

New Resources, New Selection Skills  
Head for the Edge, *Technology Connection*, April 1996

Twice this year I have been asked to give talks on "The Best of the Internet for Kids." After only very short consideration, I decided that this was an extremely daunting task. With the thousands? hundreds of thousands? millions? of Web sites alone available on the Internet, any short list which could be shared would have to be eclectic indeed, and shortly out of date. I compare giving such a talk as being asked to "booktalk a library."

It is certainly possible to share some exemplary sites for young people, whether those sites have been created specifically for young folks or are adult sites which are of use and interest. It's also worthwhile, I believe, to list a few "jump sites" to child- or school-oriented materials on the Internet. I suspect we all have our favorites like Uncle Bob's Kid's Page <<http://gagme.wwa.com/~boba/kids.html>> or kids.comm <<http://kids.com/>>. And given a lab for hands on training, time could not be better spent than finding, using and comparing search engines like Archie, Veronica, Yahoo, Lycos, and WebCrawler.

I submit, however, that in our roles as "instructional consultants," we should be helping teachers and students develop usable evaluative standards for Internet resources instead of just pointing out some good ones. Haven't we always prided ourselves on teaching folks how to fish rather than simply providing the fish?

Below are a few standards for evaluating good World Wide Web sites I share when asked to give those "Best of the Internet" talks. This list is by no means exclusive, and you'll quickly note that many of the standards apply to all information resources.

1. Does the source have some subject authority? Is there actual content at the site? My advice is that if you have descended three levels and are still asking "Where's the beef?" move on. The author should clearly state his credentials, and if the information is critical, the credentials need to be verified. There are no editors on the Internet to help filter out the sludge.
2. Can the source be judged impartial? If this source is written or sponsored by a commercial sponsor, are we alert to bias? Do we apply the same standards to commercially sponsored Internet resources as we do to other commercially produced educational products? (Check out the "Code of Good Practice for Business-Sponsored Materials" written by the International Organization of Consumers Unions.)
3. Is the information timely? Does the page include the date of its last revision? It's surprising how many Internet files are birthed and then abandoned.
4. Is the site age appropriate for content and vocabulary? This one is as tricky for Web pages as it is for print materials. There are sites which have been created just for children, but are little more than blatant product endorsements which I would not select, while NASA and the Center for Disease Control have resources published for an adult audience which can provide excellent information for elementary students.

5. Is the site well organized? Are there links back to the home page from lower level pages? Does the homepage serve as an accurate table of contents to the rest of the site? Non-linear organizational structures still need a logical arrangement. Lengthy menus need sub-menus, pages need to be clearly categorized, and it's always nice when the topic of the page bears a resemblance to the category under which it was found. Pages themselves should be organized. Considerate Web page writers put links back to the site's homepage on every page at a site.
6. Are the links on the page to other sites relevant to the subject? Are the pages regularly checked to see if the links are still valid? Again, check for revision dates.
7. Does the site preserve bandwidth by using graphics to convey information and not just for visual appeal? Have 5-10K thumbnail graphics which link users to large picture files been provided for those of us with less than stellar connections to the Internet? Are large amounts of textual information divided into smaller pages for faster downloading?

Developing "selection" standards for Internet sites should be a natural for our profession. We need to start asking ourselves,

"What is it that makes a gopher useful?"

"How can I quickly tell if a newsgroup is worth following?"

"What criteria can I use if asked to recommend a listserv?"

"Are there identifiable qualities of a good e-mail message?"

And more importantly, we should be teaching our students to ask such questions.