Teaching Students to Evaluate E-Reference Sources with Moodle Forums

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SAIL, April 7, 2011
Texas A&M University at Galveston
California Maritime Academy

- Vallejo, California
- Established 1939 to train merchant marine officers
- Joined California State University system in 1995
- 850 students
LIB100: Information Fluency in the Digital Age

- Semester-long, 2 units
- Required for two majors
- Approx. 24 students per class
- Primarily freshmen
- Covers all five ACRL Information Literacy standards
What’s an online forum doing in a real-time, in-person class?
ACRL Standard 3.6

The information literate student validates understanding and interpretation of the information through discourse with other individuals, subject-area experts, and/or practitioners.

Outcome 2: Participates in class-sponsored electronic communication forums designed to encourage discourse on the topic.
ACRL Standard 5.2

Follows laws, regulations, institutional policies, and etiquette related to the access and use of information resources.

*Outcome 1: Participates in electronic discussions following accepted practices (e.g. “Netiquette”).*
LIB 100: Information Fluency in the Digital World

This class will provide students with an introduction to research, information management and computing technology skills that are fundamental for success in the college environment and beyond. Students will explore the research process, develop efficient search methodologies in an online environment, and learn to critically evaluate resources. Simultaneously, students will receive an orientation to the use of Microsoft Office programs, with special attention paid to information management, critical-thinking and problem-solving.

- News forum
- Syllabus
- Pre-Survey
- Midterm
- Learning Styles Survey - Anonymous
- Post-Survey
# First two forum assignments (worth 5%)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Fears</th>
<th>What Actually Happened</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students wouldn’t do it</td>
<td>• 85% participation rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students would post inappropriate comments</td>
<td>• Nothing inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students would post minimal, rote comments</td>
<td>• Most students posted substantial comments that showed engagement with readings</td>
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Unexpected benefits

• Insight into student experiences and preconceptions

• Jump-started in-class discussion
Challenge: Teaching students to find & evaluate subject-specific reference
Wikipedia
“Rolls Royce of Reference?”

“Considering the expense of these titles, the download figures are disappointing for a large university with about forty thousand students, 25 percent of whom are postgraduates. Clearly many of our online subject encyclopedias are not earning their keep.”

Reference & User Services Quarterly, 2010
Fishing Hole Scouting Report

1. Paired students up

2. Gave each pair a topic to background in class

3. Assigned one recommended reference source, to be compared to Wikipedia

4. Students wrote evaluations in forum
Topics

- Malpasset Dam Collapse
- Admiral Nelson
- Earthquakes in California
- Alternative Energy
- Role of Women in modern Japan
- Hyundai Merchant Marine Corporation
- Global Warming
- Marine Propulsion
- Confucianism in South Korea
- Ballast Water and Invasive Species
- Whaling in Antarctica
Evaluation Criteria

• Successful location of answers
• Currency
• Ease of use
• Any other pro/con comments
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Guide Title</th>
<th>Comparison</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lonely Planet Japan vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ei Compendex vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beyond Failure vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<td>Mergent Online</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oxford Dictionary of World Religions vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<td>CIA World Factbook vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<tr>
<td>CQ Researcher vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encyclopedia of Maritime History vs. Wikipedia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Factiva vs. Wikipedia</td>
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</table>
Results/Accessment: Fall 2010

• About 1/3 of students preferred the librarian-approved source over Wikipedia

• About 1/3 preferred Wikipedia

• About 1/3 saw benefit to using both

And... I learned how students actually use the reference sources I recommend!
Overall, student preferences were independent of format.

Some students considered print sources easier to use:

“I think the book, Lonely Planet Japan was more helpful than Wikipedia. I first searched Wikipedia and it took me awhile to find relevant information. Wikipedia had information that was on a more broad scale. My partner used the book first and she found information right away.”

Others considered print too slow:

“You can't exactly go Ctrl+F on a book and I actually had to look for my keyword in the index. We still do that in the 21st Century?”
Corresponds to recent research on attitudes towards e-books:

Students and faculty broke down into four types:

- Book Lovers
- Technophiles
- Pragmatists
- Printers

*College & Research Libraries, March 2011*
Students also commented on:

- **Organization**
  - ...very easy to use as it was organized in tabs and sub-tabs for quick access to precise information.

- **Audience**
  - If you read Wikipedia from a professional’s point of view, then it would not satisfy their needs.

- **Source authority**
  - The pros about the site is that it’s not just edited by anyone with a computer.
What needed refining?

- Students only learned about one source
- To benefit from the “knowledge-base” created by forums, more information needed to be shared in class during debriefing.
- A few reference sources just didn’t work for this exercise.
<table>
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<th>Topic</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Handbook of Energy Efficiency vs. Wikipedia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Admiral Nelson</td>
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<tr>
<td>CountryWatch vs. Wikipedia</td>
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Results/Assessment: Spring 2011

- About 2/3 students preferred the non-Wikipedia source
- About 1/5 preferred Wikipedia
- Again, preference was independent of format
What does the Fishing Hole exercise accomplish?

• Introduces students to reliable, authoritative alternatives to Wikipedia

• Gives them a successful experience using a non-Wikipedia source, either print or e-reference

• Acknowledges that Wikipedia is a contender, in terms of convenience
Why were online forums more effective than take-home bibliographies?
One of the major findings:

“... evaluation is far from being a solitary task for most students. When conducting research for course work, students most frequently turned to instructors (49%) for help. During research for personal use, students relied on support from friends and/or family (61%).”

Moodle forums are social
Still much work to do to make e-Reference as findable as Wikipedia.
Questions or Comments?

