

Using Web Resources in a Public Speaking Class

THE WORLD WIDE WEB IS A VAST DATABASE OF CURRENT AUTHENTIC MATERIALS that presents information in multimedia form and reacts instantly to a user's input. The usefulness of the Web for helping students conduct research has been noted throughout CALL literature, but the manner in which the research takes place makes an important difference in how effective the language and content learning is (Egbert 2001; Lindsay and McLaren 2000). Simply being exposed to a variety of resources will not lead to learning unless the students know where to locate these resources and how to use them.

This article describes a teaching unit that I created for advanced students in a public speaking class. The unit combined Web research with Web site evaluation in order to make the students' work online and in class as effective as possible.

Doing research on the Web

The primary problem of doing research on the Web is not merely identifying the myriad of sites available, but being able to evaluate them and discover what each does and how well it does it (Felix 1999). Warschauer (2000) proposes that new information technologies will transform notions of literacy, making online navigation and online research two critical skills for learners of English. He also points out that the new reading skills required of students include:

- efficiently locating information;
- rapidly evaluating the source, credibility, and timeliness of the information located; and
- rapidly making navigational decisions about whether to read the current page of information, pursue links internal to the page, or revert to further searching.

In light of these ideas, I designed a teaching unit for my public speaking class with two objectives. The first objective was to teach students how to find Web sites with valuable information they could use in preparing their speeches. The second objective was to help students learn how to critically evaluate the information they found online and make them aware that not all content found on the Web was of equal value.

A survey of the class revealed that all 49 students knew that the Web could give them access to valuable sources of information and they all had basic searching skills. Everyone had used the Web at least once, and 64% used it extensively, getting online at least once each day. Regarding the average time they spent online every time they logged on, 14% responded that they spent less than an hour and 23% said they spent between one and two hours. The remaining 63% spent more than two hours online every day. Almost everyone used the Web for research for schoolwork and for communication via e-mail. However, my question “How do you tell what’s good and what’s bad?” was met with many confused looks, and my question “How can you be sure that the information you have found is accurate?” was answered with many shaking heads.

Learning to evaluate Web sites

To prepare the class for a scavenger hunt of useful Web resources, I asked the students to visit the following five Web sites as homework:

- A Guide to Critical Thinking About What You See on the Web <http://www.ithaca.edu/library/Training/hott.html> (visited: 3/14/03)
- The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, or Why It’s a Good Idea to Evaluate Web Sources <http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/eval.html> (visited: 3/14/03)
- Web Evaluation Guide http://www.infosearcher.com/cybertours/tours/tour04/_tourlaunch1.htm (visited: 3/14/03)
- Evaluating Web Sites and Citing Information Found on the Internet <http://www.ala.org/ICONN/fclesson5.html> (visited: 3/14/03)
- How to Tell If You Are Looking at a Great Web Site <http://www.ala.org/parentspage/greatsites/criteria.html> (visited: 3/14/03)

Students were to scrutinize the Web sites and take notes on the information provided. All five sites deal with assessment of Web content and offer criteria to evaluate them. In the following class, we discussed the nature of the Web and the concept of Web literacy in the information age. With the help of the material on the assessment sites, we constructed our own set of evaluation criteria using these five questions:

- Who is the author or the sponsoring institution?
- Who is the audience?
- What is the purpose of the information presented?
- Is the content accurate and objective?
- How current is the information? When was the last update?

Searching for useful speech resources

The next day in class, I asked the students to complete the quotation, “That’s one small step for man, but...” (one giant leap for mankind). Despite slight variations in the specific words, everybody seemed familiar with the statement. When I asked them when and where those words were spoken, they easily put together the right answer (they were spoken by astronaut Neil Armstrong just before he stepped onto the surface of the moon on July 20, 1969). Then, I posed the questions: Which American president spoke about a “government of the people, by the people, for

the people?” When did he use those words? What was the occasion? This time, I encountered many puzzled looks and after several guesses, someone brought up Abraham Lincoln. The students were not able to guess the other answers, so we decided that they should try to find the information on the Web for the following class.

At the same time, I also assigned a Web scavenger hunt (see the appendix). After going over every question on the scavenger hunt assignment to make sure everyone understood what was asked of them, I assigned it for homework and asked the students to bring it back completed in two weeks. Two weeks later we met at the school’s resource center instead of our regular classroom. The resource center is equipped with computers with Internet access. In groups of three, the students shared the results of their individual searches, placing special emphasis on the last three questions. They were to present the Web sites to each other, explain how they had found them, and state whether the site was a credible source.

The Web scavenger hunt assignment was very well received by all of the students in the class. It provided them with the opportunity to practice Web searching skills and become familiar with resources potentially helpful in their preparation of speeches. They found it both challenging and rewarding. Many students expressed surprise at the amount of useful information in the form of scripts and video clips that they could find on the Web. Some students admitted not ever having thought about the reliability of the information found on the Web. For most of them, Web literacy was a concept they had never heard of.

During interviews I conducted later in the course, I asked them what they learned from doing that initial Web search assignment. Fifty-five percent of the students said they used information they found doing the assignment in their speeches given during the course. Some of their individual responses follow:

- “I know which Web sites I can go to and find useful tips or information about making speeches, for example, to find out the way of delivering a special occasion speech.”
- “I usually surf on the Chinese Web sites, but through the assignment I read more sites in English and practiced my reading

skills, writing skills, and how to organize the materials.”

- “I learned how to explore Web pages and get information in a short time and sort the information quickly and efficiently.”

The two major complaints I heard regarding the assignment were predictable: the assignment was too time-consuming to complete, and the school’s Web connection was too slow and frequently jammed. Eighty-two percent of the students felt that the assignment was worth doing. Finally, I was pleasantly surprised when two students approached me after class to ask for more assignments of this type, in particular the first two questions from the scavenger hunt.

Using the Web for speech class

From my follow-up interviews with individual students, I discovered three main ways in which they used the Web for the public speaking class. The first was as a supplement to the textbook. They found Web sites that gave them advice on how to organize and write speeches and tips on how to improve their delivery and conquer stage fright. The second way was as a source of famous speeches in history and of samples speeches for special occasions. EFL students probably do not know the appropriate language to use or the kind of content to include in a speech in English for a particular occasion. Not having ever attended a wedding, a funeral, a commencement, or an awards ceremony in an English-speaking country, they have no schema for these events and therefore need models to follow when asked to prepare these kinds of speeches. The third principal way the students used the Web was to search for relevant material in the same way they do research in a library. The students found statistics, supporting arguments, and counter arguments to enrich their speeches and enhance their credibility as public speakers.

One major drawback regarding the use of the Web is how easy and enticing it is to plagiarize online content, because, as one student said, “... it was already so well written.” In fact, one of the students had to do her speech again because she incorporated too much information found on the Web verbatim in her speech.

Here are three students' accounts of their experience using Web resources in their speeches.

- Peter explained how he used the site www.weddingjokes.com for his wedding toast:

"I found this Web site on yahoo. I logged on and found out that many kinds of wedding speeches are there. I read sample wedding speeches of every kind. Afterwards, I chose the kind of wedding speech I would like to present. From this moment, I kept on searching for sentences, jokes, and quotes that I could apply. When I encountered some problems, I would visit the site again and try to find solutions."

- Mary used the Web when preparing a eulogy:

"For the special occasion speech, I was making a eulogy. When I was trying to find some useful tips or samples or references, I found an online book regarding how to write a eulogy. The abstract of the book was available on the site, and it was quite useful. I didn't buy the book online, but I thought the author deserved a compliment for writing such a good book. So I emailed him to show my appreciation. I told him that after reading the abstract and summary he gave of the book, I seemed to be able to write a good eulogy and that his points were clearly made. I said thanks. He replied. I was so surprised. What's more exciting was that he attached a copy of the online book!"

- Jane used the Web for her informative speech:

"'The Happiness Killer—Depression' was the longest speech that I had ever made. I was quite nervous because I knew nothing about depression. By using a search engine, I found the Web site www.zoloft.com, which provided background information about depression. I decided to use that Web site because it didn't use many technical terms, but still explained depression clearly, and that made it easier for me to understand. The Web site was made by the drug company Pfizer, so the information they provided was quite reliable."

Actually, the Web site Jane used was created by the company that manufactures and sells the depression medication Zoloft. Naturally, I asked her about the credibility and objectivity of the information presented on the site when we went over the draft of her speech before she presented it. I questioned her decision to use the site. She said that she was aware of the potential for biased or inaccurate content and that the information on the site closely matched information she had read in Chinese in medical literature a doctor had given her. Because she was making an informative speech, I encouraged her not to overemphasize any particular type of treatment or mention a particular medication for depression in her speech.

Conclusion

My students found that the Web can be useful for a speech class in three ways: as source of advice on how to prepare and deliver a speech, as a source of models of different kinds of speeches, and as a source of data to enrich and support arguments. Web resources are especially useful because they are timely and easily accessible. However, the students needed to be guided in the process of evaluating Web sites and recognizing reliable information. This important skill will benefit students not only in public speaking but also in their other academic pursuits.

References

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APPENDIX | SCAVENGING THE WEB FOR SPEECH RESOURCES

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1. Which famous speech in American history ends with the words “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!”? When did the speaker use those words? What was the occasion?
2. Fill in the missing words of President Reagan’s eulogy to the Challenger astronauts: “We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and _____ to _____.”
3. What is the international organization of Toastmasters? What is the URL of the organization?
4. Find a Web site that gives advice on how to speak in public. Write down its URL and the piece of advice that is most useful to you personally. Who provided this information? Is it a reliable source? Comment on the purpose of the Web site, its target audience, and the quality of the information provided.
5. Find a Web site that contains video clips or scripts of famous speeches. Write down its URL and the speech you found most interesting. Who is the publisher of the site? Is it a reliable source? Comment on the purpose of the Web site, its target audience, and the quality of the information provided.
6. Find two sites that can help you prepare a speech for a special occasion such as a toast or a eulogy. How can the information on these sites help you?

Hint: Try the Bartleby Web site at <http://www.bartleby.com> and search engines such as Altavista, Google, and Yahoo.