

Doing research on the Web: New teaching tool pushes students to analyze online materials

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Students doing research for their classes are increasingly turning to online resources, which raises concerns among many academic instructors who have questions about the quality of material found on the Internet. However, research co-authored by North Carolina State University's Dr. Susan Miller-Cochran offers a teaching approach that attempts to address the problem by encouraging students to do their own critical analysis of the material they use in their work – regardless of whether it was found online.

"This is the first research tool that encourages students to analyze the reliability of the texts they're reading, rather than pigeonholing the material based on where it was found," Miller-Cochran says. "We want students to think critically about what they are reading, whether it is in print or online."

The research approach developed by Miller-Cochran and co-author Rochelle Rodrigo, of Maricopa Community Colleges, calls on students to evaluate two aspects of online research materials. First, students should determine how the text changes over time. For example, is something published and never updated? Or is it a dynamic text, such as an article on Wikipedia, which is constantly being revised?

Second, students should determine if and how an online text has been reviewed. Did a recognized authority in the field edit the material? Did a

body of peer reviewers go over the text? Was the material self-published, with no outside agency review whatsoever? Sometimes the answers are fairly complicated. Wikipedia, for example, is in some ways self-published, but also has elements of peer review. "But then the question becomes," Miller-Cochran says, "How do you define peers, and when does the review occur?"

The ultimate goal, Miller-Cochran says, is to get students into the habit of asking questions about the reliability of their research materials, whether in print or online. "Just because something has been published in print does not make it a reliable source," Miller-Cochran says, "and online materials are not inherently unreliable."

Source: North Carolina State University

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