



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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ADDRESSING THE LIMITATIONS OF INTERNET RESEARCH

Students are becoming more Internet-savvy. Quite naturally, they are turning to the Net to gather research material for their essays and term papers. While your college may have a fine library and you may go to great lengths to show your students how to effectively research a topic, many of them will view the Internet as the first and only source of information. What these students fail to see, of course, is that there are clear problems with using the Internet as a research tool.

Information Overload

One of the first problems students encounter when performing research via the Net is information overload. Students may use the Internet to locate valuable source material for a research paper on Alzheimer's disease, but to get to that information, they may have to sift a mountain of sand. (For example, a search of Infoseek produced over 5 million hits for the term "Alzheimer's disease.") One way to illustrate the overload problem is to give your students this challenge: Take 10 minutes to research a specific topic; research the topic through a traditional electronic database, such as Lexis/Nexis or Periodical Abstracts; research the topic through the Internet; compare the yield after 10 minutes. In all probability, the students' overall yield will be greater, but your yield will be easier to work with and more refined.

Source Credibility

Another major problem, which students almost always overlook, is source credibility. Despite the cautions we offer, most students take written information at face value. Though they may question authority in their personal lives, they rarely question opinions offered in text, even when that text could be written and uploaded by anyone with basic computing skills and limited or suspect credibility.

One quick way to open students' eyes to the credibility issue is to visit any conspiracy-related web site. Show students how some site producers go to great lengths to make their highly questionable—or outright inaccurate—information appear credible. My favorite approach is to access one of the alien-oriented sites, complete with "blacked-out" government documents and "expert" testimony. It does not take long for students to realize the problems associated with accepting this information at face value.

The Hypertextual Environment

Finally, it is true that much of the beauty of the Internet comes from its hypertextuality. We may start by exploring a web site dedicated to the Great Pyramid of Giza, and within a few clicks of the mouse we can be accessing a site discussing cryogenics. While this mobility can generate interesting approaches to topics and can lead to some very unique results, it presents a significant obstacle for student researchers. They tend to forget that a hyperlink can—and often does—take them to an entirely new source. This becomes a problem when they attempt to document their sources. They may attribute sources inaccurately and have trouble retracing the steps that led them to a specific source. We can help to eliminate this problem by stressing how hypertextual environments work, encouraging them to pay careful attention to the addresses of sites they visit, reminding them that their browsers may have a "history" file which keeps track of their movements in cyberspace.

Armed with this knowledge, students may rethink their reliance on the Internet. While we do not want to discourage students from using the Internet, we must help them become aware of its limitations as a research tool.

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PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT: JOB INTERNSHIPS

Many of our English as a Second Language (ESL) students are interested in making the United States their permanent home. Many will face the difficulties of international career changes; i.e., sometimes the profession they pursued in their native country does not exist here, or is saturated and difficult to enter. Moreover, the experience they gain from other countries is hard to verify for prospective employers.

One special program at Mt. San Antonio College is designed to address these needs—Careers in Business and the Job Internship Class.

This program is designed to:

- Build resumé power
- Enhance interviewing skills
- Develop negotiating techniques
- Develop problem-solving skills
- Earn local letters of reference.

Students enter our program and are oriented to the process of securing a non-campus volunteer internship. The procedure is as follows:

Step 1: Students read our "Site Description Book." Different campus departments have written brief summaries of the training they offer, services they provide, and days/hours they require.

Step 2: Students rank-order several sites at which they wish to interview.

Step 3: The job internship coordinator matches students to sites, giving preference to students' higher rankings.

Step 4: Students and sites are notified of interview matches and arrange interview times.

Step 5: Interviews take place, and site supervisors rank interns in order of preference.

Step 6: The final matching takes place, and students begin their internships.

Neither the students nor the sites know where they ranked each other in regard to preference. This process takes six to seven weeks; and during this time, students are developing their resúmes, practicing their interviewing skills, and developing work-related vocabulary. After they begin their internships and for the remainder of the semester, the class becomes a process group where students talk about their experiences and brainstorm problem-solving techniques for issues that arise. They also support each other by talking through

the anxieties they feel as a second-language learner working at a predominately English-speaking site.

At the end of the semester, site and student evaluations are completed. Feedback is used by the job internship coordinator to assist the site supervisor in improving the quality of the training.

Students who do well at their sites not only can include the experience on their current resúmes, they can expect to receive a letter of recommendation that will accompany them to other opportunities.

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