Has the Use of the Internet Improved or Devalued Education in Schools?

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Within the past decade, the Internet has become more recognized as a research tool in schools. Educators seem to encourage the use of online research now more than ever.

However, this concern still runs through the mind of teachers, students and professionals: How viable is online research?

Concerns about Searching Online

The advancement of the Internet birthed the "Information Age." People can find the answer to just about any question by just typing in a few search words, but how reliable are online sites? Can they provide accurate reports for writing articles, conducting market research or completing science projects?

Some teachers, regardless of the grade they teach, discourage using websites as sources because they doubt the reliability of them. However, it depends on who runs the site and who writes the content placed on its pages.

For instance, most professional journals display content based on real clinical studies and cite experienced sources. Therefore, they usually earn respect from the community. Likewise, the websites run by well-known research organizations providing statistics from recent surveys also seem to gain trust of people fairly fast. Even some general educational sites run by medical centers seem to offer information people can trust.

Although heavily criticized, even popular sites like About.com Ehow, and Howstuffworks have some merit. After all, they serve people seeking practical help on any topic from how to fix computer errors to learning how to cook chicken. Many people turn to these sites to find out answers to some very interesting trivia questions, too.

Wikipedia is another popular site. Almost everyone uses it and relies on it, but how trustworthy is this online encyclopedia? One way to find out is to compare some of the information found on this site's pages with that found in traditional encyclopedias.

One study conducted by the Journal of Clinical Oncology does just that. Findings published in this periodical demonstrate that Wikipedia provides the same level of accuracy and depth as the Physician Data Query. Furthermore, a 2005 report indicates that the margin of error in Wikipedia articles compares quite closely to Britannica plus or minus a percent.

How to Determine Accuracy of Information

Online education in general has gained more respect within the past 10 years. The same is true of web-based resources, even ones that give out information for free. The fact that major search engines improved their algorithms has contributed to the improvement of data available online. However, people still need to know how to determine the credibility of a source.

These criteria will help researchers evaluate website information:

- It offers references to scholarly sources.
- Contact information is provided by site owner.
- The person or organization in charge of it updates it often.
- The information provided comes from an unbiased source.
- Content on it does not exist just for promotion.

- Site pages are well-organized and text is free of spelling and grammar mistakes.
- Writers who created the web page text use more formal language.
- No negative reports about false claims exist.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Research

The main advantage of using the Internet for research is that it shortens the time it takes to find specific information within pages of a book, magazine or newspaper. It also can save time when looking for general facts on a subject such as drug abuse statistics, medication side effects, or emergency preparedness steps.

On the other hand, if a person has no idea what search terms to use, it makes research more difficult. Either way, using the Internet to conduct academic research usually requires visiting government portals, non-profit sites and consumer report publications. On the contrary, sites that put up content just to make a sale usually appeal to the emotions instead of relying on facts.

Still, reference materials that previously showed up in library bookshelves now appear online. Using these resources can help all students, professors, and writers focus on what they do best — evaluate data and make reports.

Using web-based research tools can drastically reduce the time it takes to come to an educated conclusion about specific subjects. However, it usually requires making a careful analysis of where the information displayed on sites originates.