**Fact or Fiction?? Online Information Resources Debate**

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**Grade:** 7-8  
**Subjects:** Language Arts, Technology

**Overview of Lesson Plan:** In this lesson, students consider the accuracy of the Web sites they regularly use, then prepare for a formal debate on the reliability of Wikipedia and similar Web sites. For homework, they prepare note cards and practice delivering their orations.

**Suggested Time Allowance:** two class periods

**Objectives:**
1. Reflect on their own ongoing assessment of the accuracy of Web sites they regularly use.
2. Learn about Wikipedia's maintenance and reliability by reading and discussing the article "Mudslinging Weasels Into Online History."
3. Prepare for formal debates on Wikipedia's reliability.
4. Create "cue" cards and practice delivering their orations, asking a volunteer to evaluate them.

**Resources / Materials:**
- pencils/pens  
- paper  
- classroom board  
- copies of the article "Mudslinging Weasels Into Online History"  
- computers with Internet access (optional)  
- note cards (at least ten per group)

**Activities / Procedures:**
1. WARM-UP/DO NOW: Students respond to the following prompt (written on the board prior to class): "Work with a partner to come up with an informational Web site (not e-mail or gaming sites) that you visit regularly. Then, discuss the following questions about the site and record your answers on a simple chart:
   - What is the purpose of this Web site?
   - How accurate and trustworthy do you consider information on this site to be? (Rate the Web site using a scale of one to ten on which "one" means "not at all accurate" and "ten," "very accurate."
   - Have you ever tried to verify information from this site before using it by checking one or more additional sources? If so, did you find the original material to be accurate?
   - Have you or anyone else ever had reason to contradict information included on the Web site? If so, please describe the specific occurrence."
After a few minutes, allow each pair to share its Web sites and ideas with the class, and record them on the board in a master chart. During the class discussion, encourage students to consider whether they tend to "trust" or to "judge" Web sites to be reliable sources, making sure that students understand the distinction. Do they feel that perhaps they should be more skeptical of online information than they have been?

2. As a class, read and discuss the article "Mudslinging Weasels Into Online History" focusing on the following questions:
   a. What is Wikipedia?
   b. Who founded Wikipedia?
   c. When did they found it?
   d. Who maintains Wikipedia?
   e. Approximately how many people visit Wikipedia each day?
   f. How is the site supported?
   g. What are Wikipedia's "administrators"?
   h. In October, if you clicked on one picture of President Bush featured on Wikipedia's Web site, you saw a picture of which historical figure?
   i. What does it mean that the presidential candidates' entries were put "under protection"?
   j. Who are the "untouchables" in the Wikipedia?
   k. What does "lol" stand for?
   l. How often did one administrator claim that the candidates' entry pages were "vandalised" [sic]?
   m. What particular aspect of Mr. Bush's entry did users debate on post-election day?
   n. Who did one editor suggest would eventually ascend to the presidency?

3. Depending on class size, arrange students into four to six small groups, and inform them that they will spend the remainder of the class period preparing for a formal debate on the reliability of Wikipedia and similar Internet resources.

Explain that formal debates are verbal contests in which equal numbers of participants engage each other, one side arguing in support of a given (positive) statement and the other side attempting to refute that statement. Each student will play one of three pre-assigned roles and speak no more than a pre-arranged length of time. Assign groups to argue in support of or against one of the following statements (two groups--one pro, one con--to each statement):
   - "There are no circumstances under which Wikipedia entries should ever be trusted again."
   - "Internet users should themselves bear the responsibility of verifying the accuracy of information they find online."
   - "Wikipedia exemplifies everything that is wrong with the Internet."

Next, assign students within each group one of the following roles:
- Speaker(s), opening statement: introduces the group's argument with a clear statement of purpose ("to prove" or "to refute"); offers at least two persuasive points to support the statement of purpose; and briefly sums up (2 minutes)
- Speaker(s), rebuttal points: reiterates the statement of purpose; attacks the accuracy
and/or relevance of evidence presented by the opposing team; and concludes by restating evidence presented by the opening speaker and/or introducing one or more pieces of new evidence (1 minute)
-Speaker(s), closing statement: again, reiterates the statement of purpose and supporting evidence; responds to the rebuttal points of the opposition; and formally concludes the argument with a persuasive and memorable closing sentence (2 minutes)

For further background on formal debates, visit the following debate Web site, offered by the Orange Unified School District: http://www.orangeusd.k12.ca.us/yorba/debate.htm.

Provide students with enough time (possibly extending into the next period) to do research and outline their arguments. (Alternatively, Web research could be done at home.) When researching, students should draw upon the following:
- information on Wikipedia's structure and content from the article
- Wikipedia's official Web site (http://en.wikipedia.org/)
- at least one other Web site with which to compare Wikipedia
- interviews with the school's computer/technology teachers (optional)

Each group will need to conceive their own argument (affirmative or negative) as well as begin formulating potential rebuttal points. Students assigned to perform the rebuttal may want to compose some stock phrases in advance that can be used to open and close their rebuttal regardless of the ultimately variable content.

Ask students to create outlines in class, then draw "cue words" from them, which can be recorded on the note cards, to which students may refer during the debate. Students should not draft formal statements and memorize them, but must sufficiently familiarize themselves with their arguments so that a word or short phrase on a card (for instance, "2004-moral values-Bush") can "cue" one or more fluid sentences (for instance, "In 2004, moral values led voters to re-elect George W. Bush.") delivered with effective eye contact. Students may begin to work out the content of their note cards in class, if they have time.

4. WRAP-UP/HOMEWORK: Students finish creating their "cue" cards (note cards) and practice delivering their orations, asking another person (relative, friend, neighbor) to evaluate their rehearsal as follows (copied onto a handout for easier student access):

"Please rate the performance with a check, a plus or a minus for each of the following criteria:

STRUCTURE
-Clear statement of purpose
-Use of evidence
-Summary/closing statement
-Sophistication of vocabulary
-General persuasiveness
PRESENTATION
- Volume
- Pitch
- Enunciation
- Pace
- Tone
- Body language
- Eye contact

Instruct students to ask the chosen evaluator to sign the completed handout and to turn it in before the debate. Inform them that they will use the same handout during the debate to evaluate their classmates' orations.

The debates should be held in the next class period. During the presentations, students should evaluate each other using the criteria used in the homework assignment and determine the "winning" side of each debate. Afterwards, bring students together for a final discussion. Ask students to consider which side "won" each debate and whether the debates changed their minds about the reliability of Web resources. (Teachers should decide if they wish to ban students from citing Wikipedia as a source.)

Further Questions for Discussion:
- Should Wikipedia be banned as a research source for school projects? Why or why not?
- Do the administrators effectively "neutralize" Wikipedia's content? Why or why not?
- Is it ever appropriate to identify a modern political figure with Hitler? Why or why not? If so, when?
- How much is the "editing" of Wikipedia's content about Mr. Bush and Mr. Kerry an indicator of the divisiveness surrounding the 2004 presidential election?
- Is "lockdown" an appropriate response to the "vandalism" on Wikipedia? Why or why not? How else might the administrators have responded?
- Is the "vandalism" just "juvenile idiocy" [sic]? Why or why not?
- Wikipedia's updated entry on President George W. Bush ultimately included the phrase: "His second term is scheduled to end January 20, 2009." Do you think that is an appropriate resolution to the dispute summarized at the end of the article?

Evaluation / Assessment:
Students will be evaluated based on participation in the initial task and subsequent class discussion, participation in the debate preparation, a volunteer's assessment of the debate rehearsal, and contribution to the debate.

Vocabulary:
weasels, collaborative, encyclopedia, entrepreneur, vetted, flurry, metacriticism, vandalism, spate, punctuate, assassinated, impeached, resign, envisage, obstacle, amendment

Tiered Learning Activities:
1. Develop ten questions designed to determine the quality of Web sites, and then, based
on your criteria, identify an exceptional Web site and then write a letter nominating that Web site for a (fictitious) "best of the web" contest, making sure to specify how the Web site meets your criteria.

2. Write a neutral encyclopedia entry about either Mr. Bush or Mr. Kerry. Then write a one-page essay comparing your entry with that of Wikipedia and one or more other online encyclopedias (Britannica, Encarta, or Encyclopedia.com). How neutral does your entry seem in comparison?

3. Write an essay that answers the following question: "How much do the Wikipedia shenanigans, as described in the article "Mudslinging Weasels Into Online History," reflect the divisiveness of the 2004 presidential election?" You will want to research campaign advertisements, supporter slogans, protest signs, and other statements used by both sides so you can draw on specific examples in your essay.

4. Draw up a proposal for either a Web site or software that evaluates the authenticity, accuracy and authority of Web sites. For ideas, you may want to visit http://www.factcheck.org.

5. Compile a class list of reliable Web sites, after determining appropriate criteria through class discussion. Appoint two or more members of the class to serve as "Web librarians" (rotating regularly), responsible for maintaining and adding to the list and assisting their peers. At the end of the term, the class may choose to offer the complete list to the school Web site or school library for reference.

**Interdisciplinary Connections:**

Civics - Prepare a statement to deliver to Congress, defending the free-speech rights of the authors of potentially offensive Web sites. Does the Internet complicate issues of freedom of speech? If so, how? Are Internet authors responsible to the public in the same way that journalists are? Why or why not?


Global History - Write an encyclopedia entry on the history of the encyclopedia (print and electronic). What roles do people play (encyclopedia authors, door-to-door salesmen, etc.)?

Journalism - Use your imagination and sense of humor to create a "fake news" story about Wikipedia in the style of "The Onion" (newspaper) or "The Daily Show" or "Saturday Night Live" (television broadcasts).

Teaching with The Times - Read the Public Editor's column every week for the next four and write a response in your journal each week. How does Daniel Okrent, the Public
Editor, help maintain the credibility and reliability of The Times in the eyes of its readership? To order The New York Times for your classroom, click here.

Other Information on the Web
Infoplease (http://www.infoplease.com), a part of Pearson Education, offers almanacs, atlases, a dictionary, and a thesaurus.

HowStuffWorks (http://www.howstuffworks.com/) has won numerous awards from various publications and organizations.

Grades 7-8
Technology Standard 3 - Understands the relationships among science, technology, society, and the individual. Benchmarks: Knows ways in which technology and society influence one another; Knows examples of copyright violations and computer fraud (e.g., computer hacking, computer piracy, intentional virus setting, invasion of privacy) and possible penalties
Technology Standard 4 - Understands the nature of technological design. Benchmarks: Identifies appropriate problems for technological design; Evaluates the ability of a technological design to meet criteria established in the original purpose
Language Arts Standard 1 - Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies of the writing process. Benchmarks: Uses style and structure appropriate for specific audiences and purposes; Writes persuasive compositions
Language Arts Standard 7 - Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of informational texts. Benchmarks: Applies reading skills and strategies to a variety of informational texts; Knows the defining characteristics of a variety of informational texts; Identifies techniques used to convey viewpoint; Draws conclusions and makes inferences based on explicit and implicit information in texts; Differentiates between fact and opinion in informational texts
Language Arts Standard 8 - Demonstrates competence in speaking and listening as tools for learning. Benchmark: Listens to and understands the impact of nonprint media on media consumers (e.g., persuasive messages and advertising in media, the presence of media in people's daily lives, the role of the media in forming opinions, media as a source of entertainment and information)