Google Jockeying

Scenario

Dr. Chen has been using Google jockeying all semester in his Western History class. He has been livening things up by getting a student to "Google" real-time during his lectures, searching the Web for resources relevant to the day's topic. The Google jockey's actions and results are displayed to the rest of the students on a projection screen. An IM application lets students send requests to the Google jockey for particular searches or direct the jockey to reference sites. Dr. Chen has rotated the task of jockeying, and each student has had an opportunity to do it once. Most students say that being the Google jockey is challenging and that it forces them to be extremely focused on what is happening and on their actions. Now, midway through the term, the tables are turned. Each student has prepared a 15-minute presentation on a different topic, and as the students give their presentations, Dr. Chen sits as the Google jockey.

Steven's presentation is on Depression-era international relations. Much of his research was done online, and during his presentation, he directs Dr. Chen to certain Web sites he thinks are especially useful in helping explain his topic. As Steven talks to the class, Dr. Chen visits those sites and also searches the Web for key terms that Steven brings up. Although Dr. Chen has advised the class repeatedly to use multiple search engines, not until he acts as the Google jockey do they clearly see the breadth of information that is exposed by consulting different search applications. He also shows the class the benefit of digging several pages down into search results, skipping past hits that are repeats of previous resources, and finding valuable information on obscure sites.

Although at times he feels like he is competing for the class's attention with Dr. Chen, Steven sees that his classmates are all focused on the discussion, unlike student presentations in other classes, when it seemed only the professor was listening. By the end of his presentation, Steven knows more about his topic than when he began the lecture, thanks to the additional information Dr. Chen finds online.

What is it?

A Google jockey is a participant in a presentation or class session who surfs the Internet for terms, ideas, or Web sites mentioned by the presenter or related to the topic at hand. A screen displays the jockey's searches for all participants to see. Typically the instructor or presenter will use at least one projection screen to show slides or other content to a class. Google jockeying adds one or more screens to the session, allowing students to see related resources and additional information that clarify the main topic. Although the term takes its name from the Google search engine, any search engine will do, and the practice also includes navigating directly to known Web sites that might (or might not) be directly mentioned in the lecture, without passing through a search engine. A Google jockey might look for definitions of specific terms, images or multimedia files that demonstrate concepts, or other online resources that illuminate a topic.

Who is doing it?

Adoption of Google jockeying has so far been relatively limited. The practice appears to have been started by a professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California (USC), who said the impetus behind the idea was a lecture in which he would be discussing a wide range of disparate ideas. USC has since incorporated the practice into several courses, and a number of conferences and workshops have also added Google jockeying to their presentations.

How does it work?

Someone in the presentation—typically just one person, though an environment could be set up to allow for multiple jockeys—is designated the Google jockey for a session. That person performs Web searches on a computer connected to a secondary projector. In a carefully prepared presentation, the lecturer might plan a script of searches that the jockey performs to accompany the presentation, with the option of adding others as needed. More commonly, the jockey searches in a free-form manner for key terms that come up, navigating to Web sites that explain or offer examples of those terms. The lecturer might prompt the jockey to visit specific Web sites or search for particular terms or phrases during the presentation, and another channel of communication—such as a chat window—can allow participants in the lecture to request other searches or to comment on results.

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In some presentations, the addition of Google jockeying will influence the direction of the lecture, allowing the presenter to adjust the session or change direction of the content based on audience reaction. In other cases, the Google jockey might represent a true "back channel," taking place as a corollary to the primary lecture without affecting it directly.

Why is it significant?

Today's students have grown up with technology, using it to create new modes of always-on communication. Students want to be constantly exposed to multiple sources of input. Google jockeying takes what otherwise would be private, back-channel communication and makes it available to the entire class, transforming an individual activity into one that benefits the group. Students benefit not only from immediate access to the world of online resources but also from the research techniques of the Google jockey and of their peers in the class. Google jockeying acknowledges a mode of working that many students prefer while fostering a group dynamic. The participation that Google jockeying encourages can draw distracted students into a topic and help keep participants engaged. To the extent that students can request or direct the searches of the Google jockey, the practice minimizes attention losses to other distractions, such as personal e-mail or instant messaging.

Students use and understand the tools and techniques of Google jockeying, but evidence shows that many students lack strong information fluency skills, despite having been raised on technology. Students believe in online research, but many are not adept at conducting Web research efficiently or at discerning reliable online information from material that is suspect. Despite research indicating that using multiple search engines significantly expands the results obtained, many latch on to a single search engine and never stray from it. Google jockeying vividly shows the benefits of diversifying searches and functions as a real-time demonstration of searching for, cross-checking, and evaluating online resources.

What are the downsides?

The skill of the Google jockey has a considerable bearing on the usefulness of the exercise. Google jockeying teaches both the jockey and the audience about efficient, targeted Internet research, but a novice jockey can be a drag on the main presentation. Although many benefit from the educational component that Google jockeying adds, some students—and faculty—are not comfortable multitasking and will find the practice more distracting than helpful. Because Google jockeying is part of the class, individual students cannot simply "turn it off." In addition, Google jockeying does require extra hardware, in the form of another computer and projector with screen, as well as a room that accommodates these extra pieces.

Where is it going?

As learning spaces are increasingly designed to incorporate technology, and as Internet connectivity becomes faster and more ubiquitous, Google jockeying provides a compelling application of this infrastructure. Technology is directed at learning and engaging students in the lecture topic, steering them away from personal distractions. More and more research is done online, and Google jockeying can be a valuable tool in exposing students to new kinds of online resources and showing how best to use those resources.

Google jockeying adds a new dynamic to lectures, creating a collaborative environment with elements of theater and play. A session might be formatted as a debate, pitting a Google jockey against the lecturer or against another Google jockey to show different sides of a topic. Google jockeying might also facilitate locating rich content for a class to help illustrate subtle or complex concepts. Google jockeying could also be used to demonstrate discipline-specific research tools and methodologies to students exposed to a new field of study.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

Google jockeying has the potential to foster more engagement among students, particularly in large lecture classes. The practice builds on tools students already use, and it adds a sense of fun and spontaneity to learning. For some students, bringing Web surfing into a lecture makes learning more compelling, seeing how a lecture topic can open doors to a world of other information or resources online. In this way, Google jockeying models appropriate practices of inquiry, showing students best practices for conducting research while encouraging them to explore resources they might not be aware of or that they might not use otherwise. Students can take the skills modeled in class and apply them independently. By modeling the practice of discovering relevant data on the Internet, topics like information vetting and Internet literacy can be explored as a class. Google jockeying also gauges students' media literacy, and it can be a barometer for a lecture—the level of activity for the Google jockey and interest among participants is often a reflection of whether the instructor is keeping students' attention.

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