**Lesson Plan: Website Evaluation**

This lesson was designed to be used by librarians who teach information literacy. However, it can be adapted for use in any class in which basic research skills are taught. It has two parts. The first requires students to find and evaluate websites via a Google search. The other requires that they evaluate a website provided on a References list in a scholarly article. The two parts can be conducted as separate lessons, or each used individually.

**Instruction Problem**

Students often have trouble determining whether or not a website contains valid information and therefore do not always make good decisions when selecting web resources. Furthermore, some students have been taught ineffective "short cuts" for evaluating websites (e.g. those that end in .gov, or .edu are appropriate, and those that end in .com are not) but have not been taught to look for bias or other clues that a web resource might contain misinformation.

**Target audience**

This lesson plan is designed for traditionally-aged undergraduate students (those aged 18-24 years). Beyond being digital natives, these students are, quite literally, the first "Google" generation. Google has always been a "go to" search engine for them from which they could expect to find some result regardless of their research need.

**Objective**

At the end of the lesson students will be able to identify authoritative websites, based on a variety of evaluative criteria, and explain the reasons for their selections.

**Cognitive Demands Table**

Based on work by Morrison, Ross & Kalman this table synthesizes the difficulties students may encounter when evaluating a website

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Difficult Cognitive Elements | Why Difficult? | Common Errors | Cues and Strategies Used | Evaluative Strategies |
| Choosing a website from a list (e.g from a Google search) | There may be many to choose from; learner may not know what to look for | Selecting what is on top; selecting based on one criterion | Is author given? Affiliation? Can you find more information about the author/entity? Does the website have information you need? Does it have references? Date? Does it provide information from multiple points of view? | Number of criteria used; ability to articulate why a website was chosen |
| Determining the validity of a provided website (e.g. one found on a list of citations or references) | Learner is not sure what to look for | Accepting someone else's authority | Can you find more information about the author/entity? Does the website have information you need? Does it have references? Date? Was the website cited in a peer-reviewed article? In what way did the author cite it? | Ability to articulate why the website meets their information needs. |

**Instructional Strategies**

*Discussion*

As most students are traditional-aged undergraduates we can expect that they will have performed a Google search, and may have been given some guidance on evaluation. Before the lesson the instructor will lead students in a discussion about what they know about searching for websites and what they have been told about authority.

Students will need to be taught that no one piece of information will provide them with a full answer. Further, students need to recognize that one website may be appropriate for certain information needs, but not others. The lesson will include looking at some live websites which will serve as illustrations (see examples below), and include a discussion of how to find the biases based on several criteria. Students will be directed to evaluate the websites using a variety of criteria including, but not limited to, looking at web addresses, advertisements, currency, authors, and hosts, as well as the type of information the site provides.  Ultimately, students need to understand that in addition to looking for clues, they must also read the information on the site to be fully informed.

*Example websites on gun control:*

States United to Prevent Gun Violence (pro gun control)
http://ceasefireusa.org/

National Rifle Association (anti-gun control)
http://cdn.nraila.org/

*For both of the above sites the bias is clear.*

Just Facts: Gun Control
http://www.justfacts.com/guncontrol.asp

*Bias on this one is more subtle - read "about us" carefully. Ask students what they think.*

ProCon.org: Gun Control
http://gun-control.procon.org/

*ProCon.org strives for balance. Again, ask students what they think.*

*Hands-On*

Students will conduct a Google search on a topic of interest to them and select three websites that they believe to be authoritative on the topic, and one not so, and write explanations of their choices using the criteria discussed.

 *Part II*

Provide students with a scholarly article that contains at least one website (not an electronic journal article) in the References list. Ask them to identify which of the references are websites and look them up online. Have them look for criteria such as date, host, domain, and advertisements. Finally ask them to find the place in the article where it is cited. Ask them to determine if the author used the information from the website in a positive, negative, or neutral way and write an explanation as to whether (and how) they would use for their own research.

**Evaluation**

Formative evaluation may take place during the discussion about what students already know. The instructor will get a sense of what students needs are, and how they usually conduct searches, allowing for some leeway in conducting the lesson. Because students will have a hands-on session following the discussion additional formative evaluation will take place as students begin searching and ask questions.

Because the instructional objectives require that students explain their reasoning in selecting websites to use (or not) students will explain their choices in writing. The following rubric was designed to help evaluate the task as it requires judging critical thinking skills.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Google Search | Student considered a variety of websites before making final selections and used at least four criteria in selection. Student was able to describe their reasoning in selections and was able to articulate the reason why the site met their particular research need (or not). | Student considered a variety of websites before making final selections and used at least four criteria in selection. Student was able to describe their reasoning in selections. May still be unclear that one site can meet different research needs. | Student understands what to evaluate, but does not look beyond the first few choices on the screen, does not look for sites that may be less biased, and does not understand that a site may meet different needs for different research problems. | Student made no attempt to evaluate the sites, simply selecting those at the top of the screen; or student used only one or two criteria in selections. |
| Reference List | Student was able to correctly identify a website, and was able to bring up the site on their own computer or device and was able to explain how the author used the resource. | Student was able to correctly identify a website, and was able to bring up the site on their own computer or device and answered each of the questions.  | Student was able to correctly identify a website, and was able to bring up the site on their own computer or device, but did not look for bias. | Student was unable to correctly identify a website from a list of references, or identified the site but did not know how to bring it up on their own device. |

**References**

Morrison, G. R., Ross, S. M., & Kalman, H. K. (2012). *Designing Effective Instruction* (7th ed.). N.p.: Wiley.