Website Evaluation: Yowell Elementary School Library

http://sites.google.com/a/ccpsweb.org/yowell-elementary-school-library/

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Goals and Learning Objectives

The purpose of this project is to have current Syracuse University School Media students act as evaluation consultants and assess the websites of school libraries. This real-life evaluation will provide the student with tools, knowledge, and experience relating to the evaluation of websites, and the school library with evaluation results, problems, and suggestions regarding their web page. Through completing this assignment students will learn how to provide a professional website evaluation for a client and the importance of proper website design. The end result will be providing an elementary school library with the evaluation results and suggestions and recommendations that will improve the website.

A General Description of the Website

The Yowell Elementary School Library website functions as the internet presence of the Yowell Elementary School Library in Culpepper, Virginia. The intended audience of the website is preschool through 5th grade students and teachers at the school. The content of the website is related directly to the operations, rules, and services of the library, including hours, frequently asked questions, the library catalog, and class schedules. The website itself is not unique but has some interesting features, including a “Make a book suggestion” link that allows students to email the librarian and provide titles of books they would like to see on the shelves.

A Brief Description of the Evaluation

Criteria/Method
The primary evaluation of this website was done by three participants. Each participant performed a tour of the website, forming impressions and ideas, and then used two tools to evaluate it. The website was evaluated based on its overall appearance, content, visuals, links, navigation, and ease of use.

**Instruments**

The tools used were the Website Motivational Analysis Checklist (WebMAC) Professional 2.0 and the Arnone and Small Content Validity Scale. The website was also tested with Cynthia Says, an online accessibility validation service that tests against U.S. Section 508 guidelines which require federal websites to be accessible for people with disabilities.

**Evaluators**

The Yowell Elementary School Library website was evaluated by a graphic designer with three years of professional experience, an internet sales consultant, and Stephanie Kosmerl, a current Syracuse University School Media student.

**Data Analysis**

The data from the WebMAC tool comes in the form of numeric scores. On each statement, a website can get anywhere from 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). The scores are divided into four categories, Stimulating, Meaningful, Organized, and Easy-to-use. The scores are plotted on a graph that shows which categories need much improvement, some improvement, or are not in need of improvement.

The Arnone and Small Content Validity Scale is scored in a similar way as the WebMAC tool, rated from strongly disagree to strongly agree, from 1 to five respectively.
The compliance tool, Cynthia Says, failed the Yowell Elementary School Library website. This means that the website does not comply with American Disability Association (ADA) standards.

**Synthesis of Overall Findings**

Overall, the findings show that it is the presentation, and not the content, that needs improvement. While evaluators found that the content was audience appropriate, credible, and neutral, and the navigation was relatively easy to use, the actual appearance of the website leaves much to be desired. The website is in need of a visual redesign.

The WebMAC scores reported from all participants were very low in the visual category (Stimulating). The average scores were as follows: Stimulating = 5, Meaningful = 16, Organized = 16, and Easy-to-use = 19. Each category is out of 24. As previously stated, where content and navigation are concerned, this website ranks average or highly and needs little to no improvement.

The Content Validity Scale provided similar results. In areas where content was rated, the Yowell Elementary School website rated very high, receiving either 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree). The only low score was in reference to contact information. The website received a 2 (disagree) because contact information is not readily available. The only way to find any contact information is to click on the “Make a book suggestion” link which allows for users to email the librarian.

The results from the Cynthia Says compliance check showed that the website is not suitable for the use of people with disabilities. In order to be ADA compliant, all images must have descriptions embedded in the HTML, such as alt tags. None of the images on the site have these and therefore are not accessible to screen readers.
Recommendations/Suggestions for Improvement

The Yowell Elementary School Library homepage is far too busy. It contains seven pictures, two videos, and very little informative text. All of the pictures and videos are great, just having so many on the home page is overwhelming. Another problem regarding the visual content of the home page relates to page loading time. The amount of photos and videos may cause someone with a slower internet connection to have problems loading, either taking a very long time or not loading properly. It provides no real information about the library, something that would be expected on a home page. Also, there is too much blank space, particularly between the photos and videos, and this causes the user to have to scroll a great deal. Users want information presented to them in an organized and very apparent manner. Too much scrolling detracts from the website’s ease of use.

All three evaluators felt that the background of the website, which emulates yellow lined paper, was distracting and unappealing. The bright yellow can be painful for eyes and the pale blue navigation cause eye strain since it is hard to read on the background. Removing the yellow paper background and replacing it with something that is eye-catching and appropriate to the content without being distracting of detracting from the information presented would be best. The background of the main content section should be a solid color. In order to add interest and uniqueness, a fun border or logo can be added.

Another problem is that the website is not ADA compliant. When run through “Cynthia Says,” an online accessibility validation service, the website failed in all of the categories that applied. The pictures are missing descriptive labels that can be read by a screen reader. In addition to the large quantity of images and lack of text on the front page, without descriptive
labels people with vision problems will have no idea what is on the page. Providing descriptions in the HTML would go a long way in making the page ADA compliant.

The links on the website could use improvement. When a user clicks on a link he or she is directed away from the Yowell Elementary School Library page and to the link. It would be much better if links opened in new windows or tabs. This allows for users to still have access to the website. Also, adding a link to the Yowell Elementary School website would be helpful to users.

Finally, page does not provide any contact information. Looking at the page it is impossible to find an address or phone number for either the Yowell Elementary School or the library. There is no “Contact Us” link in the navigation, nor is it anywhere on the page. Being able to easily locate the contact information is very important and makes the website and the library seem more transparent and open to comments and questions.

Reflection on the Experience

Evaluating websites is a very important practice. It should be done during the website creation process and after a website goes live. Without proper evaluation, it is difficult to judge whether a website is useful or appealing. The feedback from evaluations gives website creators goals and ideas regarding changes to the website. Sometimes the website creators are so invested in their websites that they are unable to see flaws. Having unaffiliated people evaluate is looking at the website with fresh, unbiased eyes. Also, links and content can become outdated. Evaluation helps to catch and rectify these problems.

There are many things to be considered when evaluating a website. Content, appearance, and navigation have all been discussed. Audience appropriateness is very important and testing
websites with the intended audience will provide invaluable information. While it would be difficult to conduct an evaluation or focus group with elementary school students, showing them the site and asking them what they like and dislike would be helpful.

In addition to using website evaluation, website creators should consider proper information architecture when designing websites. Oftentimes this can keep mistakes from occurring. The text *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* by Peter Morville and Louis Rosenfeld and *Don’t Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* by Steve Krug can be valuable resources. Usability testing can be very lucrative in website evaluation. During a usability test, users are asked to perform certain tasks and record their experiences. This can actually be even more informative than a website evaluation since the users are looking at the website from a user’s perspective rather than an evaluator’s.

*Bibliography*

