The Toolbox
A TEACHING AND LEARNING RESOURCE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Volume 14
Issue 1
September 2015

Separating Fact From Fiction in the Digital Information Age

The continued emergence of digital technology has resulted in the instantaneous and ever-growing availability of vast amounts of information. To put this in perspective, below are some mind-boggling statistics regarding information in digital contexts:

- Since its inception at CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) in 1989, the worldwide web has grown exponentially. By 2013, there were over one billion websites operating on the Internet (Internet World Stats, n.d.).
- The website Technorati regularly surveys the status of technology as it intersects with the culture. In 2011, it reported that there were more than 8 million active blogs online, with a new blog being created every 7.4 seconds.
- Wikipedia, the most prolific of the wiki sites, began operation in July 2001 and estimates the number of wikis included on its site will surpass 4.5 million in 2015.

As faculty and students increase their levels of engagement with digital information, it is critically important that they develop the skills necessary to discern the level of accuracy and significance found in online material. However, the need to separate fact from fiction existed long before the digital age. In a 1969 lecture to the National Council of Teachers of English, Neil Postman, American author, media theorist, and cultural critic, proposed that “the art of crap-detection” (p. 1)—a term coined by Ernest Hemingway (see Manning, 1965)—was vital to a reader’s ability to separate useful content from that which is worthless, inaccurate, or vacuous. Postman posited one of five qualities can alert a reader to possible areas of inaccuracy or exaggeration:

- pomposity—using fancy words and phrases to reduce readers’ awareness of a lack of content;
- fanaticism—failing to accept any data or positions counter to those of the writer;
- inanity—exaggerating explanations on topics that have little value or relevance;
- superstition—without any supporting data, authoritatively stating fantasies and false notions as if they are true; and
- earthiness—using off-color language to emphasize a point or position.

“Technology is a bit of a double-edged sword. Used right, it’s a wonderful tool, but unfortunately, it makes it easier for a lot of mediocre people to get really crappy ideas out.”

— Martin Gore, English singer, songwriter, and musician
The fact that students have established themselves as voracious consumers of the information found on the Internet has been widely documented (e.g., Jones, Johnson-Yale, Millermaier, & Perez, 2009; Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). As such, faculty should not only facilitate student learning in relation to identified course content but also help students develop the skills necessary to be vigilant critics of the content they encounter in digital venues. The next sections offer several ways this can be accomplished in the classroom, and a list of additional online resources are presented in the sidebar.

Walk the Talk
First and foremost, faculty need to model the patterns of behavior they hope to pass on to their students. For example, during lectures and discussions, instructors should avoid trying to impress students with stilted, technical, and flowery language when plain, everyday terms would easily accomplish the same outcome. Paying attention to the manner and delivery of course content can help faculty steer clear of the five qualities Postman (1969) identified above and prevent students from “red flagging” or dismissing classroom material as not worth listening to. Further, the classroom environment should encourage an inquisitive and analytical mindset for students, where they feel comfortable discussing and sharing—as well as challenging—ideas from peers and the instructor. Creating this type of backdrop for learning, modeled and supported by faculty, helps students try out new ideas, propose different ways of looking at content, and build better understanding through dialogue.

Let Me Count the Ways
It is helpful to give students guided practice in identifying and naming the various forms of hype that writers often use to convince readers of their assertions. With this goal in mind, faculty could locate articles or websites that strongly espouse a position on particular topics related to their academic discipline. Then, as an assignment or a classroom learning experience, instructors would walk through the identified resource with students, pointing out how the authors may be working in deceptive ways to convince the reader of their thesis.

Different Points of View
In every academic discipline, any number of topics invite controversy and strong differences of opinion. One strategy for helping students confront these hot-button issues and assess the ways in which different positions are communicated is to assign students responsibility for finding two or more opposing viewpoints (e.g., websites, blogs, articles) on a topic of concern. They would then draw up a list of points and counterpoints made by each author and reach a conclusion as to which writer was the most truthful and forthright in presenting his or her position. Students may even find that the most convincing writer takes a position counter to their own perspective on the issue, which can lead to deeper and richer classroom discussion and learning. As F. Scott Fitzgerald (1936) observed, “The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function” (para. 2). Faculty can help students accomplish this task by developing the skills of analysis, discernment, and dialogue, as well as become wise and discriminating consumers of information.

Help your students learn and practice the art of crap detection!

References

Additional Resources
The Baloney Detection Kit available at http://www.brainpickings.org/2014/01/03/baloney-detection-kit-carl-sagan/
Crap Detection and Other Essential Network Skills available at http://socialreporter.com/?p=2079
Crap-Detection Mini-Course (check out the Crap Detection Resources tab) available at http://rheingold.com/2013/crap-detection-mini-course/
Critically Processing What You Read available at http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/critically-processing-what-you-read.php
With enrollments in community colleges on the rise, the quality of the first-year experience for students is critical to their success, whether they wish to obtain a certificate, an associate degree or transfer to a four-year institution. The Institute on First-Year Student Success in the Community College will provide attendees the opportunity to discuss the current role of the community college in higher education and develop an action plan for creating or enhancing pathways for community college student success.

Register at:
WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/IFYSSCC

Price per individual: $645
2 or more: $625

REGISTRATION DEADLINE OCTOBER 28, 2015

Paths to Learning
This book offers a succinct description of several pedagogical paths available to faculty that can actively engage all students. In addition to providing the most recent information on learning and assessment, individual chapters tackle different approaches, including critical pedagogy, contemplative pedagogy, strengths-based teaching, and cooperative/collaborative learning.

Barbara F. Tobolowsky, Editor
177 pages. $30.00

Foundations For Critical Thinking
Foundations for Critical Thinking explores the landscape of critical-thinking skill development and pedagogy through foundational chapters and institutional case studies involving a range of students in diverse settings.

Trudy Bers, Marc Chun, William T. Daly, Christine Harrington, Barbara F. Tobolowsky & Associates
ISBN 978-1-889271-93-4
224 pages. $30.00
What’s Happening at The National Resource Center

Conferences and Continuing Education

Save the Dates

22nd National Conference on Students in Transition
October 17-19, 2015
Baltimore, Maryland
Registration Deadline: October 7, 2015

Institute on First-Year Student Success in the Community College
November 6-8, 2015
University of South Carolina
Registration Deadline: October 28, 2015

35th Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience
February 20-23, 2016
Orlando, Florida
Proposal Deadline: September 28, 2015
Early Registration Deadline: February 4, 2016

Online Courses

The National Resource Center offers online courses on topics of interest in higher education. The courses provide participants the same content and opportunities for interaction with peers and the instructor as traditional (i.e., classroom-based) learning environments while taking advantage of pedagogy and teaching techniques that are not possible or common in those settings. The courses use tools such as e-mail, threaded discussions or forums, listservs, and blogs. Enrollment is limited to 40 participants. Participants will earn 1.5 continuing education units for each course. Visit http://www.sc.edu/fye/oc for more information.

Online Course Offerings

Maximizing Digital Tool Use in the First-Year Seminar: Helping Students Become Digital Learners
October 5-30, 2015
Registration Deadline: September 25, 2015
Facilitated by Brad Garner, Director of Faculty Enrichment in the Center for Learning and Innovation, Indiana Wesleyan University

Research Reports on College Transitions No. 5
An Exploration of Intersecting Identities of First-Generation, Low-Income Students
Rashné R. Jehangir, Michael J. Stebleton, and Veronica Deenanath
65 pages. $20.00

Welcoming Blue-Collar Scholars Into the Ivory Tower
Developing Class-Conscious Strategies for Student Success
Krista M. Soria
92 pages. $25.00

www.nrcpubs.com
Publications—New Releases

Research Reports on College Transitions No. 5
An Exploration of Intersecting Identities of First-Generation, Low-Income Students
Rashné R. Jehanigir, Michael J. Stebleton, and Veronica Deenanath

This new research report captures the challenges low-income, first-generation students faced in their collegiate journey, examining the strategies they employed to persist. Organized thematically and using student narrative, the brief report explores the diversity of first-generation students, the intersections of their multiple identities, and their interactions with the institutional agents that affect college success. An Exploration of Intersecting Identities of First-Generation, Low-Income Students also offers practical suggestions for higher education professionals working with this diverse and growing population. ISBN 978-1-889271-97-2. 65 pages. $20.00. To read an excerpt or place an order, visit www.nrcpubs.com.

National Resource Center Exhibits and Presentations

Like many of you, the staff of the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is actively involved in the conference circuit. We are pleased to share the following upcoming opportunities to hear about the results of research studies conducted by the Center, learn about best practices, and meet National Resource Center staff members.

First-Year Seminars in the Community College. Keynote presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment; at the 2015 Two Year First Year Conference; September 25, 2015, 8:15-9:00 a.m.; Sheraton Norfolk Waterside Hotel; Norfolk, Virginia.


Judging the Book by Its Cover: Research on Common Reads. Concurrent session by Tracy L. Skipper, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Publications, at the 2015 NODA Annual Conference, October 24-27; Denver, Colorado.

Writing for Professional Advancement. Concurrent session by Stephanie Foote and Tracy L. Skipper, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Publications, at the 2015 NODA Annual Conference, October 24-27; Denver, Colorado.

An Evidence-Based Discussion of Aligning Objectives, Experiences, and Assessment in the First-Year Seminar to Carry the High Impact Into the Second Year and Beyond. Presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, at the 2015 Assessment Institute in Indianapolis; October 25-26, 2015; Indianapolis Marriott Downtown; Indianapolis, Indiana.
First-Year Seminar Characteristics Predicting Institutional Retention Rates. Research paper presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment, at the 2015 ASHE Annual Conference; November 5, 2015, 2:30-3:45 p.m.; Mineral F, Hyatt Regency Denver at the Colorado Convention Center; Denver, Colorado.

Telling the Story of Common Reading Programs in First-Year Seminars. Presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment; Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center Director; and Sara Frakes, National Resource Center Graduate Assistant for Research, Grants, and Assessment; at the 2015 ASHE Annual Conference; November 5, 2015, 4:00-5:15 p.m.; Capitol 6, Hyatt Regency Denver at the Colorado Convention Center; Denver, Colorado.

A 360 View of the Policy, Practice, and Promise of College and Career Readiness and Success. Panel presentation by Dallin George Young, National Resource Center Assistant Director for Research, Grants, and Assessment; David T. Conley, University of Oregon; Laura Jimenez, American Institutes of Research/College and Career Readiness Success Center; Julia Duncheon, University of Texas El Paso; and Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center Director; at the 2015 ASHE Annual Conference; November 7, 2015, 9:15-10:30 a.m.; CC 103, Hyatt Regency Denver at the Colorado Convention Center; Denver, Colorado.

Journal Editors Panel. Panel presentation including Jennifer R. Keup, National Resource Center Director, and other representatives of higher education scholarly journals at the 2015 ASHE Annual Conference; November 7, 2015, 1:45-3:00 p.m.; Hyatt Regency Denver at the Colorado Convention Center; Denver, Colorado.

Partner Events

Two Year First Year Conference
September 24-25, 2015
Sheraton Norfolk Waterside
Norfolk, Virginia
http://www.tyfy.info/Conference

2015 Midwest First-Year Conference
September 25, 2015
Waubonsee Community College
Sugar Grove, Illinois
http://mfyc.org/

Center for Higher Education Retention Excellence
Can Non-Traditional Students Save Higher Education and Vice Versa
November 13-14, 2015
Central Connecticut State University
New Britain, Connecticut
http://thechere.org/events/

The Toolbox
Author: Brad Garner
Telephone: 765.677.3341
E-mail: brad.garner@indwes.edu
Address: Indiana Wesleyan University
4201 South Washington Street
Marion, IN 46953

The Toolbox is an online professional development newsletter offering innovative, learner-centered strategies for empowering college students to achieve greater success. The newsletter is published six times a year by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina. The online subscription is free. To register for newsletter alerts and access back issues, please visit www.sc.edu/fye/toolbox.

Publication Staff
Editor: Toni Vakos
Graphic Designer: Joey Hilton
ANNUAL FYE
ORLANDO | FEBRUARY 20-23, 2016

PROPOSAL DEADLINE: SEPTEMBER 28, 2015
WWW.SC.EDU/FYE/ANNUAL

ONLINE COURSES
ON THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE
AND STUDENTS IN TRANSITION

OCTOBER 5 - OCTOBER 30, 2015
Maximizing Digital Tool Use in the First-Year Seminar:
Helping Students to Become Digital Learners
Facilitated by: Brad Garner
Indiana Wesleyan University

Register by Sept. 25, 2015
www.sc.edu/fye/oc

» Course Capacity - 25 Registrants
» Fee - $425

This course will focus on the ways in which the first-year seminar, through intentionally designed teaching and assessment strategies, can help first-year students acquire the competencies necessary to engage with digital technology and become more effective and active digital learners.