Critical Consumption of Digital Information

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the Internet being a prevalent tool for seeking out information and researching, K-12 students must learn key skills to evaluate online information for trustworthiness. Studies have shown that students and even preservice teachers have difficulty identifying trustworthy online resources. This chapter discusses the essential need to build website evaluation skills. Website analysis involves consideration of authorship/authority, currency, bias, and accuracy. Lateral reading, the skill of evaluating the credibility of the source by comparing it to other sources, is essential to determining the credentials of the author, identify potential bias, and corroborate accuracy. Website analysis skills must be integrated across content area instruction. Lesson ideas to support K-12 teachers in fostering website analysis skills, a component of digital literacy skills, are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

> *This website is not very reliable. It is strongly biased even though they give lots of information. However, we have no proof that the information is accurate because they do not cite their sources. Also, we have no idea who wrote this article and if they have authority to do so.*
> *~Liam, 6th Grader*

This kind of thinking - information consumption with a healthy level of skepticism, an expectation that authors will prove their claims, and an understanding that, particularly online, it is essential to corroborate ideas from multiple sources - is the kind of thinking that needs to be employed when researching in the world of cyberspace. This style of thinking is both a means to engaged learning and a catalyst to developing engaged consumers of information and civic efficacy.

The Internet virtually eliminates the lag time between asking a question and seeking and accessing the desired information. Curiosities can be captured and converted into questions to be entered into a search engine or artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot. The search returns a list of potential resources. AI generates a synthesized answer to the question. The choose-your-own adventure continues for students as they select which resource in the search results list to access. *Which resource should one click first? How are the search results organized? Is the AI synthesis correct?*

Fostering students' digital literacy skills is essential for empowering them to answer authentic questions. Today's students, digital natives, have grown up with devices and the World Wide Web, but the educational community is yet to embrace a systematic approach to support students in developing the skills to be critical consumers of information. This has created a learning environment in which educators are playing catch up to identify the needed skills, at times teaching themselves the skills, and creating digital literacy lessons for students. Developing an intentional, sequenced K-12 digital literacy curriculum that can be embedded in content instruction is critical.

"Digital literacy" is an umbrella term that describes basic technology operational skills; cognitive skills required to identify, evaluate, and understand digital information; and socio-emotional skills to communicate and collaborate in online environments (Ng, 2012). In his 1997 book *Digital Literacy*, Paul Gilster (1997) coined this term to describe the set of skills required to effectively access the Internet; find, manage, and edit digital information; and engage and communicate via the online network. Digital literacy encapsulates one's ability to effectively use and evaluate digital resources, tools, and services and apply them to lifelong learning processes. The evolution of technology makes the term digital literacy prone to morphing meanings to match the newest technologies.

Another relevant definition of digital literacy is "the ability to assimilate, judge, and communicate information presented in a wide variety of digital/electronic formats" (Hull et al., 2003, p.11). The importance of developing cognitive skills for evaluating online material is an important component of digital literacy, but the instructional practices are largely absent from our K-12 classrooms (Braasch et al., 2013; Britt & Aglinskas, 2002; Eastin et al., 2006).