

# The Media Center: So Much Information Becoming Expert Witnesses!

Mary Alice Anderson, Lead Media Specialist  
Winona Middle School  
Winona, Minnesota

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**I love technology!** It is an integral and valued part of our school's media/technology program. Our students have ongoing learning experiences that are abundant with information technology. I love the Internet and the richness it brings to our students and to my job. But, I also love books; I concur with many educators who are concerned that students no longer want to use print or quality databases. A middle school parent recently said, "I wish he'd open a book and say "aaaaaa, this is what I need." I've also heard students grumble about "stupid Internet assignments" and seen them get excited when they find just what they need in a book. But we cannot ignore the richness and diversity of the Internet or ignore the draw it has for students. My students are fortunate to attend a technology rich school and live in an wired community, but we cannot equate good computer skills with information literacy. We try to promote a balanced, effective and efficient information experience for our digital age students.

**Becoming Expert Witnesses.** Last May 350 8th grade students successfully completed their "Expert Witness" research projects examining current social issues. The task is more than a "report"; it meets a state of Minnesota current issues analysis graduation standard, challenging students to participate in the entire information process of identifying a topic, information need, most appropriate resources; gathering, evaluating and synthesizing information, and finally, presenting their findings to their peers. Students successfully used an online encyclopedia, web sites, online periodicals and newspapers, and many books. Throughout the research process they met with their teachers, took notes and most created Powerpoint presentations to accompany their oral presentations. Nothing new, of course, but the project and the topics have the potential for student frustration and poor issues analysis if students are not provided a structure and process.

**Advanced planning.** Teachers and I began planning a year in advance. We learned from our first involvement with this project that students need solid background information before they can move forward. The Internet, the resource of choice for most, often provides too much information for middle level students who generally do not know enough about the topic to refine their search. To help students get off to a solid start we devoted a considerable chunk of the media center's book budget to upgrading our collection of books on current issues. We met months ahead of time to discuss the skills students would need for success, schedule needed spaces in the media center, instructional time, and research time. The planning process also provided staff development for teachers who had not taught this unit before. I also taught a mini-staff development class to help teachers become more comfortable with Powerpoint. I made a web page for the project that provides ready links to online resources and a list of key print resources. Theoretically this benefits students working at home as well. By spring we were ready to begin the project,

**Information Literacy Instruction.** Teachers and I co-taught the lessons designed to help students make wise choices when selecting resources, rather than race to the web without any forethought. We began with an examination of Clones R Us, a web site that sparked lively discussions both about cloning and the site's validity. Not every student caught on to the phony lists of satisfied cloning clients, an opportunity to show students the site's disclaimer which explains that Clones R Us "is a spoof site intended to simulate one possible manifestation of reproductive cloning technology, and stimulate thought on the pros and cons of reproductive cloning." Just for fun we moved on to web sites not related to the topic. Student laughed at the web site depicting Mankato, Minnesota, as a tropical paradise with pyramids and a submarine base, recognizing it is an obvious fake site, but I reminded them that some of their classmates had used that site "for real" when they planned a Minnesota vacation in 6th grade. They didn't do so well in their efforts with a fake site about New

Hartford, Minnesota, which is non-existent. One student did catch on right away, exclaiming "You want us to use books!" Web site evaluation in a nutshell!

Continuing with cloning as a sample topic, we moved to the the Expert Witness Class Project Page and a quick review of online catalog searching because my students are just like tech savvy students everywhere who will spend forever searching the web before they spend a minute finding a book. This was a time to review the importance of a "personal brainstorming session, " trying multiple search terms, paying attention to copyright dates, and pointing out that books, too, can have biases and inaccuracies.

Next stop, World Book Online Encyclopedia and the multitude of related web links, magazine articles, newspaper articles and "Back in Time" articles that World Book Online offers. We discussed the significance of using web sites that have been selected by experts and editors and the efficiency of using these web sites compared to an open search on a topic that might yield thousands of hits, not all reliable.

InfoTrac Magazines and ProQuest Newspapers were our next resources to search. ProQuest's guided search option and search wizard are terrific tools for helping students narrow down a topic or complete a search.

The final information destination was an introduction to the Multnomah County Oregon Social Issues Links, a collection that is ideally suited for current issues analysis because the links present both sides of the issue and direct students to age appropriate sites. We also reviewed the best and most appropriate search engines to use, encouraging students to use search engines for younger topics to lesson their changes of finding inappropriate or offensive sites. We also recommended the Safe Search option in Google.

**Settling down to work.** We provided several times of research time in the media center, always a necessity for required projects and a deterrent to plagiarism or too much reliance on parent help. Our block schedule provides solid chunks of time for quality work in a less frazzled atmosphere. Once students had selected a topic and their thesis statement had been approved, they could begin information process. As 8th graders, they have experienced our "no printing" rule for three years and accepted the required note taking forms, another deterrent to the copy/paste syndrome. As the research progressed, students made increasingly better use of the forms, making sure they always used them. Our forms are a half page each and color coded for the resource. There is space for the bibliographic information and enough space to record key points. Student ultimately found the forms helpful for organizing their information for their final presentation and helpful in knowing how to cite their sources. They also found the books helpful ("oh, this is a good one. . . it has it in here." ) and easy to use although I expect many didn't anticipate that. Students were required to turn in all research forms when they completed their project.

Hearing from the students. Some thought the "magazines and newspapers were the best resources because the topic was on current issue." They liked the option of sending articles to their house by email and the found related sources and background information in World Book Online to be great.

Student evaluation comments showed that some found the extensive list of topic choices too much to comprehend; others would have liked a separate list of topics for each section of the class to avoid sharing. They wished the bibliography format and note taking cards were more precise because they experienced difficulty citing sources if the author was not a person or if their was more than one author.

In the final evaluation some students said they liked the guidelines because "we knew what to expect ." Others said they did not like going over resources, indicating they knew how to search. This is an ever-present dilemma in teaching or reviewing the "finding information" aspect of information literacy with students who have had a multitude of experiences working in the media center or using the Internet at home. Yet, my observations tell me that review is always necessary; without it students tend to take what to them is the easy way out and do not try a multitude of resources. Without instruction many would have neglected some of the same resources they said they liked: World Book, Social Issues Links, or even the magazines and newspapers, which they could also access at home.

The final product was an oral presentation. For many this was their first experience with Powerpoint and they enjoyed it, saying it added a lot to the project and allowed them to be professional. Many noted that it made it easier to present and made giving a presentation fun because "not as much attention was focused on me; relieved some of my nervousness." The processes involved in the expert witness project are a nice culmination of the vast experiences the students have at Winona Middle School. An oral presentation and a Powerpoint slide show are also plagiarism deterrents.

**Creating a balanced information environment.** Our goal of providing a balanced information experience in a transparent information environment is ever present. Students always move back and forth between books and technology. In another example, 6th grade students interviewed family members before creating a timeline of the person's life using Tom Snyder's Timeliner. They used the "Jump Back in Time" feature from the America's Library web site to locate primary resource photos to insert in their timeline. To encourage the use of print we moved several books into the lab; they loved the picture books about the last several decades and spent significant amounts of time browsing for pictures to scan. I've always encouraged kids to search on their own for books, but now I'm pulling more books and putting them on carts to encourage more use of print. Our links of web sites for other class projects are evolving into class project pages that include lists of print resources and links to quality data bases such as Gale's Junior Reference Collection. Our Practical Tips for Using the Internet web page keeps evolving to meet the expanding information needs of students and new challenges that arise as technology changes.

I feel fortunate to teach at a time when so much information is readily available for our students. Like other educators, I want my students to have their experiences with information technology be valid and valuable. As media specialists it is our obligation to educate all students about the potential, perils and possibilities of the resources they take for granted.