

Evaluating Online Resources

-Bal Krishna Sharma

In this brief essay, first I will discuss the need for evaluating online resources for academic purposes, reflecting on my experience with “academic writing” as a university teacher in Nepal, instructor of academic English in a university in the US, and an editor of a refereed ELT journal published from Nepal. And then I move to offer some tips on how to evaluate academic resources available online for students of academic writing (e.g. thesis, dissertation, term papers, article manuscripts, etc.). I conclude the essay with some useful links and their brief annotations for further reading on evaluating resources online.

When I was teaching M. Ed. students at Tribhuvan University and supervising their theses, I found that students plagiarized language as well as content of their theses from open sources like Internet. Using questionnaire and interview, I carried out a study on why and how students plagiarized academic works when they were writing their theses. Findings revealed that students lacked their evaluative skills on judging the authenticity of online resources, among other reasons. From 2008, I have been teaching academic reading and writing courses to international graduate students in the University of Hawaii at Manoa. I have found my students having hard time to evaluate relevance as well as authenticity of online resources in their areas, in addition to struggling to deal with plagiarism issues. As one of the editors of the Journal of NELTA, our editorial team has had to deal with issues of plagiarism as well as authenticity of our authors’ manuscripts in using online resources while preparing manuscripts. One of the major reasons of manuscript rejection is the author’s inappropriate use of unreliable web resources. Based on this experience, I realized that offering some tips would be helpful for students of academic writing (e.g. theses, dissertation, articles, term papers, etc.) as well as any individuals involved in the business of academic English. Also as Coordinator of “Resource Building/Collection” section of NELTA Networking team, I have provided hyperlinks for academic journals available for free in applied linguistics/ELT accessible in this link: <http://neltachoutari.wordpress.com/downloads-and-links/>. Journal of NELTA’s previous issues have been achieved in Nepal Journal’s collection website. <http://>

www.nepjol.info/index.php/NELTA/issue/archive

Readers can use the criteria below in order to assess those web resources. The present essay will complement this endeavour of mine.

The World Wide Web offers immense amount of information and data from all over the world in multiple languages. Because so much information is available, it is necessary to develop skills to evaluate what is useful and relevant for your purpose. For example, if you type “learner autonomy” in Google search, finding hit reaches to 1,71000 in 0.4 seconds. What will you do then? Do you cite everything that you find? Or do you use the first 10 or so findings for your purpose? It is difficult to answer this question. It is not a big problem for printed resources like books, chapters or journal articles because such resources have been evaluated before by reviewers or scholars in the field. However, because anyone can publish on the web, you need to evaluate the materials in terms of their authenticity, relevance as well as their reliability. Scholars have offered a number of criteria to evaluate such resources. I briefly discuss their summary below.

Criteria for Evaluating Online Resources

Authorship

Who wrote the page?

It is necessary to find out who wrote the material/text that you are reading. Find out the name of the author as well as his/her affiliation to the institution. You can also see the home page of the author by googling. Then ask a question: Does the author seem to be qualified to write on the topic? You can see the list of publications by the author in order to assess the author’s expertise. If you find some resources particularly useful to you but cannot access for free online, you can request the resource by emailing to them. Though this is not guaranteed, I have used this strategy when my library does not have the copy I want. If you are convinced that the author “knows” what s/he is writing, then you can use that resource.

Publisher

Who is the publisher?

You can access resources from multiple locations: personal websites, official websites, blogs, etc, but all of them are not equally useful for your research purpose. For example, if the resource is published by a university press (e.g. Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, etc.), it is likely to be authentic and reliable for your scholarly purpose. Academic journals are published by different university presses as well as publishing houses. Read the submission guidelines of the journals and find out if they are peer reviewed, refereed journals. Articles published by refereed journals are reviewed and evaluated by usually two other reviewers to ensure quality. Journals that accept contributions without review can be poor in their scholarly quality. If you locate the material in websites, blogs or Wikipedias, they can be useful, but they are usually not scholarly. Google search, for example, often leads you to Wikipedia pages, and while information there is useful for review, it might not be too appropriate for your academic work.

Intended audience

For whom was the information written?

Remember that every information is not written for academic purposes-- for example to help you write thesis or term papers. The publication could be aimed to general audience (e.g. magazine readers) or specific audience (e.g. students/researchers of applied linguistics). Therefore, the source can be very superficial lacking depth, or too technical accessible only to the experts on the topic or just right for your needs and purpose. Therefore, different resources design their content to fit their audience's interests in terms of format, style, complexity of ideas and amount of details. Make sure that the resource you are using is for the audience like you and for the work that you are pursuing.

Currency

When was the work published?

Journal articles published online are dated and they are identified with volumes and issues. You need to use recent works as much as possible. Because knowledge changes every day, older publications can be less useful and sometimes misleading. For example, if you have an article on “second language acquisition” published in 1987, you need to question its relevance in 2011. You might want to look for an article that has been written pretty recently, for example in 2010. Because authors usually tend to provide their list of publications in their home pages, you can access recent publications from their personal websites as well. For using information from web pages, you can see when the work was last updated. If the web page was written in 2001 and has never been updated, information there can be absolute.

Fact or Opinion

Is the information fact or opinion?

Any information included in publication is rarely neutral. In addition, it is necessary to first verify if the content contains author’s opinions or proven facts on the topic being written about. Authors usually tend to take a position in their writing and they believe in their opinions. Therefore, it does not mean that you also agree with that opinion. Even the so-called facts are used “selectively” to support the author’s opinions. While evaluating resources, it is important to examine “who” is providing the information you are reading and what could be their point of view or bias. Because the Internet provides larger space for publication, people find it as a perfect venue for commercial or political agendas. Even the facts included in the information can be incorrect or misleading. Just to give you an example, David Crystal in 2008 assumes that 15 million people in Nepal can speak English. This is a statistical assumption from one of the most well known linguists. However, you can ask a critical question: Can 15 million people in Nepal speak English where literacy rate is only 48 percent and total population is about 27 million? What happens if you present Crystal’s assumption as a fact in your thesis? In order to avoid any risk that results from biased opinions or selective facts, you need to collect other sources and compare and contrast them against each other.

Coverage

Does the author give diverse opinions on the topic and list references and further readings?

Academic topics are hardly non-disputable. There usually is more than one opinion on the topic you are writing. Then you need to make sure that the author is presenting more than one opinion or previous literature on the topic and then only taking his/her position. When you read different approaches or perspectives on a topic and find controversies and differences, it is difficult to decide which source is accurate or reliable. In such a situation, you need to locate more resources and do more readings. Good academic sources mostly provide reference lists and further readings. You can also judge the reliability of the information on the basis of those reference and reading lists. If they are directly relevant to the topic and are current in their publication, then the resource you are using is likely to be authentic and reliable for your purpose.

Annotated Bibliography/Further Readings

1. University of Maryland Library for Evaluating Web Resources (<http://www.umuc.edu/library/guides/web.shtml#Evaluate>) : This website provides five separate criteria for evaluation of web resources for research purposes-- particularly presenting a series of questions to determine if a web resource is of high quality.

2. Cornell University Library (<http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/skill26.htm>): This website offers critical tips on evaluating print as well as web sources before writing any academic paper. It addresses three main components: author, title, and publication information. It also offers how a website can be evaluated by examining home pages.

3. Johns Hopkins University Webpage: (<http://www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/index.html>)

Information provided in this webpage presents a set of criteria that can be used to evaluate print as well as web content to assess information.

4. Duke University Library (<http://library.duke.edu/services/instruction/libraryguide/evaluating.html>)

This webpage provides you some basic principles on evaluating resources while writing research papers. By posing a series of questions, readers and researchers can determine the quality and reliability of resources before using them.

5. University of Albany Library (<http://library.albany.edu/usered/eval/evalweb/EvaluatingWebContent.pdf>)

This document offers tips for evaluating the quality and reliability of web content for academic purposes. It comprehensive discussion of web-content from sources like web pages, blogs, wikis, social networking sites, free research services and multimedia types is helpful for the students to figure out which content is trustworthy for academic purposes. The following link is helpful to access those useful tips.

Source: <http://neltachoutari.wordpress.com>