

***The Why Files* as a laboratory for studying the role of the world wide web in public understanding of science**

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In a series of studies spanning some seven years, a team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison has used a science Web site, The Why Files (<http://whyfiles.org>), as a laboratory to explore a variety of questions about how individuals use the World Wide Web to learn about science. The Why Files is an award-winning site that provides the "science behind the news." This presentation will summarize some of the results of this programmatic research. The studies have included:

- Surveys of frequent users of The Why Files at two time points in order to study changes in demographics of individuals who seek science information on the WWW. These surveys suggest that the WWW is "democratizing" the audience for science at a fairly slow pace.
- Audit trail analyses at two time points in order to explore changes in the ways individuals move through the site. These analyses have determined that Why Files users move through the site in a linear mode, much as they would read a magazine article.
- Think aloud studies at two time points in order to track individual coping patterns as they negotiate the site. These studies suggest that individuals are devoting less and less time to "orienting" behaviors, a good thing for those interested in learning.
- A series of experiments to compare learning on the site with learning via traditional print and to examine the ability of the WWW to nurture particular behaviors that either encourage or detract from learning. These experiments have offered a number of insights, among them that individuals' more idiosyncratic processing of Web information produces learning that "looks" different from learning measured from print sources.