Topic 8 —Authenticating online information

Introduction

This session is designed to help teach students how to find and evaluate legitimate information on sexuality, sexual health and relationships on the Internet. In the lesson students learn advanced search skills that will increase their chances of finding relevant information and reduce the number of unwanted and inappropriate hits. They are guided in how to evaluate a source of online information on any topic to determine whether the material it delivers is reliable and unbiased. Students are also provided with the names and Web addresses of sites that are known to be reliable to familiarize them with quality sources of sexual health information.

This lesson is adapted from *USE, UNDERSTAND & CREATE: A Digital Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools*: http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework

Activities

1. Authenticating online information

Time

40 minutes

Handouts

H1: Internet Search Skills

H2: Reliable Sources

Background Material

B1: Family Online Rules - Tip Sheet

http://mediasmarts.ca/tipsheet/family-online-rules-tip-sheet

Authenticating online information

Time: 40 minutes

Overview: Students will consider the use of the Internet as a research tool and learn how to use search engines more effectively. They then apply these skills to investigating relationships and sexuality. Finally, they consider three websites they have used in the course of their research and evaluate them as sources of information.

Key Messages

- Young people need access to reliable sexual health, sexuality and relationships information.

- There is a great deal of valuable information online but its worth depends very strongly on the skills and habits users bring to it.

- We can evaluate a source of online information on any topic to determine whether the material it delivers is reliable and unbiased.

Preparation and Materials

Internet-connected computers

H1: Internet Search Skills

H2: Reliable Sources

Method

Part 1: Search skills

1. Begin by asking students where they go when they need information or questions answered:

- How many ask a teacher, a parent or another adult?

- How many ask a peer (a friend, sibling, etc.)?

- How many look things up in books or at the library?

- How many look things up on the Internet?

Most likely, the Internet will be the most popular choice.

Ask:

- *Why do people like to use the Internet for research (*Answers will include: it's easy, it can be done quickly; its private)

- *What are some disadvantages of getting information online?* (Answers may include: not always accurate; hard to sift through; don't know if you can trust the author; sometimes you get results you weren't looking for)

- One thing many people want to know more about is sexuality, relationships and sexual health. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet as a source of information about sexual health?

Advantages are likely to include:

- It's anonymous and an alternative to asking a person face-to-face

- Instant access to information (you don't have to make an appointment for someone to talk to you)

- Low cost and accessible (don't need to travel to a clinic, the Internet is in the majority of households)

- Extensive amount of information (not reliant on library holdings or the knowledge of others)

Disadvantages, in addition to the ones already discussed, are likely to include:

- It can be hard to find information about sexuality online without being exposed to explicit sexual material

- Filtering software often blocks material relating to sex, including sexual health information

2. Explain to students that finding any kind of information online is a skill. There are methods they can use that will help them to find what they want, get more relevant results and fewer unwanted results.

Distribute the handout *H1: Internet Search Skills* and review it with the class.

3. Explain to students that you're now going to apply their newfound search skills to questions around relationships and sexuality. You will give them a topic and they will work together to develop search strings that will find the information.

Tell the class that you want them to research the following topic:

Are young people affected by being exposed to sex and sexuality in media such as TV, movies, music and videos, etc.?

4. First ask them what they think the answer might be and, after a brief discussion, have them suggest search strings. The first few suggestions will probably be fairly rudimentary, so remind them to go through the step-by-step process of building a search string they learned in the handout.

More terms: What are all of the relevant terms that should be included?

- Probably "young people" or "teens"; certainly "media" and "TV" and "sexuality"; perhaps "movies" or "music"; probably "effects"

- Which of these are essential and should be prefaced with "+"?

- Where could "OR" or "~" be usefully employed? (How many similar terms are there for "young people" or "teens"? Could there be synonyms for "effects"?)

- Are there terms that could be usefully searched as phrases? (Including "music videos" is likely to get more relevant results than using "videos" as a search term.)

Filtering bad results: If you have access to a data projector, start your Internet browser and navigate to the *Google* Search Settings page (http://www.google.ca/preferences?hl=en). Under SafeSearch Filters, click on the box to "Filter explicit results (remind students that they should always start at the most restrictive level first, and only go to the next level if they don't get any relevant hits). Ask students if there are any terms they might want to exclude using "-" to avoid getting irrelevant hits and remind them that they can always refine a search after doing it, so they can use "-" if they find that any irrelevant hits appear.

Boil down the discussion into two or three search strings such as:

+effects ~teens +"sex in media"
~effects +"young people" +sex TV OR movies OR "music videos"
"sex in media" "young people" OR teens

If possible, perform searches using each string and compare the top ten results. (Remind students to read the summary below each hit before clicking on it.) Ask students to decide which search string produced the most relevant results and to speculate on why.

Were students able to answer the question? Ask if they were surprised by what they learned and, if so, what surprised them and why.

Part 2: Reliable Sources

1. Explain to students that they have another option in addition to search engines when looking for information about sexual health online. They can use reputable sources of information that specialise in sexual health and that are known to be reliable.

2. Make sure you point out to the students that some information is specific to Australia, or their state/territory. For examples things such as laws about consent, or information about types of contraception that are available in Australia.

3. Point out that the most important thing is to establish the reliability of any online sources. Distribute the handout H2 *Reliable Sources* and talk students through it. Then, as a class, individually or in groups, have students navigate to three of the websites listed below (each of these is considered a reliable site), and evaluate each one using the handout:

   www.shineSA.org.au

   www.cyh.com

   http://lovegoodbadugly.com

   http://au.reachout.com

   https://minus18.org.au

   https://esafety.gov.au/?from=cybersmart

   http://www.twenty10.org.au

4. Conclusion.

Ask:

- *What clues were present about the reliability of each site?*
- *How useful did each site seem as a source of information and why?*

Internet Search Skills

The Internet is a terrific source of information on all kinds of topics. Sometimes it's too good: there's so much information, it can be hard to find just what you're looking for.

Most of the time, we use **search engines** like Google or Yahoo to help us find information. Search engines catalogue what's on the Internet, but they're not very smart – they give you exactly what you ask for. If you're not specific enough, you won't get the information you want.

The words you use in a search engine are called your **search terms**. All of them together are called your **query** or **search string**. In general, the **more relevant words** you include in your query, the better your results will be.

As well as the actual words you enter, most search engines allow you to add special symbols and words to your search that limit the results. These are **+, -, ~** and **OR**.

- Including + in front of words means that you will get only results that include all those exact words. This helps eliminate many irrelevant results.

Example: +body +image

- Including OR between two words means that you will get results that include either word. This is good when you have two words that are synonyms or close in meaning. It also can help if one of the words is likely to be blocked by a filtering program.

Example: emotions OR feelings

- You can also use the tilde sign (~) to look for a word and any words that mean the same thing. For example, a search for "~emotions" will also search for "feelings," because the two words are synonyms (they mean the same thing).

- Placing - before a word means that you will get only results that do not include that word. This helps eliminate many irrelevant results.

Example: pill -vitamin

- You can also search for a whole phrase by placing it within quotes. This means you will get only results in which those words occur in that order.

You can combine this with other search terms.

Example: "managing periods"

- You can also limit your search to a particular website by placing "site:" and then the site's URL (Web address) after your search string. This is useful if you know of a good site and want to find particular information there. Remember not to put a space between "site:" and the URL.

Example: "contraception" site: www.shinesa.org.au

Many search engines also let you filter your search results to keep out material that may be offensive. Google, for example, lets you set your *SafeSearch* settings if you click Settings and select Search Settings. It's a good idea to start at the highest level of filtering and only switch if you can't find what you're looking for.

Try developing a search string for another sexual health topic. Make sure to use multiple search terms, symbols like +, - and ~, and to enclose phrases in quotation marks.

Adapted from www.mediasmarts.ca

Reliable Sources Worksheet

Website: _____URL: _____

1) Is the site's purpose to inform, entertain or persuade, sell something, satirize or make a joke? How do you know?

_____

_____

2) Is an author and/or organisation's name listed? What is it?

_____

_____

3) Is information about the author and/or organisation clearly stated? What is it?

_____

_____

4) Can you contact the author or the organisation? What contact information is given?

_____

_____

5) Are there links to detailed information about the author or organisation?

_____

_____

6) Who links to the site?

_____

_____

7) Is there a connection between the author's viewpoint and the organisation they represent? (You can do a Web search on the author or the organisation to help you figure that out.)

_____

_____

8) Does the author use "loaded language" (words that get a strong emotional reaction) or make broad statements that are not supported by evidence? If so, give examples.

_____

_____

_____

9) Does the site offer more than one point of view or link to other points of view? If so, give an example.

_____

_____

10) Is the information up to date? How do you know?

_____

_____

11) Do all the links still work? List any broken links.

_____

_____

Adapted from www.mediasmarts.ca