A new approach to unit content: Using interview transcriptions in an interactive online unit

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At Kurongkurl Katitjin, the School of Indigenous Australian Studies at Edith Cowan University, we have developed an online unit for pre-tertiary students which focuses on the processes of writing fictional text. The unit, ABB 1112: Journeys in Writing, is part of the Indigenous University Orientation Course and is delivered by using a combination of online, print and multimedia materials.

Rather than basing this unit on a more traditional modularised content structure that has been used successfully in much distance education material, this unit has used interview transcriptions as the foundation of its content. Two Aboriginal authors, Dallas Winmar (dramatist) and Graeme Dixon (poet), were selected to form the focus of this innovative unit. By examining the way in which these two authors go about the process of writing fictional text, students come to discover and understand first-hand the processes involved in writing.

Both authors were interviewed on audio and video tape. Transcriptions of these tapes were then recorded and categorised into various sections. This text then not only formed the content of the unit but also drove the entire manner in which the unit was presented to students. The learning and assessment activities of the unit were based around the transcripts and the whole structure of the unit reflected this content. Additionally, by collecting content anew, from authentic sources, the authors had a direct input into how their work was presented in this educational online context, one which is culturally appropriate as it allows Indigenous authors to connect with Indigenous students.

Rather than basing this unit on a set of predetermined concepts, we have attempted to use a more flexible, authentic method providing students with relevant, culturally sensitive material. This paper examines the methods used to collect "fresh" content and how this content was used to create an interactive, online unit which reflects appropriate Indigenous ways of learning, as well as the principles of social constructivism and situational cognition. The unit uses current online technology in an attempt to cater for the diversity of the Indigenous student population.

Background

Online unit development at Kurongkurl Katitjin

Kurongkurl Katitjin, the School of Indigenous Australian Studies at Edith Cowan University, designs, produces and delivers online units to Indigenous adult learners. Edith Cowan University currently has the highest enrolment figures for Indigenous students in the country, the largest proportion of these enrolments being in Kurongkurl Katitjin's external Aboriginal University Orientation Course (AUOC). This course is a pre-tertiary program designed to bridge Indigenous students into university degree courses.

The online units being developed within the School are based upon a sound pedagogical foundation characterised by authentic learning environments that reflect real life contexts. The units are integrated with content which is relevant to Indigenous learners and which has been developed by teams of Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. The process of online unit development has been underway at the School for three years and the staff involved in the process are currently involved in creating a number of innovative online and multimedia educational resources. This collective expertise, along with strong School and Faculty support, has enabled the continued development of the online unit program within the School.

In 1998 Kurongkurl Katitjin conducted a major review of its Aboriginal University Orientation Course with the aim of developing a curriculum framework to direct a complete rewrite of the course. In the same year, a successful application for a grant from Open Learning Australia provided an opportunity to develop initiatives in tandem with those that were in progress at Kurongkurl Katitjin at the time. With these circumstances, it was the intention to develop online units and to also increase online access to educational opportunities for our students.

Kurongkurl Katitjin recognises that students participate in many different communities, that they have varied cultural, political and social relationships, and that their identities are becoming increasingly complex. Providing innovative means for accessing education via the internet is a reflection of a rapidly changing world but, more importantly, as the world shifts towards more specialised and decentralised conditions, we predict that our students are going to require the literacies that make them competitive. We acknowledge that the world is shrinking, largely due to communications technologies, and that it is part of our role to provide students with greater access to these technologies. Kurongkurl Katitjin believes that the new technologies offer unprecedented possibilities in terms of access, appropriate innovation, cost effectiveness and new market possibilities for our students.

Background to the development of the unit, *ABB 1112 Journeys in Writing*

One of the online units to emerge from the Indigenous Open Learning Project, Journeys in Writing, has used interview transcripts from two Aboriginal authors from Western Australia as the foundation of its content. This method of content development is quite different to the traditional, linear approach to structuring content which already exists in some format. The two local Aboriginal writers, Dallas Winmar, a dramatist, and Graeme Dixon, a published poet, were selected to be the "voices" of this unit and were subsequently interviewed for the purposes of content collection and development.

Development of content: Interviews with authors

Early influences

A couple of years ago, Rob Wellington from Tantamount Productions, a major contributor in the development of the Mabo multimedia project with Film Australia, gave some advice which was to significantly influence the way the Journeys in Writing unit was developed (R. Wellington, personal communication, 8 April 1999). The advice seems self evident in retrospect but was vital at the time. He emphasised the importance of knowing your clients when considering the design of a product's mental conceptual landscape. He suggested coming up with a range of likely hypothetical subjects, representational of potential students, and to "flesh them out" in terms of their real life concerns and preoccupations. In Wellington's multimedia universe, these virtual characters start to mushroom as they take on all the characteristics of people similar to those we have previously come across as students in a university bridging environment. Next, collaborative efforts by the design team began, followed by the process of brainstorming all the perspectives from which these characters might like to approach this relatively small, ambiguously bounded, interactive universe. By accepting the value of this advice, the design team's decision making processes were primarily influenced by an overarching recognition of the perspective of student motivations.

Content development begins

Filming and interviews began with Graeme Dixon and Dallas Winmar, the featured authors in the unit. These interviews were conducted by an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous staff member of Kurongkurl Katitjin in the natural settings of the authors' working environments which sometimes turned out to be their homes. This decision regarding the location of the filming was made in order to give students an insight into the actual conditions in which the authors worked. By presenting the content in this way, it is intended that students enrolled in the unit will become immersed in the authors' situations.

The interviews were recorded on audio and video tape. Approximately three days of filming with each author was conducted. A flexible set of questions was prepared prior to interviewing, loosely categorised into topics relating to the writing process. Sometimes unexpected topics emerged from the interviews.

It is interesting to note the differences in interview styles between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and the effects these influences had on the footage collected. Carol, an indigenous interviewer, largely because of her close relationship with Dallas Winmar, uses a conversational approach to interviewing. Carol also has a history of working in radio and the use of short questions and responses is reflective of this background. The questioning technique used by Greg reflects his experience in documentary film making. Greg allows the writers to speak with minimal guidance, allowing for a stream of consciousness technique.

Preparing the content

The interviews provided plenty of useful data with which to work. For example, they provided a plethora of material on issues such as Aboriginal history, social justice and politics. However, decisions about content inclusion were driven by writing method, the central topic of the unit. By examining the way the writers went about the process of creating fictional text, the students will be able to come to discover first-hand the processes used. The authors introduce students to the craft of writing through their own experiences which allows students to explore and analyse the process of creating texts through the eyes of the writers.

This method of developing and presenting content, based on the exploration of actual interview footage and accompanying transcripts, was chosen to offer students an insight into the processes behind how a piece of writing came into being. The idea of writing method was the absolute key focus for gathering information and directing interactions with our featured writers.

The idea of using contemporary authors talking about their own writing processes opened up a universe of interrelated themes which are projected in the unit in ways that actually speak to our student audience. Whilst our two featured writers are successful in that they have produced work to high critical acclaim, they are very down to earth ordinary people with no pretensions. They write and speak on issues that cut to the heart of contemporary Aboriginal identity, history and politics. They are individuals whose lives are firmly embedded in the struggle of ordinary Aboriginal people. The writers speak. They have a voice and they model writing practices that may act as a catalyst for the students' own creative writing development. In this way a rapport is built with the students, one that we may not normally have been able to achieve. This element is reflected in the structure of the unit: rather than re-packaging existing materials we wanted to create new knowledge. Also, the structure of the content was determined by the featured authors rather than the unit developers.

Using this new knowledge and content, we deliberately included a diverse choice of activities that were appropriate to our student group's varied backgrounds and learning preferences. In this unit students are able to make selections from a range of suggested activities and submit a group of activities to form a portfolio assignment. This negotiation associated with the choice of assignment tasks is expected to bring about a greater sense of student inclusiveness in the unit.

The featured authors provide much of the scaffolding by guiding students through their work samples by way of their comments and reflections on their work. In this way, the authors become the students' "coaches" (Herrington and Oliver, 1995). We have added learning resources such as a Literary Jigsaw that contains supporting information about the writing process, a historical overview of Aboriginal writing in the timeline section and samples of other Indigenous Australian writers' work. Students work through analysis activities and encounter commentary on existing Indigenous texts to support the development of their own creative texts.

Other issues

The data gathered from the authors created a unit not just about the process of writing, but a unit about history, social justice, identity and contemporary Aboriginal and Australian culture. In this way the unit is a journey, a process of discovery and exploration. This approach to content development also means that the unit can easily be built on by adding the experiences and ideas of other authors in future versions, including the student writers themselves.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework supporting the development of the unit can be described as being three-fold as the principles of constructivism, situated learning and grounded theory research methods are taken into account. Firstly, a constructivist view of learning assumes that knowledge is a component of the learner's prior experience, not just a fixed collection of unrelated facts. As a result, this unit recognises that our students come to study these online units with an already developed accumulation of background experience and cultural knowledge (Ober & Bulsey, 1998; Henderson, 1996). Based on the rationale that the learner is naturally curious, motivated by a desire to understand the world, it is the student who initiates and steers the learning process in this online unit: "it is helpful to remember that what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher does" (Shuell cited in Biggs & Moore, 1993, p. 448). Accordingly, the unit's navigation is directed by the learning process and the learner:

Learning involves meaning, understanding, and a way of interpreting the world ... Teaching is the facilitation of learning, actively involving both teacher and student. The teacher interacts with the learner in line with the assumption that learning

involves the active construction of meaning by the student and is not something that is imparted by the teacher. (Biggs & Moore, 1993, p. 25)

The principles of situated cognition directed our decision to provide an authentic online learning environment via an interface based on a mixture of artwork (designed by a combined effort of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists) and real life metaphors. Since the theory of situated cognition is based on the principle that effective learning will only occur if "it is embedded in the social and physical context within which it will be used" (Herrington & Oliver, 1997; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989), the learning activities and assessment tasks within the unit provide students with many opportunities to practise their writing skills in realistic contexts. Such tasks also take into account the students' varied backgrounds and learning preferences:

... instruction should be geared not just toward imparting a knowledge base, but toward developing reflective, analytical, creative, and practical thinking with a knowledge base. Students learn better when they think to learn ...They also learn better when teaching takes into account their diverse styles of learning and thinking ... (Sternberg, 1998, p. 18)

Lastly, the grounded theory approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) used in the qualitative research field, can be used to describe how the content for the unit was developed. Instead of starting from a predefined content structure, the categories of content that were finally included in the unit emerged from the actual content collection process, the interviews with the Aboriginal authors.

Conclusion

This method of content development has implications for our future online unit construction processes at Kurongkurl Katitjin. We have found this method to be a workable model that can be replicated in future development. It may also have application in the wider educational community, especially in the area of multimedia and online resource development. In this specific way of presenting content within the format of an interview, the voice becomes a powerful tool of connectedness which achieves stronger contact with the student body we are trying to reach. By creating new content, the barriers associated with copyright, outdated materials, expensive resources and the lack of relevant information for a specific client group can be overcome. We can create units of study which incorporate original content, learning activities, assessment tasks, resources and communication techniques which are designed by a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff to suit the needs, interests and skills of our Indigenous student body.

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