

## **New test finds students' cyber aptitude wanting**

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Sure, today's students can download songs to their iPods, text message their friends and update their MySpace pages in a flash.

But can they use a search engine to find reliable information to help them choose a new car? Can they determine whether health information on a Web site is bogus or legitimate? Can they compose a decent e-mail?

As technology becomes an integral part of everyday life, schools and businesses have started looking for a way to assess the tech savviness of their students and applicants. The Educational Testing Service--author of the SAT and AP exams--has developed a test designed to grade students' knowledge of the cyberworld.

The Information and Communication Technology Literacy Assessment, or ICT, is an online exam that gives test takers a series of tasks to see how they would use the Internet and computer programs in the real world.

The tasks include sorting an e-mail inbox, using a search engine to write a report and creating a spreadsheet.

ETS recently piloted the new exam at high schools and colleges across the country. The scores of the first 6,300 students who took the test were surprisingly mediocre.

Today's youths, it turns out, are not as tech-savvy as they appear.

"We were quite surprised," said Mary Ann Zaborowski, executive director of product management at ETS. "It was shocking to us that students did not perform well."

### **Not-so-great results**

Just 52 percent of test takers could correctly judge the objectivity of a Web site and only 65 percent assessed the site's authoritativeness.

When asked to use a search engine to look for information on the Internet, only 40 percent entered multiple search terms to narrow the results.

Test takers also had trouble figuring out when it is ethical to use information they find on the Internet in their own work and how to rewrite the facts they find at Web sites for a new audience.

"The preliminary results do raise for us a warning flag . . . and a cry for action," Zaborowski said. "These skills are not intuitive. They have to be learned."

ETS officials say the scores from the pilot test are a snapshot and may not represent the technological skills of the entire American student population.

But teachers and librarians say the numbers confirm what they've suspected for years: Being able to use Google and Wikipedia doesn't mean a student knows how to do college-level research.

"They were raised using computers," said Sonia Gonsalves, a psychology professor at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in Pomona. "Students were very technologically competent, but not necessarily proficient at using information."

Stockton was among the first schools to test the ICT exam. The majority of the 260 students who took the basic and advanced versions did well, but not great, said Gonsalves, who serves as director of Stockton's Institute for Faculty Development.

The college, which plans to give the test to another 270 students this year, is developing a two-semester course to improve students' computer and Internet knowledge. In the future, students who score poorly on the ICT may be steered into the new elective.

The test costs \$27 to \$33 a person, slightly less than the SAT fee of \$41.50. Test takers sit at a computer, though they never actually log on to the Internet. Instead they perform a series of tasks in a "simulated" online world using the Search-a-rama search engine and other mock Web sites and databases.

### **Average score is 550**

The computer keeps track of how the students navigate tasks during the 75-minute exam. They are given a score ranging from 400 to 700, with the average student scoring 550 last year.

A similar exam designed for businesses to test the tech knowledge of their employees is set to be piloted later this year. One of the first customers for the new exam will be a health-care company that wants to identify tech-illiterate employees for extra training before it launches a new computer system, ETS officials said.

For now, the student version of the test is being used, mostly as an experiment, at about 80 institutions.

Finding ways to teach students the intangible skill of navigating the Internet and distinguishing shady Web sites from reliable pages may be tough, said Norbert Elliot, a New Jersey Institute of Technology English professor who studies how to assess students' skills.

"It's not writing down equations. It's not identifying a grammatical error in a sentence," Elliot said. "A lot of this is experience."

New Jersey Institute of Technology is also working on ways to weave better Internet and computer literacy training into its courses after giving the ICT test to 353 students at its Newark campus last year, he said. Having an exam to test students' tech knowledge is the first step in what may become a whole new field of teaching.

"We really are in new territory here," Elliot said.

### **READER CONNECTION**

Would you like to learn more about the ICT Tech Literacy Exam?

For a demonstration of the exam with sample questions, visit the ETS Web site at [www.ets.org/ictliteracy/demo.html](http://www.ets.org/ictliteracy/demo.html)

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