

TNU - Grad – Wood, Tim – Teaching Zack to Think

Two memorable courses in my less-than-distinguished academic career were high school Geometry and a college course in elementary logic. Despite their different titles and settings, both were dedicated to one task – to teach me how to think.

The methods of the Geometry teacher, Miles Hufft, were hard for me to swallow at first. But he spelled out his mission – to teach us to think – and ran us through countless “theorems” and “proofs” until he felt he had accomplished something.

The name of the college logic instructor is lost to bad memory, but he too tried to teach me how to think logically and critically. He took me through exercises in logic that helped form my ability to draw worthwhile conclusions.

Today's students, especially the Zacks of the world, may not be getting this kind of teaching early enough to protect them from the snares of the Internet. While it's become a joke for some to say, “If it's on the Internet, it must be true,” it's not a joke to parents and teachers of impressionable children.

Zack is the student cited in the article “Teaching Zack to Think” who read one isolated web page and as a result concluded that the Holocaust is a hoax. It's a frightening article.

Our children, and maybe adults too, have lost many of the protections they once had. As a child, I rode my bicycle freely all over the small town in which I grew up. I was terrified to let my own children ride very far outside of their immediate neighborhood. The world seems more dangerous.

Another protection that we're rapidly losing is that of the gatekeepers of information. As a long-time newspaper journalist, I was a gatekeeper. As a reporter, my decisions about what stories to cover and how to cover them decided how people knew about important events. As a newspaper editor, I decided what news went into the newspaper, and thus had an influence on what people knew about their world.

Broadcast journalism book publishers are two other examples of entities who had their gatekeepers. Before the explosion of information on the Internet, these gatekeepers had huge influence on how people thought and lived. In the best-case scenario, these gatekeepers were honest and worked hard to deliver information that was accurate, relevant, timely and fair. While there was potential for abuse by these gatekeepers, the system worked fairly well to keep the public supplied with information that had survived critical thinking. They closed the gate on and blocked nonsense.

With the World Wide Web, we've lost the protection of the gatekeepers. For minimal expense and effort, anyone can make their points of view available to the world. Beliefs that once never would have reached print or airtime now are just a few mouse clicks away.

Zack has to be his own gatekeeper. He must now do for himself what once was done by highly-trained individuals who had earned their way into the gatekeeper role.

This puts yet another burden on educators. Critical thinking skills must be taught at a younger age. We must continue to refine those skills while children stay in the educational system.

The article mentions three ways to help students like Zack do critical review of Internet information. These methods are purpose, author and meta-web information. The purpose of a web site must be critically reviewed. The purpose is not always apparent. Some digging may be required to discover the purpose of a web site.

Just as the Internet can deceive, it also can be used to probe the source of information. This is the role of investigating the author, assuming you know the name of the author of the article. The “Zack” article recommends a web search for the author.

A final method is to use meta-web sites – essentially search engines of search engines – to look at the web site in the context of other web sites. By learning what web sites link to the suspect web site, much can be discovered about it.

While teaching the Zacks of the world to be critical thinkers and readers may seem yet another burden on parents and educators, it also can be an opportunity. Isn't the purpose of education ultimately to produce people who can interpret information critically and make informed decisions on their own?

Miles Hufft and that logic teacher had it right. The purpose of Geometry – and any academic course – should ultimately be to teach a person to think. Perhaps the demise of the gatekeepers and the explosion of the Internet will remind educators of the need to do this basic task.

Reference:

November Learning, (2009) *Teaching Zack to Think*.

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<http://novemberlearning.com/resources/archive-of-articles/teaching-zack-to-think/>