Evaluating Online Information and Sources

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UKLA

Introduction

It is now widely accepted that information is essential to the fundamental skills of learning and gaining knowledge. It provides the raw material for pupils to:

- tackle assignments at school
- find things out about hobbies and matters of personal interest
- understand issues that affect the world and them personally
- make the right decisions with regard to, for example, their futures and items they might want to buy, either in the shops or online.

In adulthood, we need information:

- when studying for degrees and other qualifications
- to enable us to solve everyday problems that emerge in our lives
- to help us update our skills and retrain when jobs and the workplace change
- to make informed decisions when we vote and take part in democratic processes.

In previous eras, one of the key information challenges for the individual lay in finding material to suit their purposes. Today, with the widespread availability of the World Wide Web, locating information has become much easier. However, as there is so little in the way of quality control on the Internet, a significant problem is that of identifying the best and most suitable material for meeting any specific need. Thus, one of the biggest ongoing concerns for educators who support pupils in finding and using information nowadays is how best to help them to appraise the material they access. The importance of evaluation in the electronic environment is highlighted by initiatives such as the British Computing Society's *Digital Literacy for Life Programme*, which features one of the techniques presented in this minibook (British Computing Society, 2013).

The chapters that follow address the particular skill of evaluating information. Specifically, the focus lies in the appraisal of material online and for school purposes where 'high stakes' are involved, especially academic success. Many of the issues raised can also apply to the use of paper materials and

be extended beyond the curriculum, to, for example, finding out about matters of personal interest. The title of this minibook refers to 'sources'. In broad terms, a source may be regarded as a means by which information is provided to others. Books, pamphlets and leaflets - and indeed people - may be considered to constitute information sources but we will particularly concentrate here on digital, Web-based, documents.

Chapter 1 explores the placement of information evaluation in relation to the whole spectrum of information skills, before briefly establishing its role in other contexts, specifically those of problem solving, critical thinking, reading strategies and the National Curriculum. Discussion follows on what research has revealed about the tendencies of young people with regard to assessing information and sources, and why, for so many, such evaluation seems a major challenge.

The second half of the minibook has a more practical focus, with the emphasis moving to activities that may usefully be carried out with young people. They are aimed at upper primary and, especially, secondary level. Part Two begins by proposing a ten-point learning programme whose stages progressively develop the learners' skills in evaluating information. After presenting this scheme, we draw attention to how one of the main strategies often employed in education - that of prepackaging information for immediate use - can have a significantly detrimental effect on the promotion of young people's information skills. If provision of this kind is offered routinely there is scant opportunity for pupils to learn from the modelling of good information practice by a capable adult or peer working with them. Chapter 4 describes an activity that affords a non-teacher-based approach to how information evaluation may be modelled. This practical section is concluded with a chapter that takes the concept of source appraisal far beyond the principle that material can be assessed according to predetermined criteria and introduces the notion of meta-evaluation.

With its blend of theory and practice, this minibook will appeal to anyone who takes an interest in now young people find and use information and is especially concerned with helping them to make better informed decisions as to which material should be accepted for their purposes and which should be rejected.

Part One **Theory and Literature**

Chapter 1

The nature of information evaluation

Information evaluation defined and explained

Information literacy (IL) refers to the knowledge, skills and understanding required by an individual if they are to recognise a need for information, search for it successfully and put it to use effectively and ethically. Many modern perspectives on IL stress the importance, within this overall set of processes, of evaluating the information that is retrieved. It is widely accepted that a lot of dubious material is available via the Internet. The nature of much of the poorest quality material that can be found on the Web is well expressed by Miller and Bartlett (2012), who succinctly highlight the prevalence in this environment of 'lazy mistakes, selective half-truths, deliberate propaganda, misinformation, disinformation and general nonsense' (p. 36). The availability of such material is indicative of a key problem - the Web is generally lacking in gatekeepers who would filter out information that does not meet minimum standards; users therefore have to play the gatekeeping role themselves.

It would be unwise, however, to believe that the need to evaluate information is an entirely modern concern and has arisen only with the growth of information that has accompanied the emergence of the Internet. Indeed, over thirty years ago, Marland (1981) outlined the importance of evaluating information against the criteria of:

- appropriateness in width of scope
- suitability for the individual's purpose
- relevance
- authority (e.g. with regard to the author or editor)
- reliability
- up-to-dateness
- accuracy
- bias
- level (p. 32).