

# Critical Internet Literacy: What Is It, and How Should We Teach It?

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In June 2017, I received an e-mail from the editor to whom I had submitted a paper on some research that I had been carrying out on critical Internet literacy. The message began, “Your manuscript has been reviewed....The comments of the reviewers are included below.” My heart sank; this was clearly the prelude to a rejection. But no, not only was my paper accepted, it was accepted with the most astonishing request for “minor revisions” that I have ever received: The reviewers asked me to revise my paper to make the discussion and conclusions “more political.”

The focus of my critical Internet literacy paper was a study that I had carried out on the Internet research and evaluation skills of 11-year-olds in the United Kingdom. On the whole, these young people had done a good job, but I also argued that the findings indicated a number of ways in which critical Internet literacy might be enhanced. The reviewers and the editor, however, wanted me to go further. They felt that I should stress even more strongly the urgent need for students who are using the Internet “to develop critical skills in a ‘post-truth’ era.” I was happy to say more about criticality and the specific implications from my analysis for the development of Internet research skills, but I was concerned: It’s a big leap from trying to teach students to be confident but cautious users of the Internet to giving them the skills to be able to spot fake news on a social media site or to decide whether to trust what some Web comments identified as a conspiracy theory.

The term *critical Internet literacy* is intended to evoke an association with *critical language awareness* and its cousin, *critical discourse analysis*. These terms have been used over two decades of studies by Fairclough (1992, 2013) and others to give attention to the ways in which language not only describes the world but also maintains and reinforces power relations within it. Most teachers are already aware of the need to develop critical language awareness. They know, and they want their students to know, for example, that the use of language can reflect ideologies, assumptions, and beliefs. Should female soccer play-

ers be called women, ladies, or girls? What are the power implications of the phrase “all men are created equal”? To which people should *terrorist* or *freedom fighter* be applied? A critical discourse analysis does not take sides but rather attempts to go beyond transparent meanings to identify the more subtle meanings beneath. It attempts to examine the beliefs and values that are represented in the language that an author uses, and the ways in which those choices position us as readers, such as by subtly representing suppositions as facts through repetition.

A critical discourse analysis of the media representation of Donald Trump, for example, four years before he was elected president of the United States (Zainab, 2012), noted that whereas he was described by *The Guardian* newspaper as a “billionaire with no shame, little sense of style, large amounts of hair and unlimited ambition,” his opponent (in a legal battle to prevent the building of a golf resort in Scotland) was described as “quiet-mannered town planner hired by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds” (p. 48). A critical discourse analysis attempts to identify not so much alternative facts but the ways in which language inevitably transmits values *and* facts. As Janks (2001) argued, the goal of critical language awareness is emancipatory; its object is to empower, not simply to provide tools for linguistic analysis.

## Empowering Our Students

So, how should we empower our students and enable them to become more skilled, confident, and critical navigators on the Internet? The approach I adopted drew on the excellent work of a number of scholars, particularly Mercer (2009; University of Cambridge, 2017) and Dwyer (2010) on why it’s helpful for children to work in groups of three and with defined roles; Einav, Robinson, and Fox (2013) on how children are able to judge trustworthiness; and Zhang, Duke, and Jiménez (2011) and Castek and Coiro (2015) on how we can both improve and evaluate children’s Internet research skills. Drawing on

these studies and having followed the appropriate ethical procedures, I gave seven groups of three students each a 25-minute Internet search task to answer the question, “How many stars can you see in the sky?” This is quite a tricky question. Many 11-year-olds assume that the answer is the same as that to the question, How many stars are in the universe? Yet, of course, this is not the case. To make the research task more manageable, I did three things:

1. I constrained their searching to just six webpages that I had preselected.
2. I asked the students in each triad to choose one of three roles (in a slight adaptation of Dwyer’s, 2010, approach): planner (team leader, with responsibility for completing the task and securing consensus), navigator (in charge of which sites are visited/revisited and in what order), and evaluator (responsible for making sure that each site is evaluated on two specific dimensions—relevance and trustworthiness—and to help them focus on this, they each had a worksheet with space for comment on these factors for all six sites).
3. After 15 minutes, I reminded the group to look again at the research question. (In nearly every case, this resulted in the group refocusing on the topic of how many stars are visible in the night sky, rather than the much wider question of how many stars are in the universe.)

With the students’ permission, I recorded the sessions, and after transcribing their discussions, I looked for patterns in the data. One very easy approach to reviewing the students’ search behaviors was to categorize everything that took place into one of two categories: desirable or undesirable activity (e.g., I categorized discussing the research question as desirable; I categorized off-task behavior or ignoring a suggestion from a group member as undesirable). As I thought about the different skill areas that were demonstrated, three very simple divisions seemed to dominate: The students talked about the strategies that they were using at the word or sentence level; they talked about their comprehension (or lack of comprehension); finally, although they didn’t do this very often, they talked about their work as a group and about how they were (or were not) collaborating.

Then, I decided to do the teacherly thing, to drop the focus on the undesirable, and instead focus on the desirable behaviors. This left me with a list of nine desirable Internet-searching behaviors, and I realized that these formed a potentially valuable list of exactly what stu-

dents need to do to demonstrate, or enhance, their critical Internet literacy. The list does not say everything that needs to be said, but I feel that it captures much of what needs to happen at the individual and group levels and, as such, might be useful for other teachers. I also hope that the voices of the students that I include in the next section make the suggested strategies more tangible.

## Nine Strategies for Enhancing Critical Internet Literacy

### 1. Proceed With Good Understanding of the Task

This was actually quite rare. Most groups began by visiting websites and then started to discuss whether a site seemed to have some general relevance. The evaluator’s role was crucial here; despite having the role of task manager, the planner tended to only gradually assume a management role, but Jessica (all names are pseudonyms) showed how it might be done: “Let’s just look and see if it answers our question, because our question is ‘How many stars can we see in the sky?’ So, we don’t just have to look for the biggest amount of numbers.”

### 2. Use Your Reading Strategies!

Interestingly, groups in which a member suggested skimming (Hannah: “Yes, let’s just skim-read it”; Chloë: “Shall we, like, skim-read and see if we can find anything...?”) performed more successfully than groups that opted for (sometimes painfully long) reading aloud of large chunks of text. Discussing reading strategies in the group proved to be really valuable.

### 3. Scroll Down the Page

Unlike books, many computer displays show only part of the text that’s intended to be read. Some groups neglected to scroll down the page and, therefore, failed to encounter key information. The navigator has important responsibilities in this respect.

### 4. Be Alert! Be Suspicious!

Collectively, the students in this study were commendably circumspect: Although many adults would nowadays regard this as overly cautious, the students mistrusted Wikipedia on principle (Ben: “I don’t trust Wikipedia!”), they mistrusted any site that displayed

advertising (Chloë: “Why are there cars [advertised on this website]?” Jessica: “I don’t trust it....They’re just trying to get money out of the website”), and they were cautious about an overfriendly tone (Cameron: “I don’t trust this already. The writing looks informal”; Paige: “It’s trying to sound like it’s your friend. This is just blah-de-blah”).

### 5. Read Between the Lines

This is perhaps the key to critical Internet literacy. The first part of this is to monitor the group’s own comprehension (Hildegard: “Are you actually taking any of this in?” Amie: [grins] “No!”). Paige showed caution; she noticed that a website named Answers.com may appear to give answers but has wholly unedited content: “Sometimes titles can be deceiving, because, like, sometimes Answers.com, because it says ‘Answers,’ we think it has the answer [but it doesn’t].” Similarly, Chelsea discussed how much faith to put in scientific language; she actually trusted the less scientific site more, perhaps because she understood it better: “This one is concise. The other one has got larger words and stuff, so I trust this one.”

### 6. Make Late Decisions

Premature closure is always a threat, especially if one group member values speed over depth. The planner’s role can be vital (Lucy: “Let’s look at them all again.... We need to go on the one we trust most and look at that again”).

### 7. Integrate Information Across Sources

This high-level skill also depends on a group avoiding premature closure. These students often managed it well (Hannah: “Let’s go back and look at the positives and negatives about them. This one you can tell it’s real because it’s got a caption below the picture.” Chloë: “Yeah.” Hannah: “And you know the other website, some websites just want you to like them on Facebook”).

### 8. Be Clear About Your Role

This comes with both modeling with the teacher and practice, but it makes a significant difference to group processes (Amie: “I’m the evaluator, so I’m trying to see that we’re doing the right thing.” Lawrence: “I’m the navigator, and you’re the planner....” Hildegard: “I’m supposed to be telling you guys what to do”).

### 9. Make Joint Decisions

This is key to making the best use of the different skills in a team, and again it comes with practice. It’s great when a teacher can see this working. As Logan put it, “We’ve got to work together...’cause working together is key to answering the question.” At a later point in their decision making, Olivia noted, “So, we’ve gone through all the websites, and we’ve gone through all the relevant....EarthSky definitely answered our question and gave us extra information.” Logan responded, “Yes, Sky and Telescope and EarthSky are similar. Did you notice that? They are similar, and they are the most relevant.”

## Critical Internet Literacy: Transitioning From Analysis to Action

These 11-year-olds demonstrated commendable critical Internet literacy, but of course their research skills were not perfect. There were long periods of silence, and for over five minutes, one student read aloud from a website that in fact was irrelevant to their needs. Three of the seven triads had wonderfully cooperative discussions but failed to answer the research question because the navigator didn’t scroll down to the area of the two sites that gave the answer. So, if we use the critical Internet literacy list as a starting point for teaching, what else needs to be in place?

First, as Mercer’s (2009) work has made clear, putting students into triads does not guarantee productive group work. Constructive group work, carried out independently of the teacher, happens only when students have clear aims for their talk, agreed-upon ground rules for speaking, and a task that they consider worthwhile. Carrying out research on authentic tasks is also important, and this was the focus of recent work by Coiro, Castek and Quinn (2016), who reported on projects that led elementary school students (from first to fifth grade) into areas of Internet inquiry that had personal significance for them and also dealt with controversial issues, such as health, the environment, and civic engagement. The students’ project outcomes were also innovative and ranged from webpages to letters to authorities, PowerPoint presentations, and videos.

This emphasis on bringing together critical awareness of language and applying this to issues that matter is precisely what Janks (2001) and Fairclough (2013) advocated. As they see it, critical language awareness is not simply about language study; it im-

plies a transition from analysis to action, and in this sense, critical Internet literacy is not simply about developing a set of scholarly skills. If it indeed leads to empowerment, this implies more than just the ability to understand what those who post content on the Internet are trying to achieve. It implies the ability to become stronger in resisting oppression through language (e.g., in my stars study, being aware of insidious advertising or suspicious of an overfriendly tone), more confident in asserting one's own voice, and more likely to be willing to create and publish one's own alternative narrative.

In this sense, I didn't need to make my paper "more political." Critical Internet literacy is already political.

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### The department editors welcome reader comments.



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