Learning Through Critical Literacy: Why Google is Not Enough
Bettna Fabos

There is a disturbing development on the information superhighway: most of the websites students now access for their projects are commercial (Ebersole, 2005, Fabos, 2004). This trend is exacerbated by the fact that students from junior high to university level conduct most of their research online. Students are consequently awash in commercial data, much of whose validity they don’t question and much of which they plagiarize (Rainie and Hitlin, 2005).

A heavily commercialized internet, of course, is no accident. The internet’s backbone was privatized in 1995; since then, powerful business interests have continued to leverage large parts of the Web towards commercial, not democratic purposes. The extensive public relations and advertising campaigns to get the internet in schools (1995-1998) was not much more than a means to increase household connectivity and thus create a viable commercial platform (Fabos, 2004; Stein, unpublished). Commercial search engines, the web’s most popular navigation tools, are perhaps the most egregious affront to the web’s educational potential. They fly in the face of impartial knowledge gathering—which we tell our students is the goal of academic research. Because of search engine’s extraordinary (and relatively recent) success at generating click-through rates (where banner advertisements continue to fail), search engines are the hottest properties on the Web, bringing highly targeted audiences to their clients. They are both the newest marketing strategy for advertisers, stacking their lists with paying customers, and some of the most used and trusted sites on the Web. Consequently, search engines effectively betray the trust of users, most of whom still believe that the first two pages of a search result list are the most relevant.

Meanwhile, students just want to search for “objective” information for most of their research projects. Not surprisingly they turn to commercial search engines for their ease, speed, and promise to provide “innovative, useful technologies that enable people to find, use, share, and expand knowledge” (Yahoo! Search, 2005). But since commercial search engines have largely replaced libraries as a venue for college student research (Griffiths & Brophy, 2005; Thompson, Martin, Richards & Branson 2003), the educational promise of the web—as it is used today in our secondary and higher education classrooms—is not being realized. It should come as no surprise that commercial sites—shopping sites, corporate public relations pages, industry-supported think tanks and organizations, and even uncritical, pro-business government reports—easily find their way into students’ fact-based research projects. Moreover, as search engines become more commercialized (as recent industry consolidation suggests), students will be accessing an increasingly limited array of information, not the “universe of knowledge” President Bill Clinton described in his 1997 State of the Union Address, which hyped the educational potential of the Internet.

1 To learn more about the public relations effort (by U.S. government and the telecommunications industry) to get schools wired, so as to build a critical mass for the commercial internet to thrive, refer to Fabos, B., Wrong Turn on the Information Superhighway: Education and the Commercialization of the Internet. New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 30-57.
What I will argue in the next few pages is the following: if students are going to depend so much on the web, we need to go beyond teaching students how to critically evaluate web information, a typical response in the age of internet commercialization. Students need to understand the commercial exigencies of the Web, and the fact that the medium is charged with social, political, and economic forces. But this is just the beginning. A more important move for educators is to steer students away from fact-based, “objective” research projects (most often researched online) and towards projects that help students understand that all information (web based and otherwise) is also charged with social, economic, and political contexts. To do this, educators must stop privileging the world of facts and “truth.” We must teach our students ideological constructs to raise the bar on educational inquiry and information access. And we must give our students assignments that focus on the analysis of ideas, encouraging them, at the same time, to come up with their own ideas, and their own concrete ideologies.

NEED NEW SUBHEAD
Web Page Evaluation as Training for Life (a suggestion, but would like to see much more pithy and energetic sub-heads)

University educators often say they are appalled at student research—much of it plagiarized from online sources (Ercegova and Richardson, 2004; Wood, 2004), much of it hapless and hurried and terrible. “Teachers tell horror stories about students who actually believed satirical articles from The Onion and used them as evidence in term papers,” Block (2002) writes. Professors and instructors typically blame student laziness and “the web” (it’s replaced books!). They put plagiarism clauses in their syllabi and, if time allows (and they’re adequately suspicious), they search the web for lifted paragraphs.

Educators have also begun to include web page evaluation skills (also called information literacy) in their curriculums and requirements. This initiative has come from librarians, mostly, and to a lesser extent, high school and college English teachers as part of research paper units. In the hopes that students put more objective, trusted resources into their reports, librarians are increasingly teaching students (often during library orientations) what librarians do: judge sources (in this case websites) according to established criteria: authorship, accuracy, objectivity, currency and coverage. By turning students into librarians, they surmise, they will enable them to weed out “untruthful” Web content on a page-by-page basis. Typical teachings go like this: Government sites (e.g. www.nih.gov) tend to objective; commercial sites (e.g., “obesity.com”) tend to want to sell you something in addition to offering often helpful information; home-built websites authored by individual people, especially those identified by a tilde (~) (e.g., http://www.uni.edu/~fabos) tend to be factually misleading or incredibly biased. Pages with grammatical errors, no dates, and strong opinions are especially suspect.

In this current discourse, web page evaluation skills are often referred to as “critical thinking,” an umbrella term that is loosely applied to a range of higher order thinking skills with regard to reading and producing texts. While critical thinking skills have long applied to print texts, the general consensus among educators and librarians is
that the Web, with its many varied and incongruent resources, necessitates critical thinking skills above traditional research skills.

The single, dominant theory of new information literacy within this particular body of literature can thus be summarized as follows: students develop critical thinking skills by determining whether a web text is high quality and “truthful” or low quality and “not truthful.” These skills—part of the liberal-humanist tradition—can then be translated to critically analyze other media. They also will lead to better student research papers, educators presume, because students will be able to select only those sources that are objective and therefore true.

As popular as these web page evaluation strategies have recently become (and as admirable as these efforts to improve student research are), there are some immediate drawbacks. First, many students who have learned these critical thinking skills, it seems, can’t be bothered: evaluation takes too much time. Beginning in Junior High, when they are looking up facts about tectonic plates and Maya Angelou, they are establishing their own evaluation shortcuts: a site is “good” depending on (a) how fast they can find the succinct fact or objective summary they are looking for, and (b) how sophisticated and accessible the design is—good design suggests time and effort were put into the site (Buschman and Warner, 2005; Fabos, 2004). By the time they reach college, most students are used to the idea that any fact will do so long as it seems correct. Indeed, fast facts, more often than not, easily satisfy the requirements of students’ fact-based assignments.

Second, it appears that even students armed with web page evaluation skills simply don’t trust their ability to discern factual information on topics with which they are unfamiliar (Watson, 2001). As such, they easily fall prey to the “credibility aesthetic” of professionally-crafted web sites that appear as legitimate and objective as possible. Whether students care about the quality of their sources or not, current web page evaluation criteria do little to prevent a student from thinking a public relations page with a well-crafted design and the aesthetics of objectivity in place, is valid and factual, especially when other like sites corroborate the information (Fabos, 2004). Evidence also suggests that students are just fine with the results they are getting, rating their internet research abilities highly. Meanwhile, a significant gap is appearing between their own evaluation of their research skills and the actual quality of their work (Buschman and Warner, 2005).

With more classroom time spent on web page evaluation, especially in secondary grades, most educators believe (or hope) that these drawbacks can be overcome. There is a third and even more significant drawback to web page evaluation, however, which is drastically overlooked by current web page evaluation practices: the entire web, at least the way students currently access it—via commercial search engines—is inherently biased from the onset. Commercial search engines stack the first 2-3 pages of their search result lists (the most “relevant” sites) with web sites favoring commercial enterprise. Even Google, the only search engine not using paid placement strategies in its result lists (at least for now) is susceptible to commercial intrusion. Because it bases its search algorithm on link relevance (the more links to a particular site, the more relevant it is), Google is a victim to the many web sites that invest in schemes to increase the number of outside pages linking to them. Moreover, countless Search Engine Optimization (SEO)
companies work around the clock trying (successfully) to crack and undermine Google’s algorithm, a persistent problem for Google’s engineers (Harmon, 2004). Accordingly, students armed with web page evaluation skills (those that choose to use them, that is) can evaluate each particular site for its usefulness, but if they persist in seeing search engines as neutral navigation tools they are searching with blinders on, never approaching the possible breadth of a particular topic.

For these reasons, it’s important to extend web page evaluation practices to the entire web. Educators should begin to de-mystify search engines as the invincible tool for the information superhighway; they should show their students how search engine commercialism impedes the quest for impartial information. Critical discussions about search engines could begin by delineating the three different branches of the search engine industry, a discussion that would help students understand how small the search world really is:

1. **Directories** are often mistaken for (and predated) search engines, but are nothing more than comparatively small databases that may or may not feed a search engine. Although librarians were the first to catalogue sites into directories, Yahoo! developed the first commercial directory in 1994 by hiring numerous editors to compile web pages and place them into logical categories. Other online directories followed Yahoo!’s model, like the Australian-based directory Looksmart, which launched in 1996. Another significant directory (especially to the search engine industry) is the Open Directory Project, which was launched in 1998. This enormous non-commercial endeavor, constructed entirely by a global army of volunteers (or as they are referred to, “net-citizens”) is by far the largest directory on the Web and continues to grow in size every day. This directory is the primary database used by all search engine providers.

2. **Search engine providers** (there are only a handful—Google, Teoma, Inktomi, AlltheWeb, and AltaVista) power most searches on the web. These companies own and manage web indexes—huge database of web pages—and have developed complicated algorithms for searching these databases. These companies offer impartial searches (as opposed to commercial searches, below) based on their own unique formula of site relevance. They syndicate their services to search portals.

3. **Commercial search providers** (e.g., Overture, Google Adwords) manage advertiser indexes. They broker commercial sponsorships for web search results and, like search engine providers, syndicate their services to search portals. Their services include sponsored links (which appear on top, below, and on the sides of search result lists; paid placement links (which appear within search result lists) and paid inclusion links (which appear somewhere in every search conducted on a given search portal).

4. **Search portals** (e.g., Yahoo!, AskJeeves, Excite, AOL), are brand name portals powered by search engine providers and commercial search providers. Yahoo!, for example, is powered by both Inktomi (impartial searches) and Overture (commercial searches); CNN is powered by Google (impartial searches) and Overture (commercial searches). Sometimes search portals are search engine providers themselves, as in the case of Google and Alta Vista.
Even if there are many “search portals,” there are only a handful of search engine providers and commercial search providers. In fact, the search industry is similar to local radio, where dozens of stations may exist, but two or three companies are behind nearly all of them, or similar to the soda industry, where there are seemingly many soft drinks but most of them are produced by Coke or Pepsi. Search portals mix and match between various impartial and commercial services to come up with “unique” search results, but in reality they are not unique at all.

Because search technology is currently the most profitable area of the web, it is also important to understand the recent consolidation within the industry. For example, to enter the search business, Yahoo! released its own search technology, but more significantly, purchased one of the top five search engine providers, Inktomi, in 2002 (abandoning its relationship with the syndicated search engine provider, Google). A few months later, the giant commercial search provider, Overture, bought two of the top five search engine providers, AlltheWeb and AltaVista. This deal enabled Overture to better influence the advertising within AlltheWeb’s and AltaVista’s “impartial” syndicated searches. Then Yahoo!, not to be one-upped by Overture, actually purchased Overture a month later. This purchase allowed Yahoo! ownership of three of the top five search engine providers (Inktomi, AlltheWeb, and AltaVista), as well as the top commercial search provider, Overture. With these deals, Yahoo! has become a massive media company. The only search brand in direct competition with Yahoo! is Google, which remains the most trusted search engine worldwide (and for good reason). With the recent release of its proprietary search engine provider in 2005 (after a failed attempt to acquire Google in 2003), MSN is poised to become dominant player number three.

The industry has thus experienced massive consolidation, with Yahoo!, Google, and now MSN morphing into media and advertising conglomerates. Because of this consolidation, the number of paths students use to access online information is minimized. Students should be aware that the commercial search engines they typically use when doing their fact-finding missions are intentionally limiting. As Roy Solomon of Yahoo! Shopping said in 2003, “Search is becoming the most efficient way for consumers to find products” (p. 1), meaning that search engines are more concerned about consumer information than they are about gearing online information towards academic research.

If students critically evaluate the search engine industry, they should also learn about alternatives to commercial search engines, such as open source search engine development (e.g., Nutch, www.nutch.org) or subject gateways—web portals that rely on human beings to categorize and aggregate “significant” web sites. Students tend to avoid subject gateways because of the extra work involved in typing key words a second time. They also don’t like straying too far from the comfort of a search engine’s results page (Fabos, 2004). However, subject gateways, often compiled by experts within a particular topic area, can be goldmines of rich data and otherwise marginalized information. The National Science Digital Archive and INFOMINE, for example, compile and categorize comprehensive science web sites. The Internet Public Library, based at the University of Michigan, has one of the best online newspaper collections on the web. And the Library of Congress has created Portals to the World (links to global resources) and has begun various digital archiving projects to put incredible primary resources online. Even more
subject gateway activity—heavily funded by government initiatives—is occurring in Europe (including the U.K.) and Australia.

Britain’s Resource Discovery Network (RDN), for example, is supported through especially generous funding from the Higher Education Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales. Universities throughout the U.K. are responsible for the growth and update of particular subject areas: ALTIS (University of Birmingham) deals with Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism; BIOME (University of Nottingham) covers Health and Life Sciences; EEVL (Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh) handles Engineering, Mathematics and Computing; GEsourc (the Consortium of Academic Libraries in Manchester) is concerned with Geography and Environment; Humbul (Oxford University) is taking on Humanities; PSIgate (also located with the Consortium of Academic Libraries in Manchester) manages Physical Sciences; and SOSIG (University of Bristol) is responsible for Social Sciences, Business and Law. Each of these University hubs is amassing thousands of “authoritative” academic web resources on its assigned subject area, with hundreds of active content experts from over 70 educational and research organizations contributing web links.

The RDN initiative is actually only a small part of the U.K.’s larger Electronic Libraries (eLib) Programme, which is lavishing significant funds on academic libraries and institutions to digitize special collections, including theses and all forms of academic research. “The main remit is to provide a body of tangible, electronic resources and services for U.K. Higher Education,” an introduction to the eLib programme reads, “and to affect a cultural shift towards the acceptance and use of said resources and services in place of more traditional information storage and access methods” (Introduction, 2001). The U.S. has not reached this level of coordination because its universities and colleges are either state or private entities (hence more discrete), and because the various independent subject gateway initiatives are grant-, not contract-based, allowing for more creativity and innovation, perhaps, but also less consolidation and communication.

Perhaps the most exciting trend in the world of subject gateways, however, is a movement that will make subject gateways look and feel very much like search engines. The new buzzword among subject gateway developers is cross-searching: the ability to search across many subject gateway platforms at the same time. This new searching method looks and feels a lot like a search engine. Users type in key words and dynamically search (librarians like the word “harvest”) across hundreds, even thousands, of different subject gateways located all over the web. If search engines crawl over an index, cross-searching tools harvest a database collective—a collective that could serve commercial or educational purposes. This technology is revolutionary because it has huge implications for the comprehensiveness and relevance of search results. In fact, a user (let’s say a student) could enter a search engine-like environment, access thousands of academic sites, and not come across a single commercial entity. The Oaister project (www.oaister.org) out of the University of Michigan is a good example of many content archives coming together under one searchable interface. “Our goal,” project developers write, “is to create a collection of freely available, previously difficult-to-access, academically-oriented digital resources that are easily searchable by anyone” (Oaister, 2005)

Another development worth mentioning is the emergence of collaboratively-built web resources. Ibiblio, for example, draws upon over one thousand volunteer contributors
who tend to specialize in a particular field. As ibiblio director Paul Jones explained, “We think specialists in their fields understand what they’re doing better than librarians do. We collect the best people—and their work” (Jones, 2003). Another example is the Merlot Project, which relies upon a community of volunteer professors to judge and advance web content. Each contributing scholar manages a subject area, and both annotates and rates selected web sites. The wiki movement (“wiki” means “quick” in Hawaiian) is another fast-growing trend for online collaboration. The open source movement involves a social software that enables any user to edit and build a given web page within a wiki site. On collaborative wiki sites—such as the citizen-built encyclopedia “Wikipedia”—many different experts and interested citizens build on a plethora of topics. The volunteer contributors edit—mostly to improve—entries in an atmosphere of trust and public goodwill, and all former entries are archived so a user can see how a certain topic area has evolved. While wikis can work as interoffice collaboration tools or as online personal organization pages, these sites are also places where topic links can be stored, categorized, and harvested. In other words, they can be places where suppressed gems of information (i.e., sites ignored by commercial search engines), can be found.

These librarian, academic, and public movements to organize and sustain valuable web information are leading to a web research environment far more eclectic and extensive than what search engines are promising for education, but only if students know about them. By 2005, the subject gateway movement, the related digital archiving movement, cross-searching tools, and collaboratively-conceived public resources had not yet reached the mainstream (Willinsky, 2006).

NEW SUBHEAD
(Same re a bit of flash in the sub-heads)

It’s likely that a more concrete understanding of the commercialized web—and a knowledge of other online databases and searching systems—will improve students’ research projects. Another area that needs attention, however, is the very assignment that leads students to the web in the first place. In addressing student research practices, a growing number of educators (myself included) argue that the nature of information students search for is just as important as they way they do their searching. In other words, it’s the assignments, not students’ laziness and/or their lack of web page evaluation skills, that are behind so much poor-quality student work; it’s the fact-finding mission itself (online or not), and the constant quest for objective information (Block, 2002; Salpeter, 2003).

A different approach to assignments—referred to by some as “critical literacy”—asks students to work with opinions, not facts (e.g., Kapitzke, 2001; Luke, 2000; Semali, 2000; Willinksy, 1998). As critical literacy scholars argue, facts are

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To clarify: “information literacy” is another way to describe the web page evaluation skills described above. “Critical thinking” or “critical reading” extends from the liberal-humanist tradition of truth-seeking and determining authorial intent. For a good discussion about the differences between “reading” and “critical literacy,” see Cervetti, et al, 2001.
malleable, and certain facts are necessarily more privileged than others within a particular social, economic and political context. Rather than asking students to write a paper or design a project based upon “true” facts gleaned from various objective sources, critical literacy scholars suggest that students should understand why and how certain information can be advanced as truth. Thus, students can learn how to critically understand all information, whether it’s the corporate press release that overwhelms an “objective” news story, or a lonely blog that rails against popular culture. In Allan Luke’s (2000) words:

The aim of critical literacy is a classroom environment where students and teachers together work to (a) see how the worlds of texts work to construct their worlds, their cultures, and their identities in powerful, often overtly ideological ways; and (b) use texts as social tools in ways that allow for a reconstruction of these same worlds.

(p. 453)

Interpreting a multiplicity of texts (ideas), valuing this multiplicity and understanding its contextual complexity, is to engage, quite literally, in democracy.

The logic for assignments that take students in this direction is quite sound: students searching for opinions, not facts, would be less likely to plagiarize. Students actively engaged in constructing a continuum, with more critical and less passive relationships with their sources, would be forming their own ideas as much as synthesizing those of others. The difficulty in having students weigh opinions, not facts, is that students have little experience at thinking ideologically and are hard pressed to place information they find on any kind of spectrum. When college students say they’re apolitical (something one hears quite often in the classroom, and sees quite often in low rates of political participation) it’s because, in part, they’re not taught to think politically. These are typical comments from my own students, who are mostly sophomores and juniors in college, about their ideological identity (which they narrowly define as concerned with government and politics):

I have to admit that I am not very big into politics or the workings of our government.

I’m embarrassed to say how uninformed I am…

I have never considered myself a political person. I can’t tell you the difference in political parties in the senate, or what the senate is.

As my first statement I would just like to say, I hate politics. I hate government. I could [n’t] care less who is in office.
My personal view on government and politics isn’t very positive, nor is it a very strong viewpoint. I cannot seem to get into or even understand any part of politics no matter what I do. I know people need leaders and rules, but frankly, it all bores me.

Ideological debate to them most often means confusing arguments between the two dominant U.S. political parties, or discussions about a vaguely present government. What it should mean, far more generally, is the open, rational discussion and consideration of all ideas, not just the ones deemed relevant by mainstream Washington D.C. politics. A first step is to help students recognize what an ideological continuum is in the first place. The labels of “conservative,” “liberal,” “republican,” and “democrat” are limiting because they’ve come to represent so many things that they have been rendered almost meaningless. At the same time, these terms can also elicit very strong stereotypical reactions from people. Instead, it is more helpful to get students to understand many perspectives along a broad political and economic continuum (e.g., libertarian, radical right, neoconservative, moderate republican, moderate liberal, etc.), and the influence of capitalism that shapes so much communication and information. It’s also helpful to start with an issue that defies the liberal/conservative or republican/democrat dichotomy—a topic such as “obesity” or “the FCC ruling on media ownership”—and to model for students what an investigation into various ideological positions looks like.

Subhead

I recently explored with my students the topic of “obesity,” which has lately become a global epidemic and, as such, a common news topic as health studies are released and new anti-obesity drugs are created. But the discourse defining causes of and solutions to obesity can be twisted into a wide range of positions about obesity, and these positions can be arranged on an ideological continuum.

I asked my students to analyze a number of documents discussing the epidemic. Some read excerpts from books such as *Fat Land* (Greg Critser), *Fast Food Nation* (Eric Schlosser), *Food Politics* (Marion Nestle) and *The Fat of the Land* (Michael Fumento); some read magazine articles by writer Michael Pollan. Others read a special issue on obesity in the business magazine, *Forbes*. We also looked at current newspaper stories and TV documentaries, such as an ABC special report on obesity and a *20/20* report on “healthy” fast food; TV ads for fast food; and public relations materials from corporations like Kraft Foods. Finally, we looked at various web sites, such as the Centers for Disease Control (a government site) and the Center for Science in the Public Interest (an advocacy group).

Then we began charting ideas—the causes for obesity, the proposed solutions to the epidemic—on a spectrum. Many texts I chose fell on the “anti-food industry” side, blaming specific practices within the fast food, soda and snack industries for the epidemic: increasingly intense (and deceptive) advertising, marketing, and public relations campaigns, especially those geared towards children; increased portion sizes; and misleading labeling practices. Other texts targeted the larger environment created by hypercapitalism, and argued that public spaces (sidewalks, parks) and school activities (physical education and health education) have diminished in support of private enterprise, and that a general reduction of tax support in schools has led to more...
commercial deals promoting soft drinks and snack food, and hence more obesity. These
texts also supported the idea that video games and television promote less exercise (and
provide a venue for more junk food and soda advertising). Other texts presented a macro
argument, blaming huge government subsidies of the corn industry since the 1960s and
the massive corporate lobbying that led to these subsidies. Cheap corn, they argue, has
enabled cheaper meat and sugar substitutes (corn syrup), and has allowed the fast food
industry to proliferate. In general, texts that blamed the food industry or corporate
enterprise called for industry regulation, taxation, lawsuits, and campaign finance reform
as solutions to the obesity epidemic. While most of them didn’t disqualify individual
responsibility as a means for curbing obesity rates, the crux of their solutions involved
massive policy change.

Another set of texts, these falling on the opposite side of the spectrum, were
supportive of industry, and blamed individuals—their lack of motivation, education, and
their unfortunate genes—for the obesity epidemic. Many of these writers were
“researchers” or physicians who advocated personal responsibility via intense exercise
regimes (e.g., Jenny Craig), diet pills (e.g., Redux, Meridia, newer hormone-based drugs)
and medical interventions (e.g., stomach reduction) as a solution to obesity. Regarding
the condition like a treatable disease, they also advocated support networks and the need
to educate society about the difficulties and discrimination faced by obese people. Some
texts, often written by the formerly obese, called for a softening of public attitudes
towards people with this disease. It didn’t take long for my students to discover that this
perspective, personal responsibility, was also propagated by big business, especially the
food and soft drink industries. By stressing individualism and self-reliance (values that
are constantly sold to Americans through many commercial outlets) and by
decommitting collective action, these texts, such as the Forbes special issue on obesity,
put the social problem of obesity squarely on the shoulders of the obese individual. They
especially advocated exercise programs (i.e., exercise more, buy more processed food),
diet pills and surgery—solutions that actually spawn a very profitable diet and wellness
industry. Indeed, keeping people obese (and blaming them for it) is very good for
corporate well-being.

Other than encouraging people to take personal responsibility for their weight
gains, the business sector advocated two industry-directed solutions to the obesity
“problem”: flavor technology and intensified public relations and marketing efforts.
Flavor technology is the science of creating foods that are fatty or sweet, but only in taste.
These fat-free foods would fall under the “new and improved” label, so the industry
would not have to create new brands, or significantly alter their packaging. Moreover,
fatty-tasting fat-free processed foods would also encourage people to buy even more
servings because they don’t feel guilty about eating too much fat—a win-win scenario.
Another industry response is to change people’s perceptions rather than the products or
other industry practices. This means public relations and marketing efforts that involve
hyping the “healthy” aspects of fast food. For example, at the time we did our analysis,
we watched numerous television commercials, such as those from KFC, that showed
actors talking about the fast food they were eating being so healthy it caused them to lose
weight. We looked at slickly-produced public relations magazines sent to households by
Kraft, Inc. that offered cooking tips for healthy eating—all using Kraft products. We also
noted other industry public relations responses: the sponsoring of exercise programs and
get-fit events, and the lobbying of public officials to make sure regulation or industry critique doesn’t happen.

The following tables helped students make sense of the continuum of information about obesity:

**Obesity Discourse: Anti-Industry vs. Pro-Industry**

### Causes for Obesity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-Industry</th>
<th>Pro-Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individuals and The Environment</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laziness (to a lesser extent)</td>
<td>Laziness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genes (to a lesser extent)</td>
<td>Genes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast Food/Snack/Soda Industries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corn syrup</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving sizes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising/marketing</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Solutions for Obesity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-Industry</th>
<th>Pro-Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal Responsibility</td>
<td>Personal Responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to Cook</td>
<td>Exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>Drugs/Surgery</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulate Food Industry</td>
<td>Flavor Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Ban Ads Aimed at Children)</td>
<td>Public Relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Regulate Labeling)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Corn Syrup Subsidies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue the Fast Food industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase Taxes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote Campaign Finance Reform</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
The most interesting part of our analysis occurred when we began studying “objective” news reports about the obesity epidemic. For example, we barely found any articles implicating advertising, the fast food industry, or corn subsidies in the mainstream media. Instead we collected a plethora of articles about new drugs, new surgery techniques, and the new industry strategies to highlight the “healthy” aspects of fast food. Similarly, an ABC special called “Fat Like Me” documented a family determined to lose more weight (personal responsibility) and a teenage girl who dressed up in a fat suit and tested high school students’ attitudes towards her obesity. ABC’s solution—exercise and be nicer to fat people—very much aligned with the industry perspective. Another high profile obesity report, this time on 20/20, investigated the “healthy” foods promoted by most fast food chains. The report seemed to be leading to a critique of fast food marketing deception (e.g., the salads are expensive and the dressings contain more fat than a burger), but then morphed into an endorsement of the healthy items on the menu.

With these kinds of examples, we were able to embark on a critique of our media system, which is supported by enormously wealthy commercial enterprise. We could easily demonstrate, through our study of this topic, that instead of well-argued accounts of the many aspects of the obesity issue, the U.S. news media consistently framed stories in ways that did not implicate their sponsors. Students would not have been able to critique these news reports, and their obvious bias towards business, had we not outlined our obesity spectrum earlier. Indeed, we enjoyed a boisterous critique of the word “researcher” in most of the news articles we analyzed, because it was clear that these objective-sounding analysts were really paid by private enterprise to either produce certain drugs, flavor molecules, or surgery techniques.

By sorting through these ideas and assigning them to ideological poles, students’ educational horizons certainly expand. They can appreciate how politicized a topic like obesity is, and how ineluctably tied it is to our economic system. They can understand how commercial journalism practices play into the obesity positions taken by business, and they can understand how an epidemic may be of great concern from a public perspective, but enormously profitable from a business perspective. Taxation, regulation, and even the difficult-to-digest phrase “campaign finance reform” can become clearer (issues) as a result of this kind of analysis, and this can help students understand many other issues far beyond obesity. Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2006) refer to this kind of discussion as the critical process, and make the distinction between information and knowledge. “Information in the form of news facts, and knowledge about a complex social process such as a national election are not the same thing,” they write. “The critical process stresses the subtle distinctions between amassing information and becoming knowledgeable, or attaining media [critical] literacy” (p. 32).
Knowledge is Out There (But It Won’t Be Found On A Commercial Search Engine)

To some educators (e.g., Burbules & Callister, 2000; Mather, 1996; Salpeter, 2003), the obvious medium for this sort of ideological investigation or assignment is the World Wide Web—the “universe of knowledge,” the host of “incongruent resources,” the tool students turn to first for most of their college and high school projects anyway (Rainie, Kalehoff & Hess, 2002). Salpeter (2003), for example, recommends that students find point-counterpoint web sites to understand numerous points of view:

…you could challenge students to do their own research to find point-counterpoint sites on such topics as the effects of television viewing on children or the advantages and disadvantages of a diet high in carbohydrates—or any other controversy that ties in with a current curriculum topic. As each site is located, students can summarize the key points being made and identify which ones directly contradict what they have learned elsewhere. Then it’s time to debate what is the “truth.” Which point of view is more popular? Does that make it more believable? Who created each site, and what reasons might that individual or organization have for espousing a particular point of view? Are they simply stating their opinion, or is there evidence that they are distorting or hiding information to make their case? (XX)

In Burbules and Callister’s words, a critically literate assessment of internet material uses discussions about misinformation, malinformation, messed-up information, and mostly useless information to highlight and reflect upon the procedures and criteria by which people identify information as “mis,” “mal,” “messed-up,” or “mostly useless” (p. 117).

But once again, if students investigate online obesity via commercial search engines, they will be given a narrow, corporate scope, not the rich material we gleaned from the variety of sources described above. Our own search on Google using the word “obesity” revealed, predictably, over 3 million hits. The first 50 web sites in the search results offered what seemed to be a plethora of informed, objective resources: the American Obesity Association, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Health Institute, the International Obesity Task Force, the North American Association for the Study of Obesity, the International Journal of Obesity, and medical forums such as “Obesity Online.” These sites, or pages from within these sites, accounted for 29 of the 50 leading sites on the search result list, and demonstrated the huge amount of redundancy evident in most Internet searches. It’s also important to note that of the first 50 sites on the list, 21—nearly half—were commercial pages advertising obesity drugs, surgery options, and other “treatments” for the disease—most certainly the results of search engine marketing and brokered contextual links. The professional organizational and government web sites would undoubtedly pass any student’s objectivity radar. However, armed with the ideological foundation we were able to establish above, our search through the many articles and reports in these sites demonstrated that, as with “objective” mainstream news media reports, they hardly challenged the industry take on obesity. Personal responsibility and medical treatments loomed large as the most practical solutions (treatments) to the epidemic (disease).

Why is this? Because beyond the many commercial advertisements inundating our search result list, Google gave us the most popular views on the obesity topic. And in the world outside of Google, the most popular views typically are not the dissenting
views. Indeed, Google gives us a world much like the mainstream news media, where commercially-controlled and industry-sanctioned positions dominate, and dissent is marginalized. That doesn’t mean that dissenting opinions aren’t valid, and they could be the best take on an issue. But if they’re marginalized in the rest of the web, they’ll also be marginalized on Google. In our typical one-word Google search, nowhere could a student locate, for example, the web page for the Center of Science for the Public Interest, The Commercialism in Education Research Unit, or Commercial Alert, all organizations which offer valuable dissenting opinions on the dominant obesity ideology. It is clear that the web is not the “host of so many incongruent sources” that so many educators (and students) believe it to be. Google alone won’t give you a full range of opinions unless users know how to search them out, and have a pretty good idea, before a search, what the range of opinions is that they’re looking for. Like all mass media (and unlike public libraries) the web is a commercial medium first and an information tool second.

Perhaps the most important critical literacy lesson, then, is to reorient students to the public library and books—the source of most of the dissenting opinions we found in conducting our obesity research. Where else but in public libraries, including those in public schools and universities, can we find books and independent magazines that lead us to truly in-depth, unconventional and controversial subject matter? Even as the future of the internet looks more and more like commercial television, it is the noncommercial government-supported public library and the noncommercial online archives associated with education, that will promote open access to the full spectrum of ideas.

General comments:

An excellent essay which illustrates clearly one major downside of e-learning. No major revision is necessary; changes and suggestions for changes are relatively minor. This essay will be a welcome inclusion in BNC.


Jones, Paul (2003, June 13). Personal communication.


