Library & Information Technology Association

Testing Information Literacy in Digital Environments: ETS's iSkills Assessment

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Despite coming of age with the Internet and other technology, many college students lack the information and communication technology (ICT) literacy skills necessary to navigate, evaluate, and use the overabundance of information available today. This paper describes the development and early administrations of ETS's iSkills assessment, an Internet-based assessment of information literacy skills that arise in the context of technology. From the earliest stages to the present, the library community has been directly involved in the design, development, review, field trials, and administration to ensure the assessment and scores are valid, reliable, authentic, and useful.

Technology is the portal through which we interact with information, but there is growing belief that people's ability to handle information—to solve problems and think critically about information—tells us more about their future success than does their knowledge of specific hardware or software. These skills—known as information and communications technology (ICT) literacy—comprise a twenty-first-century form of literacy in which researching and communicating information via digital environments are as important as reading and writing were in earlier centuries (Partnership for 21st Century Skills 2003).

Although today's knowledge society challenges students with overabundant information of often dubious quality, higher education has recognized that the solution cannot be limited to improving technology instruction. Instead, there is an increasingly urgent need for students to have stronger information literacy skills—to "be able to recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information" (American Library Association 1989)—and apply those skills in the context of technology. Regional accreditation agencies have integrated information literacy into their standards and requirements (for example, Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2003; Western Association of Schools and Colleges 2001), and several colleges have begun campuswide initiatives to improve the information literacy of their students (for example, The California State University 2006; University of Central Florida 2006). However, a key challenge to designing and implementing effective information literacy instruction is the development of reliable and valid assessments. Without effective assessment, it is difficult to know if instructional programs are paying off—whether students' information literacy skills are improving.

ICT literacy skills are an issue of national and international concern as well. In January 2001, Educational Testing Service (ETS) convened an International ICT Literacy Panel to study the growing importance of existing and emerging information and communication technologies and their relationship to literacy. The results of the panel's deliberations over fifteen months highlighted the growing importance of ICT literacy in academia, the workplace, and society. The panel called for assessments that will make it possible to determine to what extent young adults have obtained the combination of technical and cognitive skills needed to be productive members of an information-rich, technology-based society (International ICT Literacy Panel 2002).

This article describes ETS's iSkills assessment (formerly "ICT Literacy Assessment"), an Internet-based assessment of information literacy skills that arise in the context of technology. From the earliest stages to the present, the library community has been directly involved in the design, development, review, field trials, and administration to ensure the assessment and scores are valid, reliable, authentic, and useful.

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