

Alligators in the Sewers? Really?

By Joy Egbert



A large number of alligators, flushed down toilets as babies, have grown up and proliferated in the bowels of New York City. Over the years, they have grown in number and size and frequently terrorize those foolish enough to visit the subways.

The tale above has been making its way around the Internet ever since there's been an Internet. It's wild enough to capture the attention of the average sixth grader, and because it's been published on the Internet, it's remarkably believable to many of them—especially English language learners (ELLs).

Students often believe and repeat word for word what they read, see, and hear on the Internet regardless of whether the material was meant as a joke or a hoax. ELLs in U.S. classrooms may be even more susceptible to false messages than native speakers for a variety of reasons. A lack of exposure, misunderstanding about the veracity of Internet-based information, a lack of direct markers on the Internet that indicate whether an item is intended as a joke or a farce, and cultural backgrounds based on different values can make it difficult for ELL students to vet what they read.

Media Literacy and 21st-Century Skills

Media literacy is the ability not only to understand what you read, hear, and see but also to evaluate and make good decisions about what various media present. To become more media literate, teachers and their students need to learn and practice critical thinking skills such as analysis,

evaluation, inference, interpretation, and self-regulation. To do so, they must learn to use the Internet and other electronic resources responsibly and with the necessary skepticism.

It's not unheard of for students to discuss outrageous content from the Internet in class or with their peers. What teacher hasn't heard students exchange rumors about one urban legend or another? Why not use these conversations as a springboard to a lesson on media literacy? The alligator story above, for example, can become a media literacy lesson addressing technology skills as well as content-area knowledge on laws, reptiles, and big-city life. In the process, students can practice reading, writing, and other skills included in the sixth grade curriculum.

An Urban Legend Lesson

The purpose of the lesson would be for students to learn to:

- Judge the credibility of sources
- Identify conclusions, reasons, and assumptions
- Judge the quality of an argument
- Develop and defend a position on an issue
- Ask appropriate clarifying questions

Start by reviewing relevant vocabulary and making sure all students have the background knowledge and language to understand the issues. Once all students can retell the gist of the message, ask them to consider how they would determine whether they could believe everything they read on the Internet. Using the alligator tale as an example, you might guide your class to include tasks that require them to use a variety of skills to:

- Understand more detailed content about the alligator message
- Communicate among themselves and with others
- Think creatively about types of useful resources that might shed light on the issue
- Assess the veracity of the information they will encounter
- Produce a well-supported conclusion as a group

The Center for Media Literacy has a great free kit to help students assess the truthfulness of information. The kit includes lessons based on five core concepts of media literacy. Present these five key questions based on the core concepts and model how they might be answered:

- Who created this message?
- What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
- How might different people understand the message differently than I do?
- What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in or omitted from this message?
- Why is this message being sent?

These questions (and their simpler versions provided in the kit) give learners a structure for their inquiry but are open ended, so students must call on their critical thinking skills to answer them well and to determine the veracity of the source.

The kit also includes essential questions for teachers that will help you avoid personal or cultural bias and to value the perspectives of all students:

- Am I trying to tell the students what the message is? Or am I giving them the skills to determine what they think the message(s) might be?
- Have I let students know that I am open to accepting their interpretation, as long as it is well substantiated, or have I conveyed the message that my interpretation is the only correct view?
- At the end of the lesson, are students likely to be more analytical? Or more cynical?

The Student Process

Have students split up the work of solving the alligator issue. They might brainstorm inquiry topics such as alligator habitat, sewer composition, and other alligator stories. Then they should follow a problem-solving process:

1. Students compile everything they know about the topic and then figure out what else they need to know to help examine all sides of their topic and how they would go about getting that knowledge. Students consult library resources, conduct interviews with experts, and use NetTrekker d.i., a school-focused Web browser, to find resources. Because the websites in NetTrekker d.i. are ranked by readability level and the program includes translations, images, and other scaffolds, the ELLs in the class could choose readings that are accessible to them. The students use Google Docs to record, share, and edit their answers.
2. Next, students categorize information by finding relationships among the pieces, evaluate data sources using the essential questions, decide which aspects of the data are the most important, synthesize their answers about the material, and decide what the implications are. For this stage they can use the software Rationale, which allows them to create clear visual and text-based representations of the argument they are developing.
3. Finally, students integrate data from all groups, come to a decision, and evaluate the decision-making process. By following a semi-structured process, all students should be able to defend their decisions about whether there are alligators in the New York City sewers. The ELLs can participate by using technologies that provide differentiated resources and multimodal presentation of data.



Students could go to a website like Snopes, which synthesizes and evaluates reports on alligators in the sewers and other urban myths. However, not all of the false information they get is available on Snopes, and the Snopes site needs to be analyzed critically as well.

Using a media literacy framework helps students understand that no one source has all the answers. For example, many ELL students believe that newspapers in the United States always tell the truth. Similarly, Wikipedia is commonly used as a starting point for student research, but students need to understand that it would be foolish not to check out the veracity of its statements.

The Teacher's Role

It is important for teachers to help students see the need for and excitement of being able to think critically. In modeling critical thinking, you need to:

- Perform think-alouds as you search for resources and decide how truthful they might be.
- Allow students to participate in classroom processes but also provide scaffolding when needed. For ELLs, this might include mini-lessons on conditionals and question formation and the U.S. notion of fact versus opinion.
- Ask essential questions. To address clarity, you might ask, "Can you give me an example of...?" or "What do you mean by...?" To focus on precision or specificity you might ask, "Exactly how much...?" or "On what day and at what time did...?" And to address breadth, you might ask, "How might ___ answer this question?" or "What do you think ___ would say about this issue?"

By modeling self-questioning and other strategies and by focusing on both language and content needs,

you can help all students understand what media literacy is and how 21st-century skills play an important role not only in school but also in life outside of school.

Resources

Center for Media Literacy: www.medialit.org
 Google Docs: docs.google.com
 "Literacy for the 21st-Century: An Overview and Orientation Guide to Media Literacy Education" by E. Thoman and T. Jolls of the Center for Media Literacy: www.medialit.org
 NetTrekker d.i.: <http://school.nettrekker.com/frontdoor>
 Rationale: <http://rationale.austhink.com>
 Snopes: www.snopes.com



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