
The name, James Herring, is likely to be familiar to readers with any real interest in information literacy. Especially associated with the PLUS model, he has to his credit an impressive number and variety of publications on the subject, which have appeared over a period of more than thirty years. His work on information skills predates the modern Internet age and this new book provides a pleasing continuity with his early publications, whilst still presenting a thoroughly modern perspective.

The volume strikes an appropriate balance between theory and practice. It is well referenced and academically sound, in addition to being useful. The aims of the book, which are clearly stated in the introduction, are wide ranging – Dr. Herring hopes to facilitate better use of the Web by educators and students, to raise the profile of information literacy within schools, to provide a resource for new teachers and teacher-librarians and to help more experienced professionals update their skills and knowledge. The introduction also orientates the reader effectively in terms of the work’s structure and intended readership.

The opening chapter is one of the most volume’s most diverse. It deals with topics as disparate as the purposes of education/schools, learning theories and what makes a good teacher. There is a danger that any attempt to deal with a combination of these substantial issues in a single chapter will lead to a certain degree of fragmentation, although each is important in helping to establish the background against which the potential of the Web in an educational environment can be understood. Not all of Dr. Herring’s comments will find universal favour, however. He notes the ability of the Web to motivate learners in well structured situations but the resource can also cause great frustration to youngsters, especially when technical problems arise or when filters block entirely innocent sites seemingly without reason. Furthermore, the Web’s distractions can lead to much off-task behaviour during lessons. As plagiarism forms one of the concerns that often troubles teachers most in relation to student use of the Internet, it is unfortunate that more attention is not given to this issue and methods of countering it.

Whilst the book is aimed at teachers and teacher-librarians, students too would benefit from reading parts of it. Sections within chapter two, for example, would help them realise that Google is not the only search engine, alert them to many potentially useful search features and raise their awareness of frequently overlooked tools, like metasearch engines, visual search engines and directories. By offering answers to important questions, Dr. Herring also suggests tips on effective searching. The questions posed, though fundamental, are considered by students and educators alike all too rarely.
The third chapter addresses an area that research reveals often commands little attention from students – the evaluation of Websites. Here, however, the perspective is that of the educator, rather than the learner. The proposed criteria are sound in themselves but the time likely to be required by the individual to evaluate a range of sites against them may be appreciable. Few would dispute Dr. Herring’s argument that educators should be skilled in such evaluation. Yet a crucial matter is the use to which the abilities are put. It is not unusual to find that some teachers employ their evaluation skills to isolate a small group of quality Websites and direct their students to visit only these when tackling a particular assignment. If this practice is habitual, the learners receive insufficient opportunity to evaluate Websites for themselves and, indeed, may not even be aware of the need for such assessment.

The author then effectively brings the book up-to-date by covering the new, more participative applications of the Web. There may be a temptation to assume that since Web 2.0 is much discussed in many arenas these days, and blogs, wikis and podcasts have become part of everyday language, coverage of the fundamentals relating to them is scarcely necessary. Chapter four does, however, provide an invaluable overview for any reader whose knowledge is patchy. Dr. Herring’s treatment may well also stimulate educators to develop their own creative ideas in relation to these applications.

As one may expect given the background of the author, Dr. Herring provides an expert, balanced picture of the nature of information literacy and is particularly knowledgeable when identifying mismatches between rhetoric and the actuality revealed through research. He singles out specific models of information literacy for special attention, outlining the characteristics of the Big6, Kuhlthau’s Information Search Process, the New South Wales DET model and his own PLUS framework, and explores examples of their use. Inevitably, any reader familiar with a range of information literacy models may question the selection decisions made by Dr. Herring, especially if they themselves favour one that has gone unaddressed. The author intriguingly raises the prospect that students may develop their own models and he picks up this thread in the next chapter.

Dr. Herring draws a pertinent distinction between “Web users” and “Web learners” when introducing his discussion of how student exploitation of the Web may be improved. His comments are made with his customary insight, although his return to the matter of evaluation means that the reader will already be familiar with the criteria cited in the guides he reproduces.

Anyone who has not read in the introduction the author’s preview of the material to come may well be surprised by the contents of chapters seven and eight, which examine how Websites for student use may be developed. Ostensibly, there may appear to be a sharp break between the earlier chapters and these two, yet they do play an important role in extending the reader’s skills and knowledge further in related areas. The more technical elements may be daunting to some but the author handles the material with consideration for those who are not Web experts.
The book concludes with some thoughts on the future. Such speculation is always dangerous, although the author’s ideas are generally soundly based and he draws on some very recent sources. By no means all the comments will be supported by traditionalists, however. Dr. Herring’s vision of teachers learning alongside their students is unlikely to win the approval of educators who think that teachers should be seen as the fount of all knowledge. The old debate on the possibility of a paperless library is also inevitably raised. The author quite understandably forecasts that, as students will be faced with more and more information in the years to come, skills in coping with the volume and variety will become increasingly important. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, with tools becoming easier to use and advertising hype making extravagant claims as to their abilities, information specialists may well face an uphill task in convincing both educators and students that information literacy is an area that must be taught. A similar problem arises in relation to staff training, which forms a recurrent theme within the book. Dr. Herring raises this matter in relation to a range of issues, notably effective searching, the evaluation of Websites, information literacy and Website design. The Internet’s apparent ease of use means that adults tend to assume that little training is needed. It is frequently only when they attend such sessions that some realise the inadequacy of their existing knowledge.

From a practical perspective, no doubt many readers will find invaluable the examples and specimen resources offered throughout the book. Some will simply be adapted, whilst others may stimulate readers to develop their own ideas. Resources such as the lesson plan template have a value that goes well beyond the confines of ICT and information literacy teaching.

This closing chapter on the future may prompt the reader to realise that, with the information landscape changing so quickly, much of the content will soon become outdated and the book’s value will diminish over time. This is unfortunate since, at the time of its writing, it is an excellent text and should be recommended. Even in the short term, the reader may need to exercise some caution over the use of addresses stated for Websites, given that many sites change their URLs suddenly and others disappear completely. Before purchasing the book themselves, readers should also reflect on its cost. Even bearing in mind its quality, an asking price of £39.95 would seem expensive for a paperback of just 143 pages.

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