



# What Do They Know?

## A STRATEGY FOR ASSESSING CRITICAL LITERACY

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In the adult senior high school in which I am a teacher-librarian, adults of all ages are taking preparatory or full-credit twelfth-grade courses. Although instruction in critical literacy in elementary and middle schools has existed for some time, it is difficult to know how critically literate our students are, as our students have returned to school after many years. I assumed that many would have gaps in their learning, including gaps in information and critical literacy skills, and that they were likely to approach all online information as good. In fact, Todd (1998) has argued that the teaching methodology in school libraries may actually impede critical literacy:

Judging the quality and utility of information for the required task was a major barrier for students. They have traditionally worked in a school environment where library resources are assumed to be “good” by their mere presence in the collection. The assumption that all information is “good” has been carried over to the Net (21).

After reading in the *New York Times* about the deficits in evaluating online material among Berkeley students (Nunberg 2005) and reviewing the preliminary research findings on ETS’s Web site that “only 52 percent of test takers could correctly judge the objectivity of a Web site, and only 65 percent could correctly judge the site’s authoritativeness” (Bogan 2007), I decided to develop a critical literacy assessment tool for my students.

I approached the school technology committee to produce a survey that

would provide a snapshot of the strengths and weaknesses of critical literacy skills at my school. The technology committee was interested in gathering information about student experience and access outside of school, as reflected in Section I questions. The parts of the survey dealing with critical literacy were developed to determine to what extent students are experienced in using the Internet for other purposes as compared to using the Internet to retrieve information, and to provide a rationale and basis to plan instruction that will enable students to better critically evaluate Internet resources.

Designing questions to measure ability to evaluate online resources was difficult. In the absence of samples or examples of similar tests or surveys, I used the categories from Appendix K, “Determining the Reliability and Relevance of Resources,” from *Focus on Inquiry* (Alberta Learning 2004). After some revision, I felt satisfied that my student survey questions could determine whether students can evaluate

the purpose, background, author or publisher viewpoint, and relevance of a Web resource. After several unsuccessful attempts, I gave up trying to design short questions that would determine if students could evaluate the accuracy, timeliness, or scope of a Web site. Rather, I decided to proceed with questions that would fit this survey format. The technology committee asked if I would administer the survey to staff as well as students. These results (see tables 1–4) turned out to be useful for comparison with the student results.

Table 1. Section I: How Many Years Have You Been Using the Internet?

No. of Years	Staff (%) (34 surveys)	Grade 12 (%) (126 surveys)
0	3	4
1 to 2	9	13
3 to 4	3	10
5 to 6	6	17
7 to 8	9	17
9 to 10	35	26
11+	35	14

Table 2. Section I: How Many Times Do You Use the Internet during a Typical Week?

No. of Years	Staff (%) (34 surveys)	Grade 12 (%) (132 surveys)
0	6	5
1 to 3	15	26
4 to 6	3	15
7 to 10	22	15
10 to 20	11	11
20 to 30	12	8
30 to 40	15	8
40+	18	12

Here are some observations based on the results. Staff report having used the Internet for more years and typically with greater frequency than students. A much higher percentage of staff than students indicated that they use the Internet for finding information and performing research. Only 42 percent of students report that they use the Internet to find new information

or to conduct research. Only 14 percent of the students report that they use information databases. This contradicts any preconceived notion that students are more proficient at using the Internet than staff for school-related research. Staff also answered the critical literacy questions more accurately than students on all the questions. This may reveal a combination of

increased proficiency in critical literacy and greater experience using the Internet for research.

Only 38 percent of students were able to determine which Web site would be most relevant in answering the question “Where are the best places to go while visiting China?” This may indicate that students do not read search summaries carefully.

**Table 3. Section I: Why Do You Use the Internet?**

Reason for Use	Staff (%) (34 surveys)	Grade 12 (%) (132 surveys)
E-mail	94	59
News	47	27
Weather	50	22
New information/research	91	42
Music	24	37
Games	18	17
Maps	44	22
Information databases	32	14
Social networking	6	31
Other*	24	6

Another revealing finding is that only 48 percent of the students were able to identify the most reliable Web site. Among the remaining students, 40 percent identified Wikipedia as the most reliable Web site. In contrast, only 12 percent of staff identified Wikipedia as the most reliable choice. Perhaps this is due to a heightened awareness of the raging debate among educators on the reliability of Wikipedia as an Internet resource, because anyone can edit it.

The need for continued instructional intervention in critical literacy for helping students to identify and use reliable Internet Web sites is clearly evident. I plan to illustrate how unreliable the Web can be. A colleague recently shared with me

\*Some of the reasons specified are: banking, shopping, jobs, apartments, stocks, personal Web site, videos, finding car parts.

**Table 4. Section II: Critical Literacy Questions**

Category of Question	Description of Question	Percent of Answers Considered Most Accurate	
		Staff (%) (34 surveys)	Grade 12 (%) (132 surveys)
Purpose of Web site	Purpose of Amazon	74	42
	Purpose of Stats Canada	91	87
Background of Web site	Personal Web address	80	78
	Which Web site most reliable?	67	48
	Official passport info.	85	65
Viewpoint of author(s)	Hate Web site	74	58
Relevance	China Travel Info.	76	38

an effective way to teach students how easy it is to add nonsense to Wikipedia by demonstrating to students just that, then timing how long it takes before the nonsense is removed. Hoax Web sites are also useful in demonstrating how easy it is to post inaccurate

or bogus information on the Web. Another effective strategy is to challenge students to predict and then find the official White House Web site from four choices: <www.whitehouse.org>, <www.whitehouse.gov>, <www.whitehouse.com>, or <www.whitehouse.net>. The “Determining the Reliability and Relevance of Resources” in *Focus on Inquiry* (Alberta Learning 2004, III) is a useful reference for both teacher and student when searching for reliable information on the wild, wild Web. Strategies for finding the best information also needs to be

taught. This includes making use of authoritative online encyclopedias and subscription databases. I’m anticipating that, as is the case when teaching print informational text, instruction for increasing critical literacy online, plus practice, will equal improvement.

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