

Media Literacy & Questioning Credibility

Two educators share their strategy to teach students how to separate valid from suspect information on the web.

by Arlene Anderson and Brooke Moore

Media literacy means thinking critically about the messages we create and consume. To be literate in this way means that students question author credibility, the evidence and rhetoric behind messages, the mode of communication, the intended audience, and the effectiveness of the pairing of media and message. Media literacy is also about operating responsibly and collaboratively within a network that expands and shifts constantly. Finally, media literacy is about empowering students to use technology creatively and for their own purposes rather than allowing technology to use students.

Why does it matter?

In the same way students from a couple generations ago used pen and paper to explore their thinking, students now use a plethora of technological tools. They use these

tools to show their thinking, connect to others' thinking and work collaboratively on issues, projects and tasks. Teachers and other adults do not control the flow of information — we no longer control what gets published for public consumption and what does not. Therefore, rather than throwing students into a swirl of constant information and hoping they escape unscathed, we must ensure that students can navigate the omnipresent barrage of information with purpose and competence. If we do not teach media literacy, we leave our young people at the mercy of others' persuasion.

How does it look?

In the classroom where students are media and technologically liter-

ate, they:

- Question the veracity of information and its source
- Design their own messages and texts through technological tools
- Communicate with clarity and innovation
- Adjust their mode of communication to an audience's needs
- Feel comfortable taking risks and exploring new technologies
- Navigate the digital world safely and respectfully
- Cite appropriately and



accurately

- Facilitate discussions to explore issues and ideas.

Following is a strategy we developed to teach these skills and practices.

Giving credit and having credibility

With access to the World Wide Web, students often find themselves in a flood of information; the challenge learners face is in determining which information sources to trust. Wikipedia proves a good place to begin the process of critical evaluation with students because verifiability is at the core of the encyclopedia's content policy. Once students learn how to apply the standard, they can judge for themselves whether the articles they find on Wikipedia, *or elsewhere*, meet their information needs. They can also learn how to use formal citations to establish the credibility of the content they create themselves.

Before working through this lesson with students, become familiar with Wikipedia's criteria for a good encyclopaedia article (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Good_articles). Reproduce it so it is available for your class to consult. Also in advance of your class, find a Wikipedia article containing content your students will be familiar with and that is accessible to them in terms of their reading ability. If students are familiar with the topic, they will be able to identify inaccuracies and unsubstantiated claims. Try to find an article that provides a list of references or links to external websites but contains few inline citations.

Ask your students to generate criteria for a good encyclopaedia article. Have them compare their list with Wikipedia's criteria for a good article. Confirm students clearly understand the importance of the following

terms:

- **Neutral Point of View:** articles are balanced
- **No Original Research:** articles report the published research of reliable sources
- **Verifiability:** sources must be cited so that readers can verify their accuracy

Read through the selected Wikipedia article with your students and, after they identify the article's main points, ask them to apply the "good article" criteria with emphasis on ensuring that readers can verify the accuracy of the material (students should find some points that need to be verified).

Have students note the first and subsequent points that need citations numbering them in the order in which they appear in the article (these will appear in the body of the text as informal inline citations).

Have students try to verify the claims either through independent research or by consulting the references and external links provided at the bottom of the Wikipedia article.


For information that can be verified through a reliable source, have students generate a formal citation and place it below the article alongside the number it corresponds to in the body of the article

As a culminating activity, have students write an article on a topic of their choice, citing sources as necessary. Upload the article to Wikipedia, or use another Wiki platform like Wikispaces for them to publish their article.

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How's it going?

If students are working on this assignment collaboratively as a whole class or in small groups they will peer assess as they move through the task (assessment *for* and *as*). If they are working with an online collaborative tool, the history of who contributed will most likely be recorded, so you will be able to assess individuals' efforts (assessment *of*) while they are working as a group. Also, if you are able to be online at the same time as they are, you will be able to see their thinking as they move through the task in real time and you could make suggestions as they work (assessment *for*). If you are not working online, students will produce paper copies of their edits and a final draft. Either way, you will be able to see if they are able to correctly reference material.

The Wiki article that students write at the end of this strategy is an ideal summative assessment task (assessment *of*) as they will need to demonstrate all the skills discussed in this strategy. Offering students the chance to peer and self-assess (assessment *as* and *for*) their article before you evaluate it will give them the opportunity to ensure they are giving you their best work. Before any of the student or teacher assessments take place you'll want to ensure that students are working with clear criteria which they will derive as part of their investigation into the article used in the first several steps of this strategy. Using the criteria provided by Wikipedia is a good starting place. 

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