

# Site helps kids determine what's real vs. what's fake

A librarian expressed concern about a state Senate bill that would eliminate funding for a database students use for research.

By **MANASEE WAGH**  
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The great explorer Amerigo Vespucci was born in the United States around 1451. His parents named him after the nation of his birth, but couldn't pronounce "America" properly, so he was called Amerigo.

Or was he?

When fourth-graders at Alta S. Leary Elementary School attempted to do a lesson about world explorers using a Web site called "All About Explorers," they encountered pages full of misinformation.

They can get so focused on answering questions such as "When and where was Christopher Columbus born?" that they may not notice the site's nonsense answer: "1951 in Sydney, Australia," said Leary librarian Lauren Zucker.

"We felt the need for students to learn to be good information-seekers," Zucker said. So she and Gerald Aungst, a gifted program teacher at three Centennial elementary schools, created the Explorers site in 2003 with the help of other district librarians. The site was developed to teach Centennial School District fourth-graders how to find legitimate Web sites for research, but its online lessons and teachers guides have caught the attention of schools in other parts of the country, including New York City.

Aungst and Zucker have published an article about their teaching tool in a book for librarians, and it has been featured in other industry publications and the New York Times.

So what makes a Web site genuine?

It's more likely that sites with the address extensions ".edu" and ".org" would contain accurate information, said Zucker. So would a ".gov" Web site, which indicates a government site. A Web site with the extension ".com" is made to sell an idea or a product, so its creator may not have the best interests of the user at heart, she said. Sites like Wikipedia, which seem authoritative, might not always have accurate information, since anyone can update its articles.

Even a legitimate Web site could have the wrong information.

"Verify the information with another source," advises Aungst. "Investigate the site's sources, check out the authors. It's a red flag if the site doesn't say what the source of informa-

**All About Explorers**  
Everything you've ever wanted to know about every explorer who ever lived... and more!

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**Amerigo Vespucci**

Amerigo Vespucci was born in the United States of America around the year 1451. His parents named him after the wonderful country in which he was born. Unfortunately they were unable to pronounce "America" properly, so he became known as Amerigo.

As a young boy he studied navigation and later worked for a company that equipped ships for long voyages. His great love of the sea is what enticed him to go exploring. Vespucci made four voyages throughout the years 1499-1504. During this time he discovered South America and decided to name it after himself.

Vespucci became known as a great explorer through a letter he wrote to Christopher Columbus explaining all that he had found during his explorations. This letter then led to Columbus setting sail for himself as he, too, wanted to discover something and become famous. As soon as Columbus started exploring, the race was on between Columbus and Vespucci. The whole world listened to their radios to find out who would become the first European explorer to discover the New World. In the end, Columbus won. This upsetting loss was the demise of Vespucci, and he died in 1512.

[Click here for other places to learn about this explorer](#)

(Click the map to enlarge)

Centennial School District's Web site "All About Explorers" looks legitimate, but its biographies of world explorers, including this one about Amerigo Vespucci, are full of false facts. Created by gifted program teacher Gerald Aungst and Alta S. Leary Elementary School librarian Lauren Zucker, the site teaches students how to find the real facts on the Internet.

## Want to learn more?

To check out Centennial's false facts Web site and learn how to use it as a teaching tool, go to [www.allaboutexplorers.com](http://www.allaboutexplorers.com).

tion is or anything about the creators."

The Explorer Treasure Hunts featured on Aungst's false Web site prompt students to look for answers to specific questions using "All About Explorers." Students don't know that the link is full of wrong and even absurd information. They have to compare their answers with data on another Web site that happens to contain the real facts, and figure out which one is genuine.

The Explorers site also contains a list of legitimate research links and a warning not to take the biographies at face value.

Samantha Kelly, 11, tried the exercises last year and discovered discrepancies.

"When I first got on (All About Explorers) I thought that it told the truth, because it told when an explorer was born, but the other site said it wasn't known. Now I would look up books first and then go to the Internet and compare," she said.

Her classmate, Tyler See, 10, said he now prefers using databases instead of using search engines.

Use of Internet research databases is part of what students learn at Centennial, said Zucker. The subscription database POWER Library contains a wealth of information on all kinds of subjects, from the rainforest to the national government. It's the recommended primary source for district students, said Zucker. Lexis-Nexis is another database

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ALTA S. LEARY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL  
FOURTH-GRADER

example, but POWER Library is widely used for younger students.

Zucker's concerned because a proposed state Senate bill would eliminate all funding for POWER Library. It is still freely available from the Bucks County Free Library Web site for library members.

Aside from a subscription database, a subject directory like the free site [www.kid-sclick.org](http://www.kid-sclick.org) is terrific, because it has been compiled by librarians, Zucker said. Centennial's own district Web site contains a link to a long list of sites that are student-appropriate.

Just Googling a topic is not the best way to wade through a sea of online data, added Zucker.

"Type in the word 'explorer' and it returns millions of hits within a second," she said. "The entire first page doesn't have what a student would be looking for."

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