

## Case study 8: a lesson plan in action – the tree octopus

A prominent example of a lesson plan is the tree octopus. The lesson plan has been used in different iterations since the 1990s. The lesson plan below has been adapted from the original Connecticut University New Literacies Lab lesson<sup>292</sup> to include the concept of lateral reading from the Stanford History Education Group.<sup>10</sup> It is focused on a fictional Pacific Northwest tree octopus. The task requires young people to fill out a worksheet answering questions regarding the octopus, followed by a class discussion about the accuracy of the information. The lesson encourages using strategies like lateral reading and asks young people to consider how the lessons might be applied in other situations. Several websites and resources are given as a starting point.

### Lesson plan

Aim: students analyse and learn about checking the accuracy of the information on websites and wider skills and techniques about lateral reading and information online.

Evaluating the reliability of online information is a key part of media and information literacy. This activity asks the young people to analyse a number of spoof websites and authentic websites. It shows them the importance of lateral reading and assessing the website's content and layout to check its accuracy.

Topic: endangered animals

Level: 10-13 year olds

### Lesson outline:

1. Show the young people the image of an octopus, and ask them what they know about the species. Tell young people they will learn about one endangered and rare species of octopus – the Pacific Northwest tree octopus. Do this seriously, highlighting the website they are to use. Go through the worksheet and what questions you want answered, and get the young people to divide into pairs to perform the task.
2. The worksheet can include these questions/prompts using the website provided:
  - What is the habitat?
  - Where is it located geographically?
  - What is the average size of the octopus?
  - How do they use their tentacles?
  - What colour are they usually?
  - Discuss their reproductive cycle?
  - What are their main predators?
  - Choose one way that you can help protect the species.
3. Once the class has filled out their worksheets, facilitate a class discussion, firstly by going through the worksheet, checking their answers, and secondly opening up the discussion by asking the class whether they think the tree octopus exists?
4. Ask the class what things made it seem credible and what things may give away that it wasn't a credible website.
5. Have a broader discussion about how what we see in the real world can be more

convincing, but there are tools that we can use to help us to determine what is credible.

6. Looking at other sources outside of the website is important. This is called lateral reading. What types of sources should we look to? Offer some credible sources e.g., WWF endangered species list.
7. Discuss how the layout and style of the website is convincing? In what ways is it not? (Note that websites have changed significantly since this lesson was first produced).
8. Divide your students into pairs and get them to go to different pairs of sites, one credible and one that is fake (There are seven sets of websites that are included in the lesson). Which website is which and why? (Note that the environment has changed since this lesson was first produced and many websites that contain false information are far more convincing than the websites outlined in the lesson).

### **Beyond the octopus lesson – making connections to other media and information literacy and digital citizenship concepts**

While this lesson is an important starting point, there is potential to draw further lessons around this concept and stretch students to think about other areas some examples are outlined below:

- A lesson focused on critically engaging with content on social media, e.g., a TikTok video about aliens or celebrity conspiracies etc.
- A lesson focused on lateral reading, jumping off a website and looking at other sources is an important tool and way of understanding the accuracy of information.
- How AI and deep fakes could produce videos, photos, and documents of the tree octopus that look real, and how does this change the way we see.
- What happens when algorithms and AI put something like the tree octopus in our feed? Why is it important to critically engage with what we see on our feeds and question its reliability?

## References

10. Civic Online reasoning: Stanford History Education Group, Lateral vs vertical reading lesson plan. Retrieved 05 July 2023 from <https://cor.stanford.edu/curriculum/lessons/lateral-vs-vertical-reading/>
292. Lesley University, New literacies and education: The Tree Octopus legacy. Retrieved 21 July 2023 from <https://lesley.edu/article/educating-children-to-tell-fact-from-fiction-on-the-web>