

Using the Power of the Web in Course Activities

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The World Wide Web has emerged as perhaps the most powerful and ubiquitous learning tool since the widespread adoption of textbooks over the 17th and 18th centuries. (For a frame of reference, some recognize Coote's *The English School Master*, which was published in 1596 and offered lessons in spelling, arithmetic, and history, as the first textbook. *The New England Primer*, first published in 1690, sold over five million copies and was used well into the 1800s.) I suppose one could argue that the chalkboard, which was standard equipment in schools by the 1830s, was also a powerful learning tool, but the value of chalkboards was generally limited to the information written on them by teachers.

The web has become so popular as a research tool among students that the term "research by Googling" is now often heard. This paper isn't intended to argue on behalf of this form of student content exploration. Much information on the web, as we all know, is biased, misinformed, downright inaccurate, and/or not intended for the faint of heart. Moreover, the web often distracts students from the plethora of pre-screened and excellent resources available through Layne Library's many online databases.

It is important that if you give students assignments that might encourage the use of web research, that they be given guidance in determining what is good and what isn't. See the document [Guidelines for Screening Information Sources on the Web](#), in the same section of this web site. You may feel free to download this and distribute it to your students to encourage them to do critical thinking when they review info they find on the web.

Faculty-Driven Web Research

But, we digress. Rather than giving students free-form assignments in which they are turned loose to find their own resources, you could direct them to the sites that you want them to explore. Give them specific guidance on what kind of information you want them to look for and report, or discuss.

For example, I asked my students to read the following:

The U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Technology Plan

<http://www.nationaledeotechplan.org/>

This document paints a rosy picture of how the DOE feels technology is an essential part of teaching and learning in today's schools and is vital in achieving No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates. (January 2005)

- and -

Special Alert: Congress Cuts \$191 Million from Educational Technology

<http://www.thejournal.com/SpecialAlert/November2004.cfm>

This article described a 27.7% cut in NCLB funding earmarked to assist states in supporting school technology. (November 2004)

I asked them to reconcile the two. How could the Federal Government praise the virtues of technology in meeting NCLB requirements and at the same time cut funding for school technology by 27.7%? We had a spirited discussion.

The point is that numerous web sites exist out there in virtually every discipline that can be utilized by students in guided learning activities requiring higher order thinking. For example, here are a few:

Lakota Winter Counts

<http://wintercounts.si.edu/>

The Lakota people recorded their history through a series of drawings known as winter counts. The Smithsonian Institution has collected a series of these drawings covering the period 1701-1902 and developed a wonderful multimedia exhibit including detailed explanations of the drawings and oral histories. What a wonderful way for students to learn more about the native peoples of our area!

Global Edge

<http://globaledge.msu.edu/>

This site, maintained by the Center for International Business Education and Research, Michigan State University, provides a wealth of information about 200 countries and their business climates, as well as numerous resources needed for American companies to do business in those countries. We may be in the middle of the U.S., but our students need to be sensitized to the realities of International business. How about an assignment in which teams of students develop business plans for marketing a South Dakota product to say, Ecuador or Vietnam?

Landmark Supreme Court Cases

<http://www.landmarkcases.org/>

This valuable site, maintained by Street Law and the Supreme Court Historical Society, provides extensive background information related to some of the most significant cases in our nation's history, including *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) and *Miranda vs. Arizona* (1966). Students can read the issues involved in each case, the text of the majority opinions, and the long-term impact of the decision on our society. What a great resource to initiate discussions about how Supreme Court decisions have altered our nation's history!

All You Can Read

<http://allyoucanread.com/>

This site provides links to 22,800 magazines and newspapers in 200 countries. Want your students to find out how the world press views current events in the United States? Another good discussion starter, appropriate for a wide variety of disciplines. It would help if our students spoke the languages.....

Ethnologue: Languages of the World

<http://www.ethnologue.com/>

Speaking of languages, this site is self-described as an encyclopedic work cataloging all of the world's 6,912 known living languages.

The Value of Primary Sources

Don't overlook the educational value of primary sources available on the web. These provide excellent opportunities for our students to experience and discuss history (see White House Tapes link below, for example) or use the actual documents or data sets used by professionals in the field. Course activities using these resources can simulate real world experiences and better prepare our students to be productive and competitive in the work force.

Enron Annual Report 2000

<http://www.enron.com/corp/investors/annuals/2000/ar2000.pdf>

How about a real world exercise in forensic accounting? Enron did well in 2000. Or did it? Comparing the information published in the company's actual annual report with the information later discovered or disclosed can be very enlightening. The annual reports of many large corporations are freely available on the web and can be used for a wide variety of interesting assignments.

U.S. Census Bureau Publications

<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/titles.html>

The Federal Government releases hundreds of publications every year, most of which are freely available to the public, including students and faculty, in PDF form via the web. These are primary source documents that relate in some way to almost every major that we offer at DWU and can be valuable study material. Our students need to know what information is available and how it can be used. Here is an example. This is a directory of publications of the U.S. Census Bureau, on topics ranging from Agriculture and Business to Governments and Transportation. The well-used Statistical Abstracts, of course, are available online.

WhiteHouseTapes.org

<http://www.whitehousetapes.org/>

Here they are. The original White House recordings – more than 5,000 hours of secret recordings by six American presidents, maintained by the University of Virginia's Miller Center of Public Affairs. What better way for students to learn about history than to experience it for themselves? They can listen to Nixon's discussions with aides about the identity of "Deep Throat" or Kennedy's conversations about reducing American presence in Southeast Asia in 1963, just before his death. The latter would be a good "what if" discussion-starter.

The Thomas Jefferson Papers

http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/jefferson_papers/index.html

This is a collection of images of 27,000 original documents related to Jefferson, compiled by the American Memory Project at the Library of Congress. The entire collection is easily searchable, enabling students to discover Jefferson's own thoughts on the creation and early growth of this country and the issues that were present at the time.

Rembrandt's Late Religious Portraits

<http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2005/rembrandt/flash/index.shtm>

Numerous web sites worldwide have been established to help laypeople (including students) understand the world's great works of art and music. This is a good example. This site, maintained by the National Gallery of Art, provides background information and interpretations of 22 late images by Rembrandt van Rijn.

How Do You Find This Stuff?

Your challenge, then, is to think through the educational experiences that will have the greatest value to your students in achieving the learning outcomes you set for them. Is there information on the web that will give them practical, real world experience in applying your course content? How do you find it?

Aside from Googling, there are a couple of ways in which you can learn about interesting and valuable web sites. One is through subscriptions to online newsletters that exist to review web sites. An excellent example is The Scout Report (<http://scout.wisc.edu/>), a weekly review of sites published by the Internet Scout Project at the University of

Wisconsin. The Scout Report is indispensable to me. I scan every issue for reviews of sites of possible interest to our faculty. If you would like for me to watch for sites on topics of special interest to you, please let me know.

Scout Report is rather unique in that it is not subject-matter specific. Netsurfer Digest (<http://www.netsurf.com/nsd/>) is another one but requires a \$20 annual subscription. Likely to be of greater value to you would be an electronic newsletter or web site that is specific to your discipline. For example, Eduhound Weekly (<http://www.thejournal.com/newsletters/sampleeduhoundweekly.html>) is an electronic newsletter providing weekly reviews of web sites of interest to K-12 educators. Web site reviews are commonly found in discipline-specific newsletters published by professional associations, foundations, and other organizations affiliated with professional fields. One way to find these is by doing a Google Advanced search, with "reviews of web sites" or "web site reviews" as a required exact phrase and the name of the discipline or content area as a required term. You may be surprised what turns up!

Google does not have the exclusive franchise on web searches. Many tools are out there. The San Diego State University (the other SDSU) Library (<http://infodome.sdsu.edu/research/guides/recommend.shtml>) maintains a web site containing links to a variety of different web search tools, categorized according to their specific strengths. You might find them quite helpful.

Finding Publications that Reference Good Publications

Here is a tip you can pass on to your students and also use in your own research. One of the best ways to locate really useful resources for a research paper is to identify one excellent publication and find out what other publications cite it. This is a great feature in Google Scholar, which is still in beta testing but is accessible through the More link on the Google web site, or at <http://scholar.google.com/>. Scholar allows you to identify publications that have cited a particular publication.

Say, for example, I've found this terrific article on global warming by Helen Highwater. I suspect that I might find other great articles on global warming (or refutes of Ms. Highwater's work) if I can identify other publications that cited her publication. Scholar does that! I'd use a Google Scholar Advanced Search and enter her name in the field for "exact phrase" and selected key words in the field for "all of the words."

Let's try a real example. Suppose I'm looking for works that cited George W. Bush's epic ***The National Security Strategy of the United States of America***. I do a Google Scholar advanced search and get this:

[Bounding the global war on terrorism](#)

J Record - 2003 - [offnews.info](#)

Page 1. BOUNDING THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM Jeffrey Record December 2003

Page 2. ii ***** The views expressed in this report are ...

[Cited by 8](#) - [View as HTML](#) - [Web Search](#) - [iwar.org.uk](#) - [macwebguru.com](#) - [radio.weblogs.com](#) - [all 43 versions »](#)

[Global Debate and the Limits of the Bush Doctrine](#)

P Dombrowski, RA Payne - [International Studies Perspectives, 2003](#) - [blackwell-synergy.com](#)

Page 1. Global Debate and the Limits of the Bush Doctrine P ETER D OMBROWSKI

Naval War College R ODGER A. P AYNE University of Louisville ...

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[Essential Elements Missing in the National Security Strategy of 2002](#)

C Knight, PDA Commentary - [Commonwealth Institute, Project on Defense Alternatives ...](#), 2002 - [comw.org](#)

Page 1. 1 Essential Elements Missing in the National Security Strategy of 2002

Charles Knight PDA Commentary adapted from a presentation ...


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[\[BOOK\] Maintaining effective deterrence](#)

CS Gray - 2003 - [carlisle.army.mil](#)

Page 1. MAINTAINING EFFECTIVE DETERRENCE Colin S. Gray August 2003 Page

As you see, this gives me a list of 71 publications that cited Mr. Bush's magnum opus. Not only does Google Scholar let me link to these publications, but also tells me who cited THOSE publications, and so on.....

Try it! Enter your own name and find out who has cited YOU, besides South Dakota state troopers on I-90. Just kidding!!!!!! 

At worst, this tool encourages "research by Googling", but it could be useful in locating publications that might otherwise not be found, since Layne Library no longer is able to carry Social Sciences Citation Index.