

PREFACE

One afternoon, as Beth was busily trying to clean the house, her 4-year-old son was bored. In order to get her work done, she enticed him to sit at the computer to look at the Lego website at *www.lego.com*. He had very little experience with computers, except for perhaps a game or two he had played at his day care center. This was his first time encountering the Internet. As Beth returned to her cleaning, she noticed how adeptly he navigated around the website, easily finding icons and links of interest. She became so engrossed in watching him that the cleaning was forgotten. Although Beth knew he could not read the links, she could clearly see that he was able to meet his personal needs for information and entertainment. How did he know what to do next? She began to think about the different reading strategies he might need to make his browsing of the site even more purposeful. Beth also began to wonder about all the skills he would eventually need to learn in order to more effectively use the Web.

Thus began the formation of a kernel of an idea. From that point on, Beth has had a growing interest in better understanding how we find, understand, and use information from the Web. This interest led to a dissertation, multiple research studies, and coauthoring this book with Maya. It is ironic to recall a conversation in the teachers' lounge several years back in which Beth remarked that she could not see herself using computers because typewriters were so much easier! In some ways, Beth came to the field of technology through the back door. Maybe it's the same door through which you have come. Or perhaps you have entered through the front door, like Maya, who began to wonder about the potential for technology to motivate and support struggling readers and writers back in the early 1990s. Wherever you are on the continuum of technology use, whether for personal or instructional purposes, we welcome you.

Actually, this book is about more than technology, although we do address hardware, software, websites, search engines, and a host of other technology topics. First, and foremost, this book is about learning. Technology, specifically the Internet, can be a powerful tool for learning; in fact, this tool may be the most influ-

ential communication and learning device we have ever encountered. In our classrooms, across the grade levels and across the content areas, we recognize the need to teach students how to use computers through instruction in keyboarding, word processing, and creating electronic presentations. We have spent time teaching students how to turn on computers, log in, type in Web addresses, and click on links. However, have we also spent time teaching students how to critically read once they locate a website? Have we prepared them with strategies for finding the most important or useful information within a website? Have we taught them ways to harvest information from a website and to then display this information in their own words? You may be familiar with the term “digital divide,” which acknowledges that people without computers have limited access to electronic resources, but educators also talk about a “second level digital divide,” which recognizes that even when children have access to computers, they will be disadvantaged if they are not taught how to use them (Hargittai, 2002). Not teaching children how to use computers is like giving them books but not teaching them how to read.

The heart and soul of this book stems from our belief in the importance of providing our students with the skills and strategies needed to be successful in their current role as students as well as in their future role as productive citizens. Since the Internet is the most comprehensive resource for authentic student research, one goal of this book is to apply what we already know about effective instruction to teach strategies for negotiating this potent but disorganized information space. Another of our purposes is to draw from what we already know about literacy processes in print in order to understand the benefits and challenges of reading on the Web. Throughout this book and on our companion website (www.ReadingTheWeb.net) we explore the similarities and differences between technology and print in order to build connections to new ideas and information. Finally, this book provides a research-based, classroom-tested model for the cycle of Internet inquiry that we call “QUEST.” Though Maya is currently a university professor and educational researcher, she served as a reading specialist for many years; therefore, she has a passionate interest in promoting literacy for all types of students. To that end, this book also offers suggestions for adapting and extending curricular activities for diverse learners.

Using the Web to answer our personal questions, whether for school, work, or entertainment, relies on the belief that the Web will meet our informational needs. Beth’s son is now a fifth grader, and he has mastered many of the basic skills for locating information on the Web. In fact, the Web has become his resource of choice for everything from a recipe for peanut butter cookies to directions for a magic trick. He has grown up with this tool as an integral part of his daily life, as have many of our students. Sometimes we feel as though we are playing catch-up with our students. However, keep in mind that your experience and knowledge of learning and reading, whether just budding or in full bloom, is the connection that will help students be effective Web readers now and in their future. We sincerely hope that you find this book useful, whether you are a teacher, library media specialist, instructional technologist, university professor, or researcher, and that you will share your stories with us as we continue to investigate this fascinating new phenomenon of searching for meaning on the Web.