Use of Web in Tertiary Research and Education

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Abstract

The increasing level of official and academic information on Aboriginal issues on the Web enhances its utility in research and teaching. Aboriginal communities can also share Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, disseminate information to other indigenous communities and access the benefits of the knowledge society by adopting ICT. The use of search engines can save time in research and reveal trends in policy perspectives reflected by language.

Keywords

Introduction

The role of the Web, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in tertiary education and research is expanding and changing. This article is written from a user perspective, drawing from personal experience as a new associate lecturer in Aboriginal Studies and as a research higher degree student. It will consider the changing attitudes of academic staff to student use of the Web for undergraduate research and the valuable and expanding number of resources available. An example is used to illustrate how the Web can enhance learning and provide a valuable communication outlet for remote Aboriginal communities in Australia. The discussion will then focus on how the use of search engines in both undergraduate and postgraduate research can reveal shifts in language use. It is argued that these changes in language reflect a corresponding shift in political attitudes to Aboriginal policy, potentially making search engines a tool in the primary detection of such trends.

Undergraduate Research on the Web

Within the School of Aboriginal Studies at the University of Tasmania, first year undergraduate students have been discouraged from using online sources for research until quite recently (Dr L. Miller, 1/08/2006, per com). This reluctance was due to student inexperience in judging academically reliable sources among the plethora of information available on the Web. However, the most recent Unit Reader (a compilation of relevant articles and book chapters) in the first year program included

a URL for students to access as a reading exercise and research resource. Change comes slowly in some University Schools but this small step took Riawunna from discouraging first year student use of the Web to *requiring* it. Despite continuing concerns surrounding the appropriateness of the material students reference, the Web is increasingly recognised as an important resource in the field of Aboriginal Studies.

The availability of key authoritative *mainstream* information reinforces the utility of the Web in tertiary education and research. Current Indigenous Affairs policy is central to most contemporary research in Aboriginal Studies. Government departments and agencies increasingly post current legislation, regulations and policy on the Web. The Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination [OIPC] provides information on a range of Indigenous policy areas. For example, the OIPC website sets out the rationale and intention of one of the Howard Government's more recent initiatives in Aboriginal policy, Shared Responsibility Agreements [SRAs] (2006a). It also provides a search engine to access particular copies of these Community-Government contracts that are being adopted Nationwide (OIPC, 2006b). Access to academic articles is also growing on the Web with databases, e-journals and university websites adding to the information available. The Centre of Aboriginal Economic Policy Research [CAEPR] posts papers on a range of contemporary Indigenous issues (ANU, 2006).

Another form of key information on the Internet is emerging as *Aboriginal* communities and organisations establish their own websites. Neelameghan & Chester argue that indigenous communities "possess valuable knowledge . . . that can benefit societies beyond their own" (2006). However, poor socioeconomic circumstances and the language and education barriers often experienced by Aboriginal communities can limit their access to the benefits of the emerging knowledge society (Neelameghan & Chester, 2006). Despite these limitations, the adoption of ICT by some Aboriginal communities is facilitating the transformation of Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into a new medium for a broader audience. This trend represents an opportunity to address the negative coverage of the print press who all too often concentrate their attention on the social despair to be found in remote Australia.

These Aboriginal Community websites can also play a valuable role in Aboriginal Studies. One of the readings in the first year course is a chapter by Palmer on Yalata, a remote Aboriginal settlement in South Australia (1990). Yalata was home to the Pitjantjatjara people who had been relocated from Maralinga before the British conducted nuclear tests on their Country during the 1940s (1990). Palmer's paper illustrates the divergent expectations held by Aboriginal peoples and government officials of the Self Determination policy. The article describes the experience of some of the Yalata residents as they strove to establish an outstation on a section of their Country that was still habitable after the nuclear tests. The Oak Valley Outstation represented a move 'home' after years of exile. However, the reluctance on the part of government officials to sanction funding for the project repeatedly frustrated the attempts at repatriation by the community. Palmer's article (published in 1990) ended on a negative note, with little hope of the Oak Valley Outstation ever being more than a temporary camp.

Earlier this year a talented undergraduate student, while researching a tutorial presentation assignment (a talk to fellow students) on this topic found the Yalata website and by chance, noticed the link to the Oak Valley Community (2006). The existence of this website and the information it contained, provided the student with another 'chapter' in the Yalata/Oak Valley story. The Pitjantjatjara people had persisted and the public policy machine had gradually responded. Oak Valley is now an established community with the infrastructure required to make it a permanent

settlement. The website describes services established in the community and partnerships with government departments to provide Land Management functions through Landcare (OVC, 2006). The story had changed from one about the failure of the Self Determination policy to community triumph in their persistence and commitment to the Outstation. As Neelameghan and Chester contend, Indigenous peoples hold knowledges and wisdom that have great value for the broader society (2006). However, the real test of ICTs is in their capacity to bring the benefits of the knowledge society to Aboriginal peoples: in their improved access to information and services; in enhancing opportunities for economic and social development, and in sharing the experience of their success with other Indigenous communities struggling with similar issues. The existence of the Oak Valley website greatly enhanced the student's learning experience and understanding of Self Determination, and importantly, enabled Indigenous voices to be heard.

Search Trends and Language Shift

Another feature of the Web that enhances learning and research is the use of search engines. A search on the Web can be very effective in providing a context for an unknown quote or theory in a timely manner. One of the essay questions in the 2006 first year program included a quote from Warren Mundine, in which he referred to the Noble Savage 'myth' (Pybus, 2006; Mundine, 2006). A discussion of the question with a student revealed they had no knowledge of the Noble Savage theory and that they thought 'it was something Mundine had just come up with' (A. Hockey, 5/10/2006, per com). The question was not about the Noble Savage theory however, a basic understanding of its meaning and context was necessary to understand the question. Therefore, a Web search was suggested as a time efficient way to source that information and context, without being sidetracked from the main topic of the essay.

The use of search engines can save precious time in research. However, their capacity to reveal trends in the use of language also make them useful in identifying areas that may warrant analysis. While conducting research in 2004 on the air pollution issue in Launceston, Tasmania, a Web search for information proved virtually fruitless using the search criteria 'air pollution' or 'air pollution Launceston'. A fellow student suggested 'air quality' and miraculously, a plethora of 'hits' materialised! It seemed that no one (particularly government agencies) had air *pollution* but everyone had air *quality*! This could simply be attributed to 'spin' but it should not be dismissed as irrelevant. Stone (2000) argues that the strategic shaping of language can reveal underlying assumptions and hidden agendas in public policy. Web searches can reveal broad trends in language use that (through analysis) can reveal policy directions and attitudinal changes.

A current Google 'Alert' (employed through my research) scans for new sites that match the search criteria and then emails me a list of 'hits' daily. The search criteria are 'Aboriginal economic community development' and the results reveal a subtle shift in language in Aboriginal affairs. Approximately three quarters of the sites the search returns are Canadian. This reflects a language trend in indigenous policy in both countries. Canada is tending towards the use of 'Aboriginal', while Australia is moving away from its use in favour of 'indigenous'. This will come as no surprise to people working in the field or the Australian Aboriginal population generally. Government policies, agencies and services reflect this trend in both their titles and language. The Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme [ATAS] has become the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme [ITAS] and Aboriginal Affairs had become Indigenous Affairs (DEST, 2006; FaCSIA, 2006).

So, how important is this language shift and what does it indicate? 'Aboriginal' (capital

A) has long been synonymous with Australia's first peoples. The use of the term when referring to Canada's original inhabitants may reflect a desire to move away from the policies of the past. The term 'aboriginal' simply means "original inhabitant" (Encarta, 2006). However, Encarta now defines 'Aboriginal' as "a member of any of the indigenous peoples that inhabited Australia [or Canada] before the arrival of European settlers" (2006). In the Canadian context, the term does not have the same historical links that the terms 'Native Americans' or 'Indians' evoke. Australia's first people were not only 'A/aboriginal'; they were '*the A/aborigines*'. And importantly, Aboriginal and Aborigines are terms most first Australians identify with. 'Indigenous', on the other hand, means "originating in and typical of a region or country" (Encarta, 2006) and can be applied to *any* first nation's peoples worldwide. What does this shift in language represent in Australia?

The change in language from the specific (Aboriginal) to the generic (Indigenous) may be reflective of a broad policy shift initiated by the current conservative government in Australia. This ideological shift moved from 'special' treatment designed to redress the long-term disadvantage of socially and politically marginalised groups to 'mainstreaming' services on the basis of equal provision, thereby transferring the responsibility for unequal receipt onto the user. Thus, there is a move away from 'Aboriginal' implying ownership, belonging and responsibility for past wrongs to 'Indigenous' one of many first peoples worldwide. Indeed, it has been argued that the ability of mainstream agencies to adequately service Aboriginal people has been demonstrated by their servicing of Migrants. Again, this implies a conceptual shift from the specific and special (deserving special treatment) to the generic and 'one of many' (deserving *equal* treatment). The trend revealed by this daily Web search reflects a political shift - one that sits uncomfortably with many thinking Australians. The strategic shaping of language has been employed to alter perceptions of the appropriateness of Mainstreaming services. The land of the 'fair go' is becoming an increasingly stratified society and it appears that *first* Australians will once again be *last* in line.

Conclusion

The use of the Web in tertiary education and research in Aboriginal Studies is gaining acceptance, even for first year undergraduate students. As reliable information on the Web changes and increases, the possibilities for research and education change and grow as well. ICT creates valuable opportunities for remote Aboriginal communities to access and share knowledge. It also provides a strategy to overcome some of the problems created by distance. Search engines are time saving research tools that not only locate information but can also reflect broad trends in language use. These language trends can indicate changes in attitudes and values underlying public policy and ultimately perhaps, society as a whole.

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Bibliographic information of this paper for citing:

Aitken, Wendy (2007).   "Use of Web in Tertiary Research and Education." *Webology*, **4**(2), Article 42. Available at: http://www.webology.org/2007/v4n2 /a42.html

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