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Just a Click Away: The Double-Edged Sword of Using the Internet in Research

Geoff Wickersham

One concern that teachers face at almost every level is how to use the Internet for research. How much should students depend on it? How do you tell good sites from bad ones? Along with these questions, there is always the problem of Internet plagiarism. Within the past three years, there has been an explosion of websites where students can download essays, either for free or for a fee, on just about any topic imaginable. A recent search using Altavista Search Engine found over 3.7 million matches to the words I asked it to search for: term papers. I found fourteen free papers on *Romeo and Juliet* in about ten minutes' time. The topics ranged from comparisons between *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merchant of Venice*, to the role of the nurse, to the use of symbolism in the play. Some of these papers were well written with regards to content, use of quotes, thesis statement, and organization.

By now you're probably wondering how many of your students know about this. Chances are, a good number of them know about it or have even used it in the past. What used to take hours and some brainpower to complete now can take a little computer knowledge and half an hour. Granted, I knew what I was looking for when I went hunting for term papers, but our students are becoming increasingly more and more savvy when it comes to the use of computers and the Internet. What is a teacher to do?

One of the ways to apply the Internet to research and combat Internet plagiarism is for all teachers to become wily Internet users themselves. There is an enormous amount of information out there to be used, from primary documents, to complete novels on file, to insightful discussion forums that can engage everyone. But this is just the beginning, folks. The Internet is becoming an increasingly important part of our classrooms that cannot be ignored.

However, I am not one of those Internet hysters who believe that the world is just a click away. The world is out there, but there is a lot of information that we teachers need to be aware of. Our students have many tools at their command. Their presentations are becoming

more and more sophisticated, sharper, and flashier with the super new software that they seem to instinctively know how to use. But with all of the CD-ROMs, Print Shop Deluxe, Power Point, and other programs, there comes a risk, a temptation to take the easy road when crunch time comes. We need to harness our students' excitement for the Internet but also be cognizant of how to recognize when they take short cuts. This article just might be the help you need.

Use of the Internet for Research

The one thing that you must get across to your students when they look to the net for research is that *anyone* can put *anything* on the Internet. I have come across a personal home page for Alice Walker made by one of her biggest fans, and I have also found some student website projects that some enterprising students have done for a high school class. Because you don't need a degree to publish something on the net, I have always tried to prescreen websites for my students before we spend time researching as a class or before I hand them a list of fun and interesting websites I call "Mr. W's Cool Web Pages."

When I prescreen the websites, I look for a number of different elements: authority, validity, clarity, and ease of use. If the website fits all of these criteria, then I can recommend the page to my students.

Authority

One of the best criteria I use when determining the value of a website is my own judgment. That is something that all of us can readily rely on. We should find the author of the website and look for a bibliography for the author's sources. Is the person who wrote this a student, teacher, doctoral candidate? Are all of his or her sources from the Internet? (That just might make you wonder if the person ever gets outside.) Does the person seem like an authority on the subject, or is there something that makes you wonder

about the author's intentions? This is an interesting area to examine because it calls on your powers of perception. Some websites don't mince words. For instance, I found a conservative literary group on the Internet called The Jolly Roger at <<http://www.jollyroger.com>>. They fancy themselves as pirate poets out to skewer liberal university types who denigrate the classic canon. They see themselves as the last bulwark erected for the DWM (Dead White Male) against the tide of political correctness. Take this as you wish; I suggest that all of you check this website out as an easy exercise in spotting obvious bias on the web.

One more question to ask is how old is the information on the site and when was it last updated? Also, why is this person publishing this material? Does she have an ax to grind or does her fan status blind her to certain flaws in the information? Does the author recommend *Cujo* as Stephen King's best novel? Clearly, *The Stand* is his best and my personal favorite.

Validity

Again, your own judgment is a useful tool here when deciding how truthful the information is. Is there anything that sounded false or inaccurate? There are a lot of trivia and urban legends out there that pass for fact, so be careful with facts. It is important to look for certain things that pop up when you are accessing a website. One of these is usually the sponsor. Is the person writing about postponing potty training sponsored by Pampers? I also look for those little boxes at the bottom of the site. Is this site kid friendly? Does a reliable web reviewer recommend it? If there is a box at the bottom that says "Top 1000 Adult Websites," steer clear.

Clarity

After you've determined the authenticity of the website, next is organization. How is the information presented in the website? Is the font too small to read without a microscope or the wrong color in contrast with the background color? How well is the website written? Sometimes, I have found websites that have a ton of great information, but the vocabulary would probably be inaccessible for most of my students. For instance, I found a timeline on Teddy Roosevelt's presidency, but it was so long and filled with so many cultural events that even I had a hard time using it.

Sometimes, there are great primary resources on the Internet, but they are unreadable because they are scanned poorly. I found this particular instance when I tried printing up some invoices/documents from an Island-Immigration site I was using. When the printer spit these sheets out, I couldn't read anything but jagged black lines.

Ease of Use

The biggest factor in whether students will utilize a website is if the site is user friendly. How well is this website organized? Is all the important information three or four clicks away from the main page?

If it takes five clicks to get to the page you want, don't give students the home page; give them the exact page when asking them to look for information. If you are using class time to conduct Internet research, finding the exact web page is very important because some students are not great researchers. Sometimes they may have a hard time finding the important topics on a page when those topics are readily apparent to us.

Another aspect to consider is the different links on the web page. Can you move around the site easily? Where is the table of contents? Do these links lead to other areas of the website that have the topics you want? Are the link buttons arranged in alphabetical or some other logical order? Do you have to scroll up and down a page to read the information, or is it all presented on one page? If it is all on one page, print it?

One important factor is the length of a webpage. Most students like to print up a page and read it later, as opposed to copying down the information from the computer screen. So, what happens when one student comes across a site containing an English Kings and Queens timeline, and it comes out to 38 printed pages? He'll print it, your media specialist will give you a nasty look as all the pages spit out of the printer, and the rest of the class will be forced to wait while one kid hogs the printer. Chances are, he'll only need two or three of those pages, and the rest are a waste of time and paper. It happens to the best of us, so just show him how to highlight, cut, and paste what he wants onto a word processing program, and print it.

Something that I have run into lately is just a sign of how good some people are getting at designing websites. Even with the fastest of computers, sometimes there are so many pictures, link buttons, graphics, and other doodads on the web page that it takes forever to download. Students usually are not a patient lot when searching for information on class time, and this lag in downloading can get in the way. You may want to steer clear of these sites if at all possible, or ahead of time print out the pertinent stuff and photocopy it for the kids. Or, have your media specialist add the page as a favorite on the computers, and it should load more quickly.

There are a few other ways to evaluate websites, including some numerical, fill-in-the-blank evaluations that you will find at the following websites:

Kathy Shrock's Guide for Educators at [http://](http://discovery.school.com/shrockguide/eval.html)

discovery.school.com/shrockguide/eval.html

The Need for 'Neteditors and 'Netreviewers by James Rettig, Dean of Reference and Information

Services, College of William and Mary at <http://www.swem.wm.edu/firehose.html>

CyberGuides: A Rating System by Karen McLachlan at <http://www.cyberbee.com/guides.html>

Library Selection Criteria for WWW Resources by Carolyn Caywood at http://www.keele.ac.uk/depts/cs/Stephen_Bostock/Internet/criteria.htm

Using the guides that you will find here might even be an interesting higher level thinking skill with which you can challenge your students.

Internet Plagiarism

As I stated earlier, one of the biggest problems the staff at the high school where I work encounters is Internet plagiarism. Some of the teachers aren't even aware of the problem. My school is located in an affluent suburb north of Detroit, and all of our kids have access to the Internet through school computers which they can use at just about any time during the school day. A number of our kids have computers at home and have their own e-mail accounts on America Online® (I know because I receive about 10% of my homework through e-mail from students), so our students are, on average, familiar with computers.

However, the most disturbing thing can be found in discussing with students some of the ethics involved in cheating. Through informal talks with my students, I have found that some don't care about cheating, and some even have the attitude, "if I don't get caught, what harm does it do?" Most of our students probably see cheating like teachers do; it's wrong and shouldn't be done. A survey taken by CNN in 1996 found that 89% of students said that cheating was "common at their schools" and 76% admitted that they had cheated on schoolwork. The interesting thing that the survey said was that out of those kids who were caught, only 5% were actually punished!

But what about the good kid who forgot to study the night before a test? Or what about the A student who is up to her neck in student government, the school play, and basketball, and her paper on *The Odyssey* is due tomorrow for 9th grade English? Granted, neither of these scenarios entitles the student to cheat, but even the best kids may try to bend the rules a little under extreme circumstances. That is why teachers need to be aware of what Internet resources our students can use to obtain free term papers or even those that cost upwards of \$100.

One of the first websites dedicated to distributing free term papers was found at www.schoolsucks.com. What an appropriate name for a webpage designed to undermine the integrity of a student's work. At this website, you will find just about anything you need in almost every subject area from American literature to biology. There were 64 categories to choose from; the two biggest categories were science and history followed closely by English. When I arrived at the first page of the website, I saw that they even have a search engine to help students find exactly what they want. I asked the search engine to find me papers on creative writing, and it gave me thirteen papers to choose from. I called up one poem called "Ordinary Atheist," printed it out, and had the paper in my hand in less than five minutes. Now all I had to do, if I were a student, would be to type it out to make it look like

my assignment as opposed to something printed off the Internet.

Another source of free term papers is <http://www.cyberessays.com>. This one looks very professionally done. It has lots of links to other free term paper sites, and it even asks students to submit their own essays for consideration to their endless files of essays:

"Cyber Essays is a completely free service that relies on students to submit their own papers in order to keep this site expanding; so please consider submitting your good papers to us as you enjoy this site."

Right below this section is a box that tells students what is new at Cyber Essays. For instance, they recently loaded 100 new history and English essays into their database. Students can also receive a free newsletter via e-mail that tells them of new updated essays, and they can even send e-mail to their friends that will "spread the news about this great website." When I went into the English section, they had eight of the latest essays highlighted with titles like "An Analysis of the role of the Queen in 'Beowulf' and 'Grendel,'" or "Social Criticism seen in *Animal Farm* and *A Tale of Two Cities*." When I clicked on the box "Famous Authors" there were essays on Hemingway and Shakespeare as well as on A. E. Houseman, Salinger, Poe, and Dickens. This list was somewhat limited. However, when I clicked "Novels," a huge list arranged alphabetically appeared, starting with 1984 and ending with *The Wretched of the Earth*. There were even multiple entries under books like *A Farewell to Arms*, *Animal Farm*, and others.

The website called Homework's Done! at <http://members.aol.com/oohalooo/index.html> is below average for this kind of website, but it states that "all these papers are used as **examples only**. Do yourself a favor and **don't turn them in**. Besides, you found this site, how do you know your teacher hasn't found it too?" The emphasis is theirs and sends a warning that should be on all of these kinds of websites, especially after you have learned about them.

One of the most unabashed websites I have found is one called The Evil House of Cheat at <http://www.cheathouse.com>. They boast right at the top of the page: "Pioneers in the industry, with the largest user base, and essay database . . . Over 9,500 essays in over 44 categories, over 1.8 million served. Leading the industry since 1995." This website is one of many where you will have to pay for the term papers you want. You can become a SuperUser with access to all 9,500 essays, an Evil Cheat newsletter, and technical support all for just \$9.95 a year. Regular access only allows you to look at 2,000+ essays, but you can gain this for free by adding their link to your own homepage. Another aspect of this webpage is its tips on how to cheat in the classroom! You can find this at <http://www.cheathouse.com/topten.shtml>. This page should be mandatory read-

ing for all teachers because there are techniques here that I have never encountered or seen before. If that's not enough, they also have added links to articles by CNN, *The NY Times*, and *The Washington Post* as evidence of how famous they are.

One place that charges high fees for their work is Research Assistance at <http://www.research-assistance.com/>. They charge a flat fee of \$7.50 per page and any paper over seventeen pages is \$127.50, regardless of length. They will send it to you Federal Express or e-mail the paper to you if you are really in a hurry. Also, they will custom write a report for you at a rate of \$20-\$35 a page.

I couldn't possibly list and examine all of the sites there are for free or paid essays, but one of the best lists I have found that has numerous links to these kinds of sites is at <http://www.chuckiii.com/cheats.shtml>. There are over 65 links to term paper sites listed here, and the list continues to grow. To ban this is to limit free speech, so teachers must find ways to circumvent these kinds of sites. One of the first ways to do that is to increase awareness.

The second thing that you can do is assign alternative research topics that require a student to be more creative instead of a straightforward term paper. Also, do some searching of your own. One thing that I do before I collect papers is scan some of the free websites and print those papers that are similar to my topics. At least that way, I am prepared for the essays that sound fishy.

Some may say that the Internet is a double-edged sword. It is only if you don't know how to use it, so I would recommend that teachers get caught up or stay fresh with all of the new sites, technology available, and even the rebellious side of the Net. By being aware ourselves, we can help keep our kids honest and also know how to help them when they are searching the vast array that is the Internet? Armed with the knowledge, the Net won't be such a dangerous or unknown place to venture anymore.

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