

WEB-BASED RESEARCH PROJECTS IN ANTHROPOLOGY: NOTES FROM THE VIRTUAL FIELD

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During the 1998 fall term at the University of Washington, I was involved in the development of Web-based research projects for our department's Introduction to Anthropology course. These projects were the result of a cooperative venture by the instructor and the teaching assistants. ¹Our goal was to incorporate the growing popularity and usability of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) as a technology and forum for communication into the four-field introductory course. But, as with others from academics to business, we were faced with the challenge of inventing and thinking through ways to utilize this powerful new medium. What follows is a report on our approach for instructors who may want to take advantage of Web-based research yet are new to its use as a teaching tool.

Setting Up Web-Based Research Projects

There are a number of things to think about when setting up a Web-based research project. The kind of research project suggested here does not require extensive computer knowledge on the part of the instructor nor the students. In these writing projects, the Web can be envisioned as analogous to a massive library. One lecture should be devoted to a demonstration and explanation of Internet Web searches. We invited a guest lecturer from our university's communications and computer division who was able to introduce students to the Internet and answer questions about access to the Web. An instructor who is well versed in doing Internet searches could do the demonstration without depending on outsiders who know the technology but who are not as familiar with the discipline. The amount of time that can be spent introducing students to the Web will depend on the students and level of the class, but it is likely that most students will have had some previous experience with the Internet. It is a vital conduit of information that students should become familiar with at the college or university level if they have not done so before. A good demonstration of Web searches should be of value to all but the most savvy Web surfers in your class. Even those familiar with the WWW can learn more advanced methods for conducting searches.

Using the Web as a kind of vast library is a useful analogy. First, it is useful in explaining to students about the research project since they may be more comfortable with a library-based research project than with something as "high tech" as a Web-based research project. This may be more true of older students or faculty than with today's undergraduates, who have no memory of a time when personal computers were not a common academic tool.

¹James Green was the instructor in charge of the course, with teaching assistants Eric C. Thompson (lead), Ke Fan, Thomas Murphy, Judith Pine, Mary Shenk, and Clark Speed. The author is very grateful for their help and enthusiasm developing the assignments used in the course.

The Web-as-library also helps to orient those who might think: it is an undue burden to "force" students to use the WWW. It is not any more of a burden than "forcing" them to use the library as long as there are a sufficient number of computers on campus and students have free access to the Internet.

However, the Web is not really a library and Web pages are not books, journals, or magazines. The difference should be taken carefully into consideration when setting up any Web-based research project. Perhaps the most important difference is the disappearance of layers of editing, peer review, selection, and censorship traditionally involved in the production of articles or books. The wonder of the WWW is that it provides an amazingly broad forum for divergent views, opinions, and information. But it also demands an even sharper degree of critical thinking on the part of the reader to separate opinion from fact and understand the agenda and background of the author. The research projects we designed for the course encourage students to focus on both the subject matter on Web pages and on the quality of information on the Web.²

Although we use this approach in a large 350-student class in introductory four-field anthropology, it is appropriate for both small and large classes and in any anthropology course at the introductory level, i.e., cultural anthropology, world cultures, archaeology, or physical anthropology.

The following section provides examples of the Web-based writing projects that we developed, the objectives of the assignments, and the results. Instructions for the writing projects are in the same form as were given to students and can be found at the end of the narrative of this article. They can be photocopied for student use. In addition, students are given an outline of the criteria for the project and a list of possible websites for the first assignment. These will be discussed in a subsequent section.

Examples of Web-Based Research Projects

As taught at the University of Washington, the introductory course emphasizes biocultural and sociocultural anthropology. In the first part of the course, issues in biocultural anthropology including evolution, human biological variation, and critical subjects such as "race" and gender are discussed. Race and gender issues are used as a bridge to sociocultural anthropology, focusing on the nature of culture, kinship systems, and religion. The two examples of Web-based research projects used here were developed in the context of this particular course. While instructors will want to develop Web-based projects tailored to their own courses and course content, there are some general principles that should be considered in developing any Web-based research project.

² The term "Web page" is used to indicate one particular page or file that can be assessed through the WWW. A Web page has one specific URL address. A "website" refers to a group of interrelated Web pages (e.g. the University of Washington's website). The two terms are often used interchangeably and can cause confusion. For example, following this nomenclature, a "personal Web page" would actually be a "personal website." But the former term is more commonly used.

The First Project/Writing Assignment. In each project, students will produce a five to seven page paper based on their critique and analysis of a particular type of Web site. The first project addresses a major theme of the first half of the course, evolution. Both readings and class materials introduce students to the theory of evolution, the specific history of human evolution, and the issue of cultural resistance to evolutionary theory by particular groups in the U.S. The first writing project requires students to compare and contrast Web pages that discuss the theory of evolution. (See the handout that follows on p. 11 for instructions to students.)

The purpose of this assignment is to prompt students to think: critically about the information and views available on the WWW. The prototype paper that we envision in writing this assignment would be a comparison of a website written from an evolutionary perspective with one that argues against evolutionary theory such as from a creation science perspective. Although we do not want to overly constrain the parameters of the project, we do want to encourage students to explore the vast diversity of opinions available on the Web. To facilitate this goal, students are provided with an extensive list of possible websites to critique (see handout for possible websites and criteria for evaluation). They are also encouraged to search beyond this list. Since websites unfortunately go out of date, they should be checked out before students are given the handout.

To bring in concepts from the course to the critique, we emphasize the use of evolutionary theory as a basis for contemporary biocultural anthropology and also make a distinction between scientific "truth" and religious or creedal "truth." Most importantly, the assignment emphasizes the necessity of evaluating information such as is found on the Web where the source of the ideas is not necessarily apparent and where a wide variety of opinions appear with little basis for orienting the reader to the agendas behind them.

Evaluating the first paper. In general, the research paper evaluators concluded that the assignment was quite successful. It turned out to be very easy to clearly differentiate good papers from mediocre ones. Students did display a critical stance in their evaluations of the sites, and some students related that the assignment changed their understanding and approach to information on the WWW. The evaluators also concluded that students may have been given too broad a leeway in choosing websites. Specifically, some papers were submitted that critiqued alternative creationist websites. There was some feeling that this may have served to unduly undermine the evolutionary approach to understanding human variation presented in class. In addition, some students tended to find the arguments of creation science particularly seductive and displayed a poor understanding of the hypothesis testing model of scientific method and theory. Finally, some students did not refer to the often simple counter-arguments to creationist objections of evolutionary theory.

The Second Project/Writing Assignment. In the sociocultural segment of the course, students were given more direction in developing a particular kind of argument about presentations of self on the WWW. They were asked to answer more specific questions about the websites they were to write about. The questions directed the students to use terminology and concepts introduced in class, such as reading "subtexts" within "texts." The assignment also leaned on Benedict Anderson's seminal theory of "imagined communities" that had been introduced in class. (See the handout that follows on p.12 for instructions to students.)

One aspect of this project is that it verges on virtual ethnography. The students are encouraged to treat the information provided on personal home pages somewhat as they would use information from ethnographic interviews in analyzing the discourse of personal home pages. Of course, just as the Web is not a library, neither is it a traditional field site. It would be useful to discuss the differences between Web browsing and participant observation or ethnographic interviewing in class.

Conclusions: Issues in Web-Based Research

This project only touches on one approach to Web research. There are many other kinds of Web pages and websites that could be incorporated into Web-based research projects. And the possibilities for using the WWW and Internet expand even further if email, news groups, or chat rooms are considered that allow direct communication between two or more parties. Instructors should attempt to use these technologies as well as the Web in ways that would enhance student learning and expand the bounds of anthropological research.

One issue that may arise regarding the use of Web pages in student research is in regard to copyright. Internet copyright law is still in its infancy. A general rule of thumb is that Internet Web pages should be treated as copyrighted materials in a library. Students should be encouraged to use appropriate citations for Web pages that they use in their research or papers. A simple citation guide that includes citation styles for books, articles, and Web pages can be generated and distributed in class. As part of the assignment, students are also instructed to include a printout of the main page of the websites they critiqued. This is helpful for evaluating student work. Printouts should be covered under fair use copyright law.³

A related issue may arise with respect to accessing and critiquing personal home pages. There is an ethical question involved in accessing and critiquing home pages without the knowledge of the author. On the one hand, Web pages are public documents. From this point of view, students and the general public should be free to read and critique them as they would books or articles without the consent or knowledge of the author. It is not generally considered necessary to get the consent of authors of newspaper articles or autobiographies, for example, in order to read and comment on them. However, the WWW is an emerging technology and some authors of Web pages, particularly personal home pages, may not be aware of the implications of Web publishing, that Web publishing involves the creation of public document that anyone with a computer and modem can access. And they may well put information on the Web that they might withhold if they expected their sites to be widely accessed by people whom they do not know. Here again, the analogies of Web-based research to library research or ethnographic interviewing is pertinent.

³ This is the lay opinion of the author and should not be taken as legal advice.

In the opinion of the author, Web pages should be treated as public documents and it should not be incumbent upon researchers to receive permission to use these documents in their research. If such a standard were to be established, it would be unduly burdensome to researchers and possibly infringe on standards of academic freedom (the equivalent of requiring the researcher to get permission from authors to review their writings in a public library). Rather, it should be the responsibility of individuals publishing on the Web to edit their own writings and exclude information that they do not want made public. At the same time, however, the ethical standards of the American Anthropological Association should be taken into account when conducting Web-based research.

As with business, government, entertainment, and communication, anthropology on the Web will be a growing area in the coming decades. The standards and methods for such research will change with the rapidly expanding use of Internet technology. The ideas outlined here are just a start toward thinking about creative and productive uses of the Internet in teaching anthropology. It is hoped that it will encourage teachers to involve their students in the development and critical thinking about this expanding field of cultural interaction.

Reference Cited

Anderson, Benedict

1991 Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism
(Revised edition.) London and New York: Verso.

FIRST WRITING PROJECT

The theory of evolution, while generally accepted at present in the scientific community, is still widely debated and not accepted by many people. The most recent and fastest growing forum for expressing opinions on this subject is the Internet. For your first writing project, write a paper comparing, contrasting, and evaluating at least two Internet websites that address the subject of evolution. The sites you choose to critique should express distinct, and in at least some ways, conflicting viewpoints on the subject of evolution. In the paper, use concepts from lectures and text materials to evaluate the website materials. The paper should include a description of the content of the sites, an appraisal of the viewpoint of the creators of the sites, a use of concepts from the course materials (class materials and readings) in evaluating the websites, and your opinion about the validity of the information presented in the sites you choose to critique.

Possible sites to critique include: science, Christian creationism, Islam, Mormonism, pedagogy, homosexuality, and pharmacology. You are encouraged to search the WWW beyond this list:

<http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/histOly/evolution.html>

<http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaverall/Hanger/2437>

<http://onramp.ior.com/~kjc/creation.html>

<http://emporium.turnpike.net/C/csiindex.htm>

<http://library.advanced.org/19012>

<http://www.daveyd.com/Boards/IPolitics/Posts/951.html>

<http://www.su.ic.uk/Clubsocs/scclislamic/articles/evolution.htm>

<http://www.usd.edu/anth/cultarch/culttopics.html>

<http://home.onestop.net/mhhl/INDEX.H1M>

<http://www.druglibrary.org/schaffer/lsdlunivch6.htm>

<http://www.frii.com/~allsop/eyring-1/fag/evolution>

http://users.cybercity.dk/~dko12530/g_studies.html

SECOND WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Cultural anthropologists study many kinds of communities using concepts such as kinship (family), ethnicity, religion, gender, and language. Cultural anthropologists also study identity, or how people understand and express themselves as members of various communities. In the second half of the course, you will read about various aspects of community in your text and see representations of communities in various films. Traditionally, anthropologists have conducted participant-observation looking at what people do, listening to what they say, and reading what they write to understand how people come to think of themselves as members of particular communities and what those communities mean to them.

As discovered in the first writing assignment, the Internet is fast becoming a major forum for people and institutions to express themselves. For the second writing assignment, you will be critiquing two or more personal home pages. Like film, Web pages are texts that include subtexts, defined as implicit messages within a particular text. When analyzing the Web pages, look for the subtexts within the pages that help you answer the following questions; write an essay organized around a central argument.

- (1) How do people express their membership in and connection to particular communities through their Web pages?
- (2) Are certain communities emphasized more than other kinds of communities in personal home pages? (Readings and class materials will identify types of communities traditionally studied by anthropologists.)
- (3) How do the communities with which people align themselves through their Web pages compare to those traditionally studied by anthropologists (such as kinship groups or religious communities)?
- (4) Reflect on how you would construct a personal home page.
 - a. What would you choose to include or exclude?
 - b. Why would you make these choices?
 - c. Has your view of personal home pages changed in light of your research for this paper?

If you already have a home page, you may choose to critique it with these questions in mind. But you should not use your own page as one of the two or more home pages you initially critiqued.