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
STAFF WRITER

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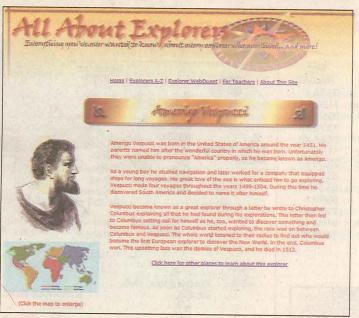
Aungst and Zucker have published an article about their teaching tool in a book for librarians, and it has been featured in other industry publications and the New York Times.

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-

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.

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

> "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."
> **SAMANTHA KELLY, 11**
> 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.kidsclick.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."