

Evaluating information

Deciding which sources to trust

Every day, learners make decisions about where to get information, which sources to trust, and how to respond to conflicting views. Developing skills in evaluating information from different sources or from just one source helps learners to avoid fake news and misleading information, make decisions about conflicting opinions, and move beyond a limited set of sources that filter out different views and reinforce biases.

Inside the classroom, students study resources that are often carefully curated. When studying at a distance, and in their daily lives, they will come across many other information sources. They need to develop the skills to judge which are reliable and which should be avoided.

People who have not been taught to evaluate information often take one of two approaches. They may rely on the opinion of others in their social group and discount other views. Or they may make a

decision based on what feels right, without looking at other explanations or arguments.

Teaching students to evaluate information develops their understanding that knowledge is complex and diverse, that it develops over time and is informed by various sources of information. It also develops their appreciation that some explanations are better than others, and that there are strategies that can be used to help distinguish reliable evidence and good arguments.

Evaluating information at a distance

Expose learners to different opinions and perspectives.	Instead of sticking with one source or textbook, share multiple accounts and sources. These might include different explanations of past events, various sources of evidence, or competing scientific models.
Provide criteria for evaluating information and opportunities for students to practise.	Groups can work together in a live session or via a shared document, to develop criteria for evaluation. They can then apply these criteria to information they have found or that has been shared with them and discuss their conclusions.
Support the development of strategies for making sense of the world.	Provide opportunities for critical thinking, asking questions such as, 'How do you know?' and 'How did you evaluate this website?' and then discussing responses.
Build in time for students to reflect on their assumptions.	You could ask students to share via audio/video/text how they have applied what they have learned, you could run an online quiz using a tool such as kahoot.com, circulate a list of questions to be answered, or ask all learners in your class to devise a test of understanding, and then use one of those.
Motivate students to care about truth and knowledge.	Taking time to evaluate information is more difficult than relying on friends' opinions or stories that seem plausible. Include discussion of the personal implications of taking information on trust without checking it. The Covid-19 pandemic produced many examples of people who put themselves at risk by not checking whether the health information they received was reliable. These cases provide topical examples for discussion and evaluation.

How did it go?

Let us know in the comments on the website www.open.ac.uk/blogs/innovating how evaluating information worked for you and your students. Please share any tips that others would find useful, or link to information you evaluated.