

CHARACTERISTICS OF A QUALITY EDUCATIONAL WEBSITE

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One of the most important factors in determining whether or not any lessons you do with the Internet are successful is the quality of the websites you use. It is very hard to have a meaningful lesson if all the sites you find contain no real information or, even worse, completely false information. As teachers, we should always look at any websites we want our students to see before they do. Be a critical website watchdog. This is especially crucial for younger students who will be unable to critically assess these websites and frequently accept everything they see or hear on a website as the truth. Use your "teacher's intuition." What should we look for in a good educational website?

Here is a little way for you to remember what to look for when assessing the quality of individual websites. Try judging sites by using the "Four A's" of good website design. Look to see that websites are Accessible, Accurate, Appropriate, and Appealing. Evaluate any website on these four criteria and you'll have a pretty good idea if you've got a good website on your hands.

Accessibility

If you want to use a website with your students, you have to be sure it is there for them to use. Just because it was there when you checked a month ago, do not assume it will be there when your students try to look at it. The computer that hosts that website could be turned off or crashed, or the website could be gone altogether. The only way to find out if it is working is to check it out yourself beforehand.

Speed is another issue in determining accessibility. You may find a fantastic website but it takes 10 minutes for each page to load on your computer. Do not waste your students' time waiting for pages to load when you can find another website that loads much faster. It's probably a good idea to have a backup website or two in case the fantastic website you looked at yesterday is mysteriously gone or running painfully slow when your students go there. Believe it, these things do happen!

Be sure to browse the website thoroughly. Just because the first page works, don't assume all the links to other pages do as well. The entire website should be accessible, as well as links to other pages.

When assessing Accessibility, you also need to consider whether your students will be able to navigate through the website to get the information they need. Some websites can be too confusing for young students to use. Determine whether or not the time you and your students spend trying to move throughout a website is worth the information you will find there.

Accuracy

One of the first facts about the Internet is that anyone can make a web page. This includes experts in a particular field, people with no clue of what they are writing about, and everyone in between. That being said, the Internet is still a tremendous resource of information on just about any subject. Once again, until your students are prepared to analyze websites critically, you really need to visit all websites before your students do. If you know a lot about a particular subject, determining whether or not a website is factually correct is fairly easy. However, if you and your students are covering a topic for the first time, you may not know if the facts you are reading are based on the latest theory or some person's deluded opinion on the subject!

Try to determine who the author of a website is. If a website is created by an expert in his field, you can be pretty sure the content is going to be accurate and up to date. Websites created by individuals are harder to evaluate, but often just as informative. If you are not sure whether someone's website is accurate, try to compare it to other websites in the same subject area. Often when looking at a website, you can pick up on an individual's bias. As a rule, this is a good way to determine the author's purpose.

Again, don't assume everything you see is totally accurate. Just as you would not want students to use one book source for a report, you should never rely on one website for all your information, no matter how accurate you believe it to be. Compare and contrast it against what you know, what other websites say, and what other types of sources say. Teaching your students this critical analysis of websites may be the most crucial Internet skill you help them learn.

Appropriate

To judge the appropriateness of any website, you need to have a good understanding of your students. Websites range from ones with many pictures and little if any text, to text-only documents full of concepts and information. Depending on the grade level and ability of your students, one website on a particular subject may be better for them than another. Especially look for sites that facilitate learning or instruction through interactivity. You won't know this though until you visit the websites and determine which ones are best suited for your students.

There are few things to consider when judging whether a website is appropriate. First, try to determine the website's intended audience. Second, read the language the website uses and ask yourself if your students will be able to follow. Are the terms too scientific? Are explanations clear and concise? Are pictures or diagrams clearly explained and connected to the content discussed at the website? Does the website talk down to the students? Finally, be sure the website provides information on the topic it is supposed to be about! This sounds obvious, but many websites start out discussing one topic, and then quickly digress to other, unrelated ones.

Appealing

An appealing website is basically put together well and easy to follow. Just as a website with broken links is frustrating, so is a website that is hard to read. Students are going to have a hard time staying focused if they are spending huge amounts of time struggling to read a website with a dark background and black text, font styles that are too hard to follow, or minuscule text and pictures. On the other hand, if the website is colorful, easy to read, full of graphics, and fun to use, your students will probably enjoy looking at it. The information will be clearly organized, easier for them both to read and understand, and most importantly, "user friendly." The appeal of a text-only website is very low, especially for students from the lower grades or with only basic reading comprehension abilities.

If a website is too slow or has many broken links, the frustration when trying to use it might outweigh any value you could get from the website. There will always be mediocre websites which you might use that have incredible factual content that you could not find anywhere else and that's okay. However, if a website is poorly designed and hard to use, save yourself some trouble and find an alternate site.

Remember, the key to evaluating any website is with you. You have to visit the website and determine whether or not the website offers something for your students. Always check out any website before you plan to use it with your class. Have a backup website or two in case the one you wanted to see goes down. Decide if the website has a good content and whether or not that content is presented in a way that

is fun and easy to understand by you and your students. And finally, teach your students the Four A's so they know a good website is one that is Accessible, Accurate, Appropriate, and Appealing. This makes everyone a better consumer of the Internet and your students' adventures on the Internet will be a more productive and rewarding experience.