Thinking Around the Corner: The Power of Information Literacy

Information literacy means more than just finding the facts. It means being able to verify those facts and then evaluate information in a complex technological environment.

By Gail Bush

"Question Authority" is not just an old bumper sticker. Questioning authority has now become a critical element of information literacy. In today's world, students require not only academic rigor, but also the information literacy skills to recognize patterns, follow trends, and predict what effects a particular change might have on a given system. We must prepare students to become strategic, critical, divergent, and creative thinkers. Otherwise, they will succumb to irrelevancy and "power down" to sit in archaic classrooms, read outdated textbooks, and lose their intellectual curiosity. However, educators can create a more meaningful learning environment, one that gives students the skills they need to succeed in an information society.

CONSIDER THE SOURCE

The first step is to teach students to question the authority of a web site or printed text, to consider the source of that authority, and to look for bias. Answering these questions for every source will lead students to a habit of deep inquiry. Students who have come to accept Google as gospel are often intrigued by this strategy. One exercise worth building into a lesson plan is to have students compare the time that it takes to establish the credibility and authenticity of a source found on a search engine with the speed of finding relevant and precise content on a specialized database.

Verifying authority, considering the source, and investigating bias are strategies that serve students whether they're seeking ideas, opinions, or facts. Reading a newspaper article online seems simple enough. What about that magazine article? Do those sources have the same parent company? Alert educators understand the significance of that question and are prepared to share in the investigation. However, educators sometimes forget that the same questions should be asked about the book on the library shelf. It is illuminating to remember that many educators once viewed print in the same way that their students now view online sources.

One benefit of building information literacy skills into lesson plans is that students who are critical, strategic thinkers will find the content relevant and worthwhile. These students will answer the essential questions of curriculum for themselves: What is worthy of learning, and when and how shall we learn it?

WHAT IS IMPORTANT?

In the era of finite information sources, when there were only three major networks and record albums had 12 selections, we accepted that choices were made based on others' expertise. Today, our information choices increase as each nanosecond passes, and we no longer can rely on the expertise of a few "gatekeepers." The information literacy skills of evaluating authority, accuracy, and credibility of sources become necessary in our personal lives when we choose a news source, a phone system, or a Medicare card. Of course, the important content in classrooms is still selected by textbook publishers and mandated by state and district standards. But the skills in evaluating con-

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tent will serve students in studying and taking tests in any discipline.

One of the first questions that students need to ask is: What is a fact? If we define it as a piece of information having objective reality, then is the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492 a fact? The question of whether Pluto is a planet resonates with many of us who were not aware of the controversy and assumed that the definition of a planet was a given. Who would question that? By asking what is real, we teach students not to accept facts at face value.

One common source used by students provides a good starting point to teach students about verifying facts. Wikipedia, the multilingual, web-based, free-content, encyclopedia project, is used by most students with Internet access, and many teachers claim that they accept it as a source. However, anyone with access to the Internet can contribute to Wikipedia, and the information on this phenomenally popular site may be suspect. Teachers should require students to verify information cited from this resource through triangulation of sources. By modeling the verification of sources, teachers can make using Wikipedia an attractive teachable moment.

PEEKING AROUND THE CORNER

Along with information technologies has come a host of new topics that students need to explore. For example, globalization has changed the way we think about many topics. Global warming, natural resources, aspects of the environment are no longer relegated to environmental science but are mixed with economics, political science, technology, ethics, and public policy. Helping your students to find global topics and to distinguish local differences will develop their higher-order thinking skills.

Social networking also deserves close attention from educators. One such network, MySpace, claims over 190 million registered users. Many lesser known social networks are connected by ethnicity, values, interests, or finances. Ning is an online service created by Marc Andreessen (creator of Netscape) that allows users to create and customize their own social networks, which may include blogs, listservs, wikis, etc. MUVEs are multi-user virtual environments, the most popular being Second Life, in which users create avatars, animated characters, to interact with the virtual environment. Educators should think of social networking as virtual collaboration. Educators can incorporate a variety of cooperative learning experiences for students in social networks.

The world's knowledge is delivered in a variety of formats. We use many media to learn about the world, including print, graphs, charts, DVDs, photographs, and many more. Each medium presents different challenges and meets different needs. Students must become literate in each medium so they can choose the one that best suits their information needs for a particular question.

Educators need to recognize that all of these media are important ways of knowing about our world. They should familiarize students with all of these media and their various literacies. The foundation for this is to teach students to be information literate, and therefore able to build knowledge based on quality information. And to provide that foundation, teachers need to stay current, learn from students, embrace change, and peek around the corner when they can. K