

Action Based Research Report

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Abstract:

The purpose of this project was 3-fold: introduce students to MLA style for website citation, introduce students to the process of evaluating website quality, and to introduce students to reading strategies that could improve their comprehensions of written works (specifically applying information known about the author's life to the understanding of the written piece – in this case, Edna St. Vincent Millay was the target author (poet)). An online activity and companion worksheet were created. Four classes of freshman English students attempted the activity during a single period on Dec. 6th in the computer lab. Reviews of student pre and post assessments and independent teacher remarks indicate that the activity was moderately successful in increasing student awareness of website quality and improving class discussion of written material (a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay). Some modification is needed, however, to improve student citation skills and further enhance critical analysis of website quality.

Problem (Purpose):

There were several deficiencies we hoped to address with this project. The teacher had noted student difficulty with reading comprehension and wanted to introduce reading strategies to her class. We also recognized deficits in student ability to identify quality websites and cite them appropriately. We combined these goals to create a project that required students to use a reading strategy (use related knowledge (a historical study of Edna St. Vincent Millay's life, for this activity) to more fully understand the author's written work) and draw conclusions about how the author's life affected her writing. Students had to not only collect information online, but also determine its quality and cite it appropriately.

Prior to this project, nothing had been done to address these deficiencies. There is no general practice of teaching reading strategies to freshman English students. There has also been neither an arena for students to formally learn about critiquing website quality nor an arena for learning the MLA official format for citing websites. We were asking students to learn several new concepts at the same time.

Theoretical Background:

College-bound high school students need to have good research (including internet research), critical thinking, and comprehension skills (Weiner, 2002). These skills, particularly comprehension, become increasingly important in online educational settings (that are becoming more and more popular) (Carnevale, 2002). The current educational approach in many middle schools and high schools is not preparing students adequately (Holloway, 1999) to use these skills as they enter college. Therefore a new approach is needed.

In recent years teachers have begun to introduce reading strategies to students to help them understand and comprehend a written selection. These strategies can be applied before, during, or after reading the selection. One of the pre-reading strategies that are recommended is placing the selection in context: understanding the author's biography, the historical setting, etc. to increase the understanding of the words being read. This, and other strategies, can easily be converted to graphic representations for students who need visual organization or provide additional information that promotes motivation and global perspective. All of these can increase comprehension for students who are otherwise struggling.

In addition to reading skills, research skills play an important role in adolescent and adult learning. At many schools, including ours, the Big 6 model of literacy is used. Teachers should understand that they do not need to abandon the Big 6 if they want to teach information (internet) literacy, but rather they can incorporate the Internet into their current efforts (Murray, 2000) (see Murray, 2000 for more information on how this can be done). The Big 6 delineates the skills that are necessary, but students still require assistance in applying those skills to an online setting. Critical thinking becomes essential as students navigate the web for quality, current information. Some would even argue that students need to learn when to use the Internet rather than print or print rather than the Internet for their research efforts.

I know several of our faculty focus on the Big 6, information literacy, and reading comprehension to a certain degree. This project is an attempt to deliberately focus on these skills. Based on the results of our project, it

would appear that our freshman need a little more direct instruction in these areas. Because these skills being so important for college success and because all of our students are college bound, I really don't think they can get too much guidance in these areas.

The Study:

Description of Learner Characteristics:

Four classes (approximately 20 students per class) of freshman English completed this activity. These eighty high school freshmen students (male and female) had limited knowledge of reading strategies and limited training in identifying quality web sites were our target audience. This was a rather homogenous group – same ethnicity, same grade level, etc.

Class personality did play a role in the attitude with which students approached this assignment/experience. One class was extremely open to learning about the task and the skills related to it. The teacher was pleased with the learning that took place in this class. Another class was closed to the concept and vocal in their claims that this was neither helpful nor new (they felt that they already knew it all). The teacher voiced concern that this attitude may have interfered with the learning that was intended. (A confrontational project (like an evaluation of the OvaPrima site) was proposed as a way to teach this class about the importance of Internet literacy.) The other two classes fell between these two extremes.

Goals:

The goal of this project was multifaceted. We wanted to address several topics with the same assignment (in retrospect, it may have been better to focus on each individually before trying to combine them all in one project). The goals included the following:

- To have students search for relevant sites
- To have students evaluate the quality of relevant sites
- To have students collect facts about the author
- To have students cite their websites using MLA style
- To have students use a reading strategy promote understanding of the reading selection

Objectives:

The objectives were numerous for this project. We wanted students to actively learn about each of our several goals. The objectives, therefore, included the following:

- Students will extend current online searching skills to locate specific sites.
- Students will be able to evaluate the quality of online sites
- Students will list valid facts about the author
- Students will cite websites using MLA style
- Students will write a paragraph on how the facts they found affected the author's works

Learning Methods and Strategies:

Students participated in several learning experiences during this activity. These learning experiences are recognized as useful tools for promoting knowledge. These learning experiences include the following:

- Guided learning
- Problem solving
- Analysis
- Synthesis

Learning Standards Addressed:

Various learning standards were addressed in this project. The specific standards addressed are listed below:

- National Education Technology Standards
 - Standard 3-1: Students use technology tools to enhance learning, increase productivity, and promote creativity
 - Standard 5-1: Students use technology to locate, evaluate, and collect information from a variety of sources

- Standard 5-3: Students evaluate and select new information resources and technological innovations based on the appropriateness of a specific task
- Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning
 - Language Arts Standards:
 - Standard 5(IV)-6: Understands the philosophical assumptions and basic beliefs underlying an author's work (e.g., point of view, attitude, and values conveyed by specific language; clarity and consistency of political assumptions)
- Illinois State Board of Education
 - Standard 1.B.4a Preview reading materials, clarify meaning, analyze overall themes and coherence, and relate reading with information from other sources
 - Standard 1.C.4a Use questions and predictions to guide reading
 - Standard 5.B.4a: Choose and evaluate primary and secondary sources (print and nonprint) for a variety of purposes
- Providence-St. Mel School Technology Standards
 - Standard 2.A.2: Develop grade appropriate skills and abilities to use technology in ways that support learning, collaboration, personal pursuits and productivity.
 - Standard 3.B.4: Select and apply technology tools for research, information analysis, problem solving, and decision making in content learning.

Materials:

This project used materials regularly provided by the school. No extra materials were used. The components needed to perform this project included the following:

- Computers with Internet connection
- Internet Detective handout
- Project handout
- IMSA citation wizard
- Vivisimo search engine
- Internet Explorer
- Rubric for evaluation

Description of Activities:

Ms. Nelson quickly introduced the assignment the day before proceeding to the lab (Thursday). After this explanation, students were told to write a few sentences about how they could determine the quality of websites.

On Friday (Dec. 6th) the students worked in the computer lab during their English class. Students worked independently and completed worksheet provided to them. The sheet (see appendix) provided directions. Students were to find 5 facts (one from each of 5 sites) about Edna St. Vincent Millay; cite the websites using correct MLA style; and describe why they considered it a quality site. After reviewing these facts, students were to write, on a separate piece of paper, a summary about how these facts influenced the author's writings. Most students initially struggled with the concept of the assignment and did not finish during the 45-minute lab time, so students were told to finish the assignment as homework.

The following class (Monday) students were told to reflect on the activity and write about what they had learned. The class then discussed Edna St. Vincent Millay's life and her poetry. They then read the poem "The Courage My Lesson" by the author and discussed how her life may have influenced this writing.

Assessment Device:

A rubric was created to evaluate student performance. The rubric is shown below:

Criteria	Score				Points
	1	2	3	4	
Students will find facts about Edna St. Vincent Millay	Students find 2 or fewer different facts	Students find 3 different facts	Students find 4 different facts	Students find 5 different facts	

Students will correctly cite their sources	Students correctly cite 2 or fewer facts	Students correctly cite 3 facts	Students correctly cite 4 facts	Students correctly cite 5 facts	
Students will successfully analyze the quality of each site	Students use given criteria to determine quality of 2 or fewer sites	Students use given criteria to determine quality of 3 sites	Students use given criteria to determine quality of 4 sites	Students use given criteria to determine quality of 5 sites	
Total					
Additional teacher comments:					

Assessment:

Three written assessments were performed and one oral assessment. The pre-assessment was simple. Students simply wrote a few paragraphs about how they use the Internet for quality research. This assessment was only done once and was done one class/one day prior to the activity. Students were provided as much time as they needed to complete their statements. This assessment was given to all of Ms. Nelson's freshman English students that were at school/in class that day.

A handout was created to assess performance during the activity. Students were required to record 5 facts (one from each of five quality websites). Students were then to demonstrate their knowledge of MLA style website citations by properly citing the sites they chose. Then, students had to demonstrate their critical thinking skills by listing how they knew the sites were "quality sites". Finally, students were to demonstrate their ability to analyze and produce conclusions by writing a paragraph about how these facts influence their understanding of the author's works. This assessment was only done once. It was provided to all of Ms. Nelson's freshman English students. They were initially given one 45-minute class to complete it. When it was evident that this was not enough time, students were permitted to finish it at home on their own time.

The post assessment was simple like the pre assessment. Students simply wrote a paragraph about what they learned from the activity. This assessment was completed one-class/three days after the project. Students were allowed to take as much time as they needed to complete their paragraphs. This assessment was done only once and included all of Ms. Nelson's freshman English students present at school/in class that day.

In addition to these written assessments, the class discussed the effect the events in Edna St. Vincent Millay's had on her writing of "The Courage My Lesson". This discussion only took place once. It involved all freshman English students present in class the day the post assessment was done (since it was done on the same day).

Results:

Date in lab: Friday, Dec. 6th

Students made some progress as a result of this project. (Teacher comments will be added in the final report.) Students completed a "pre-assessment", a worksheet, and a "post assessment". One class' documents have been reviewed to determine the effectiveness of this project. (The class was chosen by the teacher because they seemed to lack the attitude problems noted earlier and seemed more open to the experience.) These documents, in addition to teacher reports, indicate the project was useful. There were ways the project could be refined.

The day before the project (Thurs.), students were asked to write a paragraph about how they determine if a site is a "quality site". The responses focused primarily on usefulness (provides information needed), level of site appeal (interesting look), level of title appeal (interesting title), popularity (has heard another student mention it), usability (clear/precise), and amount of information (a lot of words is good). There is diversity in appreciation for the quality of information widely available on the web in this class. That difference is easily illustrated with 2 particular entries: "I don't use the Internet for my research because anybody can make a website. There is no certainty that the information will be accurate." and "...I chose the Internet for my research because the Internet lets you type and look up anything you want and I think that's good...(indicating that everything online is quality information)."

The worksheets were done the day (Fri.) the project was actually presented and completed. Most students were able to complete (or nearly complete) the 5 requested facts/citations/quality checks. In this case, however, quantity isn't necessarily quality. After proofreading their responses, I think the students need more work in the area of citing and determining quality. The sites they found tended to be ones I had also identified as quality sites, but they failed to cite the sites correctly (though they were instructed to use the wizard) and their arguments for the quality of the sites still tended to focus on aesthetics and usefulness/features, rather than critical evaluation. I, however, am pleased to see the sites that they tended to select. Many were from information databases (online encyclopedias, infoplease, etc.) and a few discussed the accuracy of information in their defenses of the quality of their sites. This is a sizable improvement from previous online research I've observed in the lab.

The day after the project (Mon.) students were again told to describe a quality site. They were also told to reflect on what they had learned from the experience. A few students reported not having learned anything, but most kids reported an increase appreciation for methods of searching and the quality of sites available. A few students commented appreciation for the search engine we required that they use (vivisimo.com). I don't know what they had used prior to this exercise, but have students recognize that not all search engines are equally useful (for research purposes, anyway). A few also mentioned appreciation for introduction of the process of recording website addresses (though no one cited the sites correctly). One student said, "I already knew [to browse and use more than one site] but what I didn't think about was to write down the address that I visited". Speaking of recording urls, it was nice to see that they included the true urls, rather than the "framed urls" often recorded when viewing a site in a frame of another site. Most students, however, discussed an increased appreciation for the need and process of validating the information on a site. I think their sentiment is well expressed in one student's report, "I learned a lot about internet research that all sites are not accurate. What I plan to do now is look for more sites and see if all the sites kind of connect in some type of way. If they do, that's when I will right it down, instead of the first thing I come to." Another student adds, "Before I truly learned how to search on websites, I didn't pay as much attention to the quality of sites. Now I understand that all sites are not filled with helpful information, because the person that wrote them may have not known what they were talking about." This sentiment was repeated by another student, "...It's very important to select a website that has true information. If not, your data would be all messed up..." A final student summarized the sentiment in this way, "...What I would do differently is read all the information carefully to make sure I'm getting what I actually need." These are just four of the many students that referred to increased critical thinking practices as a result of this exercise.

We would, however, make a few modifications on this project. More emphasis (before hand) would be placed on presenting the components of a quality website and the proper MLA citation format for useful websites. It would also help to have students complete the worksheet on a separate piece of paper, rather than on the worksheet itself so they don't feel justified in resorting to short, non-specific answers (particularly with regard to site evaluation). I think the pre- and post- assessment helped in the learning process and should be considered by anyone attempting to replicate this activity.

Findings:

These results indicate that our students need more exercises like this. They have room to improve and the project helped in this effort. They still need to do more, though. Progress has been made, but more direct instruction with reference to these skills is necessary. It is my opinion that these skills will get our students further in college and life than their ability to recite the order of the elements on the periodic table or their ability to list the characters in a given novel. That is not to say that this information is not important, but rather that it is information that could be referenced later if these research, critical thinking, and comprehension skills are high. We need to teach both, not merely content not merely skills; these entities need to be taught together to promote success in college and in a career of life-long learning. In short, our students could benefit from more activities like this.

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Searching for Understanding

Purpose:

To gather facts about your author by searching online and using quality websites. To discuss how your author's life influenced his/her writings.

Directions:

- 1) Use <http://vivasimo.com> to search online for 5 facts about your author. (You must get each fact from a different website.)
- 2) Then complete the form on the right (use more paper if necessary). List the fact, cite it according to MLA style (you can find information on how to do this at <http://wizard.imsa.edu/cite/>), and list why you consider this a quality site (use the Internet Detective handout to determine the quality of sites).
- 3) Write a paragraph about how the author's life influenced his/her work. (Create this using a word processor and staple it to this sheet to hand-in.)



1. Fact: _____

MLA website citation: _____

Why is this a quality site? _____

2. Fact: _____

MLA website citation: _____

Why is this a quality site? _____

3. Fact: _____

MLA website citation: _____

Why is this a quality site? _____

4. Fact: _____

MLA website citation: _____

Why is this a quality site? _____

5. Fact: _____

MLA website citation: _____

Why is this a quality site? _____