As Steinkuehler writes, “Interest does matter”: The kids were trying to solve a problem they cared about. Games can provide a pathway for teachers to reveal what students are capable of. And as Squire has shown, they can hook students into reading deeply and excitedly in everything from history to economics.

Ever since Marc Prensky coined the term “digital natives,” we’ve been told that young people have an innate edge in using the technology. They’re comfortable with it; they get it, effortlessly, in a way older people don’t. But this, alas, isn’t really true. 

That’s what Bing Pan, a business professor at the College of Charleston, discovered in a clever experiment. He wanted to test students’ facility on an omnipresent digital skill: How adept are they at using Google? So Pan asked a group of them to use the search engine to answer several questions. As you might expect, the students favored the top few links that Google returned.

Then Pan artificially inverted the results on the first page Google returned, putting the tenth result in the number-one slot and so on. More often than not, the students took the bait and again favored the first links—even though they’d been put there falsely. As Pan realized, the students were not actively evaluating the actual relevance of the results. They just trusted the machine.

Other studies have found similarly dismal results. A study of 102 Northwestern University undergraduates found that none ever bothered to check authors’ credentials on a Web site. Another found that more than a third of college students were unaware that search engines include paid-for links in their results. These were students who’d been using the Internet, on average, for seven years. In other words, digital natives might feel like they’ve mastered their tools, but that doesn’t mean they truly understand how they work. This
ignorance is intellectually crippling, because the results on Google (and all search engines) are prone to all manner of artificial gaming and corporate juking. The upside of public thinking—that anyone can publish—is matched by its perfectly inverted downside, which is that anyone can publish, leaving the online environment devoid of the marks of hierarchical authority on which students for centuries have relied. When I was in elementary school in the 1970s, the biggest resource we had was a couple of sets of encyclopedias. We weren’t asked to judge whether they were accurate or not; the school system and librarians took care of verifying that. (Certainly, the encyclopedias had their own deficits; they became quickly out of date and were, compared to today’s online resources, woefully narrow.) In the 1950s social critics pondered “Why Johnny Can’t Read.” Now they should ponder “Why Johnny Can’t Search.”

Whose fault is it? Not the students’. If they’re unable to navigate online information, it’s because, rather amazingly, they’re almost never taught search literacy in schools. It ought to be a core part of what kids learn in school (and new common core standards in the United States are beginning to emphasize it), but for years it was barely touched upon. This is surpassingly ironic, because teaching search literacy is a golden opportunity to teach critical thinking: What am I being told? What motivations does this person have for telling me this? Does the information match other things I know? Is it even checkable or is it speculation? These are the skills that adept adults deploy, often unconsciously, when they search for information online.

The thing is, it’s quite possible to train kids in search literacy. Indeed, librarians worldwide are the heroes in this story. They’re frantically working on teaching those skills, picking up the ball that the curriculum has thus far dropped.

Consider the efforts of Frances Harris, librarian at the magnet