Separating the Wheat from the Chaff:
How to Tell the Good Sites from the Bad

Article appeared in *Internet Trend Watch for Libraries*, March 1998

(links updated Sept. 2012)

I look at a lot of sites. As a matter of fact, I've been looking at a lot of sites since November of 1993, when the Internet was basically a large Gopher site. Back then it was easy to evaluate a site; almost all Gopher information was based at universities, all the pages looked the same because they were text-based, and the navigation was identical from Gopher menu to Gopher menu. In those days I only had to see if the content was useful for teachers.

Since the explosion of the World Wide Web, easy-to-use HTML editors, access to "free" home page space for anyone that has an Internet account, and the influx of commercial sites and advertisements, evaluation of Web sites has become much more difficult. With the huge amount of information available, it is imperative students and teachers learn how to critically evaluate a site.

There are three basic areas of evaluation that need to be considered when looking at a site. These are navigation and usability, authorship, and content validity.

Navigation and Usability
In order to use a site effectively, and in order to get to the important information, it must be navigable and easy-to-use. A site should provide for all types of learners. This can be done by offering hypertext links, so users can jump around, and a site map for the left-brained or concrete-sequential user.

Authorship
A site should enable the user to easily find out about the author; where they work, what their credentials are that makes it appropriate for them to write about the topic, and how to get in touch with them for further questions. Web page authors have to expect that they will get e-mail from interested students asking for further explanation of the topic covered.

Content Validity
The most important area to consider when evaluating a Web site is the content. Students need to be able to recognize when a Web page is a thinly-disguised commercial or opinion page or when it is strictly a source of information. More importantly, the student needs to realize when each type of page is appropriate for his/her purpose or task. If possible all information should be verified in a traditional edited print/electronic source or from reputable Web sites.

To put it simply:

- A Web page should be readable on whatever device it is being viewed, whether that be a tablet or a 27" diameter monitor. It should also be "readable" via a text-based browser or a screenreader to adhere to accessibility standards.
- It should adhere to the standard HTML conventions.
- A page should be user-friendly, well-organized, and all links should work.
- Information should be present to contact the author of a site.
- The content should be verifiable and replicable.
- The content should add to the existing body of knowledge in a unique way.

In order to help students learn how to evaluate Web sites, I have designed three evaluation instruments (elementary, middle, and secondary) for students to use. They include all of the elements mentioned above, as well as some higher-order thinking skills for further extending the evaluation process.

I used the middle school evaluation instrument in a successful lesson with fourth grade students. For this lesson I asked permission to "borrow" a Web page, dealing with Tyrannosaurus Rex, from the Museum of Paleontology. I edited the page in an HTML editor and created six new versions of the page -- some with incorrect information, others with incomplete citations, etc. I printed these pages out and gave one to each group of four students to evaluate. As the students presented their findings, it quickly became evident that the practice of applying a rubric of standards to a Web page was the perfect way to teach the students the methodology of the critical evaluation process. They were able to carry over the skills they had practiced to the evaluation of sites they wanted to use in their classroom projects.

I then created a separate list of thirty-six criteria for teachers to use when evaluating a Web site for possible inclusion in a lesson or unit. In my book, Evaluating Internet Web Sites: An Educator's Guide, I include explanations of each of the criteria as well as full-size overhead masters for teachers to use when introducing this topic. It is very important teachers practice these skills before teaching students how to evaluate Web sites. It is much easier to understand and be able to answer questions dealing with navigation, authorship, and content validity if the teacher has extensive practice with critical evaluation.

Teachers should not hesitate to use a site even if it doesn't meet all of the criteria for an exemplary Web page. If a site contains a wealth of content that can be verified, but is hard to get around, and is not signed, use it! Also, remember that the different types of Web pages (opinion, commercial, news, informational) need to be looked at with differing sets of criteria. Marsha Tate and Jan Alexander at Widener University Library cover this topic in detail. Also, gut instinct is a big part of the evaluation process, too. Wear Edward DeBono's (Six Thinking Hats) red hat for a while and just go with it!

Kathy Schrock (kathy@kathyschrock.net)
Twitter: kathyschrock