

Dresang, E. T. (2005). The information-seeking behavior of youth in the digital environment. *Library Trends*, 54 (2), 178-196.

Abstract (from the article): The theory of Radical Change, which is based on the digital age principles of interactivity, connectivity, and access, is suggested as a lens to reexamine existing research on youth information-seeking behavior in the digital environment. After a brief review of research meta-analyses, which often point to deficits in youth information-seeking behavior, questions that emerge from this research are suggested. Meta-analyses of gender and information behavior studies find that some recent research disputes former conclusions. Radical Change is applied to an examination of specific facets of contemporary research in order to demonstrate how new perspectives can be gained. This analysis addresses commonalities between information-seeking behavior related to the handheld book with hypertextual qualities and digital materials, the social nature of information-seeking, and emerging issues of access. It is noted that the public library as a setting for research has rarely been used, even though its less structured nature might provide insights that do not surface in schools. A look at directions for youth information-seeking behavior research in the future proposes how brain research might shed further light on behavioral observations. Conclusions note existing research and summarize some new points of view and areas for investigation.

Article Review

Introduction to Radical Change Theory

Radical Change theory was introduced in a scholarly publication for the first time in 1997 by Dresang. His argument was that the term “digital materials” should not only incorporate the technology of a microchip, but that it should include “handheld” devices that “embody characteristics of the digital environment” (p. 179). Initially, the theory was developed to help explain the changes in handheld books for youth that reflect the interactivity, connectivity, and access of the digital world. The theory also takes into account the changes in formats due to hypertext, multilayering, new graphic interfaces, new perspectives of “previously marginalized [youth] populations, and expanded boundaries of previously forbidden subjects.

Information-Seeking Behaviors

Dresang explains that prior research has focused on youth attitudes and preferences, search processes, modes and skills, and perceived relevance of results. Studies have been done on specific age groups and genders and mostly conducted in the school environment. More recently, studies have turned from a focus on OPACs to the Web. It was concluded that children exhibit many of the same information-seeking behaviors as adults: browsing or surfing to fulfill an unidentified need, use of the Principle of Least Effort, and that “poorly developed information-seeking skills” cause people to overlook information and strategies they are unaware of. Studies have proven “gender as a sole determining factor is too simplistic a way to look at [youth] information-seeking behavior” (as cited in Dresang, 2005, p. 182). Children between the ages of nine and thirteen are likely to be equally positive in their ability to use computers.

Interactivity

The interactivity that children engage in within the digital environment is related to their natural non-linear reading style. Young information-seekers prefer electronic environment that are saturated with visual content; have short, simple textual content; and display animation. The idea that digital resources with high levels of interactivity promote higher-level thinking among youth is suggested.

Connectivity

Connectivity refers to the sense of community, both real-world and electronic, that is developed through online media. Children prefer to learn together; they

show a tendency to want to share their knowledge with their peers and to teach each other. The idea that connecting with others while engaging in shared interests helps to foster creativity and learning has been studied among youth. Electronic environment foster collaborative learning for both youth and adult information-seekers.

Access

What Dresang associates with access is “the breaking of long-standing information barriers, bringing entrée to a wide diversity of opinion and opportunity” (p. 188). It is true that depending on individual ability, the digital environment can either hinder or facilitate access, and this is true for both youth and adults. Dresang suggests strategies be developed to solicit the opinions of youth information-seekers. Opinions about their experiences, their reactions to decisions they’ve made, questioning them in non-suggestive ways. Including children in the design process will increase access because programs are partially designed by them, the end-user. Online environment exposes youth to “a wider diversity of topics” (p. 190), an element of access that some argue reflects negatively on the development of youth.

Brain Research

The majority of studies on this subject are done through observation and direct questioning of subjects. Dresang suggests that future research include studies of brain activity to understand information-seeking behaviors in a new light. The idea of studying the brain is highly controversial and there have been no policy decisions made regarding this type of future research.

Conclusion

Dresang concludes by sharing the following ideas: past and current research has uncovered significant trends in youth information-seeking behaviors; there is a strong focus on deficiencies in technology and youth search strategies and perhaps there should be a shift in focus to potential new “ways of knowing in the digital age”; striking similarities between youth and adult information-seeking behaviors in the digital environment have been uncovered; the view that use of online technology is socially isolating is being challenged; and an increased involvement by children in the designing of digital materials will create more user-friendly environments and promote access.