
The Use of the Internet by Academics in the Discipline of English Literature

Research in Progress

Research into the use of the Internet by English Literature academics commenced in Autumn 1997, funded by a departmental studentship. The project began with a literature search that focused on the areas of history and English within the traditional realm of the humanities (Kirkham, 1989). After a review of the early stages, the area of interest was narrowed to the discipline of English Literature. This decision was also partly due to an interest in Jane Austen and the types of reading experiences her characters encountered during the course of the novel, but most importantly, due to the lack of previously recorded studies and research to date in this area. Some studies such as those by Corkill and Mann (1978), Deegan (1995), Fulton (1991), Stone (1982), Watson-Boone (1994) and Wilberley and Jones (1989, 1994) have discussed the humanities, but none were specifically related to the Internet and English Literature.

Work in Progress

Academics generally have three aspects to their daily work: administration, teaching and research. This research concentrates on the latter two aspects, combined with an emphasis on the *use* of the Internet and electronic sources. The intention is to gain a greater understanding about how the Internet is revolutionising the way that English Literature is currently delivered at higher education level.

Departments of the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, Glamorgan, Lampeter, and Swansea are being used in a case study to provide a snapshot of the current situation in the late 1990s; Given the timescale of the study it was necessary to place some restrictions and it was considered preferable to cover Welsh higher education institutions thoroughly rather than to cover a larger area more thinly.

How has this technological invasion impacted on the department which offers English Literature? Is it an aid or an add-on?

It raises such questions as:

- Does the Internet and electronic sources such as an OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue) benefit the teaching and research process?
- Has communication improved dramatically as a result of the Internet, both internally and externally?
- Would an academic publish in an e-journal as a result of this medium?
- Are web sites and text archives being recommended in a bibliography?
- Are departments endowed with suitable hardware and software to encourage active use of technology?

- Can modules be produced and offered in HTML format to provide a wider circulation of the lecture, and handouts via a series of hypertext links?
- What does the future hold for the academic in the English Department which has access to the electronic medium for teaching and research?
- Will the graphical, textual, hypertext, archival and remote based style replace the traditional 'chalk and talk' and the printed form of delivery?

Research Methodologies

My aim is to endeavour to answer these types of questions in the thesis and make recommendations and conclusions as a result of my data finding exercises. This is being achieved by using quantitative and qualitative methods in the data collection process (Barry, 1995, Berg, 1995; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). A straight number crunching approach comparison would not achieve the desired affect. Whilst it might glean a large amount of numerical data, it would be unwise to assume that this is indicative of all academics working in England and Wales for statistical use and citation.

The questionnaire, which was piloted in October 1998 and was posted in January 1999 to each academic by name in the chosen departments has used the quantitative approach. This painted an overall picture of the current situation amongst the respondents in English departments which revealed (for example) that the respondents' attitude towards the Internet was strongly correlated with the amount they used it, their position (higher positions had a more positive attitude) and general computer use.

Following on from the questionnaires, visits to academics in their own departmental offices have been carried out, enabling a one-to-one semi-structured interview, thus yielding more qualitative information. This has led to an extension of the line of questioning that began in the questionnaire. The subsequent use of focus groups (subject to geographical constraints, availability of a sizeable group of academics and incentives) to encourage a scholarly exchange amongst academics who are from the same discipline should provide a greater insight into how the Internet has been of benefit to them.

Direct contact with active Internet users via discussion lists could provide another valuable source of information. The Internet as a communication tool has proved invaluable for obtaining an answer to a query, gathering advice or making a suggestion; however, the advantages and disadvantages of subscribing to a relevant list such as mailbase, to meet select needs is still delaying some academics from 'lurking' or contributing to a discussion list.

The mixed response to new technologies and Internet usage is not new (The British Library and the British Academy, 1993; Katzen, 1985; Mullings et.al, 1996), but there are other issues. Some departments cannot afford to update old equipment, and internal policies may be a constraint. Training is needed. Awareness of copyright and plagiarism issues is also a concern. Data, Support and Advisory Services such as AHDS (see the Scholars report), OTA, CTI (see the NCiHE: CTI Evidence) and Netskills, have already begun to make an impact on some of these issues.

References

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Links

Arts & Humanities Data Service (AHDS). *Reports From the Front. Six Perspectives on Scholar's Information Requirements in the Digital Age* — <http://www.ahds.ac.uk/public/uneeds/un4.html>

NCiHE: CTI Evidence — <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/ctipsych/Dearing/Dearing.html>

Mailbase — <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk> provides electronic discussion lists for the UK HE community by subject category or search engine.

Netskills: Network Training for Higher Education — <http://www.netskills.ac.uk>

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