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Cheryl Brown: Welcome to week two. At the start of this week, we're going to look at how to improve our online search strategies.

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Cheryl Brown: We're going to look at particular ways we go about searching for information online, reflect a bit on what we did last week, and what sort of strategies you need to be able to use in order to benefit the most from finding online resources.

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Cheryl Brown: When searching online, it's often as easy to find irrelevant information as it is to find the right information. Despite the vastness of information available finding something that's what you need is often quite tricky. As we discovered last week, most people across the world use Google as a search engine. This has become such common practice that often you hear someone say: “Oh, I'll just Google that.” But Google, as we now know, is only one example of a search engine and what people should more correctly say is: “I will search for that online.”

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Cheryl Brown: So, let's use a particular example. I'm going to run you through a process that I went through; searching for a very specific term: “technology in the classroom”. Remember to use the quotation marks, so that the search engine knows to look for that exact phrase. Now I'm going to show you a series of screenshots of my personal search, but why don't you try on your own, and see what’s similar or different. Maybe you could also try using another search engine? Possibly a new one that we talked about last week. Remember it's highly unlikely that the two of us are going to return the same search results. Search engines like Google,and systems and companies like Microsoft and Apple, have a way of knowing where you’re connecting to the internet from. The information that you see will be altered, depending on your physical location. Also, because many websites use cookies, your search activity is recorded, and as a result, information you get when you go to places online is customized based on your previous search history. So let’s see how we go about doing a search.

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Cheryl Brown: This is a screenshot of the first page of my search using the search engine Google. You can see that I had over 20 million results. The first options I get are scholarly articles. The article, or the website, that comes up at the top of the search is not necessarily the most relevant. The first result is often based on the number of links to or from other websites in the page. So it could be a really popular website, or it could be that the owner, or the organization, paid for the website to be featured first in a Google search.

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Cheryl Brown: The next part I see on the search page is what other people have asked. So the search engine is trying to be clever for me. It's trying to suggest other search phrases that I might want to do. Along the top of the screen of most search engines, you have opportunities to search for different types of media. If one clicks on the news tab, you're likely to get news that is the most recent news on the topic. When I did this search, you can see that I've got news from an hour ago, a day ago or even eight hours ago. When you do a search, the results are very particular both to the place that you're located, where you're accessing the internet from, the day of the week, the time of the year, if you're looking for news articles, and also the types of things that you've previously searched for.

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Cheryl Brown: In the Google search engine, when I did my search the first time, I had “All” selected, and I got mixed mediums and modes of results. But you can search very specifically for videos or images and you'll get different types of responses. You could search for books as well.

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Cheryl Brown: What can you tell from a URL? Often when we search, we concentrate more on the information of the webpage in front of us and less on the place that it's coming from. I'm sure you're quite familiar with the way a URL is structured. For example, we know that they almost always start with the Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTP). You get the website name and then the domain name. For example, a “.co” or “.com” usually means the website is a commercial one. In this case a “.org” suggests that it's an organization. And we're also familiar with “.edu” or “.ac” websites which are used to refer to different educational websites. Have a look at your Google search results. Out of the first 10 results that came up in your search, how many of the results that were returned were from commercial websites? For my search, six of my first ten results were from a commercial website, but the rest had “.edu” domain names or were from organizations. Interestingly, although these organizations offered a little bit of information, these being blogs or opinion pieces or suggestions for different practices, they also wanted to sell me services like website design software or educational programs. These may have been the websites for consultants who are giving advice about particular educational technology strategies, and although the advice they gave was freely available online, it was limited because they wanted you to engage their services. It's important to have a look and think about the domains and where is your information is coming from online and also be aware that the search results that get returned within the first screen or two are unlikely to be the best ones. They're just going to be the most popular ones or the ones that pay for advertising.

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Cheryl Brown: How do we go about improving our search strategies? Many of us search for words or phrases, just like we've done in this particular search that I did. But here is a very useful open access article that highlights different web strategies people use.

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Cheryl Brown: There are what's called Safe player strategies which is really the most common ways that people search online. Have a look at these and see whether any sound familiar to you. What did you do when you searched for your digital education leader last week and what strategy did you use? The typical one is what's called “broad first” where we use a familiar search engine. For example, in this video I used Google and Duck Duck go and typed in a search term . Another strategy is to go to a web address that you remember or are familiar with. If I was looking for “technology in the classroom”, I might go to an educational website that I know provides me with very useful results as my starting point.For example COL’s oasis repository. Sometimes people use different search engines to see how different types of search engines return different results, and I must say that since I've been using Duck Duck Go more often, I've been finding that I often get very different results to Google. So generally in searching, people go to places that they are familiar with and know have good sources of data, and often follow links from there.

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Cheryl Brown: Some of the lesser known search strategies are listed in this article as being the parallel players strategy. That’s where you have many different browser windows open and you conduct several searches at the same time using different strategies. Then there's one where you are very particular and very precise in your search terms. We were more precise in the search term that we used in this search by using the quotation marks to search for technology in the classroom. But one could be even more precise and asked for it to be returned from only sites that have an educational domain, for example, only sites from a particular region. We could have searched even more specifically, and explored for educational technology in the classroom and virtual learning for example

Different words are more dominant in different kinds of country contexts. So you could probably think about a number of other phrases you could use for technology in the classroom: “elearning in the classroom”, “classroom-based elearning”, “educational technology”, or “technology enhanced learning”, “online learning” are just some examples That's why using quite a varied search approach is often more useful than just a narrow one if you're trying to diversify your searching strategies.

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Cheryl Brown: Thank you.