Israeli educational internet sites for children: content analysis and evaluation / Amir, Sharon

Abstract

In the last few years, the use of Internet as a leading educational tool has become more dominant. Learning is turning to be more and more net-directed in two ways: through a formal integration of Internet designated educational sites in the teaching programs, and in an informal way of internet sites that serve as a voluntary auxiliary educational tools. Nevertheless, most schools in Israel don't use teaching through Internet applications in their curriculum, especially in the lower classes. The described situation enhances the importance of parental awareness to the use of Internet. It also turns the study of children's sites quality more crucial than ever. Evaluating site characteristics will help parents and teachers use the Internet in an optimal way, which, in its turn, may develop children's cognitive and motor capabilities, as well as computer interface use abilities.

The aims of this work are to scan the contemporary arena of Israeli educational children sites and to examine, in a content analysis technique, the features of these sites, using quantitative and qualitative criteria. In addition, a comparison was made between Israeli educational children's sites segmented by ownership and payment.

The set of sites that were studied was obtained by using a designated children's directory. Purposive sampling was chosen, in order to reflect a wide variety of educational children's sites operating in Israel today. A measurement tool, based on a relevant research literature, was built for this research. During the work, some of the criteria that were used to analyze the sites, evolved due to the flexibility of the measurement tool. The measure included general, design, interactive and content related parameters, which enabled a multiple facet content analysis, in order to create a full picture of Israeli educational children's sites.

Analyzing the data has revealed these results

Israeli educational children's site characteristics:

The average profile of the sites indicates high-standard contents. Most of the feasible recommendations found in the research literature, referring to children's sites, exists in Israeli educational children's sites, except for low levels of design, usability and interactivity. On a five levels quality scale, most sites are ranked on the 2 highest levels, and the average level of contents is 3.92. Needless to say that interactivity and usability features cannot substitute educational resources that provide children open-ended experiences and appropriate challenges. The sample includes 79 educational sites, half of them owned by public organizations. Most of the sites are charge-free, does not demand registration and display no commercials. They provide parental information, but remain indifferent to the importance of publishing a privacy statement. Most sites include a substantial number of external links, only few functions as "isolated islands" with less than three links (these sites target toddlers and preschool children).

An absolute majority of sites were classified as "work and play" sites (91%). Third of the sites provides online learning programs (online projects), which offer collaborative work on agreed learning tasks. Online projects also convey educational messages. The typical contents, included in the sites, are educational ones: learningoriented, play-educational and informative. Only 6% of the sites are purely playful. The contents are mostly original, include bibliography and aim for elementary school students, especially 4th to 6th grades. More contents are aimed for parents and teachers. Most sites give nominal credits to the authors while others prefer to mention just the contents development team. The identity of the authors remains fully unknown only in a small percentage of sites. In spite of the dynamical nature of the Internet, half of the sites include static contents since they are learning oriented. About Fifth of the sites updates on a daily basis, and deal with calendar, historical and actual events.

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Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel 52900 אוניברסיטת בר-אילן, רמת גן, ישראל
Website www.is.biu.ac.il/library Email: scheinr@mail.biu.ac.il Tel. 972-3-5318163 .טל

Comparison between sites from different ownership sectors

The advantages of **the commercial sector** lie in the design, usability and interactivity features. In addition, the commercial sites include all content genres (work and play, design and make, communicate and share, online projects). Its disadvantages lie in the huge amount of commercial contents. **The private sector** is characterized by its original content, a high percent of bibliographies and a low external linking level, on one hand. On the other hand, this is the most faltering sector: its design, usability and interactivity levels are quite low, the subjects it deals with are limited, the quality of its contents is poor and commercials are displayed. This is due probably to the lack of financial resources. **The public and governmental sectors** present a uniform front in many of the parameters: they don't display commercials, yet have low levels of design, usability and interactivity. These sites characterizes in high quality contents on two genres (work and play, online projects) and a variety of subjects, which fit the target audiences, although they tend to be static. The main difference between those sectors is the seriousness that characterizes the governmental sites, which contain mainly learning programs for the higher classes and hardly any play educational contents. The public sites tend to be lighter without compromising on high-standard contents.**Comparison between free of charge sites and non-free sites Non-free content sector** advantages are obvious: the sites refrain from commercials and publish parental information. Half of them even publish privacy statement. Non-free sites lead the use of children's unique design and usability applications, while free sites design and usability level is lower than average. This sector targets elementary-school children and educational staff. Only a few sites aim all ages' audience. Bibliographies percentage among non-free sites is high and all the authors are recognizable, by nominal or group credit. All the sites were classified as "work and play" sites, and some were classified also as online projects sites. Most of them bare educational nature while only a few contain informative and commercial contents. Non-free sites quality level is higher than the general. Free content sector has its own advantages: its sites does not demand registration and have a high interactivity level, which tops the average. Free of charge sites target elementary school and junior high students as well as an all ages' audience, through a wide subject variance, in all genres. Among the free content sites there is an obvious tendency towards update and renewal of contents, unlike the non-free sector, which remains relatively static. More

than third of them deal with calendar and actual events. It seems that lack of attention to non-educational contents slipping inside, lowered the content quality level of this sector below general average. Still, most sites were ranked on the 3rd or 4th level on a 5 levels scale. This research is a first attempt of its kind to study the Israeli children educational sites map. As such it arouses some pondering that can serve as a platform for further research in this field such as – the awareness level to the surfers rights, as reflected in the privacy statement, between Israeli internet sites operators; the influence of designated children directory usage on children surf habits; characteristics of Israeli youth designated sites as well as comparative studies.

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