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Buying Precious Time: Using an Electronic Resource Library

Thousands of students begin their semester working on the compilation, analysis, assimilation, and development of a *research paper.* Historically, students search and research the library databases (paper, until a few years ago), seeking citations to articles, books, reports, and journal titles that will lead them to the development of their research question. After studying the citations (if lucky enough to get abstracts), students begin the hunt for the full text of the report, article, or book that they believe will help them develop their thesis. If the report, article, or book does not "live" in their library or in a library within close proximity to their home, they must "order" it through an Interlibrary Loan system, or pay a document delivery service. Then the library network waits to see if any other library will find the article and send it to the library making the request. The student finally has 20 or 30 items after weeks of searching. By now, after so much time and effort, *students think they are done!*

In reality, they have just begun. The total effort of reading, study, analysis, assimilation, and the first of many rough drafts is where they should be spending 80% of their time. Typically, that time has been spent just building the resource base.

This is where the library of the future, the *Electronic Resource Library* (ERL), will be of most value to students and researchers. The model of the ERL, developed at Amarillo College (AC), is designed as a prototype for information retrieval that will cut the research time spent in identifying, retrieving, and compiling literature base. Retrieving full-text/image electronic documents quickly and easily is the goal. The ERL is a product of AC's Document Exchange Digitizing Laboratory and is the first subject-specific, topic-oriented, full text/image library on the WWW.

This project is reaping benefits for the college: Indirect costs flow directly into the general fund, training opportunities for work-study students are created, high-tech equipment is shared, hands-on operations are improved, existing library services and networks are being integrated, and a "core-resource" model for support of distance education classes is being developed.

Found at **http://plutonium-erl.actx.edu,** this *Electronic Resource Library* has over 1400 full-text scientific and technical documents (called the PuCORE) on the topic of plutonium. Plutonium pits at the Pantex plant outside of Amarillo and the growing interest of researchers and scientists, elected officials and policy makers, science and math teachers and students, and interested citizen make this topic a popular first choice. A special EDUCATION button helps time-pressed science and math teachers present solidly researched, professionally prepared, graph-enhanced modules for middle and high school science classes with less than a 20-minute preparation.

We predict that this model will be a useful way of classifying exponentially exploding information in electronic form on the Web. This model will (1) help students and researchers reserve judgments and decisions until a question is well-read and understood, and (2) identify relevant information sources.

Designed as a research and educational model for future electronic high-tech access to information, the *Electronic Resource Library* is an impressive example of a community college successfully competing for funds that traditionally have been targeted for university programs. Amarillo College, capitalizing on opportunities as they arise to support programs for students, hosts a model of access to information that may lead the college and the research community at-large into the 21st century.

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Validating World Wide Web Information

How valid is the information students retrieve on the World Wide Web? Students can benefit from learning techniques that will help evaluate Internet sources for accuracy, validity, and honesty.

Attention to the full URL can assist in evaluating in the credibility of any site. Each Internet address is referred to as a domain name. The last three letters after the period (dot) indicate the Top Level Domain (organizational):

Edu: Educational schools, colleges, universities
Gov: Government, government agencies
Com: Commercial, business
Org: Organizations, not-for-profit organizations
Net: Networks, commercial and public networks
Mil: Military, United States Armed Forces
Int: International, site located outside of the United States. (Most of these sites are identified by a two-letter country code.)

The domain name may give a clue about the reliability of information at the site. Not all educational (edu) sites are posted with the approval and review of the sponsoring institution. Many schools review the content of their official pages and the pages of their departments; however, many provide students, staff, and faculty the opportunity to post personal pages with no review of the content. By contrast, information at sites under the government (gov) domain is usually reliable.

Pages posted under the organizational (org) domain may present biased material. Commercial (com) and network (net) pages usually promote various business ventures and might provide only information that supports the goals of the venture. If the Web page lists the author's name, it may provide a link to the author's home page and perhaps a resumé, or other identifying data.

Sometimes a legitimate site can be invaded and the official data replaced with erroneous information. The NCAA site (www.ncaa.org) was "hacked" when the seeding for the 1997 Division I Men's Basketball Tournament was being announced. While most sites are located on servers that have security features (firewalls) to prevent "hacking," these features can be compromised or disabled with time and persistence.

At times, legitimate organizations post erroneous data. A University of New Mexico study found that 40% of medical sites with pharmaceutical information had incorrect or misleading data.

Finally, information obtained from the Web should be substantiated by data from traditionally published materials.

Sources of Internet Information

Library of Congress—National Digital Library: http://rs6.loc.gov/amhome.html

CityNet: Information on over 5,000 cities worldwide: http://www.city.net

Electronic Newsstand: Excerpts from many popular magazines: http://www.enews.com

Net.Tutor—Interactive learning modules on concepts, tools, and techniques for becoming an effective Internet researcher: http://gateway.lib.ohio-state.edu/tutor/index.html

The Internet Public Library—A site dedicated to finding, evaluating, selecting, organizing, describing, and creating quality information resources: http://www.ipl.org/

U.S. Bureau of the Census—Population and demographic information: http://www.census.gov

Teaching & Learning on the WWW—Over 529 examples of how the web is being used as a medium for learning: http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/tl/

Virtual Reference Desk—Source of a thesaurus, dictionary, and other reference materials: HYPERLINK http://thorplus.lib.purdue.edu/

http://thorplus.lib.purdue.edu/vlibrary/reference/index.html

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