

by Jeff Utecht



Making Sense of the Chaos: The Importance of Teaching Internet Search Skills

I have fond memories of library time in elementary school. It is where I learned more than anything why alphabetical order mattered. If you want to look something up in a dictionary or an encyclopedia then order matters. Want to find something in the index of a book? Order matters. Using the card catalog to find that book on volcanos? Order matters.

I am grateful for my time in the library. That hour a week of instruction I received from my librarian through the years paid dividends during my college career, since even microfiche was kept in alphabetical order in the university's library.

Yes....in the mid 1980's alphabetical order might just have been the most important skill librarians could have taught their students. However, in 2014, I am not so sure that is the skill that is most important today. I am not saying that alphabetical order isn't important, just not as important as it once was. Now, when I want to look up the meaning of a word, I go to Google.com. I type in "define:alphabetical" and instantly get the definition. If more information is required, I go to wikipedia.org and search for it there. No alphabetizing skills required, just knowledge of using search engines. Even the book search software used in school libraries today doesn't require alphabetical order knowledge, no...what you need is search.

Today the most important skill we can give students is the skill of search. After all, microfiche is dead, the card catalog is dead, in fact the whole way that we used to order things is dead. Anyone still teaching the

Dewey Decimal system? In a digital world there is no order, there is chaos and the skill needed most today by our students, teachers, parents, and community is making sense of all the available information. Knowing how to make sense of the chaos that is the digital information landscape, is the most important skill we can give anyone today. It doesn't matter if you are searching Google, Bing, your library catalog, or the databases that a school subscribes to. At the end of the day, they all require search skills.

I believe there is a difference between "finding stuff" and "research". Both are searching but they are two different skills. "Finding Stuff" is easy, that's where you go to Google.com, type in "how much does an elephant weigh" and it spits back the answer to you. "Research" is looking for information, piecing knowledge together, and then coming to your own conclusion. For example researching a hotel for your upcoming summer holiday. Where do you go? Who do you trust? You might start at Google, but soon you'll probably end up at Tripadvisor.com. Once there, do you know how to read the webpage? What reviews do you trust? Do you trust reviews at all? What weight do you give reviews done by people who have stayed at the hotel versus, say, Expedia's star rating? These kinds of activities are aligned with the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) first standard, which requires students inquire, think critically, and gain knowledge. While these are the things we all

want to teach students, it may seem unusual that they can be practiced by researching and comparing vacation scenarios, as described previously.

Consider another set of knowledge and skills related to search, specifically literacy. Reading for understanding is the foundation of most informational text standards today, yet I'm not sure we are applying that to the Internet. Do we teach students how to read and understand web pages? The fact is, no matter how many books you read today, I would bet you still read more web pages than you do book pages. Now apply your own use of the Internet to a 3rd grade student, an 8th grade student, or perhaps a senior who is headed off to university. How many book pages will they read versus web pages in a lifetime, especially when it comes to informational text? The skill of reading for understanding is the same but the context has changed.

Some questions that every educator should consider for reconciling literacy skills with technology skills include the following:

- Can students read and understand an index page in comparison to a search results page?
- Similarly, do students know how to interpret the results from a search?
- Lastly, do students know what to do next after securing and interpreting results?

I think about how many search result pages educators and students see on a

daily basis and yet very few who I talk to understand what this information is and how to use it. This is why I created lesson plans for K-12 educators on this topic, to help students learn necessary Internet skills by providing resources to educators (<http://www.thinkingstick.com/start-the-year-by-teaching-search>).

Other resources that I love to use with students include *A Google A Day* (agoogleaday.com). This website is created by educators and it has new questions students use for practicing Internet search skills. The website itself is a great resource. However, the engaging dialog that revolves around questions and results during a class session is what I enjoy most. For example, students are presented with questions such as

“What was your search term?”

“What information was important?”

“Where did you start?”

“How do you know your information is correct?”

I use this website in many of my trainings with educators, not only to expose them to a fabulous resource, but to get them thinking about how they can create their own questions based on various content areas or specific topics. In fact Google’s own Search Education site (<http://www.google.com/insidesearch/searcheducation/index.html>) has many more resources for educators

The screenshot shows three search results for 'Global Warming'. Annotations with blue arrows point to specific parts of each result:

- Global Warming | National Climatic Data Center (NCDC)**: An arrow points to the title, labeled 'Title of the web page'.
- Global Warming - LiveScience**: An arrow points to the URL 'www.livescience.com/topics/global-warming/', labeled 'Web address'.
- Global Warming -- National Geographic - Environment**: An arrow points to the first sentence of the snippet, labeled 'The sentence where your search term first appears on that web page.'

to use for teaching Internet search. This site also enables users to examine past *A Google A Day* challenges to see how other educators are framing questions that get students to go beyond “finding stuff” and to legitimate research based on Internet-based inquiry.

Surely, educators and students everywhere are grateful for the Internet and all that it enables us to do. We take advantage of search every day in our daily lives and in our classrooms. It has changed our culture and work for the better (and of course, also in some ways that are not helpful). But with all these changes, both in our classrooms and within the world at large, there is a new skill set that we need to ensure we are not neglecting: a skill set

that once mastered opens up an entirely new world of information, knowledge and possibilities.

Jeff Utecht is an educational technology consultant, educator and author. He holds a Master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus in Technology as well as administrative credentials. Jeff began his career as a teacher in a public elementary classroom in Washington. In 2001, he received the Technology Leadership Program grant sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This marked the beginning of his journey with technology and learning. You can learn more about Jeff’s work at <http://www.jeffutecht.com/>

Professional Development

Building Teachers’ Capacity for Success

Date: Thursday, November 20, 2014

Time: 8 a.m.–3 p.m.

Location: Tacoma Professional Development Center
6501 N. 23rd Street, Tacoma, WA 98406

Target Audience: Administrators, Instructional Coaches,
School and District Leaders, Teacher-Leaders.

How do we increase student achievement? The research is clear that teacher effectiveness is the #1 determinant of student success and every teacher, like every child, is unique and has strengths, weaknesses, goals, ambitions, gaps, and special qualities. Learn from award-winning principal and author, Pete Hall, on how to support teachers’ growth as reflective practitioners through individualized motivation, personalized feedback, customized coaching, and differentiated supervision. Participants will discuss the application of a strengths-based approach (via the Continuum of Self-Reflection) and get practical tools for drawing the most out of every teacher, one teacher at a time. This session is related to Pete’s book, “Building Teachers’ Capacity for Success” (ASCD, 2008).

**For registration info,
visit www.wsascd.org**



Speaker: Pete Hall

Prior to becoming a full time consultant, Pete Hall was the principal of Shaw Middle School, a Title I school in Spokane Public Schools. After a teaching career that spanned three states and included primary, intermediate, and middle school positions, Hall served as principal of Anderson Elementary School in Reno, Nevada. When he took over Anderson Elementary in 2002, it was one of the only schools in Nevada to have failed to make “adequate yearly progress” for four consecutive years. Two short years later, it was the only Title I school in the state of Nevada to earn a “high-achieving” designation.

His leadership works include more than a dozen articles on leadership and three books: *The First-Year Principal* (Rowman Littlefield, 2004), *Building Teachers’ Capacity for Success: A Collaborative Approach for Coaches and School Leaders* (ASCD, 2008), and *Lead On! Motivational Lessons for School Leaders* (Eye on Education, 2011). For his tenacious and courageous leadership, Hall has been honored with ASCD’s Outstanding Young Educator Award (2004), Nevada’s Martin Luther King Jr. Award (2005), and Phi Delta Kappan’s Emerging Leaders Award (2009), among others. He was appointed to the Nevada Governor’s Commission on Excellence in Education in 2005 and was selected to sit on the National Education Association’s Great Public Schools Indicators Advisory Panel (2010).

Hall holds a national principal mentor certificate from the National Association of Elementary School Principals and serves as a trainer and coach for the association’s PALS mentoring program. He has worked as a personal consultant and motivational coach for professional athletes, weekend golfers, stand-up comedians, firefighters, business executives, custodians, and more.