Editorial

Quid est Veritas?

"What is truth?" Pontius Pilate, the Roman Procurator of Judaea, allegedly said in response to Jesus Christ's claim that everyone of the truth would hear his voice (John 18: 38). Whether Pilate asked this question because he had insufficient information to ascertain whether Christ's account or his accusers' was accurate, or because he was reflecting an expedient political view, Pilate's question can be applied to research based on information gathered from the Internet.

For several years many educational authorities in North America, as well as those in the Antipodes and Western Europe, have hailed the Internet as a great research resource. No longer does a scholar have to traverse the globe physically in search of rare and elusive sources. Many are now available on the Internet. Indeed the initiative of the Vatican libraries to digitize and post to their Web site many of their holdings enables unique and fragile ancient and medieval manuscripts to be accessible both to the scholar who spends her or his lifetime researching in such realms and to the layperson (Vatican Library, 2006). Even a curious primary school student can view such rare documents. Other libraries and archives also make at least some of their holdings available through the Internet, such as the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (British Columbia Provincial Archives, 2006).

On the other hand, the Internet has made it easier for those who lack ethics and scruples in research to engage in plagiarism. Moreover, the plethora of Web sites has created a virtual Tower of Babel of information. With some contentious or emotional topics, for example, it becomes almost impossible for the beginning researcher such as a school student not only to differentiate between what is true or false, but even to ascertain what is reasonable. To be sure, most teachers do not simply assign a research topic and then release their students to forage for whatever they can find. Usually some background is provided as well as guidance as to what sources might be considered appropriate. In the days before the Internet such instruction was usually sufficient, as what was available in school libraries or other local libraries had been selected and vetted by people who were largely able to distinguish reasonable scholarship from biased accounts and simple opinion pieces. This happy state of affairs disappeared with the advent of the Internet. The ubiquitous nature of the Internet, and the ease with which one can find information make the Internet, as attractive as the mythical song of the sirens. As teachers we may wish to emulate Odysseus, who filled the ears of his crew with wax so that they could not hear the sirens' song (Homer, 2002). However, our students are not a ship's crew, and we cannot exercise such control over them. Although to some degree we can present a nurturing and nonthreatening environment in school, much like what Friedrich Fröbel (1782-1852) desired for his kindergarten (Fletcher & Welton, 1912), we have little control over what the student does outside school.

Although it might be said that I am being alarmist and overreactive, a search using the Google search engine for information pertaining to the question of whether Adolf Hitler had Jewish heritage results in a welter of conflicting information. The actual statement I entered into the search engine was "Was Hitler Jewish?" (the question was placed in quotes). The search engine displayed the first 10 links of about 353 sites related to this question. That school-aged students have asked this question is supported by a page in the Holocaust History Web site that reproduces a question allegedly submitted by a grade 9 student:

> i am a ninth grader and i have been reasearching the holocaust for three years now and i am very interested in it. i have a question. my english teacher told me that Hitlers grandmother was Jewish and i was wondering if he did to her what he did to her what he did to the other jewish people.
> (Holocaust-history.org, 2006)

Several responses to the question and comments on the question and responses are provided by various people, some stating unequivocally that Hitler had no Jewish heritage, whereas others state that it is possible that he had some Jewish heritage. If references are cited at all, they are secondary sources, and in some instances mistakes are made in the citations. The picture becomes murkier when other Web sites are visited.

In a site called *The Straight Dope*, Adams states, "But while Hitler probably didn't have any Jewish blood, it can't be completely ruled out"(para. 1). The source for this information is allegedly Hitler's former lawyer Hans Frank, but no reference for this information is listed. Other Web sites contain similar information (Sciforums.com; Google Answers; Suite101.com), and many of them are set up as forums where one can either comment on what is present or enter new information. As in the other examples mentioned, if references are cited they are secondary sources or in some instances other Web sites that in turn cite secondary sources. Apart from forum-type sites, there are reference sites configured as collaborative enterprises. Perhaps the best known of these is *Wikipedia*. As in some other sites, the possibility that Hitler had some Jewish heritage is acknowledged, although emphasis is placed on a number of scholarly works that argue the near impossibility of this. However, at the top of the page about Hitler is the statement, "As a result of recent vandalism, *editing of this page by new or unregistered users is temporarily disabled*. Changes can be discussed on the talk page, or you can request unprotection" (Wikipedia, 2006). From this statement it is apparent some people who use the Internet either do not respect the collaborative nature of *Wikipedia* or wish to include information on that site that is either inaccurate or biased.

Although some of the Web sites claiming that Hitler had Jewish heritage also suggest that this was a reason for his hatred of Jews, others suggest that Hitler and many of his inner circle were homosexuals and that this contributed to his hatred (Lively & Abrams, 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, other Web sites take the information and claims made by Lively and Abrams to task (Citizens Allied for Civic Action, 2006). Although we might believe that such sensationalism may be avoided if we restrict students to refereed publications and to less contentious avenues of inquiry, scholarly accounts are not unanimous in

their perspectives either, because Machtan (2003) contends that Hitler was homosexual.

At this juncture it might appear that with such contentious topics there is a surfeit of information on the Internet, much of it poor, biased, or incomplete. Where does this leave the young researcher? Although one might advocate a prescribed list of approved sources, which would probably protect most students from the more shocking and outrageous sources, this does not prepare them well to contend with beguiling but inadequate sources that they may encounter on their own. Rather than the cloistered environment advocated by Fröbel, which could be extended to societal levels by means of government action as is done in China and some other countries, an approach that empowers people to make informed decisions about information is probably superior. The approach would be to develop in all students, from as early an age as possible, critical analysis based on prior knowledge not only of Internet sources, but of print sources as well. Granted most young students lack the knowledge base and sometimes the cognitive development to engage in critical analysis at a high level. Nevertheless, by encouraging them to engage in informed criticism rather than encouraging them to accept without question the idea that the Internet is yet another educational panacea, we will provide them with the means to make informed decisions about the information they encounter. In this manner they will probably function more effectively than Pilate.

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