Improving Web Searches for Students

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By Steve Kolowich

The problem with students using Google is not that the search giant is incapable of retrieving useful educational content. It's that finding that content using simple search terms is a difficult art to master.

But a coalition of education-oriented companies and organizations aims to make it easier to find useful educational content amid the detritus of the Web. The Association of Educational Publishers (AEP) and Creative Commons, the leaders of the group, announced on Tuesday that they are forming a working group to come up with more detailed criteria that could eventually be incorporated into the search interfaces for Google, Bing, and Yahoo!

The project, which has funding from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, was prompted by a joint move by those major search engines to help users do more structured Web searches. For example, Google recently introduced Google Shopping and Google Recipes, which allow users not only to search within those topic areas, but also to customize the search criteria to index the type of products or recipes that they want. For instance, Google Recipes users can narrow their "chicken pot pie" search results to include recipes that have certain ingredients, cook times, and calorie counts.

The idea behind the new education partnership is to determine a common "framework" for narrowing search results for education content, says Charlene Gaynor, CEO of the Association of Education Publishers — by subject area, or source type, or content type, or any number of possible criteria. The goal is also to persuade publishers of educational content, whether open-access or proprietary, to use a corresponding set of metatags to help the search engines categorize their content more easily.

The association and its partners do not have a formal relationship with the major search engine companies, so it is not a given that Google, Bing, or Yahoo! will adopt their framework. But the companies have indicated that they are open to suggestions. "As appropriate, we invite participation from major consumers and producers of structured data on the Web," they wrote on a website [http://schema.org/] devoted to their joint Schema project.

Search engines are used by college students, but they were not designed for them. This has been a subject of much handwringing among professors, who worry that students are not finding the most reliable content when they bypass the library for Google. That more and more reputable content providers — textbook publishers, scholars, universities such as the Massachusetts

Institute of Technology and many others — have been depositing useful academic resources on the open Web has complicated matters: the Internet is no longer a wasteland of apocrypha. But there is still a lot of crap out there.

"Searching is easy, finding is hard, and finding relevant is very hard," said Michael Johnson, an AEP board member who will be serving on a working group devoted to developing the framework over the next six months or so.

"The purpose of this effort is to provide a series of tags and tools that allows the search engines to more discretely and accurately expose the educational resources to the people who need it," said Johnson. The project is aimed at benefiting the publishers of educational content as much as students, he said. By giving publishers better flares and students better binoculars, Johnson and his colleagues hope to up their chances of finding one another in the wilderness of the Web.

"The tricky part is what are going to be the discriminating values by which we're going to decide the values," said Gaynor, the AEP head. That is the job of the working group, which will be overseen by Creative Commons.

Catherine Casserly, CEO of Creative Commons, said that while the project is in the very early stages, it could portend a future wherein students and educators can recommend useful or reliable sites and share them with others in a community.

"What I think we'll see is, beyond vocabulary and metadata, there will be ways that communities and reputation [brokers] and students can share info about content domains that they find to be particularly useful," Casserly said. For example, as a student who is having trouble grasping certain classroom concepts based on the material provided by the instructor, "I could rely on some of the open educational resources that some of my classmates have relied on," said Casserly. Such is the direction of the social Web, she said.

But Casserly cautions against putting the cart too far ahead of the horse. "The first phase," she says, "is getting the vocabulary right so we can get the search right."