perhaps when we pit print against digital in a zero-sum game, we're approaching the issue the wrong way. Instead of asking a question of "either/or" and trying to determine which one is superior, perhaps we should view print and digital media as serving different purposes and should explore the best ways to utilize both.

As information is increasingly digitized, the resources available to learners have increased exponentially. It is vital that students are aware of and taught [how to utilize these resources](#) as well. If they are not, the research skills they lose when they don't use print resources are not being replaced with anything.

Is the rise of search engines making people less intelligent? A 2013 article on [Slate](#) says no. Although search engines change the way that we externally store information, the fact that we store information outside of our own heads, often in the people around us, is not new.

What is new is that our digital devices are becoming one of our means of storing and accessing information. Where people used to rely on their partner, a friend, a family member, or a paper calendar to help them remember birthdays, anniversaries, and other important dates, now they are more likely to rely on Facebook and other social media.

The ubiquity of the internet and digital technology reinforces the timeless truth that a person never stops learning. Innovation is unkind to those who are unwilling or unable to adapt. But perhaps the future will be equally unkind to those who forget how to utilize “traditional” learning resources. Search engines are convenient, but do they prevent a student from learning to investigate a topic and retain information if a digital device is not immediately available to them?

Like e-books, digital references have the potential to improve our learning by making knowledge increasingly more accessible, if we have the discipline to adapt and capitalize on available resources. Teach your kids to use a dictionary, but teach them to use databases and Boolean phrases, too.

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