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Instructional Design Project: Searching for and Evaluating Websites

Overview

**Type of Library:** Academic library

**Audience:** This session is designed for twelve freshmen and transfer students enrolled in a First Year Writing seminar at a university that heavily supports and encourages course-integrated information literacy instruction. This will be the third and final library session that students will have attended in conjunction with the course, so they are already expected to be familiar with library resources and searching techniques, including how to formulate a search strategy with appropriate keywords and synonyms and how to search with Boolean operators. Additionally, I anticipate that students will be skilled in accessing, surfing, and conducting basic searches on the World Wide Web.

**Topic:** Each First Year Writing seminar is focused on a specific topic, and in this course, entitled “Martyr Tales” and taught by a faculty member in the religion department, students explore the meaning of “martyr” as it is reflected in history, literature, and contemporary culture. This library session is the last in a three-part information literacy instruction sequence taught by librarians in conjunction with a specific course assignment: Students must research a specific “martyr,” and write a paper analyzing why this individual is considered to be a martyr by some and arguing in support or against the individual’s status as a martyr. In the course of their research, students are required to consult a variety of sources, including at least two sources from the World Wide Web. Students should already be familiar with the topic of martyrdom since they will have studied it in their course, and they should be familiar with their specific “martyrs” because they have already been using skills acquired in previous information literacy instruction sessions to find, evaluate, and cite reference sources, books, and articles.

**Instructional Setting:** The session will take place in a library instruction lab. The instructor’s computer is in the front corner, the LCD projection screen displaying the instructor’s computer screen is in the front center, and a dry erase board is on the other side of the projection screen. An elongated round table with chairs is in the middle, and computers for students to use are along the sides of the classroom. A library instructor teaches the session, and the faculty member teaching the First Year Seminar course is expected to attend.
Learning Outcomes

1. Students will recognize the advantages and challenges of conducting scholarly research on the World Wide Web (cognitive).

2. Students will be able to use Google Advanced Search in order to locate sources relevant to their research on the World Wide Web (physical).

3. Students will be able to evaluate websites for authority, accuracy, objectivity, and currency in order to select appropriate sources (physical).

4. Students will value the importance of evaluating websites when conducting research on the World Wide Web (affective).

Assessment Plan and Tool

My plan is to assess learning outcome 3: “Students will be able to evaluate websites for authority, accuracy, objectivity, and currency in order to select appropriate sources.”

In order to measure this outcome, I need data that shows that students are able to evaluate websites using the criteria that they were presented in class in order to choose sources appropriate for their research papers. I will gather this data as part of a larger assessment incorporated into the course, including this and the two previous library sessions. In addition to writing a paper, students are required to keep a Research Blog. Students will have received the assignment sheet and will have learned how to blog prior to this instruction session, but at the end of the session I will review the necessity for them to begin including website sources in their blog and answer any questions. More detailed information on the assignment and how it will be evaluated is included in the assessment tool, available as a PDF document at http://courseweb.lis.illinois.edu/~samples2/portfolio/docs/assessmenttool.pdf.

In their blogs, students will write ten entries on sources that they consult in the process of their research; at least two of these entries must be for websites. Students are required to include an evaluation of the source and an indication of how they would or would not use it in their paper, and these entries will provide the data that I need to assess this outcome. I will evaluate the contents of the blogs for the purposes of grading, but I will also compare the entries in their blogs to the items they eventually choose to cite in their paper in order to gather data and assess their ability to select appropriate sources.

Since students will have already engaged in guided practice evaluating websites during the class session, I anticipate that students’ entries will reflect thoughtful consideration of the authority, accuracy, objectivity, and currency of the websites; however, if a student’s entry does not reflect the student’s ability to evaluate a website, I will give the student feedback in an email and the opportunity to revise the entry. Additionally, I will post comments on their blog to engage students in a dialog about the process of research generally and, in this case, website evaluation specifically.

While this assessment will take time for students to complete, their work on the blog will be reflected in their final paper grade. This is not an assessment that would be
practical in all information literacy programs, but it is designed for a school invested in course-integrated information literacy instruction with a history of past collaboration between library instructors and faculty.

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**Session Outline**

**I. Pre-Class Preparations**

   a. Write my name and contact information on the dry erase board.
   b. Write questions for the later discussion of the Google Video on the dry erased board.
   c. As students come in, instruct them to have a seat at the table and to have handy something to write with.

**II. Introduction (5 minutes)**

   a. **Welcome:** Welcome students to the library. Most students should already know me from previous sessions, but reintroduce myself and point out that my contact information is on the board.
   b. **Introduce Session:** Introduce the session content to students, and tell them what they will be learning today.

      i. Ask students to raise their hands if they have used Google or some other search engine, for whatever reason, in the last week. Ask them to keep their hands raised if they have used Google in the past 24 hours. Most students should still have their hands raised. I will also have my hand raised, and I will acknowledge that I use Google several times a day.

      ii. Tell students that they will be learning how to locate and evaluate materials on the World Wide Web with Google to use in their research paper.

**III. Google Video and Discussion (10 minutes)**

   a. **Video:** Show students one-minute Google Commercial, Parisian Love (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnsSUqgkDwU), explaining beforehand that this was a Google Superbowl commercial.
   b. **Reflective Writing:** Ask students to spend a couple of minutes thinking about the questions and writing down a response to this question written on the dry-erase board: How did the video compare to your own experiences with Google?
   c. **Discussion:** Sit down with students at the table and ask students to stop writing and share their thoughts. If students don’t volunteer anything, ask the following additional questions to provoke discussion:

      i. What made the commercial funny?
      ii. Was the commercial convincing?
      iii. Is the website you need always at the top of the results list?
      iv. Do you always find what you are looking for online so quickly? Why not?
v. Why do most of us use Google or some other search engine on a daily basis?
vi. What is the hardest part about searching on the web?
d. Transition: Tell students I will show them a way to search more effectively in Google.

IV. Google Advanced Search Demonstration (8 minutes)
a. Choose Topic: Ask students to volunteer one of the martyrs that they have discussed in class for the demonstration search and to brainstorm relevant key words and synonyms. If they don’t volunteer a topic, use “Socrates.”
b. Basic Search: Do a Google Basic Search for the martyr.
   i. Point out that the search has thousands of results.
   ii. Ask students how many pages they will scroll through when looking through results.
   iii. Explain disadvantages of such a large number of results.
c. Advanced Search:
   i. Demonstrate how to access Advanced Search.
   ii. Tell students that they can use their skills in Boolean searching in Advanced Search. Construct and refine a search, walking students through the different search boxes as I do so. Ask them to “interpret” how the various search boxes function before I tell them. Be sure to point out:
      1. Find web pages that have…all these words
      2. Find web pages that have…this exact wording or phrase
      3. Find web pages that have…one or more of these words
      4. But don’t show pages that have…any of these unwanted words
      5. Search within a site or domain
      6. Where your keywords show up
d. Questions: Ask students if they have any questions.
e. Transition: Tell students that conducting the search is only one part of doing research on the World Wide Web. Evaluating what you find is just as important.

V. Overview of Website Evaluation (12 minutes)
a. Handout: Distribute class handout. Point out that one side offers a review of what I demonstrated about Google Advanced Search, but that the other side offers information on how to evaluate websites.
   i. Explain the Basics of Website Evaluation: Show students Peter Steiner’s cartoon from The New Yorker: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (http://www.unc.edu/depts/jomc/academics/dri/idog.html). Ask students what they think this means, and talk about the necessity for evaluating what you find on the web.
ii. Describe main criteria to consider (authority, accuracy, objectivity, and currency), referring to the handout and explaining that there are questions we should ask to consider these criteria.

b. Guided Website Evaluation: Look at a website about the martyr we just searched. Lead students through asking and answering the questions involved in website evaluation. Tell students to consider circumstances when they might use a website in their paper that does not pass all of the criteria, and how they would acknowledge their awareness of the website’s weaknesses in their papers.

c. Questions: Ask students if they have any questions.

VI. Searching and Website Evaluation Activity (20 minutes)

a. Pair Activity: Divide students into pairs. Ask each pair to find a computer and use Google Advanced Search to find a website related to one of their martyrs. Ask students to evaluate the website for its authority, accuracy, objectivity, and currency, and to think about how/if they could use this website in a paper. I will be circulating and available for questions.

b. Group Share: Each pair will share the website that they found (I will share their computer screen on the projection screen), and explain why they would or would not use the website in their research.

VII. Conclusion (5 minutes)

a. Thanks: Thank students for their work in class, and review what they have learned.

b. Assessment: Tell them that I expect them to apply what they have learned in their on-going research. They are expected to begin incorporating the World Wide Web into their research, and their Source entries for websites in their Research Blogs should include an evaluation with attention to the four criteria they learned today.

c. For Additional Help: Tell students that I am, as always, available to help them with their research. Reiterate my contact information, and encourage students to go by the reference desk or use the chat/phone reference if they need more immediate assistance.

Handout

In order to preserve the formatting, the handout is available as a PDF at http://courseweb.lis.illinois.edu/~samples2/portfolio/docs/Handout.pdf. It is two pages, but would be ideally printed on one page front and back. I consulted websites provided by Furman University Libraries and UC Berkeley Library when creating my handout.

Discussion

Information Literacy: This session addresses two of the Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, including Standard Two and Standard Three. Standard Two asserts that the “information literate student accesses needed
information effectively and efficiently” (ACRL). By learning to use Google Advanced Search, students will be able to more successfully access the information that they need for their research on the World Wide Web. In particular, through this activity the student is “construct[ing] and implement[ing] effectively-designed search strategies” in a different type of online information system (ACRL). Standard Three asserts that the “information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically […]” (ACRL). The standard stresses the importance of being able to apply criteria to the evaluation of “both the information and its sources,” and the focus of the session on website evaluation encourages the student to do so with their consideration of authority, accuracy, objectivity, and currency (ACRL).

**Critical Thinking:** During the session, students have the opportunity to think critically about the ideas and information presented. Students are asked to compare their own experiences searching in Google with the experience advertised in the Google commercial. In addition to giving students the opportunity to critically examine the reality behind one example of advertising, such a comparison allows students to think critically about the challenges and the unique advantages of searching on the World Wide Web. Students will also need to use critical thinking when learning how to use Google Advanced Search as they take what they already know about Boolean searching and apply it in a new environment. Finally, effective website evaluation is impossible without critical thinking. Students must examine websites and ask themselves questions in order to make a judgment on the reliability of the website and to identify bias.

**Instructional Design:** The session is designed to incorporate good practices in instructional design, including appealing to multiple learning styles, engaging students through active learning, guiding student learning with scaffolding, and motivation.

- **Multiple Learning Styles:** Different aspects of the course appeal to different learning styles. For example, the Google Video activity will appeal to both active and reflective learners. Active learners are given the chance to actively participate and discuss the video and their own experiences; reflective learners are given the opportunity to reflect through writing before the discussion. This activity also simultaneously appeals to auditory learners (the discussion) and visual learners (the video). This activity may appeal less to kinesthetic learners, but other activities in the session, such as the hands-on website evaluation activity, will appeal to them.

- **Active Learning:** Active learning engages student attention and gives students the opportunity to apply what they are learning. In this session, active learning occurs in the Searching and Website Evaluation Activity. Students are actively involved in practicing the skill of using Advanced Google Scholar, evaluating the websites that they find, and sharing their evaluation with the class. Additionally, even when I am focused on sharing content with students, I attempt to keep them actively involved by asking questions. An example is when I use the Steiner cartoon and ask students to interpret it.
• **Scaffolding:** I try to build on what students already know and to guide their learning with scaffolding. For example, in teaching Google Advanced Search, I know that students are already familiar with Boolean searching. I build on that knowledge by showing how they can use that knowledge in Google. Instead of telling students something and expecting them to do it right away, I use demonstrations first – demonstrating Google Advanced Search and demonstrating website evaluation – and end with the hands-on activity which allows them to apply the knowledge and practice the skills themselves.

• **Motivation:** One way to motivate students is to give them choice. In this session, I try to incorporate student choice where it is feasible. Instead of having an example search pre-planned, I ask students for a topic (which also offers a convenient opportunity to practice identifying keywords and synonyms). Instead of giving students assigned websites to evaluate in the hands-on activity, I allow them to choose one of the websites that they find in their search. Finally, another aspect of motivation is value – students must perceive a value from what I want them to learn. In the session, I try to emphasize how what students are learning will be useful to them. For example, I emphasize that using Google Advanced Search will save them time.

**Works Cited**

