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Of course it's true! I found it on the Internet: Fostering Children's Online Critical Literacy

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Critically literate Internet surfers have developed thinking skills that prevent them from being duped by online information and experiences.

Few educators would argue that our students' increased use of Web-based resources demands an increase in the development of their critical thinking skills. But just what do we mean by critical thinking skills, or critical literacy? For this chapter, **critical literacy** is defined as a person's ability to actively reflect upon and question the subjective nature of information and beliefs when making reasoned judgments and (if necessary) taking related actions. Such a definition draws heavily upon the social constructivist literacy theory proposed by P. Freire in *Education for Critical Consciousness*. The theory claims that the fostering of reflective language and thought "challenges the status quo in an effort to discover alternative paths for self and social development" (Shor, 1999). Essentially, critically literate Internet surfers have developed thinking skills that prevent them from being duped by online information and experiences; instead of giving the Internet power and control over their online experiences, they use their reasoning skills (the ability to determine the validity, credibility, and authenticity of information) to inform and control their Web-based explorations, decisions, and actions.

Teacher-librarians are no strangers to developing their student's critical literacy skills. For years they have developed tools and school library learning experiences aimed at helping students grapple with the construction and legitimacy of information in books, videos, television shows, posters, and more. These efforts continue today and have been expanded. They have become the backbone of a school's critical literacy program aimed at challenging the notion that "all information on the Web is true." In this chapter, we present practical instructional resources and examples that promote students' Web-based critical literacy skills.

The Need for Online Critical Literacy

"More than two thirds of school aged children retrieving information from the Internet do not check the information for credibility, reliability or authenticity."

—Media Awareness Network,
2001

The Internet has quickly become a resource that teachers and students turn to first. Studies by Ipsos and the Kaiser Family Foundation, both in 2003, report that 88 percent of Canadian and 96 percent of U.S. secondary students have either accessed the Internet for research or for enjoyment. Also, the number of schools connected to the Internet is now 80 percent in Canada and 99 percent in the United States (see Statistics Canada, 2002; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Contributing factors may be government initiatives to improve school Internet access, the

Information Challenges Facing Children Accessing Internet Information

- stereotyping
- violence
- online hate
- unethical views
- harassment
- unreliable information
- invasion of privacy
- pornography
- online crime
- false arguments

estimated 45 billion Web sites from which to find online information (Zakon, 2004), and the dramatic decrease in computer prices.

Unfortunately, a 2001 study from the Media Awareness Network indicates that more than two-thirds of school-aged children do not check Internet information for credibility, reliability, or authenticity; it also reports that one-third of secondary students believe that all Internet information is true. These assumptions and uncritical Web-surfing practices have serious implications when a student accesses Web sites containing “challenging information,” such as sophisticated advertising, negative or destructive values, and incorrect information (see list at left). The need to develop students’ skills in authenticating Internet content is a great impetus for educators to work with online information experts, like the teacher-librarian.

Authenticating Internet Site Information

North American teacher-librarians have been developing children’s abilities to authenticate resources for decades. **Authenticating**, or the ability to discern fact from fiction, is a theme fully developed across most K–12 curricula. (Unlike resource assessment, which is aimed at determining the overall value or significance of a resource, resource authentication is focused specifically on proving a resource’s genuineness or authority.) Nowhere, though, is the ability to determine the truth more essential than in the “wilds” of the Internet. Educators often ask these two questions about authenticating Internet sites:

- “When should teachers begin developing students’ online critical literacy?”
- “How do we teach students how to authenticate Internet information?”

The time to start is now, and the younger the better. In *Growing Up Wired*, the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that by 2003, 70 percent of children were coming to school familiar with using computers and 91 percent were watching two or more hours of television a day. This high exposure to screen media at such an early age indicates that educators can never start too early in developing children’s ability to discern truth from deception.

Fortunately, there are many resources to aid educators in this endeavor. The following pages present three examples of K–12 classroom activities used by teacher-librarians working with teachers in developing students’ abilities to authenticate online materials.

Criteria For Evaluating Internet Resources

Source: Adapted from the Internet Resource Evaluation Criteria (Resource Sheet 12) – School Libraries in Canada 2001, Vol. 20, No. 4. The Ethics of Information Use

Name: _____

URL: http://_____

Title: _____

<i>Criterion</i>	Yes	No	Why
<p><i>Authority</i></p> <p>Is it clear who is responsible for the contents of the page? (organization's name)</p> <p>Is there a way of verifying the legitimacy of the page's sponsor? (phone number, address, something other than e-mail address?)</p> <p>Is it clear who wrote the material and are the author's qualifications clearly stated?</p> <p>Is the material protected by copyright and is the copyright holder named?</p>			
<p><i>Accuracy</i></p> <p>Are the sources for any factual information clearly listed so they can be verified?</p> <p>Is the material free of grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors?</p> <p>Is it clear who has the responsibility for the accuracy of the content of the material?</p> <p>If charts or graphs are included, are they clearly labeled and easy to read?</p> <p>Is the information valuable and/or appropriate to your task?</p>			

Criterion	Yes	No	Why
<p><i>Objectivity or Bias</i></p> <p>Does the site rely on loaded language or broad, unsubstantiated statements?</p> <p>Is emotion used as a means of persuasion?</p> <p>Does the site offer more than one viewpoint?</p> <p>Are there links to other or alternative viewpoints?</p>			
<p><i>Currency</i></p> <p>Are there dates on the page to indicate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • when the page was written? • when the page was first placed on the Web? • when the page was last revised? <p>Are there any other indications that the material is kept current?</p> <p>If graphs or charts are included, is it clearly stated when the data were gathered?</p>			
<p><i>Coverage</i></p> <p>Does the information presented seem to be complete?</p> <p>Is the information consistent with what you already know or have found in other sources?</p> <p>Does the site include a paragraph that explains what its purpose is? (to entertain, explain, advertise, persuade, or inform)</p> <p>Are there links to other sites to support or enhance the information presented?</p>			