Selecting Sources: Academic Databases vs. Web Search Engines

Information Literacy Learning Outcome this assignment addresses:
Uses selection criteria to choose appropriate information

This assignment demonstrates Learning Indicator #3 -- The information literate student evaluates information and its sources critically and incorporates selected information into his or her knowledge base and value system.

Objectives of assignment:
- Students will learn to compare resources found on the Internet with resources found in a library database. We recommend using FiSH as it is easy to navigate and inter-disciplinary.
- Students will practice using Boolean operators to perform searches in a library database and in web search engines.
- Students will learn how library databases can meet their information needs as easily, and often better, than Internet websites.
- Students will compare the materials they find on the Internet with those found in library databases.

Process:
The instructor will prepare index cards with specific topics for their subject area to distribute to the class. In order to effectively demonstrate the value of academic databases, the topics should be researched in advance to assure relevant results in FiSH and web search engines. (Other search engines, databases and topics may be used for this exercise.)

Assignment:
- If possible, require students to study the following resources before class.
  - Know Your Sources [Portland Community College]--http://www.pcc.edu/library/scripts/know-your-sources/index.html
- The instructor should review brainstorming for keywords and synonyms, using Boolean operators, evaluating sources, and accessing library databases from the library’s site in myLakeland before starting the exercise.
- Divide students into teams of two or three. Teams will receive an index card containing a specific topic. They will be researching their topics in all three search engines (for example, FiSH, Google, and Clusty) to see if one produces more accurate, relevant and authoritative information on their topic.
- Demonstrate accessing FiSH on the Library Home page in myLakeland.
- Review the basics of building a search. Discuss full-text, peer reviewed, and source type if appropriate. Leave the search page up on the screen as you distribute the worksheet.
- Give students a brief overview of web search engines, for example, Google and Clusty.
- Pass out the worksheet for students to compare search engines with library databases.
- Ask each team to look up their topic in the web search engines and database and to describe the results of the searches as prompted on the worksheet.
  - Note how each search tool or database responds to their query.
  - From the results for each resource, select one article or website that gives accurate, authoritative and factual information on their topic.
  - From the three sources listed, select only the best source and explain to the class how they made their decision.
Important summation/review points:

- The World Wide Web should not be the only source of information for students. It also may not be the fastest way to search for materials due to the large number of results.
- Once students are familiar with library database searches, they will find that databases can produce high quality material just as easily. This will save them both time and frustration.