

Enter X

An Internet based learning program for children about use of the Internet

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With the development of an extensive teaching material, an interactive Internet pilot and a model for cooperation between public libraries and school libraries, focus is on the improvement of children's approach to a qualified and goal-orientated Internet search. Both kinds of libraries face the task of strengthening the search skills of children in order to influence the information search to become free of coincidences and unreliability daily. The teaching material and the Internet pilot can be downloaded free of charge in Denmark. The model of cooperation ensures that the libraries get joint responsibility for learning and provides them with the opportunity of presenting their individual areas of expertise.

Background

In Denmark – as in all other countries – it is a big challenge to teach children to become skilled searchers of information on the Internet. The modern children get more and more of their information from the Internet. They are growing up in a media world very different from the one the adults find themselves in, regardless that we live in the same age. The approach to the media the children and young people have is uncomplicated and experimenting, but their information search leaves much to be desired.

Daily experiences from School libraries and public libraries show that the search techniques of children regarding the Internet are insufficient and uncritical. Their information searches are characterized by coincidences and waste of time, and by an uncritical believe that all they find on the Internet is true. In recent years various research reports have supported this conception and encouraged to specific and intensive work to qualify the information competencies of children.

The school library and the public library have a common interest in collaborating in solving this task: to improve students' search competencies and to share “best practice” in communicating and pedagogic. Even though schools, school libraries and public libraries make a big effort to prepare the children to be able to handle the overwhelming amounts of information, no one has yet found the philosophers' stone in this particular pedagogical challenge. To try and solve this task, The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark initiated collaboration with The Danish Association of School Librarians and two major Danish municipalities Odense and Copenhagen in 2004. We called our project Enter X – because we were on our way into the unknown!

In the first phase of the Enter X project, we had the idea that you could teach the target group – students at the ago of 9 to 12 years – to use the Internet through an online game. The game should be a real game that the children would also like to use in their spare time, but it should teach the children how to search on the Internet, and it should also be usable in class.

The result came in the beginning of 2006 where we could present an Internet based online game developed for the target group, in which the students could create their own player, dress it, give it an identity, guide it through a number of questions and earn points with correct answers and finally compete with other players about knowledge of search strategies. The game was built up around three themes: sports, Vikings and dinosaurs.

The game has been used in schools and on public libraries through 18 months. Experiences have shown that there is great need for a tool to improve children's attention to better search strategies, but that the game is not the optimal tool to do so, amongst other things because it is too slow, too opaque causing the students to not take in the learning they go through and shows too many signs that the game development company did not have the appropriate understanding of pedagogic and learning. In it words, it has proved to be much harder than expected. It has also proved to demand much more funds that the project had received. The result was a game, which is being used in schools, but which will no longer be maintained. But it was a beginning – we knew that we would be moving onto untrodden land as explorers in a landscape, where no one had ever been before.

The cooperation between school librarians and children's librarians in Enter X was so successful during the first phase with the development of the online game that the institutions and organisations behind the project chose to continue into a second phase and expand the number of participants. Originally the project partners were The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark, The Danish School Librarian Association, Odense Central Library, Copenhagen Libraries and DotBot – your children's library on the Internet. In phase 2 Herning Central Library, Roskilde Central Library and Holbæk Seminarium have joined the project as participants. As earlier mentioned the project has also entered into a close cooperation with Learning Lab Denmark, Denmark's Pedagogical University. The goal of incorporating new partners is to ensure that the project has a wide geographical range and to involve partners whom have worked with the area previously to profit from their expertise.

Enter X phase 2 = Scope

Having realized that the first phase of the game was on the right track but needed extensive improvements, we have extended our cooperation with Learning Lab Denmark where they specialize in learning. In the first phase they were some of the advisory researchers following the development of the project. Learning Lab Denmark took an interest in continuing the cooperation and developing the achieved experiences further. The second phase is named Scope and has been developed from the following question: What is it the students are supposed to learn, and is the subject and content appropriate for a game? The starting point is that it is difficult to search and find information on the Internet. The students never do as they are told and last but not least, it is important to get the information when it is needed in order to make it most useful. It has been a most beneficial cooperation, and it will result in three new tools for the work with strengthening the search strategies of the students, which will be offered to school libraries and public libraries at the beginning of the summer 2007.

The three parts in Scope is:

- The Internet pilot – an interactive helper
- An extensive teaching material

- A model for cooperation between public libraries and school libraries to join forces in the task of teaching qualified information search.

It has been important for us to develop a tool, which is immediately useful to the person sitting in front of the computer, and that the tool is based on reality. Scope is not a game like Enter X, but a direct entry to a search engine. We have chosen Google, as it is the most used search engine in Denmark. On top of this it has been our ambition to develop a teaching material, which will immediately apply to school librarians and public librarians and finally a cooperation model for the two library types.

Without any doubt the most extraordinary part will be the Internet pilot – a pilot, which will help everyone by showing the way in the jungle of information on the Internet. Perhaps it will be a small world sensation – we do not know, but we think so. The material targets children at the age of 11 to 13, but will also be applicable to adults.

The Internet pilot is a plug-in which can be downloaded free of charge onto a private computer, a school computer or a public library computer. Ideally it will be downloaded to all computers with Internet access in schools as well as in libraries. During the search, the pilot will continuously evaluate the searches carried out by the user and provide tips for improvement. It is possible to stop the search and look into the helpers tips, to learn how to improve the search. The tips are presented on a tool bar to make it easy to use only the needed information and advice. During the search the pilot will continuously graphically show, how well the search is carried out to strengthen and maintain the interest of the user. The goal is for the child to be able to incorporate the teaching and guidance he or she has received in school or in the library with the pilot, which will be on the screen at all times, when the child is active on Google. The Internet pilot reminds the child of what he or she has learned from the teaching material and guides the child throughout the search. It encourages the child to follow a strictly logical search, which will lead him or her to appropriate and reliable results as quickly as possible.

Technically it is not a complicated solution. The pilot investigates which parts or methods the child is combining and gives feed back on the search. Contrary to the Office Assistant it knows, what the child is doing, when he or she changes modus. As mentioned above it is activated when the student starts a search on Google, and therefore it knows, what he or she is doing and what a good method is to accomplish the goal or finish the task. It is discrete, has a pleasant design and is not so distracting that the user will turn it off.

Scope's teaching material consists of four modules of 90 minutes. One or two of these have to take place in the public library. It is natural to combine them with other teaching or a library orientation class. The material will be accessible from a web site and can be downloaded. It has a description of the pedagogical method with Power Point slides for each part and with a thorough description for the teacher or librarian.

The teaching material in Scope is divided into numerous subject areas. Some of these are mandatory and others are voluntary. The mandatory subjects are called core subjects, and the voluntary subjects are placed in a large category called additional knowledge. The core subjects are to be part of the teaching in a specific order and cover the basic principals for better information search. The subjects in the category additional knowledge can be placed and incorporated into the teaching as the teacher finds appropriate. Each subject area is developed as an isolated module with a structure that fits the material. All subject areas have the following overall principle in common:

The teaching must be interplay of class teaching and project orientated work in groups of two. As an example the teacher can use ten minutes to explain how to highlight search words on a found site followed by ten minutes of practical practise for the students. There will also be more challenging tasks of longer duration, where the students must put several of the learned techniques to use.

The teaching material consist of:

Core subjects:

- Meta knowledge and search – what is the Internet? What is a search engine? What is information search?
- Search Method – How to make search words? How can better information and documents be found?
- Source criticism – everything that has to do with reading and evaluating found information
- The Internet pilot – there will be an introduction to the program in the teaching material

Additional knowledge:

- Google functions
- Useful websites on the Internet – understanding of Wikipedia and similar sites, portals, other kinds of search engines and so on.
- Expansions of the core subjects
- Technical possibilities on the Internet – tips for better surfing, multiple windows open at once and so on

The professional school library team is responsible for initiating and teaching the project at the school. During the development of the project, several user tests on groups of students have been carried out. These tests have had great impact on the final result.

The cooperation model is partly used to ensure the use of the material and is build on a desire to present a practical solution, which can support and strengthen the daily cooperation between teachers, school libraries and children's libraries. The school library and the public library serve the same group of users, and thus, teaching Internet search strategies must be a common task. Both types of libraries experience a need in their daily work to be able to academically make the children able to find the best and most correct information, regardless if it is for school work or out of personal interest.

This model of cooperation makes the assumption that public librarians and school librarians offer the students a better guidance and support in the development of their search competencies, than they could, if they were not cooperating. Improvement of the students' information search competencies are the overall goal for the cooperation, as these are competencies the students will need for many years to come to search for information in the context of studies, jobs and personal

interests. The Scope material promotes cooperation in the teaching process and in qualitative improvement of the students' competences. In the long run it tries to expand the possibilities for both parts to strengthen and maintain the cooperation.

The overall goals of the cooperation is:

- To strengthen the students' information competencies
- To give students knowledge of the experiences and resources the two library types have to offer

Supplementary achievements

- More active, independent users, who take advantage of all resources in the libraries
- Teachers, school librarians and public librarians who share experiences in communicating and teaching.

What can public libraries and school libraries offer the students together? Through participation in the Scope library module the students also get a chance to see, what the public library has to offer. The students are introduced to the many possibilities of the public library, and they learn, how to conduct an information search here. This way, the visit to the public library will support the students in their daily search for information and they can expand the knowledge they have already gained in the modules, taking place at the school. Further more, they will get to know the broader variety of possibilities; they have on the public library. In time this capability of independent ability to search for information and materials in both public libraries and school libraries will be of great help to students as well as to teachers and librarians. If public librarians also participate in the modules being taught at the school, this will potentially make the benefits of the cooperation even bigger, as both public librarians and teachers gain insight in each others' knowledge and expertise within different areas.

The benefits. Through cooperation between the libraries, the students are offered greater benefits, such as:

- Focus on imagination, the good experience and interesting materials, which provides the opportunity of strengthening the desire to read in all students – including the less frequent readers
- More options when needing a library, such as longer open hours
- Bigger and broader collections of materials and access to more databases that students will learn to navigate
- A wider range of professional expertise
- Numerous places to look for help for school tasks and projects.

Through cooperation the public librarians are offered:

- An opportunity to position them selves as a valuable resource to both the students and the school
- An opportunity to discuss communication and teaching with the school library team and/or the teacher
- To introduce the students to the many possibilities of the public library and hence create more independent users.
- Access to new potential users
- To create a professional network and cooperation independent of the different library systems, which can qualify and systematize the teaching of information literacy.

Through the cooperation the school library team is offered:

- A cooperation partner in students' subject and project work
- A closer contact with the public library, offering professional sparring in new projects, acquisition of new materials, cultural events and so on.
- An opportunity to provide a wider range of possibilities to weak readers

In a wider perspective a strengthening of the collaboration between public libraries and school libraries can result in stronger networks across professional differences, new lasting cooperation and that both participants increase their knowledge of communication in the context of information search. All together, this will mean that both the public library and the school library can offer a better and more targeted service towards children and young adults, because they through the cooperation have exchanged experiences concerning this group of users and have reflected on their individual library service.

Collaboration between the public library and the school library can also be used to:

- Increase the desire to read amongst all students – especially in the grades to which the project is targeted. The public librarians have great experience in finding materials, which will catch the eye of the user, and the school could have great benefits from using this resource.
- Arrange joined cultural events on the school or in the public library, where the goal is to increase the local inhabitants' cultural understanding. Events that have the school as co organizer will have a larger audience of both children and adults. The public library can contribute with experiences of cultural communication and with integrating their existing reading promotions and cultural arrangements into the teaching of the school.
- Offer extended opportunities for searches in the information search for a project, but also a more extensive guidance and help to start the project

- Exhibit the works of students and larger school projects in the public library and thereby reach a larger audience and inspire a wider variety of people.

Besides an improvement of students' search competencies the model supports exchange of experiences between the different professional groups. It is essential that the partners working with development and improvement of children's search competencies are in contact with one another and share the knowledge. As part of this aspect Holbæk Seminarium is developing joined course for school librarians and public librarians as a pilot project. In Denmark it is still rare to see different professional groups come together in supplementary training, though we have seen the first examples. To achieve the best results – including an understanding of what the child needs in its school life as well as in its personal life across professional borders – it is necessary to exchange experiences. Finally it is of great importance that both the leaders of the schools and the libraries as well as the political authority support the model.

Local projects about communication of information and Internet teaching have been carried out previous to this project. We hope that the Scope model can become the starting point for national cooperation, on which we can develop further and incorporate as many local experiences as possible. The opportunity to collaborate with numerous extern partners have been crucial in ensuring national prevalence of the project and in engaging groups or individuals, who have previously worked in this area. The Enter X and Scope projects are economically supported by the government through the Library Agency. Behind the project and the development of the idea are active users – professionals from the school and the library, whom work with children on a daily basis. During the IASL conference 2007 The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark will be able to demonstrate and describe how the program works in real life.

References

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About the author:

Karin Gaardsted is Head of Development in The Municipal Association of School Libraries in Denmark and is responsible for the professional work of the Association. She plans and coordinates conferences and country wide projects – frequently in cooperation with other organizations – and participates in official groups of development within the school library field.