C-SAP Project 2001-2
Findings: University of Wales, Lampeter

Reference
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Project Title
Computer & Day Workshop for Student-run Library

Key Words

Student-run workshop, student networking; web-publishing

Key Findings

Two major conclusions emerged from our workshop on "Anthropology and the Internet". Firstly that although many students had been aware of the capacity for online research for their coursework, most had not been aware of dedicated anthropology websites, or search engines (such as sosig.ac.uk) where they could find organized archives of material and links. The second major finding of the workshop was that most students hadn't really considered that ethnography could exist in a sophisticated form on the internet. Students seemed to feel that ethnography was mainly written and occasionally visual. To be shown some ethnographies on the internet, and to have an explanation of the fundamental principles and practices of how these virtual ethnographies are constructed, was for many students a revolutionary experience and one that offered exciting possibilities. The desire of students to become acquainted with the possibilities for putting ethnographic writing onto the internet was most noticeable during the practical workshop where, with informed supervision, every one made a simple virtual ethnography in the space of just three hours. It was an exciting first encounter for most of them to create a webpage, and moreover one with ethnographic possibilities.

The major finding from the part of our C-SAP funded project that concerned improving our student library, was that by focusing our efforts upon a central organizational part of the library (installing a computer lending system and cataloging system) there could be triggered a whole causal chain of improvements. By being better organized, the library attracted more volunteers to help, which led to further improvements in the library, which improved morale and attracted more and more student participation in the library. This has led to, not only, better individual learning, but also better networking between students. As I discuss later, there has been even a small study group of students meeting from time to time in the library, something that never previously happened.

Summary

The nature of this project was determined by our desire to enrich the experiences of anthropology students in Lampeter, and more broadly Wales, in a variety of ways: to encourage student networking, to inform and educate our group about anthropological possibilities on the internet, and finally to improve the Lampeter anthropology library run by students since 1999. These goals informed the planning process that we undertook to design a series of actions and events that compose our C-SAP funded project. To facilitate student networking we founded a student body that could potentially unite all the students of anthropology in Wales. It is called the Network of Welsh Anthropology Students (NWAS) and it was first announced to students at the University of Wales' annual anthropology and sociology conference in March 2002. The sixteen students that signed an initial mailing list were the first members of NWAS. The organization now boasts a website, made possible with C-SAP funding, and it also hosted an intensive day long event open to all interested students that took place in Lampeter on the 25th October 2002. Although the event was intended to bring students of anthropology, in Welsh institutions, together so that they can share and enjoy friendship and ideas, it also did more. With C-SAP funding NWAS was able to provide a range of engaging workshop sessions, themed around "anthropology and the internet" which equipped students with important skills, and inspired students for their own study.

Activities

We used our C-SAP project grant for three main areas of activity. Accordingly I shall discuss our project activities in three sections. The first of these concerns the improvements we made to the student library in the anthropology department. The second project activity was a NWAS workshop hosted in Lampeter on the 25th October. Finally we used our C-SAP grant to enable us to put a website for the NWAS online.

Library Improvements

In wanting to improve our student run department library we focused first upon the need for a computer. This would enable a database lending system, cataloguing our numerous materials, and recording student borrowing in an efficient simple manner. We used our C-SAP project grant to buy a computer, and a lending and cataloguing system was tailor made for it. Ten library volunteer staff have been trained to use the system, and we have been able to effectively manage student borrowing, as well as cataloging an ever increasing amount of our resources. The old messy paper based library records, which had been highly ineffective in logging and tracking resources, has been replaced by a far more organized system. As well as these material advantages of installing the computer in the library, there has been a noticeable improvement in the spirit of the student involvement in the library. The sense of making a big improvement has been the inspiration for a general motivation to make other improvements. It has been satisfying to see the volunteers who work in the library make the effort to organize the library's entire collection of books and journals. The library, now operating as an organized environment, has become a more inviting place for our anthropology students in Lampeter. There has been a marked increase in volunteers who wish to work in the library, and the library is now open twice a day when it used only to be open for one session. The volunteers have been forthcoming with suggestions of improvements for the library. As such the library goes from strength to strength. Having wanted to make the library an inviting place for students to network in, it was extremely gratifying to see a group of first year students form a study group and use the department library on Wednesday mornings as its venue.

NWAS Workshop Day - Friday 25th October 2002

Around fifteen students attended this workshop day which was designed to inform our constituent group of anthropology students in Wales, of the various features, and possibilities for them, of the relationship between anthropology and the internet. As such we considered the potential for ethnographic presentation and research on the world wide web. Furthermore we set out to actively empower students to grasp the potential of the internet for their own use. In this spirit we hosted a practical training workshop where, under expert supervision, students were given a computer each to do complete a virtual ethnographic exercise. In the following section I discuss the three major areas of the workshop day, pertaining to "anthropology and the internet", as well as the other features of the day.

9:50 am *Anthropology on the World Wide Web*

In this presentation students were given a guided tour of some of the best online resources for anthropological research on the internet. An aim of the talk was to show that although the internet appears as a vast, disorganized collection of information of varying quality, it does actually contain good resources, and that all it takes to find it is some knowledge of the right places to look. We looked at gateway sites (such as Sosig and the Anthropological Review Database) which categorize and even review websites.

At the start of the talk students were provided with a directory of some high quality anthropological websites which it was hoped would inform their later research. The talk also presented an analytical look at anthropology on the web. Following Sarah Pink, It was discussed whether hypermedia could offer a better learning process than print research. She suggests that many academics and students are more concerned with "gutting" a book of its information, rather than reading it in a linear fashion, and that the possibilities of hypermedia for such random access are great (if not always used). Also, in the talk, it was mentioned that the internet offers students great potential for publishing their work to a potentially large audience, in a way that they couldn't in any other media for such a low cost.

10:35 am *Survival*

This time-slot was dedicated to giving anthropology students an opportunity to share, with other students, an opportunity to present any projects that they are involved in. One student was a local representative of the charity Survival which is interested in the welfare of tribal groups around the world. She took the opportunity to introduce her concern to the students present. Her lively presentation discussed the current plight of the Kalahari Bushmen who are loosing their traditional homes because of the interests of diamond miners.

11:00 am *Employability Unit*

We were lucky to have with us the head of Lampeter's Employability Unit. He presented to the students a thorough discussion of what students could expect to do in the future with their anthropology degrees. He showed data collected about what jobs anthropology graduates had gone on to do after their degrees in both the short term and the long term. Furthermore he provided us with advice about how to approach our futures, and outlined the support available from the Employability Unit. His message to the students present highlighted the requirements of contemporary employers, and how students might work towards meeting such needs and improve their job chances.

11:45 – 1:00 *Virtual Ethnographies: Principles and Practices*

In this talk, Dr Trias i Valls presented the student group with a set of analytical tools which they could use to understand virtual ethnographies, and potentially to use in constructing one themselves. By looking at websites good and bad there was a critical appraisal of elements of style and content presentation. We were shown how some virtual ethnographies have succeeded in utilizing the different elements of the multi-media capabilities of the internet. Furthermore it was shown how important it was to create a user-friendly and simple interface for the web viewer to negotiate. This was explored in some depth, with students finding out about a whole range of subtle observations of what parts of a website design were effective, and what ineffective. For example: the differences in effect of using different colours as backdrops, and how having to scroll down a long page is less appealing than using a fixed screen, with a box to scroll information within. It was shown how some webpages were less successful because they appeared simply to reproduced an A4 page of text onto the screen. In other words we learned that the web offers great potential for virtual ethnography, but that it is a visual medium that, if it is to be very effective, can't simply replicate the printed page, but appeal to aesthetic sensibilities. Students at the workshop knew that the information in the talk would not merely have academic value for them, in providing them with a set of analytical tools to critically appraise websites, for more than this the information would have practical value for them. This was because there were to get a chance to make their own virtual ethnography in the next section of the NWAS Workshop.

1:00 – 2:00 *Lunch*

The talks and hands-on workshop provided the NWAS event with an empowering and educational aspect. However there was more to the day than just that. Students were provided with a free lunch, and refreshment breaks in which they got to network with each other. First year students still unfamiliar with each other, and students of other years were able to mingle with students who had traveled from Swansea University to attend the day. In other words the lunch and refreshment breaks created an arena for student networking. Indeed after the hands-on workshop which concluded the day, all most all the students decided to carry on conversing and networking in a local pub.

2:00 – 5:00 *Hands-On Workshop*

This practical part of the workshop was enthusiastically received by students. This isn't surprising when we consider that each student was given access to a computer, and given an exercise to complete with their own creative sense. The hands-on workshop took place in a fully equipped IT suite and began with Dr Trias i Valls outlining to the students some practical issues of design and content for creating anthropology on the internet. Following this there was a practical tutorial where each student learned the basic tools of HTML web page authoring and, even if doing this for the very first time, succeeded in creating their own pages. It was interesting to look around the room and see how each student had expressed themselves differently with their efforts, but all showing engagement. After this we progressed onto making small virtual ethnographies. Each student was equipped with a disk containing a set of ethnographic materials. This consisted of an ethnographic text, some accompanying pictures and a short movie clip. These, we came to realize, were the building blocks of creating a simple virtual ethnography. Each student set about presenting the same information in very different ways, and yet what united all the students was the fact that they had learned to make a simple virtual ethnography - and everyone did. After the event there was much comment about how enjoyable and educational the event was, which was very pleasing indeed.

Resources

The NWAS website was created to function as the organizations information hub. Through it interested people can find out about events and get in touch with other members. The website reflects the principles and practices of design that were covered during our NWAS workshop day. As such its elegant interface presents the viewer with a menu of areas to browse, or seek information.

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