New Information Literacies: Helping University Students Critically Evaluate Information Online

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Abstract: One of the major challenges facing educators in the industrialised today is how to best teach critical media literacies in a world of overwhelming amounts of information. All too often simple access to information (especially that accessed with relative ease on the amazing resources which are Internet search engines and sites such as Wikipedia), is conflated with knowledge and understanding, that is, the ability to best source facts, critically evaluate material and bring information together in new ways and/or in service of one’s own argument. Instead, many students desire to find the one or two sources which they hope exist which directly ‘answer’ the question, and believe that their examiner is looking for a summary of this ‘expert’ work, rather than a cogently argued essay of the student’s own crafting. Interestingly, and as evidence of broader shifts in educational values, while ‘laziness’ or time pressure may play a part here, there is also a genuine belief on the part of some students that this is the correct way to go about researching and writing university essays. As the coordinator of a compulsory first year university foundation course focussed upon issues in contemporary media studies, communicating skills in relation to evaluating online resources is something I need to address head on. In 2008, I introduced a new annotated bibliography assessment tool in order to help facilitate the development of greater critical research skills in our students. This paper reports upon the responses to this assessment tool and will reflect upon what insights it offers us into the place of critical thinking in the modern university, as well as the broader digital media environment.

Keywords: Digital Literacies, Critical Thinking, Search Engines, Annotated Bibliography, Research Skills

“This is not to say that thinking deeply isn’t enjoyable – but the pleasure is of a different type from that of surrendering to sensations. My own view is that the enjoyment of reading Shakespeare or Joyce involves an appreciation and savouring of ‘meaning’: some cerebral light flashes on as you start to see one thing in terms of something else, and place an event in a new, wider context. Really ‘understanding’ something, be it in science or literature, usually devolves from that ‘Aha’ moment, from making a connection; by contrast, having fun is usually based on the opposite, on dissolving connections, splitting the here-and-now moment from the past and future, splitting the sensational taste of the ice cream or chocolate from the ‘significance’ of healthy food, splitting the thrill of downhill skiing from the associations of injury, and above all splitting the sense of self, of a particular identity, in favour of abandonment to the raw sensory experience.”

(Greenfield 2008, p. 7)
Introduction

IT IS CLEAR that one of the major challenges facing all educators today is how to effectively teach critical media literacies in a world of overwhelming amounts of information. As the coordinator of a compulsory first year university foundation course focussed upon issues in contemporary media studies, communicating skills in relation to evaluating online resources is something I am tackling head-on – both in terms of critical content as well as in pedagogical issues related to researching and writing analytical essays. Elsewhere I have written on the importance of teaching digital literacies as not only a disciplinary topic, but as a personal imperative, especially as young students start to make the shift from the internet as a social space, to it being a key tool for professional capacity profiling and network building, and therefore start to realise that those Facebook pictures showing them as the life of the party may have impressed their mates but may not a future employer (Luckman 2008a). But here I wish to reflect on the pedagogical changes necessary to keep pace with contemporary media usage patterns. In 2008, I trialled the use of a new annotated bibliography assessment tool in order to help facilitate the development of greater critical research skills in our students and in 2009 this task has been refined. The introduction of this assessment exercise revealed some profound differences in understanding between staff and straight-out-of-school students in relation to the research and writing process which require further iterative pedagogical innovation to best fit where students are coming from and where we want them to be. This paper reflects upon this process and reports on the strategies I’m using to adapt the traditional humanistic university model of critical thinking (as evidenced via research and essay writing), to the new writing and research expectations a generation of students increasingly influenced by the world of Web 2.0 bring to their undergraduate tasks.

But first, before launching into the paper proper, I feel it important to offer a few contextual words about where I’m coming from as an educator and lifelong learner myself here. One thing I do need to make clear at the outset is that as a scholar of new media whose Masters thesis was on cyberfeminism and PhD on rave culture, my emphasis upon more traditional sources of information (books, peer-reviewed journal articles and so forth), rather than the first page of search engine hits in this paper and the course it reflects upon is certainly not driven by a hostility to technology. Rather, as Brabazon (among others) has noted so eloquently, at a time when universities are being driven to expand and embrace students previously excluded from the hallowed halls of academe, it is beholden to us to not cheapen the education being offered, but rather to provide teaching frameworks which make evident and known the implicit assumptions underpinning university-level scholarship, and to teach these skills to those who do not bring them implicitly with them from generations of family and social networks immersed in university attendance (Brabazon 2007). One of these competencies is to use quality material from sources beyond the everyday, beyond what they would be using had they not attended university. Students come to us as already practised information gatherers, but university now affords them the opportunity and, we need to make clear, the expectation, that they will work with a broad range of more complex materials, regardless of where they are to be found. This critical evaluation of information—a proficiency the humanities has long excelled at teaching—is an even more essential employment, indeed life, skill in the current information environment.

One of the most common reasons students enrol in university degrees is in the hopes that they will secure jobs not otherwise available to them. Especially in the communication and
media fields I teach in, frequently these jobs have tens if not hundreds of other eager graduates queuing up for them. Being the kind of student who just does what they need to get a bare pass or who is not taught the skills to set themselves out from the crowd, will not land you these jobs (unless you are fabulously well connected). To reinforce this point in the course, I have a couple of sample essays from previous years available for discussion in tutorials. One is a ‘solid’, though short on the actual use of appropriate scholarly references and thus largely uninspiring essay which repeats commonly held thoughts on the topic which received a basic pass grade. Looked at alone, students grade it higher than we did. Then they are shown an essay written the same year, also by a school-leaver student, who took up the option to fashion their own essay question on a topic of personal and/or professional interest to them. The essay drew upon quality materials and reflected the author’s passion for the topic and willingness to give her university study considered thought and time – she received a High Distinction. When students realise these kinds of essays are also in our marking piles, they also start to realise why the bare pass essay was just that. I also add that this distinction student’s consistently high grades and attitude in a final year work placement so impressed, that she was offered upon graduation a place in one of the country’s top advertising agencies; no desperately applying for jobs and trying to stand out in a competitive marketplace with an average transcript wondering why you are never ‘the one’ for that graduate. I therefore feel it is imperative that we work with students to encourage life habits about doing more than ‘just getting by’ if we are to do justice to their motives for being at university. In the classroom environment, this is about making clear our expectations regarding levels of research and critical thought, and providing students with the tools to meet these expectations.

**Key Issues for Critical Literacy Educators**

It is really interesting to reflect upon the immediate sensorial differentiation lost with the shift to online research modalities. By this I mean the physicality of a hard cover book as compared with a spiral bound report, newsprint leaking newspaper article, waiting room friendly magazine, or the clearly in need of a player to be accessed analogue video. This is evident in something as basic as how they feel in your hand, and this tactile experience clearly marks their variation from one another. Today, we can and do access all these kinds of media via the one interface: namely, the computer. As such the screen flattens the innate physical difference of the artefacts; all information starts to look like it is from the same place, as, in a way, it is. No wonder this leads to all kinds of confusion on the part of students and instructors alike. Additionally, the present information saturated environment sees the potential for a conflation of access to information with knowledge, and by knowledge I mean the ability to actually use information, bring it together in new ways and/or in service of one’s own argument.

In the face of all this easily accessed information, I find students more and more offering up lists of summaries (‘he said’, ‘and she said’, ‘and then x thinks’) as argumentative essays, rather than their own sustained arguments - as if being able to plug a keyword or two into Google is some sort of special skill which their grades should reward them for in and of itself. As the editor of a special edition of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* dedicated to the non-technical implications of search engines recently noted, users are far more confident about their search abilities than perhaps they should be:
We also know that when asked about their search abilities, many users tend to be confident (Fallows, 2005), although research observing people’s online information-seeking behaviour tends to find discrepancies depending on user attributes (e.g., Hargittai, 2002), and logs of search queries suggest that the majority of users do not take a particularly sophisticated approach to searching but rather often rely on only one or two terms in their queries (e.g., Spink, Jansen, Wolfram, & Saracevic, 2002). (Hargittai 2007, p. 770)

Certainly, at university level, we expect more from our students than such basic search functions. Further, we expect them to evaluate themselves the usefulness for their task of a wide range of sources, filtering them down to a well chosen selection. All too often, however, feedback from students indicates that they are simply seeking to make up the required reference numbers with anything ‘on the topic’ and place great faith in the first results provided by search engines. As eye-tracking research conducted by a group of US-based researchers found:

…the findings here show that college students are heavily influenced by the order in which the results are presented [in Google] and, to a lesser extent, the relevance of the abstracts. These subjects trust Google in that they click on abstracts in higher positions even when the abstracts are less relevant to the task. (Pan et. al. 2007, p. 816)

Like others, it is also my experience that the current generation of school-leaving students steeped in the world of social networking as many of them are, are extremely peer focussed; they are far more likely to seek help and advice from peers, than faculty and/or librarians (Fieldhouse and Nicholas 2008, p. 65), with the flow-on effect that teaching staff can spend quite some time undoing the incorrect memes running rampant through a class. On the up side, in my experience this concern for peer esteem and growing skill base in providing feedback to peers means that well constructed group work activities can really bring out the best in students in ways writing for a single examiner simply does not.

Clearly old pedagogic practices and assumptions need to be reconfigured to acknowledge this new information environment. As high profile brain physiologist and Director of the British Royal Institution, Susan Greenfield has observed:

The critical issue facing us will be how we make a transition from the old question-rich, answer-poor environment of the twentieth-century classroom to making sense of – indeed, surviving in – the current question-poor, answer-rich environment delivered by a fast-paced technology. We, or our children, will need to remember not facts \emph{per se}. If search engines can and do deliver up-to-the-minute information, why does it now need to be internalized, imperfectly, into our highly unstable brain memory banks? (Greenfield 2008, p. 189)

A classic example of such issues is the ongoing debate many educators have—both among themselves and with students—about the place of Wikipedia as an information source. All too often the dialogue becomes reduced to the value of an \emph{online}, open source, encyclopaedia, when the real question for me is why are university students quoting a basic information source like an encyclopaedia in a complex research essay anyway? I’m the first to admit I frequently use Wikipedia as a quick reference source for names, dates and definitions, but
not for the sort of detailed information I need to cite in an academic paper (this is not to say that I don’t remind students to take entries on commercial and/or contentious political content especially with a grain of salt). Therefore, it’s not about the fact that it is online, that’s a red herring here, nor even about the fact that it’s a wiki (open peer review is the corner-stone of academic publishing, it therefore seems churlish to not think it plays a role in quality control online). The issue is it remains an encyclopaedia and not a specialist research publication of adequate depth to underpin a university-level essay; it is useful for looking up generic facts, but not as the basis for a complex analysis. Similar evidence of the difficulties students are having evaluating materials and best understanding what role they might play in an essay is reflected in student confusion that an article in *Time Magazine* or a major newspaper which they accessed via a database located on the university library website isn’t accepted as an ‘appropriate academic source’. All references, as we know, are not created equal, regardless of the interface you use to find them.

Accordingly one of the key aims of the annotated bibliography exercise is to get students engaging with books as sources of information, and monographs in particular. Indeed in an essay writing lecture I am getting increasingly desperate in my attempts to encourage book use. This is not an obsolete hold-out attempt to privilege the book as the ultimate in information dissemination, indeed I’m more than happy for students to access this material via e-books which the university library is increasingly purchasing anyway. But rather, the monograph represents an in-depth, sustained engagement with a topic; an increasingly rare quantity in the age of the screen. The limited use of monograph material by students itself points to the level of commitment and time required to seriously draw upon this kind of content; time which is increasing rare for students often working while studying. More troubling, regardless of time availability, new practices around information searching are emerging which prioritise speed and ease over depth, a process referred to by Fieldhouse and Nicholas as “power browsing” which is antithetical to reading ‘in the traditional sense’ (2007, p. 63). As fellow media and cultural studies lecturer Brabazon writes:

> The World Wide Web and the innovations of hypertext change our understanding of textual composition. In arching beyond print, a new mode of digital textuality emerges. While the benefits of non-linearity and interactivity are still being evaluated, there are other concerns to be considered. In the movement to new media, as we losing literacies – the capacity to follow print and an argument in its entirety – in an exchange for accelerated ‘smash and grab’ scholarship? (2007, p. 39)

As she further acknowledges, for whatever reasons, students frequently feel compelled to enrol in a university degree but are not willing or in a position to commit an appropriate amount of time and effort to their study at this stage in their lives. Added to this, recent school-leavers have been brought up in a ‘just-in-time’ economy. As a result it is not surprising that students, as we know, often bring the same last minute time management to their essay writing. Twenty-four hour access to material via the library catalogue further enables this in ways library opening hours never quite did. Again, as we know, such time pressures, coupled with the ‘cut and paste’ capacities of the screen, all too frequently leads to essays lacking coherent structure and even incidental cases of plagiarism as material previous filed away without appropriate citation is re-opened at the 11th hour.
Teaching Media Literacies in a Web 2.0 World

Returning to the specific course under discussion here, Media Literacies is a large, compulsory first year undergraduate media studies course for students enrolled in the various programs offered by the School of Communication, International Studies and Languages. It is also taken up as an elective by students from across the University of South Australia. The course has two primary aims: to introduce students to key issues in, and approaches to, communication, media and cultural studies (with a particular emphasis on new media and communications tools), and to further develop student’s research, analytical and writing skills. To this end the course covers a diverse range of media-related topics from a social scientific or humanities-based research perspective, with a view to examining the social, political, economic and cultural effects of this important set of contemporary institutions and its technologies. Therefore, in the course, communication is treated as a complex and organisational social process; one which is central to our personal lives and the emerging ‘new economy’ or ‘knowledge economy’ of the early years of the twenty-first century. The assessment tasks are designed to get students thinking about the connections between contemporary issues and past debates; media, communication and cultural studies as fields of knowledge; the ways in which research already undertaken in the fields of communication, cultural, and media studies can inform their own research, vocational development and analysis; and to further provide them with the skills necessary to deeply and appropriately research an issue and reach insightful and well presented conclusions regarding it.

Students in this course are drawn from a variety of programs including: the Bachelor of Arts; Bachelor of Media Arts; Bachelor of Public Relations; Bachelor of Information Technology (Computing and Multimedia); Bachelor of Marketing and Communication; Bachelor of Computer and Information Science, Bachelor of Arts; Bachelor of Management (Marketing); and the Bachelor of Arts (Journalism). With the large group of Bachelor of Arts students, it is not surprising that women were better represented than men in the student group. It is also important to emphasise that UniSA has a strong commitment to equity in education and attracts many students who are likely to be the first in their family to attend university. The course also has a significant portion of students from NESB backgrounds and a number of international students, especially from the School’s multimedia (Bachelor of Media Arts) program.

To find out more about the media consumption practices of this cohort of students, since 2007 I have been asking students to fill out an online survey into their media use. Consisting of around 30 tick box, drop-down list and textual response questions, too much data is generated by the survey to go into any detail here. While the majority of those studying the course would be recent secondary school leavers (that is, having completed their secondary studies in the previous two years and hence were born in the period 1988-1991), I do need to acknowledge the presence of several older and mature age students in the cohort. Further, as previously mentioned, the course also has transnational students, mostly from South-East Asia and China, whose use of mobile media technologies as a key means by which to keep in touch with friends, family and culture back home is evident in their responses to the survey. In 2007, the year before introducing the annotated bibliography, the survey (which received 227 responses) found that even back in the seemingly early days of Web 2.0 (2007), most of the students were regular users of social networking sites (see Figure 1). Certainly, the initial findings reinforced the fact that especially the younger, straight out of school, students...
were increasingly both accessing information and conducting their social lives online. Hence the disciplinary emphasis in Media Literacies on introducing students to key terms in media studies (ideology, hegemony, discourse, reception studies), but then on testing their usefulness as critical tools for the twenty-first century by focussing on emerging media trends as our analytical objects.

![Figure 1](image)

**The Annotated Bibliography**

In my second year of coordinating this course in 2003, it became clear that while we were assuming students came to us with well developed essay writing skills, we were nonetheless providing very similar feedback to students every year in relation to the essay. Rather than pass this knowledge on after the fact, and despite my concerns that remedial essay writing was not meant to be part of this course’s syllabus, I introduced a lecture dedicated to essay writing and, in particular, to critical essay writing skills. A key focus of the lecture is emphasising the importance to students of not just handing up an essay consisting of didactic dot point style interchangeable summaries, structured in no particular order. The lecture emphasises that to achieve higher grades, they need to write an essay which takes the reader on a journey. Where a position and plan of attack are clearly articulated in the introduction, followed through and concluded logically. The lecture also explains peer review, why such sources are privileged in academic circles, and how to identify whether a source is indeed peer-reviewed. Feedback from students about this lecture has been extremely positive, with some anecdotally reporting that they recommend it to students outside the course, or that it remained the most useful lecture they felt they went to in their entire undergraduate career.

In the last few years, as it became more and more apparent that many students were successfully completing their degrees without ever setting foot in the library—indeed, without knowing even where it was—further focus on critical thinking skills in relation to evaluating
the credibility of all the kinds of material to be found via their computers was essential. Hence the introduction of the Annotated Bibliography and a lecture specifically dedicated to elaborating upon this task. The challenge: to provide a learning framework which would assist students to identify appropriate evidence sets for their essays; to differentiate opinion from facts, and research findings from frequently witty and intelligent, but still unsupported, blog musings. Worth 35 per cent of their overall assessment, and heavily influenced by the work of Tara Brabazon (2006 and 2007), the annotated bibliography is (in the original text provided to students):

designed to get you to start thinking about and researching the approach you’ll take to your final essay. It will provide you with a brief account of available research and primary material available on a given topic, and require that you start thinking about what argument you’ll make in your final essay and what evidence base there exists to support this. While you will not be held to the essay topic you chose for this exercise, you are strongly advised to give the matter some thought so that the work you do now for the annotated bibliography directly feeds into your final essay, strengthening its quality when you come to write it up and inviting you to start thinking about the issues well before the due date.

The assessment task was articulated to students thus:

Step 1: Chose one of the Research essay questions to address
Step 2: Seek out relevant materials. For the annotated bibliography you are required to find (even though it’s unlikely that you’ll end up using all of them) the following kinds of resources:

1. 2 x Refereed journal articles
2. 2 x Academic monographs (not an anthologies nor textbooks)
3. 1 x Chapter from academic anthology
4. 1 x Report (government, think tank or NGO)
5. 1 x Op Ed or Editorial
6. 1 x Advertising or other Primary Source
7. 1 x Lobby or Interest Group Source
8. 1 x Newspaper/Magazine article

NB. For the final research essay, you’ll be required to have more than the number of academic sources listed under a), b) and c), these numbers are provided here to ensure breadth of materials and a capacity to pick the origins of sources.

Step 3: For each source you’ve chosen:

1. Provide a full citation
2. How credible is this source? What motives might the authors/publishers have?
3. Explain why this resource? How will it be useful in planning and writing your essay?
4. How does it fit in with your argument?
Provide approximately 150 words on each. To see how you will be graded, refer to the criteria mark sheet at the end of this Course Information guide.

**Remember: you will be graded according to how well the source fits with your essay, not just on your capacity to find ANYTHING of this topic from this kind of source.**

(Luckman 2008b, p. 14)

The Graduate Qualities being assessed by this assignment are:

1. is prepared for life-long learning in pursuit of personal development and excellence in professional practice
2. is an effective problem solver, capable of applying logical, critical, and creative thinking to a range of problems
3. communicates effectively in professional practice and as a member of the community
4. demonstrates international perspectives as a professional and as a citizen.

A number of disjunctures between the teaching team’s expectations of them, and actual student knowledge, were revealed by this process. Firstly, students were really confounded by the idea that YouTube may be an incredibly useful resource in putting together their essay, but not as a source of expert information. What was revealed was a profound flattening of the differences between primary, secondary and tertiary materials. A general trend existed whereby all material was set to a default (though not articulated) position as a tertiary text (information source), with poorer responses not seeing the further dimension on this that secondary sources offer. Hence these students also failed to understand that credible material at this secondary level is a key thing we are explicitly looking for when we say ‘academic sources’. Also flattened here was the role of primary sources, or even the very existence of such a status; YouTube has experts on it (such as university lecturers), therefore it is seen by some as an academic source *writ large*. I encouraged students to find original academic work by the academics they found online, just as I would for ideas they had first heard aired in an interview with an author on a TV current affairs show. But what was really hard to get them to think about was that the clearly non-academic end of YouTube also potentially had a valuable role to play in their essay as a primary source. This became evident when students were asked to include in the bibliography: “1 x Advertising or other Primary Source”. A standard email correspondence went thus:

Regarding the Annotated Bibliography Assignment I am struggling with a few areas.

- I am unsure what exactly what we need to find for “Advertising or other Primary Source” and where to find it.

Can you please give me some tips on where to find these resources?

I must admit my first reaction to: ‘where do I find some advertising or other primary source?’ was ‘have you tried opening your eyes’, which obviously wasn’t the response I gave my student. The actual response I gave to this email was:
Advertising or other primary source: you may not end up using it in your final essay, but this is to get you thinking about various ways to approach the question; for example, would a case study of the most popular videos on YouTube be one way to approach it. In this instance, they are primary texts (ie. not written up material about YouTube but the thing under analysis itself). Any web 2.0 site could be a primary text, or online community. Advertising is also a primary text which can be analysed to support your essay arguments – these can be found everywhere, obviously.

What became abundantly clear through this first iteration of the bibliography was the need to focus more on the role of primary sources in the research process. That is, to explain that some of the information they are accessing is data to be analysed in and of itself, and that the academic sources we are looking for provide the frameworks for actually undertaking this analysis. Clearly, we need to provide students with the skills to deal with the complex multi-modal information environment they exist in (Kress et. al. 2001), and, which especially in media studies, we want them to use and engage with. Thus, this represents not so much the ‘dumbing down’ of first year teaching feared by many academics, but rather points to the need for earlier induction of students into the research process, and the process of data collection which is then analysed, as the key process underpinning it. This belief will underpin how I approach preparing students for this task in future iterations.

However one further response to feedback from the task last year I more reluctantly initiated this year was the removal of the need to separately identify an Op Ed or Editorial text and a Lobby or Interest Group source. Both, I believe, remain important texts in the digital age, indeed even more so given the global reach the Internet and the veneer of benign information dissemination it can easily furnish commercial, political and/or religious stakeholders with. Ultimately though, these categories were simply too difficult for many students to get their heads around, and distracted them from the core focus of bringing together relevant material to help develop a clear argument for their essay. Ironically, these formerly old-world sources of information with an agenda are now more par for the course in an environment rife with opinion as a legitimate source of fact and public comment as exemplified by blogs. Therefore, teaching students how to discriminate in this regard is further problematised by the presence of blogs such as The Onion, Drudge Report, Salon.com, Huffington Post, and so forth which are increasingly becoming ‘sites of record’, and play a key role in realising the dream of the internet as an idealised Habermasian public sphere, of the media as ‘fourth estate’.

In the main, one good way to get a feel for how students generally handled the task is to have a look at the advice I have offered to this year’s cohort based on common weaknesses in 2008 submissions:

**Remember**

- You must find materials additional to the set readings in the course – you can use these in the final essay, but must show evidence of wider research here.
- The resources need to not just be ‘credible’ in your opinion, but the academic sources (journal articles, monographs, and book from an academic anthology) have to be academically credible, as per the guidelines provided in the lecture. Being available via the university library catalogue does not mean it is automatically academic (the library database includes all kind of resources).
• We’re not after a summary of the article; rather, we want to know how YOU are going to use it to support the points you’re making in your essay (this is more than a summary).
• Common errors made last year in this assessment task were: incorrect referencing (see the guide in this Course Info Booklet to avoid this); wrong type of resource for the category named (make sure you know what each category means, and check twice that your chosen source fits the criteria); and not addressing each of the Step 3 criteria, but rather relying on simply a summary of the piece.

(Luckman 2009, p. 14)

A common citation error (beyond the usual) was to list the database as the source of the information, rather than as the aggregator of, or gateway to, it. In the digital age, this is the analogue equivalent of saying what library you happened to find the book in and it points to the flattening effect of the screen listed above, and hence of the importance of not assuming students come with in-built comprehension of textual difference in this day and age.

The Need for a ‘Whole of Essay’ Approach

“...the mentality of the future could be to have a shorter attention span, a tendency to think in terms of visual icons rather than abstract ideas, and at the same time to be less risk-averse. Future generations would thrive on hectic fact-fielding activities, but no longer be so well equipped as their predecessors to place isolated events in a context.”

(Greenfield 2008, p. 279)

More profoundly, what the annotated bibliography revealed was a bigger problem about essay planning and organisation. This really emerged in relation to the final comment included in the task description:

“Remember: you will be graded according to how well the source fits with your essay, not just on your capacity to find ANYTHING of this topic from this kind of source.”

The inability of many students to grasp exactly what is meant here revealed the need to see the annotated bibliography as just one part of a ‘whole of essay’ response to very different ways of aggregating and communicating information. The growth of soundbite modes of everyday communication signalled by SMSing, and even web tools such as Twitter which has achieved considerable credibility in political circles, the media (for example see the centrality of it to the filling of CNN’s 24 hour news cycle, especially on slow-news days), and even to serious political protest (witness its use by those challenging the legitimacy of the May 2009 election results in Iran), makes the idea of planning out systemically a 2,500 word argument seem a cruel and unusual task. In the local context at least, this lack of capacity to structure a systemic argument (and address opposing views), has according to one of my former tutors who had 20 years experience in later years high school teaching, been exacerbated by the increasingly use in schools of a reflective essay mode. Speaking broadly, this style of writing is easier for students to grasp and better fits in with the centrality of the ‘I think’/’I feel’ speaking voice of much digital communication. But does it encourage students
to seek out new knowledge, or challenge them to consider opposing arguments which they are either able to rebut or which they may concede?

Good research practice needs to be part of a ‘whole of essay’ approach which acknowledges that contemporary educators need to adapt teaching strategies to match the different set of skills, and taken for granted effective communication strategies, screen culture has given rise to. In addition to the annotated bibliography, drawing upon innovations adopted by UniSA colleagues in the Division of Business, in 2009 students in this course will be asked to provide and reflect upon a report from the plagiarism detection site Turnitin (www.Turnitin.com; see Cheah, Bretag and Hastie forthcoming, as well as the special edition of the Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education journal, Vol. 31. No. 2, 2006 dedicated to this topic). The reflection upon this is important as we need to make it clear to students that even though the software is marketed as an anti-plagiarism tool, an essay can come up with a result of 20-30% similarity in a report and still be an excellent and original essay, albeit one which effectively uses research and data to support arguments and which contains an extensive bibliography. The corollary of this is come up with 0-5% and you’re probably doing something wrong. In this didactic, cut and paste environment, forcing students to have a full draft of their essay ahead of time, and getting them to use Turnitin as a reflective, formative tool, rather than an after the fact punitive one, is hopefully a step in the right direction towards better essays in a digital world. Ultimately, the irony is that the abundance of information now digitally available is a salient reminder for us to make visible to students our expectations, and to induct them early into the research processes which underpin the unique role of the university as not just a distributor of existing knowledge, but a site for the production of genuinely new ideas which move on existing debate.

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