"What a Tangled Web We Weave" or Not?

Introduction:
During an in-class presentation about the musical festival Woodstock, a student cited Joe's website as his source. I thought for sure that the student must have been referring to the rock group Country Joe and the Fish, whose performance at Woodstock is legendary, but I was wrong. The student was quoting an unknown Joe. At that moment, I knew I had to incorporate information literacy into my course.

Rationale:
This activity/lesson is divided into two parts. Instructors may or may not decide to follow up the first part (web evaluation) with the second part (oral citation of sources). Additionally, while this assignment was developed for a public speaking class, it can be modified for any subject matter.

(1) Many students seemingly grab web sites at random when selecting sources for a presentation. This activity/lesson seeks to minimize the eeny-meeny-miny-mo approach to selecting web sources by having students play an active role in the web evaluation process. To that end, one goal of this assignment is to present students with a practical guide to evaluate websites.

(2) Part of a speaker's goal is to establish credibility. One way to do that is by using reputable sources. Of course, students must cite sources in order for audiences to know that the sources are credible. Despite my lecturing students about the importance of documenting sources and providing information about how to cite sources orally when giving their speech, students have problems that include

- tripping over their own words as they attempt to provide oral citations.
- using obvious, unsophisticated phrasing, such as "and I quote."
- accompanying citations with "air" quotes and other inappropriate non-verbal gestures.
- no citations.

Therefore, a second goal of this assignment is to introduce/reinforce a speaker's ethical responsibility to provide oral citations for material gained from web research.

Directions:
<u>**Part 1:**</u> Evaluation of Websites:
- As preparation for the in-class activity, I determine a topic, usually based on course concepts or current events. This semester I selected anti-bullying legislation.
- I then provide a general purpose, specific purpose, and a thesis. For the selected topic, I find five different types of websites, such as Wikipedia, .org, .com, a blog, and so on.
- For a homework assignment, I email everyone the topic information and the website links. With the topic in mind, students visit each of the websites and rank each from 1-5, with 5 being the best. Students should jot down reasons for their choices.

Day 1: (For this in-class activity, it is best for each group to have a laptop.)

- During the next class session, I divide the class into 4 or 5 groups with about 5 members to each group. Each group member shares his or her rank order from the homework and provides an explanation.
- The group then agrees upon a group ranking. Each group puts the ranking on the board, and we look for patterns and variations.
- As groups defend their choices, I take notes on the side of the board. Invariably, their choices are based on solid web evaluation information, such as accuracy, credibility, objectivity, and so on. I point out their solid reasoning and begin to construct a graphic organizer that they can use to evaluate future websites. Based on doing this activity a number of times, I find that Robert Harris' CARS (Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonable, and Support) works well because the mnemonic device is both easy to remember and easy to apply. (See http://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm). Another option is to compare class findings to your college's web evaluation criteria.

Follow-up: I then direct students to go home and find ONE additional website that adheres to the criteria discussed in class.

Day 2:

- In the next class session, students return to their group, and each student shares his or her site via a laptop and defends the selection by referring to the web evaluation criteria developed in the prior class session.
- Group members, using the same criteria, rank the website using the 1-5 system. An average is taken to determine the final ranking. The goal is for each student to receive a 4 or 5.

Part 2: Presenting a Mini-Speech with Citations:
Day 1:

- Prior to the class meeting, I assign relevant explanatory material from their text. During the class we discuss text-based information on citing sources. Students then watch public speaking clips or videos to identify both research and oral citations of it.
- For their assignment, I ask students to create a mini-speech that includes a brief introduction, 1 body point, and a conclusion. The body point may be a discussion of the problem, a workable solution, etc.
- Their topic is the same as the one originally presented to them in Part One. Recently, I have used "Anti-bulling legislation is not an effective way to reduce the bullying problem in today's school."
- For their sources, students can use any web source that the class ranked as a 4 or 5. The source may include the ones I originally provided or any source from a group member. They must use at least 3 sources.

Day 2:

- Students present their speeches to the class, or if short on time, students can present speeches to their groups. Listeners pay particular attention to the use of research and citation of sources.

Discussion:

A discussion is an essential component as it connects both activities. Typically, a discussion occurs at the end of each activity. In Part One, Wikipedia is often a common topic. Students are also surprised to find that some of their preconceptions are unfounded. Thus, they learn that all .edu sites are not necessarily good, nor are all .com sites bad. In Part Two, students frequently reveal their belief that documenting sources undermined their credibility. Hence, they often did not document sources. Other students note the difficulty with creating a smooth citation.

Because students feel as if they are an active part of the evaluation process, they are connected to the activity. Rather than being handed a document that says, "This is what to look for in evaluating websites," they have become active learners and are invested in the process. Giving the speech with citations wraps up both activities and allows students to experience the process to its fruition, presenting in front of an audience.

Resources:
Critical Evaluation of Information http://www.schrockguide.net/critical-evaluation.html

Easybib http://www.easybib.com/kb/index/view/id/142

Evaluating Internet Resources from Teacher Tap (Web examples provided)
http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic32.htm

Purdue University Libraries: Information Literacy Research http://www.lib.purdue.edu/infolit/scholarship

UC Berkeley - Teaching Library Internet Workshops
http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html

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