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The Prestigious and the Predatory: Helping Online Students Navigate Open Education Source in a World of "Fake News"

Kathleen Hohenleitner PhD


University of Central Florida, Kathleen.Hohenleitner@ucf.edu

James Campbell PhD

University of Central Florida, James.Campbell@ucf.edu

John Raible MA

University of Central Florida, john.raible@ucf.edu

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The Prestigious and the Predatory: Helping Online Students Navigate Open Education Resources in a World of “Fake News”

Last summer at the Faculty Institute, two colleagues and I worked on a project exploring the trouble that Open Educational Resources pose for online instructors and students. I teach a gateway course for English majors that introduces students to interpretation, as well as to scholarly research and writing about literature. I’ve found students ill-prepared to do research and myself not entirely prepared to help them navigate OER versus discipline-specific databases such as the MLA Database. So I worked on a module with a fellow instructor, an Instructional Designer, and initially with a librarian to create an online module about OER resources, some of which are quite credible.

One of the biggest hurdles instructors face teaching digital natives is convincing them of the value of using library databases as opposed to simply googling. This challenge is not made easier by Open Education Resources, which are typically easier for students to access than the MLA Database, the standard scholarly database for research in Literature. OER have positive effects on the distribution of information in that they democratize the process of retrieving peer-reviewed sources from the web. But they also permit “predatory” journals to thrive. These journals, which literally profit from faculty’s need to publish by charging for articles to be reviewed, often offer a “peer-reviewed” process that is defined somewhat differently from that of a more credible journal, and publish articles too quickly for them to have been carefully vetted. ¹

¹ For a maintained list of predatory journals, see <https://beallslist.weebly.com/>

My peers and I developed a module through which students can navigate OER, benefiting from its accessibility while also developing critical analytic skills to use in reading any article retrieved electronically. In a world where “fake news” is a legitimate concern, I find this critical skill to be most important, particularly for online students.

The first battle I had to wage was with JSTOR. Students love it because every article it offers is delivered as full text, but its scope is too wide to be useful to begin preliminary research on Literary Criticism. For example, a student intending to write about marriage in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* came up with the following articles:

- D. Manning and J. A. Cohen, "Teenage Cohabitation, Marriage, and Childbearing," *Population Research and Policy Review*, vol. 34, (2), pp. 161-177, 2015.

- Grello, Catherine M., et al. “No Strings Attached: The Nature of Casual Sex in College Students.” *The Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2006, pp. 255–267.

I’m still at a loss to how a search of “Jane Austen” and “Marriage” brought these articles up, but it should not be necessary to explain even to beginning English majors that neither of these articles are literary criticism and will not be helpful in an essay on *Pride and Prejudice*.

I required them to use the MLA Database as part of the assignment’s rubric in order to direct them to literary critical sources exclusively. JSTOR can nonetheless be useful in tracking down full text of sources that they’ve identified in the MLA Database, but students are more ensured of finding literary criticism if they start with MLA.

I also created a topic assignment, which a lot of people who teach this course also use. Students need to submit a topic (not a thesis!), a list of five sources, and a paragraph on where

they think their essay is headed. Despite requiring students to use the MLA Database, they still constantly submitted googled articles that were retrieved from the web. I understand the students' frustration, because many of the articles have been illegally posted on the web and do also appear in the MLA database. Why shouldn't they simply google, if googling is so much easier than logging in to the database? But my goal is bigger than retrieval. I want them to learn to evaluate.

With this goal in mind, we created a rubric by which sources could be evaluated. This rubric is now available in the Creative Commons. In addition to considering the usefulness of the article to the existing literary conversation, students must consider the source: the journal. We were shocked when we looked further into some Open Education Sources. Some had phone numbers, which, when we called, were out of service. Some used gmail addresses, which diminished their credibility because if they were indeed formally associated with the

university they claimed to be associated with, they would have had “edu” suffixed on their email addresses.

One particularly generic title claimed to have noted theorist Gayatri Spivak on its Advisory Board; one wonders whether Professor Spivak has any idea that her name was being used in this way. Another rather ghoulish example included a lesser well known but respectable critic who had been dead for about 5 years. Either they failed to take his name off the masthead, or worse, added it after his death. Either way, their credibility diminished with that discovery.

It’s very difficult to teach students to vet such sources online. They may not know who Spivak is. The internet might not have updated websites that reveal if certain critics are alive or still publishing. I tried to warn students to be wary of “generic” sounding names of journals, such as *Women’s Writing*, but then I had someone doubt the credibility of *English Literary*

History, which is equally generic, but surely credible. Then I appeared to be contradicting myself.

Our rubric attempts to bring their focus to the submission practices of the journals. I created a video to help walk them through the process of vetting sources, and I give them specially chosen sources to help them see the differences. First I ask them to search the journal in the Directory of Open Access Journals. I do not find this database intuitive to use myself, but if a journal is credible, it's usually listed in this Database. This Database will assign an ISSN to every article, so that number itself lends credibility to a citation.

If a journal's submission process is extremely quick, and requires a fee, it becomes suspect. On the video I show them an example of a journal called *Women's Writing* that charges \$3,000 to review an article. I imagine that if a critic is paying that price, not many articles get refused from this journal.

Finally, I ask them to consider the credibility of the argument. Does the subject matter contribute significantly to the existing conversation on this text? Does the actual document look as if it were hastily produced? Are there typos? The video includes an example of typos with a misspelled character name.

For the assignment that will encourage students to practice this evaluation, I ask them to read Sandra Gilbert's famous essay on *Jane Eyre*, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress." This challenging but important essay from 1979 serves as their standard example of peer-reviewed scholarship. They participate in a discussion of Gilbert's feminist reading of *Jane Eyre*. The following week, they read "Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness" by Elizabeth Donaldson. This Open Education Resource from 2002 challenges Gilbert's use of the term "madwoman" from

the perspective of the newly emerging field of Disability Studies. I ask them to evaluate Donaldson's argument, and to consider whether her challenge to Gilbert's use of the term "madwoman" renders Gilbert's argument less credible. My goal is for them to see the academic conversation at work, and to realize how one critic can build on what another has done without negating the earlier critic's contributions to the field. Most of them find Donaldson's essay credible, according to the Open Access Rubric.

Their final essay, which is read in conjunction with Donaldson's, is "Baked Nectar and Frosted Ambrosia: The Unifying Power of Cake in *Great Expectations* and *Jane Eyre*" by Alexander Barron. Also an Open Education Source from a journal called *The Victorian*, this article is generally easier for the students to read critically. Some get very excited about the idea of cake because it's accessible, but Barron's argument is a bit circuitous and doesn't really prove anything profound

about the reading of either text. They are quick to identify his gmail address; some even question the validity of Breadloaf College of English (which actually is a legitimate organization associated with Middlebury College). One student even went so far as to critique his “gratuitous quoting of plot summary” which really made me proud. Unfortunately, she was the exception.

I want to be clear that I don’t intend to dismiss the work of a critic like Barron categorically. I merely want my students to realize the difference between his random discussion of one image in two novels versus Donaldson’s engagement in the ongoing literary conversation throughout the past 30 years in feminist literary criticism.

This process would be much easier in a face-to-face class. I could assign the three articles, and critique them in class. I could dispel misconceptions immediately and tactfully during a live discussion. Online, sometimes someone has already posted

a full endorsement of the intellectual profundity of the cake article before I or other students have the chance to rebut it, and then I never know for sure if that student will ever revisit the board to read the continued conversation. Teaching research online is critical for English majors and it's not fair to dismiss Open Education Sources because many are worthwhile and accessible to undergraduates. Even in the MLA Database, sub par articles are catalogued. Students must develop the ability to read critically and evaluate an argument's credibility. Ultimately it comes down to asking the "so what?" question: Why is this argument important?