



# Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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## *Encouraging Scholarly Practice for Web-Savvy Students*

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*"[A]s the Internet has expanded over the years, many college students turn to the Web not simply for quick, meaningless information but as the starting point for serious academic research. My peers and I use computers for nearly every aspect of our daily lives."*

*~Carie Windham, "Getting Past Google"*

As Carie Windham's remarks suggest, the majority of today's students are "digital natives," who cannot remember a time before computers and who instinctively turn to digital media for answers to a wide range of questions. To say that today's students are comfortable using the Web seems both self-evident and an understatement. Likely, you've found, as I have, that students increasingly interject information found on the Internet into classroom discussions or as sources for their independent research projects. U.Va. students, like Windham, often turn to the Web "as the starting point for serious academic research," expecting to learn and to conduct research using digitized information.

Their reliance on technology can have very positive outcomes – students can easily satisfy their own curiosity to find out more about a class topic or author, and they can enrich class discussion by sharing this with their peers. The problem arises when students, who appear quite savvy at locating information, don't after all know how to find reliable sources or how to evaluate the sources they do find on the Internet. Once memorized, misinformation can be difficult to erase.

Listening to my students relate what they have gleaned from the Web for class or for a paper made me wonder: Just how adept are today's students at finding the best information or at evaluating the reliability of the information they find? Do they primarily "google" the topic, or do they take the time to visit scholarly databases or archives that will point them to academic journals?

Recent research on information literacy suggests that undergraduates are not as "net savvy" as you might anticipate, given their reliance on computers. When searching for information, students typically rely on general search engines (Google, Altavista), search directories (Yahoo!) or meta-search engines (Dogpile, Metacrawler), which perform paradoxically extensive yet superficial web searches. Moreover, studies of web-searching patterns show that typical web users tend to type in only a small number of terms per query (between two and three on average), to select from the first page or two of results, and to end the search after one or two attempts to find relevant information.<sup>1</sup> The preliminary findings of a recent Educational Testing Service (ETS) survey suggests that over half of the students were able to identify "reasonably relevant materials" when searching a database of journal articles, but that students were "generally poor at identifying biased Web content" (Foster 2006).

### **My experience**

In my own courses, my first response to students' over-reliance on the Web was an attempt to regulate their use of it. To encourage greater use of print sources from the library, I limited the number of web-based sources allowed in a bibliography. As the number of academic journals available on-line continued to multiply, I found students were confused about what counts as a "print" source and what as a "web" source. This confusion,

coupled with repeated attempts to convince skeptical students that they could write a research paper that relied on only two websites, made me reconsider how I approach this assignment.

Clearly, at issue is not *whether* students will continue to use the Web but *how* they use it. Without a supporting instructional framework, my stipulations produced compliance rather than any real understanding of what constitutes a good primary or secondary source in my discipline (they also served to convince the students that I matriculated during the Dark Ages). To remedy this, I changed my approach and developed two assignments to help students more effectively search, retrieve, and critically engage with information they find on the Web.

### **How I responded**

The first assignment focuses on searching the web for relevant, scholarly sources. For each research paper or project they write, students are responsible for keeping a web-usage log.<sup>2</sup> As students locate a source on the Web, they record in their log such information as the date, the site name and author (if known), relevant content, and the process they used to locate it. By including the final step, students make their searching habits more visible to themselves and to me. At that point, I can help them fine-tune the process by directing them to more specialized search tools or archives, by working with my department's subject librarian to create a research guide handout for my class, or by arranging for a librarian to talk to my class about fruitful searching techniques for on-line research databases. I can't stress enough how helpful the library has been in helping instruct the students how to generate smart, deep searches of relevant material.<sup>3</sup>

Another benefit of the log is that it can foster classroom conversations about how and where to locate research materials in my discipline and how to determine whether a primary or secondary source is reliable or significant. These conversations provide a clear transition to the next assignment, which prompts students to carefully evaluate the sources they find. For it, I ask students to analyze at least two of the web-based sources they are considering for their research papers by answering the questions located in the table on page 3. Then we spend part of the next class period talking generally about what they discovered. You could

combine the homework assignment and discussion to dissect specific examples of good and bad websites together as a class. Personally, I like for the students to use the assignment to critique sources they are considering for their bibliographies. The follow-up discussion allows us to share insights that might seem evident, but aren't always to my students – for example, that seemingly reliable websites may perpetuate common myths or subtle bias, that even reputable sources or professional websites can provide dated information, or that the best source might not be available as an on-line pdf document but might require a trip to the library.

As I've assigned the log and the critique with greater regularity, my opinion of students' web use has changed. Rather than trying to thwart students' deeply engrained custom of turning to the Web as the source for all answers, I've instead started trying to help them ask the right questions and to think critically about what they find there. Assuming that undergraduates do depend on computers for "nearly every aspect of [their] daily lives," I hope to encourage them to do so more thoughtfully and more deliberately so as to enrich rather than stifle their own scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> From a study by Amanda Spink, "Web Search: Emerging Patterns," *Library Trends*, 52, no. 2 (2003). (Quoted in Hirsh and Prescott)

<sup>2</sup> The on-line workshop on the University of Minnesota's Center for Teaching and Learning webpage has two pages of links which explore related issues. See especially, "Beyond Google" (<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/savvy/beyond/html>) and "Sample Assignments" (<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/tutorials/savvy/sample.html>).

<sup>3</sup> You can contact your department's subject librarian or Esther Onega, the Head of Humanities and Social Sciences Instruction and Outreach, for more information on how they can help develop materials specific to your course.

Works Cited:

Foster, Andrea. "Students Fall Short on 'Information Literacy,' Educational Testing Service's Study Finds." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 27, 2006. Information Technology Section.

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Lampert, L.D. "Where Will They Find History? The Challenges of Information Literacy Instruction." *Perspectives*, 44, no. 2 (February 2006).

Lorenzo, George and Charles Dziuban. "Ensuring the Net Generation is Net Savvy." EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative White Paper 2 (September 2006). <http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ELI3006> (accessed November 20, 2006).

Windham, Carie. "Getting Past Google: Perspectives on Information Literacy from the Millennial Mind." Edited by Diana G. Oblinger. EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative White Paper. (September 2006) <http://www.educause.edu/LibraryDetailPage/666?ID=ELI3007> (accessed December 8, 2006).

**Critique of Web Sources:**

**How Do You Know Which Information to Trust?**

For any two of the websites you are considering as a source of information for your research project, please answer the following questions:

- Authority:** Who is the author? What are the author's credentials and reputation? Is the author, publisher, or association reputable?
- Objectivity:** Are the author's goals explicitly stated? Does the author demonstrate a particular bias? Does the information appear valid and well researched?
- Quality:** Is the information well-organized, accurate, and without typographical errors? Are the graphics (images, tables, charts, diagrams) clear and appropriate? Is this a scholarly or a popular journal?
- Coverage:** Does the work update other sources? Does it substantiate other arguments you've read or does it add new information?
- Currency:** When was it published? Does your topic require current information? Has the source been revised, updated, or expanded in a more recent addition?
- Relevance:** Does the work address your research question or meet the requirements of your assignment? Is the content appropriate for your research topic or assignment?

\* Adapted from the University of Oregon Libraries, "Critical Evaluation of Information Sources: Or, But Is It Credible?" <http://libweb.uoregon.edu/guides/findarticles/credibility.html> (accessed December 5, 2006)

**See also:** "Evaluating Web Pages for Use in Research," a Teaching Tip on the TRC website