School libraries are becoming increasingly virtual in nature. Online resources have become more important, more relevant, and more up-to-date than print resources such as books, and students are increasingly demanding access to these online resources. Consequently, Web site evaluation is becoming a more crucial role for the school librarian. This article seeks to highlight why Web site evaluation is so important and what criteria the school librarian might reflect on and use when mediating resources for students and staff in the school.

Why Is Web Site Evaluation So Important?

In terms of Web content, Web site evaluation is vital because of the lack of control over what Web sites contain. In addition, much of what is found on the Web is biased, e.g., towards western countries, or is unsuitable for use by school students because of content or level of language. School librarians have a responsibility, professionally and ethically, to use the best available information both for student and teacher use. This responsibility means that effective Web site evaluation needs to be taken seriously and must not be cursory. When school staff complete effective Web site evaluation, they make sure that the Web sites (or part of Web sites) they use will be fit for teaching and/or learning with particular groups of students.

Web Site Evaluation Criteria

Even a very basic Web search for Web site evaluation criteria will find a plethora of criteria sets. However, most of these criteria sets are not suitable for use in schools. For example, Harris presents the CARS model, which is aimed at university students and assumes a level of language and intellectual ability not found in the early years of high school (2010). There is no one definitive set of criteria that school librarians might apply, and school librarians can benefit from reviewing a number of criteria sets and selecting the parts that most suit their circumstances. Perhaps the best known criteria authority in the school sector is Schrock, who has created a valuable set of evaluation surveys relating to different levels of education, teacher Web sites, and formats such as blogs and podcasts (2009). Schrock’s pages also provide school librarians and teachers with a range of examples of other criteria sets. While Schrock’s guides are a very valuable guide to Web site evaluation, they could contain a stronger emphasis on the importance of level of language.

This author has devised a Web site evaluation guide that focuses on three aspects of Web site evaluation: educational criteria, reliability criteria, and technical criteria (Herring 2011). What is missing, however, from the great majority of Web site evaluation guides is that most authors fail to rank the criteria. For example, no matter how well-designed a site is, and no matter how authoritative the authors of the site may be, if the students for whom the site is selected cannot cope with the terminology used in the site, then the site is not suitable.

Educational Criteria

Educational criteria are by far the most important when evaluating Web sites. This set of criteria relates to the fundamentals of schools—learning and teaching. Educational criteria focus very specifically on student needs. Thus, it is not a question of whether a particular site will be useful for students in general, but whether a site will be useful for a specific group of students (e.g., year seven), with a specific range of reading levels (e.g., poor readers), studying a specific topic (e.g., local river pollution). Most Web site evaluation criteria sets are too general and fail to take into account the need for differentiation within classes of students. Web site evaluation needs to be applied in the context of teaching and learning, and Herring suggests that school librarians and teachers pose the following questions before evaluating Web sites:

▶ What is the purpose of the lesson(s) I will be teaching?
▶ What is the range of reading levels in this class?
▶ What activities will the students be engaged in?
▶ Can I find several Web sites on this topic to allow for differentiation?
▶ Have I searched for material that other teachers have used on this topic? (2011, 40)
The key element of educational criteria relates to the level of language used in the site. Level of language covers not only the terminology used in the Web site, but also the way the text is written or how text is used in graphics, photographs, or videos. The danger of providing students who have low levels of reading ability with sites that are too difficult for them is that students may be more likely to copy and paste what they do not understand, rather than ask for help.

School librarians and teachers should also focus on:

- their own purpose. Is the site suitable for what is being taught (e.g., the causes of the War of Independence)?
- the content of the site in relation to their purpose (e.g., for more senior students, are alternative views on the War of Independence provided?).
- student activities (e.g., can students interact with experiments on a chemistry site?).
- student motivation (e.g., does an environmental issues site challenge students to explore key issues in more depth?).
- extension activities (e.g., does the site provide higher level activities for more able students studying the poems of Robert Frost?).

Educational criteria, therefore, is firmly geared towards the actual needs of sometimes quite small groups of students who have particular needs. It is these students, however, who may benefit most from a differentiated approach to Web site evaluation.

Reliability Criteria

Reliability criteria are often seen narrowly as being related to the author(s) of the site, and whether they are authoritative and trustworthy. Reliability criteria should also take into account whether the content of a site is reliable, in that it is accurate, up to date, and not unreasonably biased. In terms of the author(s) of a site, school librarians and teachers should consider not only whether the site’s producers are authoritative (e.g., a government agency, a university, a reputable newspaper, a key researcher), but what the authors are trying to do with the site. For example, a site may have authoritative figures on the site but if the main purpose of the site is to make a profit by selling goods or service, then it is unlikely to be suitable for schools, in most cases.

For most sites, being up to date is important and, for particular types of site, it is very important. These sites include newspapers and TV channels, but may also include sites providing statistical or political information. Information must also be accurate and this can be checked by comparing the site with similar sites. It can be argued that no site is completely unbiased, so reliability criteria try to identify the level of bias in a site. For example, school librarians and teachers may want their students to view campaigning sites that focus on environmental issues. To balance the levels of bias, students can be asked to view more than one site on a particular topic. Web sites that try to mislead users, or contain racist or sexist language or images, will not meet reliability criteria.

Technical Criteria

Technical criteria, often highlighted first in Web site evaluation criteria sets, should be seen as the least important criteria in a school setting. However, some aspects of technical criteria are important if students are to be encouraged to use sites effectively. Sites should not be slow to load and should be easy to navigate, especially for younger students. For some students, sites with too much text will be difficult and unappealing, as other (perhaps more senior) students may find sites with too many graphics to be limited. All the links on a site should work and there should not be a danger of students getting lost when pursuing links. Allowance needs to be made for students with visual handicaps.

Conclusion

Effective Web site evaluation, with a clear focus on educational criteria, needs to be seen as a high priority for the school librarian, so that students can be provided with mediated Web sites that closely match the needs of particular groups of students.

References:


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