

Evaluating websites – EDM Reporter project

Criteria for evaluating a website

Working paper

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Introduction and Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on how to evaluate the quality of websites on reading and define some guidelines for this purpose. The goal is to identify quality websites on reading that could be recommended to educators, parents and children. For that we propose to consider criteria for evaluation of websites in general and then to suggest criteria for evaluating websites in reading and children's fiction.

I Why do we need criteria for evaluating a website?

The reasons are manifold, but there are some that are most often quoted:

- 1) Because there is a huge amount of material on the Internet that requires selection.
- 2) Because, as educators, it is our mission and responsibility to scrutinise all the material that we recommend to children as educational.
- 3) Because we have been brought up with a written academic culture of journals and books which presuppose a meticulous scrutiny for credibility and accuracy. "There is one resounding difference between educational materials published on the Internet and educational materials found in more traditional sources such as journals and textbooks. Materials found in journals and textbooks have been meticulously scrutinized for credibility and accuracy. But, Internet resources are often not subject to such scrutiny." claim Boklaschuk and Caisse (2001).

II What should be evaluated in a website?

Studies that evaluate the quality of websites have to previously define what their purpose is. For example, are we evaluating a website for its friendliness and easiness in terms of usability? Or are we evaluating it for accuracy of content and credibility of information? The answers to these questions depend on what we want a website for.

But websites are also evaluated for the function they are supposed to perform. Is a website

- For education & training?
- For entertainment?
- For communication?
- For information dissemination?
- For commerce and advertising? (categories by Anagnostelis, 2002)

According to each one of these functions, a website will be valued predominantly for the quality and reliability of information it displays, for its accessibility or for its presentation.

Websites are, however, quite often evaluated in terms of their design according to the categories in table 1 (which may serve as an example).

Table 1 (Tan and Tung, 2003)

Category	Definition
Graphics usage	Refers to the purpose for which websites are used and extent of usage, including the quality of graphics and how they are being organised
Text usage	Relates to the purpose of using a text-based interface
Content / Information	Mainly the scope (wide or specific) and quality of information
Updates	Design considerations with respect to websites that require updating
Layout / Space usage	How web space is utilised to present the features and functions across the pages within the website
Presentation of information	Concerns the implications of using colours, fonts and display styles to present information
Headlines	Covers the objective and extent of headline usage
Categorisation of information	Refers to ways of grouping information on the pages in order to facilitate reading
Navigation	The features used in designing the site that facilitates transition from page to page
Colour use	Concerns the usage and choice of colours used
Visual appearance	How the website looks and the impact it effects
Advertisements / Pop-ups / Animation	The purpose and extent of usage of such features
Downloading Time	Factors in designing that impact speed of downloading
Establishing website's identity	Various methods designers use to portray its unique image

These criteria help people evaluate 14 aspects of any website in general terms. However, from the point of view of educators, who want to use a website with children and recommend it to children, other criteria need to be added to the above list. Below there are some suggestions:

- the authority of the author/creator of the website (is the author identified? Do we learn important biographical information on the author of the website?)
- the stability of information and whether it is updated (websites can present updated information better than other media)
- the accuracy of information & comparability with related sources
- the workability: user friendliness, connectivity, search access of a website
- the purpose of the resource: what is it for?
- the nature of intended users. Who is it for?
- information inclusion of material: who can contribute and how?
- citation of material sources;
- scope & comprehensiveness of the materials;
- uniqueness of resources;
- level of regard by the Web community and specialists in a particular field.

Below, in table 2, you find a table that is specifically conceived for the evaluation of educational websites and that may be used as a point of departure for a more specific definition of criteria to evaluate reading websites:

Table 2 (From: Boklaschuk and Caisse, 2001)

NINE CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING EDUCATIONAL WEB SITES	
1. AUDIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clearly states the academic level of target audience. - Contains content and activities that match the academic level of the web site's target audience. - Recognizes that students learn in different ways.
2. CREDIBILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Author has appropriate credentials to author the content of the web site. - Author's name, email/contact info, or address/phone number is provided. - The educational credentials or expertise of the author is stated on web site. - The web master/web designer is credible and provides contact information. - Author responds to queries about the web site's content.
3. ACCURACY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Web site should state the educational background of the author. - Web site should distinguish between the author of the content and the designer of the web site because lack of accurate information can be masked by the 'print' of an expert web designer or web master. - The web site's information clearly matches the web site's intended purpose. - Web site is free from grammatical and typographical errors.
4. OBJECTIVITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Content is free from commercial, political, gender, or racial bias. - The web site's stated curricular goals, objectives, and motives should match its content. - If the content is based upon personal opinion, the author should make it known to the reader. - The content contains a neutral or positive tone. - Affiliations with other educational organizations/companies are stated. - Check the web site address or URL/domain to locate the organizational source of the web site.
5. COVERAGE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The scope of information is stated. - Evaluated links complement the web site's content. - The information is cited properly to allow access to a larger information base.
6. CURRENCY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Web site clearly indicates the publishing date as well as when the content was last updated.
7. AESTHETIC OR VISUAL APPEAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The use of graphics and colours enhance the web site's information. - There is a balance of text and graphics corresponding to the ability of the audience.
8. NAVIGATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Home page contains direct links to all other parts of the web site. - Useful content is no more than 3 clicks away from home page. - All links are kept current and active and the links take user to valid and appropriate content. - Each page or section on the web site is clearly labelled.
9. ACCESSIBILITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Any special software requirements to view web site's content is stated clearly. - Web site has text-only option to accommodate visually impaired users. - Web site loading time is minimal/web designer informs the user of length of download time. - Access to content should be free user should not have to pay a fee or provide personal information (name, e-mail address) to gain access to educational content.

III Suggestions for evaluating websites on reading and children’s literature

All aspects mentioned above are relevant for evaluating websites on reading and children’s literature that educators may want to recommend to children or use with children. A quick review:

- The aim and purpose of a website (what is it about? How is it going to be presented? What for?)
- Its intended readership or audience (Who is it for? Is it clearly stated?)
- Authorship (Do we know who the author and web manager are? Can we trust them?)
- Its form (graphics usage, text usage, layout and space usage, presentation of information, updates, headlines, categorisation of information, navigation, colour use, visual appearance, use of advertisements, pop-ups and animation, downloading time, its way of establishing an identity, navigation and accessibility on the web)
- Its content (what is the audience supposed to learn? Is the information reliable, accurate, stable, regularly updated, compared to related sources? Is the material comprehensive, unique, highly regarded by the web community? Is information presented objectively?)

To evaluate the quality of websites on reading and children’s literature for adult educators to use with or recommend to children, one of the first things to bear in mind is that these websites children may or not be educational. Some may be resource pages to supplement pedagogical material, others more oriented towards entertainment and the joy of reading.

The second aspect to take into consideration is reading theories that educators bring into websites. One educator may use reading just to supplement writing skills, another to enhance aesthetic appreciation and critical judgement in children. It is important to be clear about this.

The third aspect to take into consideration is that web text reading is different from the reading skills used in books, because besides the standard reading skills (linguistic, sociological and aesthetic as the most common) it.

- Requires high levels of visual literacy skills to enable comprehension of multimedia components
- Requires evaluation of text and non-text (graphics, multimedia, and images)
- Requires distinction between important visual images and mere beautification of sites (Wendy Sutherland-Smith, 2002)

So, what we suggest is a list of questions an educator may ask about any website on reading and children’s literature in order to evaluate it, based on the models presented above.

Questions have been divided into two sections: technical and content. Each of these is further subdivided as can be seen in tables 3 and 4.

In the educational context attention should be focused on the relevance and utility content aspects below.

Table 3. Technical aspects

Design	<p>Is the website accessible by the lowest level available browser? (notice that it shouldn’t take too long to download)</p> <p>Does it show a logical organization (navigability)?</p> <p>Are the graphics and the colours used in a way to make it easier for the user to understand the content?</p> <p>Is there the right combination of text and graphics that will encourage users to stay in the site or to explore the site more thoroughly? (this will be specific for certain audiences: younger children will need more graphical and visual information to supplement text)</p>
Navigation	<p>Does the home page or main page have a direct link to all of the other sections of the web site? (table of contents, an index, site map, pull-down menu, etc. Notice that: navigation within an educational web site can be considered user-friendly if “the useful content is no more than 3 clicks away from the main page”(Oregon Public Education Network, 1997-2001).</p> <p>Are all links currently active? Valid? and appropriate?</p> <p>Is each page on the site clearly labelled?</p> <p>Are sections for children and for teachers clearly marked?</p>
Disclosure	<p>Does it clearly state its mission or purpose?</p> <p>Does it state the type of information it will provide?</p> <p>Does it state how the information can be used?</p> <p>Does it identify content areas?</p>

Interactivity	Are there mechanisms for exchange of information between the user and the website or among several users?
Accessibility	Is the text readable against the background? (notice: a single, solid colour with high contrast to the text colour is more readable) Are there symbols for sign posting? Is the layout, page-length and font appropriate for children?

Table 4. Content aspects

Relevance or utility	<p>Are the images and multimedia relevant?</p> <p>Is the hyperlinked material relevant?</p> <p>How is it useful for the audience?</p> <p>(1) does the site help build information on a certain topic / author/ book /etc.?</p> <p>(2) does the site help build an understanding of the literary processes?</p> <p>(3) does the site help build an understanding of society?</p> <p>(4) does the site help build an understanding of the social context in which the literary work is done?(Welborn and Kanar, 2000)</p> <p>(5) does the site offer possibilities of a rich reading experience?</p> <p>(6) from an intercultural point of view, does the site allow readers to explore new, undiscovered environments?</p> <p>(7) does the site promote cultural knowledge about own culture and the cultures of others?</p> <p>(8) does the site introduce variety of genres, themes, traditions of storytelling?</p> <p>(9) does the site actively seek the independent critical reading of intended audience? Can it talk about books, reading experiences? Can they state their preferences and explain why?</p> <p>Do the activities match the academic level of the web site's target audience? "the reading level is too high or too low, or the activities are either too complex or too simple" then the web site is not as strong as it should be.</p> <p>Does the website provide multiple ways for students to learn about the same content?</p>
Safety	<p>Does the website ask users to identify themselves?</p> <p>Does it provide clear membership conditions?</p> <p>Does it explain clearly the policies and rules of conduct?</p>
Information quality	<p>Is the information accurate? Are there any grammatical or typographical errors? Does the site show what it stated as its purpose? Are there indications of any omissions in content? Does it identify the original sources that support the information at the site?</p> <p>Do we know who is the author of the information? Does the author have the appropriate credentials to author a website for children?</p> <p>Are sources of materials clearly acknowledged?</p> <p>What is the breath and depth of the information provided? Does it have current information?</p> <p>Are there instances of bias? Does it try to persuade rather than inform? Are there overgeneralizations and simplifications? Does it lean towards a particular idea?</p> <p>Are there conflicts of interest? (does it contain many advertisements? Are they clearly identified as such? Does it give things to persuade?)</p> <p>Is the setting of the website appropriate as a learning environment? Does it have many distractions? Advertisements?</p>

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