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INDONESIAN YOUTHS BROWSE AT AN INTERNET CAFE IN JAKARTA. PIC: AP.

Today's youth are spending increasing amounts of time communicating and interacting online. Parents and teachers often bemoan the younger generations' addiction to social media. It is frequently considered a waste of time, but is this time spent online really wasted? Could students actually be benefitting from Facebook, Line and Twitter?

Well there is an argument that the time students spend using Facebook is actually time invested in the development of the higher level thinking skills which they will need to succeed in our future society.

Today's high school students, Generation Y, are the first generation to grow up in a world where smartphones and the internet are as commonplace as colour TVs and refrigerators. They inhabit a world very different to the one that previous generations grew up in. Furthermore, the skills young people need to navigate and succeed in this environment have also changed. The development of higher level thinking skills is becoming increasingly essential for 21st century learners.

A taxonomy of cognitive thinking skills was first developed by Benjamin Bloom in the 1950s and his model is still widely referred to today. Bloom's original taxonomy has been updated slightly over time but it is still generally accepted that there are six levels of cognitive thinking skills. These

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are broken down to lower level skills (remembering, understanding) and higher level skills (applying, analyzing, evaluating, creating).

It goes without saying that higher level thinking skills are extremely important but the problem is that many schools do not allocate sufficient time to develop these skills. One reason for this is that it can be challenging for teachers to promote the development of higher thinking skills in the classroom. This is the reason so many traditional classrooms continue the rote learning of facts and figures. But in an age when most facts are just a 'google' away, it makes simply filling students heads with facts all the more pointless. What students need to be able to do is create, analyze, evaluate and apply.

Some educational institutes are taking the lead on this and utilizing social media for learning. One example from Southeast Asia is the Singapore Management University where this approach has been running successfully for a number of years. But sadly these innovative institutes remain the exception to the rule, the majority of schools and colleges still follow the centuries old 'sage on stage' model.

The essential skills that today's students need to be developing has been the focus of a recent educational initiative from the US called a Framework for 21st Century Learning. The central concept of this framework is nicely summarized as 'The 3Rs and the 4Cs'. The 3Rs stand for reading, writing and arithmetic and they represent core subject knowledge. The 4Cs stand for – communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. In order to negotiate the world of tomorrow, today's students need to develop a good balance of these skills. This initiative certainly appears promising but all too frequently these exciting innovations make only a limited impact in the classroom where teachers are often reluctant to buy into the latest educational approaches.

The 21st Century is becoming an increasingly difficult world to prepare for and too many schools are ill prepared to equip their students for these challenges. But fortunately today's students are already busy developing the essential skills to thrive in this environment and they are doing this away from their outdated, industrial-era classrooms.

Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are excellent platforms for students to develop higher level thinking skills. Students do not join these social networks simply as passive consumers, instead they engage as active members interacting with potentially thousands of other users from around the world. And while interacting on these sites, young people are engaging in a wide range of higher level thinking skills.

On social media sites students are bombarded with data, they need to apply their critical thinking skills in order to analyse and interpret this data. This is done by asking a range of critical question such as; 'is this believable?', 'is it reliable?', 'who shared this information?', 'Why?'.....etc

And it's not just sorting through the information overload, instant messaging requires students to quickly and concisely respond to questions, suggestions, compliments, criticism and even trolls.

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Previous generations could spend days before responding to a letter or a postcard, teenagers today are responding instantly.

Creativity is another area in which social media encourages huge growth – from writing posts, comments, jokes and blogs – to photography – to image editing – to the creation of gifs and videos. Social media is a hive of creativity. Never before have young people had access to such powerful tools of creativity. Tech savvy teens are now able to record, edit and publish a range of media (videos, blogs, songs and artwork) from the smart phones in their pockets.

Moving in to the wider world, young people are also utilizing social media alongside their higher level thinking skills to question and challenge larger social issues. Two examples in which Asian teenagers are currently engaging in this are; the protests for democracy in Hong Kong and the investigation into the Koh Tao murders in Thailand.

The recent protests in HK are the most publicized and longest running large scale protests to have challenged the Chinese leadership in modern times. The use of social media has been facilitating the students' cause. Social media has been used since the beginning of this movement to question and criticize the government. Students have also used social media to mobilize demonstrators. On occasions when those in authority have begun to apply pressure, the protestors have ensured images were instantly shared across the world. Had this occurred before today's digital age, I suspect the government would have quashed the protests quickly and quietly.

Meanwhile in Thailand the police investigation into the murders of two British tourists on the holiday island of Koh Tao has generated huge interest on social media. A social media community discontent with the police's handling of the investigation has been busy with their own independent investigation. This community has raised some interesting questions and theories about the accuracy of the initial police investigation. Their work seems also to be influencing events on the ground with police from Scotland Yard now in Thailand monitoring the case.

In both these circumstances social media is providing a platform for critical thinking to question and challenge important social issues in the real world. It appears that despite being dominated by multinational corporations and tech giants the internet can still be a force for good.

So the next time you see teenagers locked into their smart phones, don't despair because they are actually busy developing the higher level thinking skills that their schools and teachers are ill equipped to support – but then again they may just be playing Cookie Run!