Search Engine Analysis: Seek and Destroy

Michael Adams, Grade 7-9 Teacher, Coralwood Adventist Academy, Alberta

The phrase 'Search and Destroy' has been used widely within the military sciences and the para-military wannabes. Imagine if you will that you are Navy Seal operative on a mission to rid the world of evil and deadly terrorists, those who would endanger the safety of the free world. Ah yes, a simple enough mission if those terrorists were not in hiding. So how will you find those evil ones? You wouldn't just go out and randomly look for them under any rock or behind any tree…would you? Of course you wouldn't! If you were a trained Navy Seal operative, you would probably first equip yourself with the right armaments and then find out as much information as you probably can about those terrorists and then begin your mission.
Well, the same applies to working with the Internet and searching on the web.

Let us now change our situation, you really are not a Navy Seal operative (you just have an over active imagination). You are actually a teacher who wants to desperately use the Internet to find resources on the web. What do you do? Well, the first thing you need to do is arm yourself with the right weapon/ tools. Or more precisely you first need to use the right search engine. Think of a search engine as that navigational tool which will lead you to resources flowing with milk and honey. In other words whatever it is that you are looking for on the web.

As the Master Teacher that you are you must adequately plan your lessons. You are frustrated with all your resources and feel that those resources do not have that special something that once opened the eyes of your beloved students. Why? Simply put, they are too old. The information contained in your resources is out of date. You are teaching a unit in science, "Environmental Interactions". You want your students to truly understand the importance of human impact on endangering wildlife. You know there are plenty of resources available through the Internet. How do you get them? You have a search engine to use. The next step as you have been told is to make a list of exactly what information that you want to find. When collecting this information be specific, identify important concepts and the correct terms to identify those concepts, consider synonyms of those terms, also know the order the terms should appear.

What next? In your search engine you know where to enter the terms…in the search box. As you type your terms in the box you see a link that reads, 'search tips'. You follow the link and learn that you can use operators to further intensify your search. Operators such as "+" or "-" signs, quotes, commas, pipes (| --this is a pipe it is found above the backslash on most regular keyboards), and colons. [I can't emphasize enough that if you don't know how to effectively use a search engine, make sure you take the link that explains how to use it. It may take some time but hey, at least you have learned something. No matter how old you are education is invaluable.] Correct use of these operators will help to further specify your topic and reduce your chances of getting lost on the web. There is an incredible amount of information on the web so be careful as to not get distracted. Hence, the warning to be specific in your search.

When using a search engine you can be further specific by telling the search engine where exactly to

search. You can tell the search engine to search the web, companies, or newsgroups. Also you can be subject or community specific. Infoseek (changed to "go.com"), is one search engine that allows you to be subject or community specific. Since your topic is environmental science, you can click on the appropriate subject. In this case it would be Science or you can click on the Education community. The nice thing about Infoseek that when your results are displayed it will give you a percentage of how close that particular result matches the terms you have entered.

So you like using Infoseek, huh? Well, Infoseek is not bad, it's pretty good. While doing your search you found lots of excellent information, but you also found that much of your information was US based. You live in Canada (and by golly you are tired of all that American input that is ruining the fabric of Canadian identity), you want Canadian specific information. You relate your frustration to a colleague who directs you to some Canadian search engines that are also pretty good. She tells you to try either AltaVista or Canada.com. You were also told that AOLCanadaNetFind wasn't that bad. You're best bet for Canadian information would most likely be Canada.com.

You go home excited because you have actually "surfed the net" successfully. You can't wait to tell your wife but you realize that you are not married, (not that's a bad thing…), so you tell a friend. As you tell your friend, he suggests that next time you try using a meta-search engine. A what? A meta-search engine, such as Metacrawler. This type of search engine will actually pool results from other search engines. It takes the results that best fit your results and gives them to you.

Congratulations you have searched the web, newsgroups, companies, etc. Your mission is a success. You are duly appointed to the rank of Captain…but you're not a Navy Seal operative. But, you are a better teacher for using available technology.