

Teaching about the Internet

An opportunity for faculty outreach

by Trudi E. Jacobson and Laura B. Cohen

Thinking critically about information found on the Internet has become second nature to librarians, who frequently devote a portion of their instruction sessions, and even entire classes, to the topic. As recently as a few years ago, however, discussion of Web site evaluation was not as widespread.

In early 1996, the authors developed a list of Internet resource evaluation criteria for use in our classes (www.albany.edu/library/internet/evaluate.html).¹ We believed the topic to be a crucial one, and after a year's experience teaching Web evaluation in a variety of ways, we considered writing about the topic for a library journal. To our initial disappointment, we found that we had been scooped.² Yet we didn't want to abandon our publication idea. It occurred to us that not only were students unaccustomed to the idea of evaluating Web sites, but their professors were as well.

Throughout the '90s, librarians were generally in the first wave to use new digital resources. Faculty and students, less dependent upon these technologies on a day-to-day basis, weren't generally learning about successful search strategies, appropriate and innovative search engines, and the importance of evaluation as quickly as many librarians were. We thought our experiences and insight might strike a chord with our faculty colleagues.

We targeted *The Teaching Professor*, a newsletter that includes many practical articles with teaching tips, and queried the editor. She received our idea enthusiastically, and published "Teaching Students to Evaluate Internet Sites" in the August/September 1997 issue.³ The article presented three active learning methods for teaching the topic to students, and included some of the key criteria from our evaluation checklist.

One of the teaching methods involved the use of a bogus Web site we had developed: "The Psychosocial Parameters of Internet Addiction" (<http://www.albany.edu/library/internet/addiction.html>). This site provides a bibliography mixing real and fake resources, and includes a biography of the supposed author, Professor Rudolph G. Briggs.

Enthusiastic response

The response to our article began shortly after its appearance and has continued for two years after the fact. Most of the approximately 40 pieces of e-mail we have received have come from instructors in institutions of secondary and higher education across the country and around the world. These instructors have expressed frustration over students' blind acceptance of too much that is on the Web, and related their enthusiasm for the relevancy of our work as they try to combat this problem. Most asked for permission to use

About the authors

Trudi E. Jacobson is coordinator of user education programs at the University of Albany, SUNY, e-mail: tj662@cnsvox.albany.edu; Laura B. Cohen is network services librarian at the University of Albany, SUNY, e-mail: lcohen@cnsvox.albany.edu

our article, suggested teaching methods, or their bogus Web site in their local settings.

Our replies to this volume of e-mail has been consistent: in every case, we have given permission to use both our Web site and our teaching methods as described in our article. Our willingness to share this work is based on our understanding that teaching faculty has a vital and necessary role to play in training students to make intelligent use of the Web. Librarians cannot do it alone. Further, the Web itself is an excellent medium for sharing. There is no point in asking others to reinvent the wheel when we have already devised something that works and is easily available.

We have been surprised and gratified to learn about the variety of academic settings in which our material and methods are being used. This has also been a revealing testament to the use of the Web in an astonishing range of scholastic activities. Our work has been used in courses spanning the humanities to the social sciences; in a course on medical imaging; in a Web-based oceanography class; in a course called Microcomputer Applications in Exercise Science; and in a high school class in Family and Consumer Sciences. We even heard from an instructor at the Joint Military Intelligence College in Washington, D.C.

We have also heard from instructors who have spoken about our work in conferences. Examples include the New Mexico Council for Higher Education and the American Psychological Society's 5th Annual Institute on the Teaching of Psychology. Our work is now being cited in curriculum guides, newsletters, and articles.

Occasionally the responses have been from students and have taken a humorous turn. We enjoyed the e-mail message from a student who asked us to give her Professor Briggs's age because her teacher had assigned this question. More heartening was the student who requested information about the Department of Psychotechnology "because I do not believe that this is a real department." It was good to know that sometimes we have also gotten through to students.

Besides the written testimony in the form of e-mail messages, the Web traffic statistics of our bogus site are also indicative of its use. It is not unusual to log more than 1,000

hits each month, especially during the academic year.

Opportunities for librarians

The diversity, enthusiasm, and ongoing nature of these responses clearly indicate that we have hit a nerve with the teaching community. Classroom instructors have identified the same uncritical student acceptance of the Web as we librarians, and wish to play a constructive role in addressing this challenge. They are eager for solutions.

We have demonstrated that it is possible to train students to evaluate Web sites, and that the strategies for doing so are neither time-consuming nor onerous. Moreover, instructors are comfortable with looking to librarians for assistance. Our training in critical thinking, and the methods we have devised to apply this in a classroom setting, are recognized and respected.

Other librarians have also found that academics outside the library community welcome the opportunity to learn about Web-related topics. For example, Keith Gresham, instruction librarian at the University of Colorado at Boulder, wrote an article, "Surfing with a Purpose," for *EDUCOM Review*. He explains how to develop a search strategy and includes a number of test cases that showed how a search can be implemented and refined.⁴

Our experiences have convinced us that librarians should reach out to teaching colleagues to help them train students in critical thinking about the Web. There is every reason to believe that your efforts will be welcome. In fact, there are signs that such collaborations between librarians and instructors have already begun.⁵

There are a variety of ways to acquaint teaching faculty with your efforts and encourage them to use or adapt your work:

- write an article for a professional newsletter;
- submit a piece to your campus faculty newsletter;
 - if you have created a training Web site, offer its use by publicizing it with posters, advertisements, press releases, word of mouth, etc.;
 - look for opportunities to team teach a session with a professor for his or her course; and
 - offer to present or co-present a session for faculty through your campus's teaching excellence center.

Continuing relationships

Outreach to your teaching colleagues need not stop here. The success of our article in *The Teaching Professor* led to the authorship of a second piece, this one on choosing appropriate search tools on the Web. We have been invited to address other topics for this newsletter. It has become clear to us that we have technology-related knowledge that is not common among teaching faculty overall, and that this knowledge is eagerly sought.

We urge you to share what you know with those who teach in the classroom. Librarians have done an excellent job of sharing our ideas with each other. We have been on the cutting edge in devising ways to make intelligent use of the Web. It is time to take what we know and share it.

Notes

1. There is a wide array of criteria checklists available. A handy compendium can be found at Susan Beck's Web site: <http://lib.nmsu.edu/staff/susabeck/cheecs98.html#method>. Esther Grassian's checklist, *Thinking Critically about World Wide Web*

Resources, is one of the earliest (<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/instruct/web/critical.htm>).

2. Marsha Tate and Jan Alexander, "Teaching Critical Evaluation Skills for World Wide Web Resources," *Computers in Libraries* 16, no.10 (1996): 49-54.

3. Trudi E. Jacobson and Laura B. Cohen, "Teaching Students to Evaluate Internet Sites." *The Teaching Professor*, 11, no.7 (August/September 1997): 4. This article is also available at: <http://www.albany.edu/library/internet/teaching.html>.

4. Keith Gresham, "Surfing with a Purpose: Process and Strategy Put to the Test on the Internet," *EDUCOM Review* 33, no.5 (September/October 1998): 22-29.

5. Susan A. Gardner, Hiltraut H. Benham and Bridget M. Newell, "Oh, What a Tangled Web We've Woven! Helping Students Evaluate Sources," *English Journal* 84, no.1 (1999): 39-44 and Karen Hartman and Ernest Ackermann, "Finding Quality Information on the Internet: Tips and Guidelines," *Syllabus* 13, no.1 (August 1999): 52-54. ■

(*"Dressing up SGML . . ." continued from page 294*)

Once the processing is complete, the SGML file is displayed as a temporary html file that the computer automatically removes when the user disconnects. Since the html version is created dynamically when the user selects a hypertext link, and is deleted when the user navigates to another Web page, there is only one permanent file for any document. This means that only one file must be edited whenever corrections or revisions are needed.

An additional feature of the program is the creation of navigational footnotes from the SGML. All the notes are collected at the end of the html document with hypertext links so that the reader may jump to a note and back to the text.

Creating navigational links for the converted document

An auxiliary program called *navbar* was written to produce the html code for the hypertext links that display in a frame to the left of the html document. These links function as a

hypertext table of contents, giving the user the ability to jump from one section to another. This imitates the printed version of the text by creating a method for jumping to specific sections and scanning the e-text for specific parts. This was critical for the poetry books completed early in the project. The navigation bar enables users to scroll through the volume's contents and jump to specific poems.

Although transferring printed material to the Web poses many challenges, it also provides this generation of librarians with the opportunity to improve on the design of the book. Innovative projects like this one undertaken at UNL unite the process of information preservation with information redesign, giving us the opportunity to enhance the end product.

Note

1. More information on the UNL e-text project and examples of digitized texts can be found at <http://libr.unl.edu:2000>. ■

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