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Website Evaluation Report
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Using my group's website evaluation tool for educators, I analyzed the website Starfall (http://www.starfall.com). In my role as a Kindergarten teacher I often looked for websites that not only enhanced my teaching, but provided an opportunity for the students to be engaged on their own as well. However, using websites with Kindergarten students requires that the site be of the highest quality and easily used by small children. Therefore, a careful evaluation of the site is necessary for me to ensure that my students will be using a reliable and appropriate site.

Starfall was created by Dr. Stephen Schutz, who as a child struggle with reading. His concept was to create a tool that children could use to enhance their reading skills by providing motivating activities and interaction with the materials online. The site was developed by a team of designers and developers. This information and other details about the conception of the site are outlined under the "About Starfall" link found on any page of the website. While this information about the author and contact information for the development team are accessible, neither is as clearly labeled as I would like. Having a more obvious link title such as "About Starfall's Author" or something similar would be a more obvious link to the information. No specific links to Dr. Schutz's email are featured on the site but users can email either a feedback forum or the helpdesk if necessary. My email to both links received a response within two business days.

The site does not have sponsoring organizations listed but does have endorsements from multiple educational and family organizations and awards for being child safe. These endorsements are displayed on the home page and more information is offered about endorsements on the "For Educators" page. The organizations that endorse this site such as Homeschool.Com and the Association for Library Service to Children are both reputable organizations that research websites thoroughly before giving their name as an endorsement.

While the purpose and theme are not communicated through a title on the main page, they are clearly evident in the display of the learning categories. This is appropriate for the children who will be using the site because many may not have the ability to read yet and the graphics will lead them to their activities rather than words. Instead the colorful and rich environment conveys the purpose of the site to the child users and the links for parents and educators convey the deeper purpose behind the site. Accuracy is high because the majority of information contained within the site is either alphabet and phonics related or simple factual information. The alphabetic and phonemic principles used in the sections of the site for introducing reading are universal concepts that do not change over time. Additionally, the nonfiction part of the "I'm Reading" section is accurate and easy for students to understand. In the same way, objectivity is easily maintained because much of the information presented is simply fact or accepted alphabetic principle and thus, there is no room for interpretation. The stories and other activities used on the site do not give a sense of bias because they allow the students to make all the choices related to activities, setting, and often the character used within the

activity. In addition, the stories often use animals as the main character which prevents a bias toward boy/girl or race.

The last revision of the site occurred in 2005. I feel that this is too long a time to go without revising the site, or at least adding new information. However, as I said the content is not constantly evolving. The alphabet does not change. Ideally, more activities could be added or stories could be revised to provide new content for children on a periodic basis.

The educational value of this site is high. The carefully planned layout guides students through graphics and text to the activities that they want to participate in. Multiple methodologies were used in developing the site based on extensive educational research. Information about the methodology is available under the "Methodology" link. Scaffolding and modeling are both used in encouraging students to read and explore reading skills through games, books, and movies. The content is highly motivating to students in the target population as well as those outside the target age range. Younger children are drawn to the color and sound while older children may return to the site for the games and higher level reading even after they are educationally above the site's intended levels. The research-base for the content and presentation is motivating to teachers and other educational professionals because they know that the content is helpful to both them and their students.

The design aspects of this site are also highly rated. The site is very colorful but for motivational purposes and therefore does not distract from the content. While the use of color may be distracting to an adult, the children in the target population will respond positively to the bright colors. Likewise, the text is easy to read and sans serif fonts are used to allow easier readability. Text is displayed in dark fonts to increase readability as well. The size of the font is appropriate to the age of the user at each level. Lower levels of the site use larger fonts while the more advanced reading materials use a smaller font size.

The graphics and other media included with the site form the basis for the motivation and learning. Students are engaged in colorful displays of information about letters, words, and other literacy concepts. Plug-ins are not required for viewing any of the activities or stories and they clearly align with the purpose of the website. While the amount of graphics and other media used far exceeds that of many other sites, it is part of the purpose of the site and engages learners effectively. The layout also enhances the design by organizing the media into sections based on learners' ability levels and providing quick access to special activities related to holidays and skills. The layout is easy to use for both adults and children. Links to adult information are located to the side and bottom of the content intended for students so that the learners do not have to wade through extraneous information before finding the learning activities.

My biggest criticism lies in the area of Special Needs accessibility. This site does not provide many resources for special needs learners. Alt tags are not provided throughout the site and the graphics and sounds may be difficult for some learners with special needs to use because they will not be compatible with text readers or other accommodation devices. I would like to see the developers begin developing alternatives for the special needs learner or make the site fully accessible to those students that most need extra stimulation in learning. This site falls short in reaching learners will special needs.

Finally, I assessed the value of the navigational aspects of the site. The navigation scheme could be clearer to users. While the organization of the navigation puts the emphasis on the learner and the information they need to access, navigation back to the main page is not well labeled for children. Only a small "main index" link is provided on some of the content pages and would be difficult for students who are not reading to find. On the other hand, if the intention of the educator is for the students to work within one specific content area, then this navigation scheme is appropriate because it helps prevent curious learners from visiting other parts of the site where the educator does not intend for them to look at that time.

In addition, while the graphics and media do require a load time at times, the load time on a basic broadband connection were less than 5-10 seconds and do not detract from the activity. Those users with only a dial-up connection may be unable to access some parts of the content in an acceptable amount of time so I would only recommend using this site with a high speed connection.

All links were functional and appropriate. The few links to outside sources were educational and family organizations. These are the groups that endorse the site and while they are not something learners will be able to use they are helpful to parents and educators in understanding the purpose and validity of the site. Similarly, the site is operated independent of sponsorship organizations and therefore, is free of advertisements. Pop-up ads and/or other advertisements were not a concern because they were not used on the site at all.

Based on the website evaluation tool, I gave Starfall a rating of 79 out of 85. The main points where the site lost points were navigation and accessibility. Having clearer titles for the adult user links as well as providing alternatives for special needs users would enhance the site and allow me to use it with more students. However, the strengths of this site far outweigh the weaknesses. The interest and motivational level of the site for the target population makes it a great toll for engaging young children in phonemic and word play. In addition, the design and content are backed by research and meet accepted standards for educational value. Finally, the lack of advertisements and links to outside pages provides a safe environment for the young school age children to operate in while they are engaged in learning activities.

I would highly recommend the use of this site in a regular primary grades classroom both as a tool for instruction and a resource for independent student use. While the site may not be acceptable for use in a special needs environment it could possibly be used by the teacher for instruction both in group and individual learning situations. The site is engaging, educationally sound, and backed by research. All of these aspects make it a wonderful site to use with students.