

Closing the Content Gap: A Content Evaluation and Creation Starter Kit

Mara Rose et al.

Anyone who works at a community technology program knows that helping clients find the very best online resources is a challenging task but one of critical importance.

In March of 2000, The Children's Partnership published *Online Content for Low-income and Underserved Americans*, the result of a year-long study that identified a lack of Internet content (especially in such crucial areas as education, employment, housing, and health) that was accessible to low-income and other underserved Americans. Users with limited-literacy or English skills encountered significant barriers to being able to fully benefit from online information, which often was written at an average or advanced literacy level or was available in English exclusively. Additionally, we identified a lack of content addressing the unique interests of cultural and ethnic communities as well as local content with neighborhood-level information. Since the release of the report three years ago, The Children's Partnership has been pleased to learn how this report has served as a catalyst for on-the-ground efforts in online content development. We have heard from numerous organizations that used that March 2000 report, combined with a large dose of their own expertise, to guide them in either finding or creating resources to meet the unique needs of their clients.

The Children's Partnership is now taking the next step, from identifying the content gap to identifying strategies to begin to close it—developing recommendations to shape both content evaluation and production. In the summer of 2003, The Children's Partnership will present the results of our research in this area. In the meantime, we are including examples of two pioneering efforts in the New York City area that began by creating their own criteria for evaluating and selecting online resources for their clients, and then used those very same criteria to develop web sites that meet the unique needs of the people they serve—FirstFind, a project of area libraries, and Computer Corner, a project of Computers for Youth. In addition, we have provided the following “starter tools” that you can begin to use immediately in your work:

- A sampling of articles and research that come from a variety of fields and offer a range of perspectives on the issue of content evaluation.
- Links to guidelines that have been created in some of the fields that are leading the way in content evaluation, including health, education, and literacy.

FirstFind



Public libraries are often the first point of contact for individuals seeking access to online resources, and librarians are all too familiar with the barriers many patrons face in finding resources they can understand and use. For example many library patrons, especially those in low-income neighborhoods, encounter primarily web sites that assume a higher level of reading skills than they have.

It is with a deep understanding of this problem that the Westchester Library System, New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, Queens Borough Public Library, and the American Library Association's Office of Literacy and Outreach Services, with funding from the New York State Library, developed FirstFind. FirstFind is a virtual library that provides information to low-level readers and adults with limited English skills. The general and local information on the web site has been evaluated, annotated, and systematically organized by librarians.

The developers of FirstFind were guided by the principle that individuals, regardless of their reading skills or English language proficiency, need and want information on a full range of subjects. However, the site's developers took into account the types of questions commonly asked in libraries when prioritizing the topics to include on FirstFind, such as health, education, employment, parenting, and citizenship.

During the first year of the project, FirstFind had two major goals:

1. To train librarians to identify and evaluate informational web sites appropriate for adults learning English and acquiring basic skills proficiency; and
2. To construct a virtual library of these web sites, organized by subject area.

The development of FirstFind consisted of several steps, including convening a planning committee to steer the project, training twenty-nine librarians as web site evaluators, and evaluating hundreds of web sites. A vital part of the project was the development of evaluation criteria for both selecting resources for inclusion on the FirstFind web site and guiding the development of the web site itself.

Since the launch of FirstFind, 10,000 people have visited the site. The most popular topics have been education, technology, health, and government. Several public libraries in the New York City area provide a link to FirstFind on their homepages; The National Cancer

Institute uses FirstFind as a tool to teach seniors to find information on the Internet; a community technology center in Yonkers features FirstFind as an important resource for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren; and an ESL instructor in Washington uses FirstFind with students because the language level of the resources has been assessed in advance.

FirstFind is an exciting and important model. The guidelines the FirstFind team developed include the following criteria:

The web site:

- Has content which is of high interest and suitable for adults
- Provides accurate, complete, reliable, current information
- Is easy and efficient to navigate
- Is easy to read
- Has good graphic design for adults
- Makes its bias clear if it has one, or is fair in presentation of points of view
- Does not have as its primary purpose advertising commercial products
- Loads reasonably fast
- Takes into consideration the needs of differently-abled students

Currently, the FirstFind team is expanding the online library and revising its structure to encourage the submission of geographically specific resources that meet these same criteria. Find full guidelines and additional information about the project on the FirstFind Info web site.

Community Corner

Community Corner is a project of Computers for Youth (CFY), an organization that helps low-income students become engaged learners by using technology to improve their learning environment. CFY works with public middle schools in poor neighborhoods in the New York metropolitan area and offers each family and teacher a home computer and

other services, including training, email accounts, Internet access, technical support, and tailored web content at their Community Corner web site.

Program and Curriculum

Program and Curriculum sessions focus on teaching technology and using technology to teach, with a strong emphasis on strategies to measure and evaluate CTC programs. Conference participants and those seeking post-conference resources will examine the how the rich traditions of our field can guide other educators across the country.

Sessions in this Track will include:

Accommodating Learning Disabilities with Accessible Technology—Lisa Stringer of The Skills Center and Mary Lester of the Alliance for Technology Access (ATA)

Developing Community Content: an International Perspective on Collaboration, Fred Garnett of Community Programs—Becta, Andy Carvin of the Benton Foundation, and Mara Rose of The Children's Partnership

Youth Leadership & Community Engagement—Tony Streit and Monica Biswas of YouthLearn

A Systematic, Outcomes-based Approach to Evaluating a CTC—Dr. Charles Plummer of CCR/Science Linkages in the Community, Carolyn Boyce of EDC, Samuel Hampton of Capitol Hill Computer Corner, and Kathy DeBoe of IMF

Evaluating the Impact of Technology & Media in Afterschool Settings – the Computer Clubhouse Program—Katherine McMillan Culp and Shelley Pasnik of the Center for Children & Technology/EDC, Matt Lavine, and Laura Jeffers

Having Fun with M.A.P.S. (Multimedia Applications, Practices & Standards)—Shauna Leff of the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), Nettrice Gaskins of the Boston Neighborhood Network, Rachel Eisengart of Somerville Community Access Television (SCAT)

Youth & Digital Media—Jennifer Thomas of For Love of Children (FLOC), Jessica Hobbs of Richmond Village Beacon, and Julie Trel of Salesforce.com/foundation

Community Technology Centers: "A Gateway to the Future"—Leicester Johnson, Sasha Lotas, Alfred Attey, and Julius Weems of the Community Preservation & Development Corporation

Computer Courses Tailored for People with Disabilities—Barbara Ibanez and Judith Stevens of the No Walls Program at the Center for Development & Disabilities

Starting a CTC—George Gundrey of CompuMentor

Offering a Technical Certification in Your CTC—Carl Davidson, Networking for Democracy

Community Corner contains content in both English and Spanish that is geared toward the community it serves—low-income youth and adults who are first-time computer and Internet users. The Community Corner site includes the following sections: Home, School, Playground, Money Center, Health Center, Job Center, Community Center, Tech Support Center, and Internet Safety.



Computers for Youth

To ensure that Community Corner is useful to its intended audience, CFY involves community members in all aspects of its design and construction. The site is developed and maintained by low-income and minority interns, who are chosen to design graphics and content that reflect their communities. For instance, thanks to a suggestion from *Sindy Rivera*—a web design intern and mother on public assistance—CFY’s web design team is developing a section on Community Corner devoted to preparing people for both the emotional and academic sides of the GED, based in part on *Sindy’s* own experience.

In its selection of resources for Community Corner and its development of the site itself, CFY takes into account barriers that typically prevent individuals with low-income levels and limited literacy skills from engaging with existing material on the web. In particular, they follow the guidelines below:

- Design content around topics that are culturally and economically relevant;
- Present information in both English and Spanish;
- Develop content that is visually appealing and inviting (e.g., colors, characters, and visual metaphors that engage the target audience);
- Create text at a middle school reading level (6th-8th grade) that is appropriately “chunked” and is in a large font size so as not to intimidate fledgling readers;
- Supplement text explanations with visuals when possible.
- Offer remediation opportunities around concepts that might be particularly difficult to grasp (e.g., percentages in the Money Center); and
- Create content that loads easily on low-end computers that are connected to the Internet with 56k modems.

CFY also conducts user tests of the Community Corner web site at least fifteen times per year. They observe how members of their target audience interact with the site and assess its appeal, comprehensibility, and usability. They modify the site’s design and content based on that feedback. For example, after watching children struggle with financial literacy concepts, CFY created the Money Center that features characters of different ages engaging in practices of saving, budgeting, and building credit.



Articles and Research

For further reading, visit the sites below that come from a variety of fields and offer a range of perspectives on the issue of content evaluation.

Evaluating Internet Research Sources—This resource outlines a simple, easy-to-learn process for evaluating web content.

Evaluation of English and Spanish Health Information on the Internet—This 2001 study by RAND examines the quality of online health information, including how accessible it is to those with limited-literacy skills.

The Case for the Use of Plain English to Increase Web Accessibility—This article describes the ways that many groups, including ESL learners, adult learners, and those with disabilities, can benefit from plain English.

Choosing and Using Web Sites for Literacy Instruction: Evaluation Resources and Strategies—This article discusses some of the challenges of finding information online that is accessible to adult learners and offers strategies to help overcome them.

The ABCs of Web Site Evaluation—These 26 quick tips with explanations are designed to help students and teachers evaluate online information.

Stanford Web Credibility Research—This site offers information about a research project aimed at understanding what leads people to believe information they find online with the eventual goal of enhancing web design.

Sample Guidelines (see next page)

The online content evaluation and development research at The Children’s Partnership is ongoing. Please contact us with sample guidelines, research, example programs that you have found helpful or unique, questions, and feedback. ♦

The online content evaluation and development research at The Children’s Partnership is ongoing. Please contact us with sample guidelines, research, example programs that you have found helpful or unique, questions, and feedback. ♦

The online content evaluation and development research at The Children’s Partnership is ongoing. Please contact us with sample guidelines, research, example programs that you have found helpful or unique, questions, and feedback. ♦

Mara Rose (mrose@childrenspartnership.org) is a Technology Program Manager at The Children’s Partnership. Other contributors include Karen Roberts, Laurie Lipper, and Wendy Lazarus.