

BATEAM
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TEAM Collaboration Project Report

In identifying and addressing an educational problem through technology, our group identified that middle-school students lacked the necessary skills to effectively write research papers. Based upon Erin's teaching experience, we sought information from other middle-school language arts who further identified student writing difficulties: students were having trouble writing well organized paragraphs that supported a topic sentence; students also were having difficulty choosing topics and forming opinions about their topics that were relevant and original. Students had very little experience in gathering information from sources and lacked the ability to determine what sources were valid. Students had no experience in writing bibliographies or citing information. After gathering our research we decided that our goal would be to create a website for students that would have tools to help them develop their writing skills in a fun and easy-to-use way.

To guide us in developing our tools and website, we researched the New York State Standards for English Language Arts at the middle school level. We learned that students in middle school are expected to "compare and synthesize information from different sources" as well as "distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information." "Students are also expected to interpret and analyze information from textbooks, nonfictions books, reference materials, and electronic databases." In writing, students must "produce oral and written reports on topics related to all school subjects" as well as "establish an authoritative stance on the subject and provide references to establish the validity and verifiability of the information presented." (Learning Standards for English Language Arts at Three Level) After learning what students were expected to accomplish at this point in their schooling, our group began to think of developing and presenting online tools that would help them to reach these standards. Our group came up with the idea to structure our website and present our tools like a menu from a restaurant, which became the "Research Writing Cafe" (<http://eev2.liu.edu/cwp0406/bc/cafe/cafeindex.htm>).

The first part of our website (titled "Appetizers") addresses writing topic selection. This problem was identified by teacher who told us that their students often chose topics that they knew very little about, or had little interest in. The topic selection webpage provides a table of questions that students should answer before choosing a topic. This table focuses on the interests and hobbies of the child as a way to allow them to choose something that will be meaningful to their lives. The webpage provided a link to a table that students can print out as a word document and gives them spaces to write down their answers to each question. The page also includes a list of dos and don'ts that

was based on the interviews of teachers and their experiences with past problems involving topic selection.

The next part of our website, the “Main Course” features an interactive PowerPoint that we converted to HTML. This gives students the image of the structure of a research paper as being similar to a hamburger. Each time a student clicks on a part of the hamburger they are linked to a page that describes what information should be presented in that part of the paper. For example, when a student clicks on the top bun, a page describing the introduction of the paper appears. This webpage guides student exactly what information should go in their first paragraph, including another link that tells the student how to write a thesis statement. The hamburger metaphor is a good way for students to remember the structure of the paper and aides them in writing clear and concise paragraphs.

The third part of the Research Writing Café (“Drinks”) addresses the need for guidelines for how students can evaluate online sources for their research. Especially with the use of the internet, teachers face the problem of teaching students what sources are valid and what sources are not. This part of our website was developed as an introduction to information literacy skills for middle-school students. We used a “thumbs up” and “thumbs down” graphic to show students what to look for and what to look out for when evaluating a website for their research. For example next to one of the thumbs down is a website which has no information about the author. This is a way to show students that they must be able to determine the source of the information that is written. This site offers good guidelines for a student to judge what would be valid information for their research writing, and to aid them in the development of the necessary skill of information literacy when using the internet for research.

The fourth part of our website is “Desserts”, which is a guide for students writing bibliographies to their research papers. This webpage provides students with the format for documenting a book, article, review, film, or internet sources. The webpage provides a works cited worksheet that links students to a table that they can print out and use. The worksheet prompts for information on each source, and organizes it in a way that it becomes easier for a student to convert that information into MLA citation. There is also a link to an online citation generator that allows the students to enter in all of their information and the “citation machine” automatically puts it into bibliography format. (http://www.landmark-project.com/citation_machine/index.php). This “citation machine” is likely to be a bit confusing for middle-school students because of its complexity, but would be useful under teacher supervision. The “Dessert” page simplifies the citation and bibliography process.

Finally, we included some information about us, the webpage and how it was developed as an educational technology project, so that students and teachers can learn more as well as assess our own website’s validity; this is to keep true to what we are teaching our students to do. . For our project we also created the required website that documents the process of creating the “Research Writing Café.” (<http://eev2.liu.edu/cwp0406/ns/phoenixProject.htm>)

To date, our website has been shown informally to a few teachers and students at the middle school level in order to receive feedback about its content and usability. Initial feedback is positive. However, as an ongoing project, we have discussed some ideas for the future development of our website. We would like to study and receive feedback from students and teachers who use this website as part of their writing assignments. If we follow some students from the beginning of writing a research paper who use our website to help them, we have an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the current “Research Writing Café” and redesign it as we get feedback and hear suggestions from students and teachers. We recognized that there are many more areas that could be expanded on such as note-taking, writing an outline, reading nonfiction for the purpose of research, etc. All in all, we believe the “Research Writing Café” website has met the goal we set for this project: to provide middle-school students with online resources to aid them in the development of their research writing skills.