ASSIGNMENT DESIGN PROPOSAL
ENVIROLONAL SCIENCE 10
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Summary

Introduce students to the issue of source evaluation by adding a new dimension (“Consider the Source”) to existing Field Manual exercises. Specifically, Exercises 1, 2, 4, and 5 already require students to refer to .gov, .edu, and .org websites and one scholarly journal article, mining each source for background information in preparation for weekly discussion sections. “Consider the Source” questions would enrich these activities by having students not only look at content, but also critically engage with questions of information origin and evaluation.

Rationale

- Mellon faculty fellows expressed frequent concern with the quality of sources students use in their research, and noted that critical analysis of information sources has become particularly important in the Internet era—when lower-division undergraduates, especially, report using Google as “one-stop shopping” for all their research needs.

- “Consider the Source” would aim explicitly at development of student awareness of information sources themselves, and cultivation of a critical habit of mind–namely, asking questions about where information comes from.

- The focus of “Consider the Source” activities would be on source characteristics such as provenance, authority, reliability, timeliness, etc., concepts that are transferable to student work across disciplines. In a course composed mostly of non-majors, attention to transferability often serves students better than discipline-specificity.

- Fits well with existing pattern of exercises in the course Field Manual. Will not feel like an “add on” research activity that has little relationship to all the others, and does not result in unreasonably lengthy homework assignments for students.

- Straightforward integration with existing course structure: Requires fairly simple additions to exercises already developed in the ES 10 Field Manual.

Examples on Reverse…
Sample Questions

Exercise 1: Census Bureau website

The data on this site is provided by the U.S. Census Bureau. Go to the “About” link to find answers to the following.

- Part of what Department of the federal government?
- Role of Census Bureau?
- How frequently is census data collected?
- Based on above, how reliable is the information at this site?

Exercise 2: Hayward Fault website (seismo.berkeley.edu)

Variations on above:

- What type of organization is “behind” the information on this site?
- How do you know? What’s the clue in the site’s url?
- What conclusions would you draw about authority/reliability of information found here?

Exercise 4: Environmental Defense Scorecard website (www.scorecard.org)

- Sponsoring organization behind the “Scorecard” website? What type of organization is this (e.g., government agency? advocacy? for-profit? etc.)
- Where does Scorecard data on hazardous air pollutants come from?
- What is the Scorecard data source for toxic chemical releases?
- Some acknowledged limitations of the data?
- Conclusions about the authoritativeness of the information found here?

Exercise 5: Article: “Design & Implementation of Rapid Assessment Approaches…”

“This is an example of a scholarly journal article, one of the most important media for the sharing/dissemination of scholarly research. SJs have features that distinguish them from popular publications – e.g., articles in Time Magazine. Comment on…

- Author affiliations & expertise
- Intended audience
- Documentation of sources