



don't sit on a phoenix

Jonathan Still explains the problem with information on the Internet
- and offers a chance to win £50 in Amazon.com vouchers

My original brief for this article was to write 'something about evaluating information on the Internet'. I could hear the sound of readers worldwide quietly turning the page of *dance gazette* the minute they saw the words 'evaluating', 'information' and 'Internet' in the same sentence (as I would), so I have decided shamelessly to offer you a bribe to read this article.

The deal is this: I will personally award £50 in Amazon.com gift vouchers to the first person to find the answers to the questions below:

- Who said 'The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a light to be kindled'? Was it:
 1. Plutarch (c. 46-120)
 2. Rabelais (1493-1553)
 3. Montaigne (1533-92)
 4. Petrarch (1304-74)
 5. W. B. Yeats (1865-1939)
- If you know who said it, do you know whether it was education, a child, the mind or the brain that isn't a vase, a pail, a bucket or a vessel to be filled?

- Is it a candle, a flame or a fire that should be lighted, lit, ignited or kindled?
- And whoever said whatever they said, where did they say it, when, and where can you find the original text?

By entering the competition - especially if you win it - you will also save me the trouble of having to illustrate the first principle of evaluating Internet sources: that there are other ways of getting information than via the Internet, and sometimes they are cheaper, more reliable or more efficient. I will now illustrate how troublesome the Internet can sometimes be; you, I hope, will illustrate more ingenious ways of finding information.

The quotation, or some variant of it, appears on thousands of pages on the Internet, usually attributed to Plutarch or Yeats, but also to the other authors named above. It is quoted by teachers, lecturers, doctors, professors, educational theorists and philosophers, and is placed as a 'welcome' sign over university department web pages. It even appears on page 13 of this

issue of *dance gazette*. The National Teaching and Learning Forum (NTLF), like many similar teaching resources sites, offers it as one of many 'quotations about teaching, learning and education', promising that in the right setting, it will become a 'rhetorical jewel'.¹

I have yet to find a site on the Internet, however, which cites the original source of the quotation. The NTLF are at least honest, explaining that they don't give sources for most of their quotations, which will 'annoy scholars and be of no concern to toastmasters'. This seems rather unfair to those toastmasters who may also be scholars, but no matter. The absence of an original source does not seem to have annoyed too many scholars; so far, I have encountered only one (unsuccessful) attempt by an academic to trace it.²

This bad practice illustrates many principles of evaluating Internet information:

- Always aim to find an attribution (an author, a date, a title and a publisher).
- Always aim to supply missing

- information by searching for other sites (unless you are a toastmaster).
- read the small print. (The NTLF have merely borrowed their quotations from other sites, and want you to provide them with the source. What a cheek.)
 - Don't assume that 'reliable' sites (of universities, governments, scholars) are always reliable (many of the people who have not provided a source for the Plutarch quotation have PhDs or run university departments).

Let's look at the issue of attribution in detail, using Plutarch as an example. The problem (which I have come to call 'Plutarch's Bucket Syndrome') arose when a student wrote in a draft of her dissertation that the dance scholar Marion Gough had said, in a lecture, 'the child is not a bucket to be filled, but a candle to be lit.' The words sounded familiar, and I thought it would be very unfair to Marion Gough, who undoubtedly knew the origin of the quotation, if a student implied that Gough had presented Plutarch's words as her own.

So began the search which you too are perhaps now engaged in. It was months before I finally found an essay by Plutarch on the Internet called *The Training of Children*, the source of which you will see in the reference lower down this page. My hopes were raised: here was a man who said things like 'for to please the many is to displease the wise' and 'As soft wax is apt to take the stamp of the seal, so are the minds of children to receive the instructions imprinted on them at that age.' Just the sort of person, you would think, to come up with a rhetorical jewel like 'the mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled'. My disappointment was twofold: not only had Plutarch not written anything remotely similar to this phrase in *The Training of Children*, but another website claimed that the article, known elsewhere as *On the Education of Children*, was only *formerly* attributed to Plutarch.³

It gets worse, as the next example explains. Pythagoras (c. 582-500 BC), according to Plutarch—who-is-maybe-not-really-Plutarch in *(On) The Training (Education) of Children*, was prone to give enigmatic instructions like 'Taste not of fish that have black tails,' 'Wear not a tight string' and 'Abstain from beans.' As you



see, Pythagoras did a nice line in rhetorical jewellery, and no doubt some university website of the day (had the web existed then) would have had ' "Sit not on a phoenix" - Pythagoras' emblazoned on their philosophy department homepage.

But wait a minute, Pythagoras didn't say this, either. What he said (in Greek) was: don't sit down on a *choenix*.^{*} So who mentioned phoenixes? This is where proper attribution and references help - although I hope I never again have to write one like the one below:

The Ancient History Sourcebook: Plutarch: The Training of Children, c. 110 CE (2001) [online] June 1998. [Last accessed 9 December 2001] Originally published in Thatcher, O., ed. (1907) The Library of Original Sources. Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co, Voi. III: The Roman World, pp. 370-91. [text scanned and modernised by Prof. J. S. Arkenberg] New York, NY: Fordham University, Department of History (© June 1998 Paul Halsall). Available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/plutarch-education.html>

So far, we have a wrongly attributed author³ (Plutarch, c.110 BC), an editor (Thatcher, 1907), a scanner and moderniser (Arkenberg, n.d.), and a compiler and editor of the website itself (Halsall, 1998). By the time you read this, at least two more editors will have had a hand in altering the text. The text is now effectively sixth hand, not counting typists and

computers themselves (for computers have a mind of their own too).

I have grown so frustrated with the problem of finding the source of the vessel-and-fire quotation that I have given it the name 'Plutarch's Bucket Syndrome'. This is a contemporary disease of the Internet, whereby tiny deficiencies and inconsistencies in information are replicated thousands of times in thousands of places, like a global version of children's whispering games, making Internet research hazardous. Take, for example, another quotation: 'A little learning is a dangerous thing.' Or is it 'A little knowledge'?

A search on www.google.com brings up about 389,000 pages with the phrase 'a little knowledge . . .', and only 260,000 for the 'a little learning . . .' version. 'Knowledge' wins hands down, then. You can even buy a book called *A Little Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing: Understanding Our Global Knowledge Economy!*¹ Nevertheless, 'learning' is the word which Alexander Pope (1688-1744) used in his *Essay on Criticism*, which spawned so many later citations:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian
spring.⁷

The only way to avoid such mistakes is to be vigilant and to filter and evaluate constantly. The best guides to filtering and evaluating information on the Internet are on the web itself, a fine example being the guide to web research produced by the Library of the University of California,

Berkeley.⁸ The online version of the article you are reading now at http://www.rad.org.uk/teacher_trng/news/article2020.html has an online tutorial, which will enable you to find and evaluate sites in dance research.

Despite what may seem like misgivings about the Internet, this article is partly proof that it cannot be all bad. When I started it, I knew little about Plutarch or Pythagoras, or *Alciato's Book of Emblems*. Neither did I know what a phoenix was. As you will see from the references, I have not had to move from my computer. Unfortunately, I still do not know the source of the Plutarch quotation - but that's where you come in.

¹ NTLF (2001) Quotations on Teaching, Learning and Education in *The National Teaching and Learning Forum* [online]. [Last accessed 10 December 2001] Westport, CT: Oryx Press. Available at: <http://www.ntlf.com/html/lib/quotes.html>

² Rackett, M. (2000) Plutarch Quote in *Lt-Antiq* [Listserv message] Columbus, Ohio: Department of Greek and Latin at Ohio State University. Thu Jun 22 2000 - 11:07:39 EDT [Last accessed 10 December 2001]. Available at: <http://omega.cohums.ohio-state.edu/hypcr-lists/lt-antiq/00-07-01/0103.html>

³ Barker, W., Feltham, M. Sc Guthrie, J. (1997) Commentary on Emblem 80 from *Alciato's Book of Emblems: The Memorial Web Edition in Latin and English*, [online] Last modified 25 November 1997 [Last accessed 10 December 2001] University of Newfoundland: Department of English. Available at: <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/e080.html>

⁴ An ancient Greek measure for grain - and probably more comfortable to sit on than a phoenix.

⁵ According to Barker, Feltham Sc Guthrie (2001) op. cit.

⁶ Neef, D. (1999) *A little knowledge is a dangerous thing: Understanding our global knowledge economy*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann
The Columbia World of Quotations (1996) [No. 44936: Alexander Pope, *Essay on Criticism*. Part ii, Line 15] [online] New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. [Last accessed 10 December 2001] Available at: <http://www.bartleby.com/66/36/44936.html>

⁸ Barker, J. (2000) *Finding Information on the Internet*, [online] Last updated 3 October 2000 [Last accessed 15 August 2001]. Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley. Available at: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/FindInlo.html>

Illustration on page 43: *Alciato's Book of Emblems: The Memorial Web Edition in Latin and English: Emblem 80* [online] Last updated 25 May 2001 [Last accessed 14 January 2001]. (Scanned image from edition of the Alciato (1621) *Book of Emblems*. Padua: R P Tozzi, reprinted 1976 by New York: Garland.) St Johns, Newfoundland: Department of English. Available at: <http://www.mun.ca/alciato/c080.html>