

To Google or Not To Google: Is That the Question?

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Google is king. Long live the king! Think about it-the king is the ruler of a vast domain, as is Google, however, the analogy still holds true when you select a single “subject”. A king does not know his individual subjects very well, and Google often does not give students individual educational Web sites very well either. Is Google an amazing tool? You bet! Is it set up to help students complete school assignments? Nooooo! That is simply not its lot in life. Even though Google is making a fantastic effort, the old adage still seems to hold true-“You can’t be everything to everyone.”

K-12 students are a unique audience for a search engine. Most of the time when kids have to do a search it is for some homework assignment. All teachers working with students have noticed the “floundering” that goes on when students try and search the Web to find sites that are current, relevant and easily usable. This floundering is not unique to grade school children, high school students have the same difficulty.

Basically, if you want to avoid wasting time many teachers give students the Web sites to use and call it good. However, that technique does not help students learn the skill of searching that they will need as life-long learners. All teachers need to help students understand how to search in an efficient way to find what they need as quickly as possible. What tool on the Internet will help students achieve this goal-**THE EDUCATIONAL SEARCH ENGINE**.

The educator who has been most involved in researching how students use the Internet is Dr. Jakob Nielsen. He has run several research projects following students as they use the Web. His

studies looked at students from grade one through high school. One finding needs to always stay with us: “The idea that children are masters of technology and can defeat any computer-related difficulty is a myth.” Indeed, he found that, “...children are incapable of overcoming many usability problems.” Here is a very brief summary of what he found as children try and search Web sites: (from “Kids Corner: Website Usability for Children, Jakob Nielsen’s Alertbox, April 14, 2002.

<http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20020414.html>)

- They are very conscious of age appropriateness of the site.
- They see “banner ads” as part of the content.
- They are helped by animation and sound effects
- They like to “mine-sweep” sites looking for places to click
- They do not know how to use the scroll bar effectively
- They are willing to read instructions.
- Students are easily frustrated for a variety of reasons

In general boys prefer sites that are less wordy. Girls want good instructions. Boys tend to use computers on their own, girls often go online with parents or friends.

I think we all realize that a huge problem for students trying to find good Web sites for school work is their inability to evaluate a Web site properly. This is something that all teachers need to help students work on, because evaluation can be content specific. Once, again if students find a site on the Web they think is good, it must be okay for homework because it’s on the Web.

Teachers, by in large, have to deal with the issue of time and that is what educational search engines were designed for-save the students time. Below are questions to ask yourself as you choose the search engines you think would be most helpful to your students.

1. Who is the author(s) of the search engine?
2. Are ads present on the search engine?

3. Is the criteria for choosing appropriate Web sites present and is that criteria easy to understand?
4. Is the site on the “free” Web or a subscription?
5. Is the site really edutainment masked as education?
6. Can you search by keywords and /or natural language? (Do you have to use Boolean operators?)
7. Is the usability age appropriate?
8. Is the site easy to navigate?
9. Is the site broken down by subject headings that are easy to use? Is the wording age-appropriate?
10. Does the site use appropriate and correct English?
11. Is the search engine’s interface mostly gender neutral?

Let’s look at some search engines and see how they fare when we apply our evaluation questions.

15. Google Education at:

<http://www.google.com/Top/Reference/Education>

14. Yahoo Education: <http://education.yahoo.com/reference>

13. Yahoo for Kids: <http://kids.yahoo.com>

12. Kids’ Search Tools: <http://www.rcls.org/search.htm>

11. Oracle ThinkQuest: <http://www.thinkquest.org>

10. Awesome Library:

<http://www.awesomelibrary.org/search.html>

9. Eduhound: <http://www.eduhound.com>

8. Education Planet: <http://www.educationplanet.com>

7. Education World: The Educator’s Best Friend:

<http://db.educationworld.com/perl/browse>

6. Ask Jeeves for Kids: <http://www.askkids.com>

5. Catholic Search Engine: <http://cath.com>

4. Internet Public Library: <http://www.ipl.org/div/subject>

3. Kidsclick.org: <http://www.kidsclick.org>

2. Librarian’s Index to the Internet: <http://www.lii.org>

I realize I am cheating here-The number one pick is an example of a subscription educational search engine. Many times it is true for education that you get what you pay for,

especially on the Web. (Purchased by AEA 10 for teachers and students, Fall, 2008)

1. Net Trekker:

<http://www.aea10.k12.ia.us/media/electronic.html>

Please think about how you set your students upon the Internet. You should be checking every year that they have the skills they need to find sites that they can use for homework, and choosing Web sites out of the top five picks above can guarantee them time saved and great sites that are “good to go” when they are doing homework.