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ABSTRACT

There are over 600 sites on the World Wide Web with substantial Australian Indigenous content. This guide provides strategies for determining which Indigenous sites may be useful in an educational context. Section 1 deals with finding Indigenous content on the World Wide Web. The three main types of search engines are keyword, directory, and meta-search. The differences are explained, and examples are given for each type. Subject lists are descriptions of sites that are compiled by real people. Four examples of subject-specific lists with an Indigenous or educational focus are presented. Search strategies can be refined by making the search as specific as possible, using the advanced search on search engines, using multiple search engines and comparing results, bookmarking good sites, and asking colleagues what online resources they have used. Section 2 concerns site evaluation and discusses who published the site; the importance of including Indigenous authors; author credentials; whom the site is targeting; and determining whether the information being published is accurate, relevant, biased, secret, sacred, current, or easy to use. Section 3 discusses sources of information besides the Internet: libraries; local Indigenous community organizations; Indigenous centers in universities; museums; national bodies; local, state, or federal government bodies with responsibility for Indigenous issues; and most importantly, local Indigenous communities. Involving Indigenous peoples in face-to-face teaching provides a real context for students to understand the information. (TD)

Murra:
Guidelines for the Evaluation of Indigenous Content on the WWW

Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, Inc.

June 2000

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Increasing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in EdNA

A paper prepared for the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) by the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) as a component of the Murra project under the EdNA initiative.

June 2000

INTRODUCTION

"Every competent and sensitive teacher can teach Indigenous Studies effectively by using the best available resources to design relevant activities and meaningful outcomes according to the needs of students and experiences of Indigenous communities."

Craven, R. & Wilson-Miller, J. (1999) Teaching Aboriginal Studies, (p. 230) St Leonards: Allen & Unwin

So, you are planning a three week project to introduce your year five class to some aspects of Australian Indigenous languages. Or maybe you're thinking of spending a term with your year eleven Physical Education class examining the achievement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sportspeople. You may even be seeking to include non-Western perspectives on science into your second year undergraduate Environmental Management course.

Sure, there will be a range of resources including textbooks, journal articles and media clippings which will support your development of these teaching programs, but what about the internet?

There is, without a doubt, a great deal of Indigenous information available on the world wide web. At the time this document was published, we had identified over six hundred sites with substantial Australian Indigenous content. In an educational context, a large number of these sites would be highly valuable resources in developing your teaching program. Unfortunately, a large number also would not.

The real trick is telling the difference.

That's where this document comes in. Through these guidelines, we seek to provide you- and through you, your students - with the critical evaluation skills and strategies for determining which Indigenous sites may be of more use to you.

The guidelines cover three main areas.

Section One deals briefly with strategies for finding Indigenous content on the world wide web.

Section Two runs through five main questions to ask in evaluating the credibility and validity of Indigenous websites. It finishes with a few hints on the use of the guidelines.

Section Three suggests a range of other resources (i.e., those NOT on the world wide web) which should be accessed in conjunction with materials found on the internet.

It should be noted that these guidelines are meant to be neither exhaustive nor the sole authority on this issue. They are simply a set of guidelines. The rest is up to you - as teachers, trainers, lecturers, tutors and educators - to include these strategies to best effect in your classrooms. By doing so, we believe that you and your students will better be able to meet the challenges of utilising Indigenous materials online.

SECTION ONE: FINDING INDIGENOUS SITES

"The coming together of Information Technology and Education offers enormous potential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We must ensure that we are prepared for the information revolution, and for the benefits it can provide for our peoples' education and culture generally."

Professor Colin Bourke, in keynote presentation to 'Learning IT Together' conference, Brisbane, April 1999.

ONE.1 GENERALLY

The internet is growing at a startling pace, with literally hundreds of millions of sites already in existence. When selecting Indigenous resources for use in your teaching programs, the last thing you want to do is sift through large numbers of sites. To avoid this, you can use web search engines to do all the hard work for you and identify a 'shortlist' of possible candidates for use in your teaching program.

This section runs through the different types of search engines and offers some advice on how to make the most of them.

ONE.2 SEARCH ENGINES

Search engines come in three main types: keyword- directory- and meta-search engines. Each of these maintain large databases of information relating to internet sites. When you conduct a search through a search engine, you are searching this database, not the internet itself.

Because of differences in how search engines gather their information, where they look for it and what they decide to keep, the contents and size of their databases will vary. Because of this, the same search conducted on a range of search engines will return varying results.

Keyword search engines utilise "robots" (programs) to search the internet and bring back information about sites for their databases. This is a very efficient way of collecting site data and means that their databases are enormous. However, this very fact means that your search will probably return a very large number of matches. Using very specific search criteria is important with keyword search engines.

Examples of keyword search engines are:

http://www.goeureka.com.au/

http://www.lycos.com/

http://www.webwombat.com.au/

http://www.google.com/

Directory search engines arrange their database of sites into hierarchical menus based on some categorising scheme. Some are separated by topic and subtopic, while others may use an alphabetic structure. Unlike keyword search engines, the sites in the directory search engine's database are sorted by real humans into their categories and subcategories. This requires a substantial amount of maintenance and some screening of content. As a result of this, a directory search engine's database is smaller than that of a keyword search engine. While you can conduct a keyword search on a directory search engine, they are most useful for browsing through a specific subject to determine the range of sites available.

Examples of directory search engines are:

http://www.yahoo.com.au/

http://www.excite.com.au/

http://www.looksmart.com.au/

Meta-search engines are really just interfaces that search through the contents of a number of different search engines at once. These may be keyword or directory search engines. While a meta-search will take a little longer to perform, it does save you having to search a number of engines individually and compare their results.

Examples of meta-search engines are:

http://www.savvysearch.com/

http://www.webcrawler.com/

http://www.webinfosearch.com/

Apple Computer's Sherlock utility is another example of a meta-search engine.

ONE.3 SUBJECT-SPECIFIC LISTS

In addition to the range of search engines available, you may also consider looking for your Indigenous resources on a subject specific list. These are basically lists of sites that relate to a particular topic. The lists are compiled by real people, and this is reflected in the differences in size and scope of subject specific lists.

Some lists maintain descriptions of the sites. Others offer access to the sites through categories and subcategories. The larger and more complex lists have their own search engine interfaces. One of the best things about lists is that you do not have to search through millions of sites to find your results.

Examples of subject-specific lists with an Indigenous or educational focus are:

http://www.edna.gov.au/

http://www.ion.unisa.edu.au/

http://www.koori.usyd.edu.au/register.html

http://www.natsiew.nexus.edu.au/

ONE.4 SEARCH STRATEGIES

As you gain more and more experience in using search engines, you will begin to understand that the results you produce depend on the strategy you use in searching. To help you develop a better search strategy, here are some hints:

· make sure that your search criteria accurately reflects the topic you are searching for;

· try to make your search as specific as possible;

· learn to use the advanced search available on most search engines;

· use more than one search engine for your search and compare results;

· when you find a good site, bookmark it - you may even like to start your own subject specific resource list;

· ask colleagues what online resources they have used in similar situations; and

· it doesn't hurt to search outside the internet for resources which may be useful in your teaching program.

SECTION TWO: EVALUATING INDIGENOUS SITES

"That ATSIC, DCA and DEETYA recognise the opportunities provided by new media to further Indigenous cultural and economic goals, and pursue policies, which will enable Indigenous communities to participate fully in economic development opportunities offered by the new media and on-line services."

Recommendation in Digital Dreaming: A National Review of Indigenous Media and Communications, ATSIC, 1999, p 94.

TWO.1 GENERALLY

Once you have searched the world wide web and identified a list of sites which match your search criteria, you will then need to work out which of the sites you will use and which you will not.

Even with a very precise search, you will always need to check over the sites you have found to make sure they are the sort of thing you are after. Some of the sites returned from your search may not actually contain the information you searched for. Some may be too advanced for your students' needs, or not detailed enough. The information on the site may be presented in such a way that makes it difficult to utilise. Or you may find that some of the sites returned by your search are too biased to be of use to you.

These are just some of the issues that will influence whether or not you use a certain Indigenous site in your teaching program.

As with any other teaching resources you use, it is vital that the information used in classrooms is:

· reliable;

· unbiased; and

· up to date.

With Indigenous resources, it is also important, where possible, to use sites which:

· have involved Indigenous peoples in their development;

· avoid racist and stereotyped representations of Indigenous peoples in favour of acknowledging the diversity of Australian Indigenous peoples; and

· show consideration of the cultural sensitivities required in dealing with some Indigenous issues.

The guidelines in this section lead you through a series of five main questions, which will allow you to critically analyse the content of your Indigenous online resources and determine which ones are most appropriate to your needs. These five questions are:

Who has published the site?

Who is the site targeting?

What information is being published?

When was the site published?

Is the site useable?

The more explicit this information is, the easier it will be for you to find it, and then make informed decisions on selecting appropriate online resources for your teaching programs.

TWO.2 WHO HAS PUBLISHED THE SITE?

Knowing who has published a site can provide valuable information about the reliability of the site's content. Generally, the more reputable the author is, the more reliable the information should be. Some important questions to ask in determining authorship are:

Is the author listed?

Is contact information included?

Preference should be give to sites that list an author (or authors) - in the form of an individual, group or organisation - who accepts responsibility for the content of the site. Including the author's contact information adds a degree of credibility to the site by making it easier for you to seek additional information if required. If no author or contact information is listed, you cannot check the validity of the information.

Is the author Indigenous?

Has there been Indigenous involvement or consultation in developing the site?

Is the site endorsed or supported by an Indigenous organisation or other authority?

Does the author have credentials in the area - experience, training, knowledge?

It makes sense that the best source of information about Indigenous peoples is Indigenous peoples. Sites that have Indigenous authorship, or cite Indigenous involvement or consultation in developing the content, should be utilised where possible. This does not rule out sites with non-Indigenous authors. Nor does it mean that sites with Indigenous authors are automatically more reliable. However, as a rule of thumb, you should try to include at least one site which meets this criteria in the range of sites you finally use. This way you can ensure that some Indigenous perspective is included in your teaching program.

Even if a site is not written by, or in conjunction with Indigenous peoples, it may be endorsed by an Indigenous organisation or body. This will generally mean that the Indigenous content of the site has been checked and approved through some appropriate consultative process. As the wider community increasingly understands that the responsibility for Indigenous information should rest with Indigenous peoples, this practice is becoming more common among non-Indigenous peoples working and publishing in this field.

Whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, it is important that the author has some level of personal experience, training or knowledge about the topic being presented. Some sites will state the level of authority that the author has in the area being presented. On other sites, unfortunately, this information is more difficult to discern.

Does the site have sponsors, obvious or otherwise?

Is advertising used on the site?

Whether or not you have discerned the site's author, it may prove useful to examine who (if any) the site's sponsors are? This may be as simple as a bold header on every page that states "Proudly supported by the whatever Corporation". Or hidden away in the fine print at the bottom of the page may be a note that reads "this site was produced under a grant from the somethingorother department"

Similarly, the existence of advertising on a site may provide an insight into the organisational affiliations of a site's author. Usually, the authors, owners or managers of a site will choose who they allow to advertise on that site.

Knowing who the author's sponsors, supporters or affiliations are may assist you in understanding the purpose of the site or possible viewpoints which may be represented in the content.

Using the URL to find information about the author:

If a site makes no reference to an author or sponsoring organisation, you may still be able to determine some information about the source of a site by examining its Uniform Resource Locator (URL). The URL provides a unique address for every site on the internet.

Let's look at an example:

http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/library/lib_rsc3.htm

Close examination of this url tells us that the site is hosted by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (aiatsis), which is a government body (.gov) in Australia (.au). The web page itself is something to do with library resources (lib_rsc3.htm) within AIATSIS' library (library/). Without even visiting the site, we can discern considerable information about a site from this information. If you were to actually visit the site, you would

find that it contains a list of bibliographies and other information held in the AIATSIS library

Here are a few more examples:

http://www.amnesty.org.au/

The Australian homepage of the non-profit organisation, Amnesty International.

http://www.nimaa.org.au/

Homepage of the non-government organisation (.org), National Indigenous Media Association of Australia.

http://www.roebourne.wa.edu.au/culture/bush.htm

A site on 'Bush Food and Bush Medicine' developed by Roebourne Primary School in Western Australia.

http://www.qut.edu.au/chan/oodgeroo/journal.htm

This site contains information about the paper-based Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues, which is hosted by the Oodgeroo Unit at Queensland University of Technology. The /chan indicates that the Oodgeroo Unit is organisationally situated within the Chancellery of the university.

http://www.ozemail.com.au/~imparja/

Website for Imparja Television, an Indigenous station based in Alice Springs. This site is hosted by Ozemail, a commercial organisation in Australia that provides email and internet services. The tilde (~) in the url usually indicates that everything in this directory has been published by a user or client of the host body (in this case, the host is Ozemail). Host organisations generally do not accept responsibility for content within their users' directories.

http://www.yothuyindi.com/

Website for the band Yothu Yindi. The .com indicates that this site performs some commercial function. The lack of the .au country code indicates that the site is hosted in the USA, even though it contains Australian information.

TWO.3 WHO IS THE SITE TARGETING?

Knowing the intended target audience and purpose of a site will assist you in determining whether it is a valid resource for your teaching purposes. Does the site represent personal opinion? Is it the results of an extensive study? Is the author trying to sell you something?

Sites that present emotive arguments on a topic may not be as useful as those that present a more rounded picture acknowledging a range of views.

You should ask the following questions:

What is the purpose of the site?

Is the purpose obvious or not?

What is the intended audience?

How do these things influence the nature of the site?

The purpose and intended audience of a site will generally determine what information is included and how an argument is pitched. Being able to determine purpose and audience can provide you and your students with some understanding of the viewpoints and arguments that may be employed in the content

This is especially important when dealing with possibly contentious issues, where there are likely to be various sides of a discussion presented by different parties. For example, three separate pages discussing Native Title rights hosted on a government department website, a mining company website and a Land Council website will no doubt make different arguments.

Actually determining the purpose or audience can often be a difficult task. Some authors may state why the information has been published and what purpose they seek to serve. Most, however, provide no indication at all. In these cases, you will need to browse through the content and context of the site and come to your own conclusions.

For older students, comparing these views and understanding why they differ, may provide useful experience in critically analysing sites.

TWO.4 WHAT INFORMATION IS BEING PUBLISHED?

Probably the most important question to ask about a site is simply what does it contain? Is the content relevant to the teaching program? Will it be beneficial to the students? Is it accurate, reliable and well-informed?

Knowing who has published a site can provide valuable information about the reliability of the site's content. Generally, the more reputable the author is, the more reliable the information should be. Some important questions to ask in determining authorship are:

What is the basic point of the content?

When using online resources with your students, you should ensure that the sites you use are really relevant to the teaching program. They should assist and expand on the skills and knowledge and attitudes that you are seeking to develop. If you cannot find online resources that are genuinely useful, then perhaps you should not use any.

Does the author bring assumptions with them?

Does the information display bias?

Are there links to similar sites and other points of view?

Are sources cited for information?

In examining the content of an Indigenous website, you should generally try to avoid sites which are biased or attempt to use emotive arguments to put across one particular point of view. To ensure that students are exposed to all sides of an argument, and not lead into one particular view, sites which provide a rounded perspective or which acknowledge and link to other perspectives should be utilised. Where possible, one of these perspectives should be Indigenous.

Websites that cite the sources of their information can often be make testing the reliability of the site simpler.

What acknowledgments are made regarding Indigenous ownership of materials represented?

Is information discussed which might be of a secret or sacred nature?

Are cultural matters taken into consideration such as the inclusion of the names or images of deceased peoples?

The idea that Indigenous peoples maintain responsibility for information derived from Indigenous peoples is not new. It is closely tied in with emerging concepts of Indigenous intellectual property rights. In the past, many stories, images and materials were taken or collected from Indigenous peoples without following appropriate protocols or seeking permissions. Some of these images and stories now find themselves published on the internet with varying degrees of permission.

You should be aware that this is a difficult issue that is yet to be effectively resolved.

There are some sites that now acknowledge this error and specifically state where and how their information has been collected and what permissions were sought and given. Others note that some of the materials on their sites may fall into this category.

Where possible, you should try to utilise these sites. It will demonstrate an awareness of the issues and develop an appreciation of these concepts in your students.

Indigenous information of a secret or sacred nature should not be made available to a world wide audience over the internet. This constitutes serious breaches of Indigenous traditions and responsibilities. Sites that you believe present information of this nature should not be used.

You should also be aware of other cultural matters that arise from having Indigenous information freely available on the internet. Some groups require that the names and images of deceased peoples not be used. Many sites do not take these issues into consideration.

In regard to some sites, you may need assistance in answering these questions. This may be found through a range of sources including colleagues, local Indigenous community members, your state Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), Indigenous education providers in your area, or through ATSIC.

Simply by being aware that there are unresolved issues in these areas and seeking to avoid the use of inappropriate material is an excellent start.

Are stereotyped or racist information/images used?

Is the diversity of Indigenous peoples represented?

What sort of terminology is used?

Indigenous peoples in Australia are a diverse and complex group. There are many languages, cultural groups, beliefs and traditions. Unfortunately, Aboriginal peoples are often portrayed as a homogenous group and unkindly stereotyped. The language used in a site can also play a role in stereotyping and perpetuating racist portrayals of Indigenous peoples.

Wherever possible, you should avoid sites that portray these stereotyped and racist perspectives in favour of ones which acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous Australian peoples.

TWO.5 WHEN WAS THE SITE PUBLISHED?

As with any resource used in teaching, a site will generally be more useful, relevant and possibly even more accurate, if it is up to date. In determining when a site was published, you should ask the following question:

When was the original material created?

When was the site first published on the web?

When was it last updated?

Some sites provide you with information about when they were created and when they were last updated. This can often be found as part of a page's footer and will clearly show you the age of the site. Where this information is not supplied however, you may have to make an informed guess of the age of the site from items such as the context of the site, the language used, references and sources cited and how the content compares to similar sites.

It is important to note that even though a site may have been recently created, this is not an assurance that the information contained on it is up to date. There is no reason to assume authors are publishing only the latest information.

Is this important?

Matters of timeliness of sites should be taken equally as seriously as the other questions in these guidelines. With the rapid rate of change in Indigenous-related issues, it is important that the information you use in your classroom is up to date.

For example, a site discussing Aboriginal Land Rights which was last updated before the High Court's Mabo decision will have considerably different content to one updated last week. In cases such as this, you should try to ensure that your students have access to the most recent information possible.

TWO.6 IS THE SITE USEABLE?

Even when you have determined that a site is reliable, up to date and appropriate for use, it may still not be useful to your teaching program. The site itself may simply be too difficult for your students to use. To ascertain a site's useability, you should ask the following:

Is the general look and feel of the site engaging?

Is the site well written, structured and organised?

Is the site easy to move around?

Does the site unreasonably rely on whistles and bells?

In looking at the useability of the site, you need to take into account a number of factors. Some sites are simply better organised and written than others. You do not want to use sites that are so poorly organised that you cannot navigate through them easily and find information. Students will most likely find a site more engaging if it does not simply have pages and pages of written text. On the other hand, a site that relies too heavily on images, audio or video will risk being too slow to load and may lose the students' attention. Most sites fit in the middle ground between these two extremes.

You should try to avoid sites that are likely to impede the learning process in this way. Ultimately, the less time your students need to spend struggling with a poorly written site, the more time that will have to participate in the learning about Indigenous Australia.

TWO.7 A FINAL WORD

These guidelines have been developed to assist you, as educators, to make appropriate choices when using Indigenous online materials in your classrooms. While they provide a broad outline for evaluating Indigenous materials online, the detail - the actual assessment of the sites themselves - will be up to you.

Here are a few final suggestions to keep in mind when developing a teaching program incorporating Indigenous online materials.:

· Use your common sense when evaluating sites.

· Always use a range of sites in a teaching exercise, to provide a range of views.

· When you find a good site, bookmark it. You may even like to develop a list of useful resources to share among colleagues.

· If you are unsure about a site, make enquiries, or have your students make some.

· If you are still unsure about a site, it's usually better to err on the side of caution.

· Try to include an understanding of these guidelines in your teaching. In their own time, your students will find sites with views and arguments relating to Indigenous issues which may confuse and confound them. It is important that you arm them with the skills to critically analyse the information they will inevitably come up against.

· Remember there are resources out there that are not on the world wide web.

· You may wish to involve local Indigenous community members in your teaching program.

· There are many other sources of information on critically analysing online materials that you may wish to consult.

· Make contact with the AECG in your state.

In the end, how strictly you use these guidelines in selecting which Indigenous sites to use in your teaching program will be determined by a range of factors that will be unique to your situation.

SECTION THREE: BEYOND THE TANGLED WEB

"For communities, the real benefit of multimedia is re-engaging the youth with traditional information."

Nick Richardson and Cameron Goold, The Bush Track Meets the Information Superhighway, report prepared for the Indigenous Branch of the Australian Film Commission, 1997, p 30.

THREE.1 OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

While there is a vast amount of information available on the internet, it is valuable to remember that there are other sources of information. In developing your teaching program, you should try to include more than one type of source.

Other important sources of information relating to Indigenous Australians are:

· Your local library

· Your local ATSIC office

· Indigenous community organisations in your area

· The Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) in your state

· Indigenous Centres in Universities

· Your museum

· National peak bodies in a range of Indigenous fields

· Local, state or federal government bodies with responsibility for Indigenous issues

· Members of your local Indigenous community

THREE.2 BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMMUNITY

Undoubtedly the best source of information about Indigenous peoples will be Indigenous peoples. You may be able to answer a wide range of questions and collect substantial amounts of information through websites. However involving Indigenous peoples in your face to face teaching will provide a real context for your students to understand this information.

There are many ways to involve local community in your teaching program. You might invite a local community member to speak to your class for an hour. Or you might arrange to for the local Indigenous Heritage Officer to take your class on a guided tour of sites in your area. The school may take on a major project to assist the local community with their oral history program.

We cannot recommend too highly that you should build these relationships with your local community. In an educational context, you will find that this not only widens you students' understanding, but acknowledges the expertise that community members maintain about Indigenous culture, history and aspirations.

"Indigenous community members are the best resources for up-to-date information and historical information based on real-life experiences. Community members bring the content to life for students and readily convey the consequences of our history. This helps students to understand the relevance of the subject area for understanding critical social concerns and empathise with Indigenous people's viewpoints."

Craven, R. & Wilson-Miller, J. (1999) Teaching Aboriginal Studies (p. 230) St Leonards: Allen & Unwin

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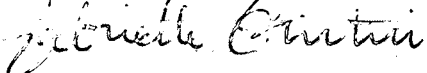
Signature:  Position: Acting Director

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