

Aboriginal Portal: Providing Information & Instruction to Aboriginal Distance Students

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Introduction

Distance education partnerships between academic institutions and Aboriginal communities possess considerable potential as they can empower students in remote areas to pursue postsecondary education without forcing them to leave their communities. Librarians can meaningfully contribute to the success of these partnerships by connecting students to relevant scholarship and offering convenient reference and instructional services.

In examining secondary data and research on the prevalent issues of technological access and distinct learning styles it became clear that these partnerships offer distinct challenges. In this project I have sought to identify preliminary best practices for the provision of reference services and the design of web content specific to the context of Aboriginal distance students.

It is my hope that this project can generate meaningful discussion and encourage other institutions to consider the design and implementation of virtual spaces and services that meet the needs of a seemingly underserved user group.

Notable Barriers

The most persistent barriers facing distance library initiatives are largely technological in nature. Financial and geographical factors can complicate access to personal or public computers.

Moreover, a number of rural First Nations communities have poor Internet connectivity to this day. In fact, according to Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada, a minority of small communities still possess no residential broadband access at all.

Figure 1: Connectivity Profiles in First Nations Communities

Provinces & Territories	Communities with low connectivity/ no residential access	Total Communities	Percentage below Industry Canada Standard*
Alberta	2	49	4%
British Columbia	25	198	13%
Manitoba	30	65	46%
New Brunswick	-	15	-
Newfoundland and Labrador	2	9	22%
Northwest Territories	27	31	87%
Nova Scotia	-	13	-
Nunavut	-	29	-
Ontario	31	140	22%
PEI	-	2	-
Quebec	9	53	17%
Saskatchewan	1	72	1%
Yukon	11	18	61%
Canada	138	694	19.9%

* Industry Canada minimum connection speed of 1.5 Mb/s
(Data courtesy of Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada's Connectivity Profiles)

Research & Best Practices

1) Accommodate Different Learning Styles

- Distance students are as diverse in their learning styles as any other student population (often more so), and there is no single effective solution. Ideal approaches for instruction and web services should be mutually agreed upon by librarians, instructors, and students.
- Aboriginal students often report learning more when able to share information with others and act as a collective (Simon et al.). As such, software that allows maximum user collaboration and communication is advised. Furthermore, instruction sessions can incorporate group activities.
- The importance of collaborative learning and establishing relationships is often noted (Lee). Librarians should establish themselves as more than a digital presence, but as someone regularly available for consultation.

2) Interact with your Users

- Librarians are not often able to visit distant communities in-person due to both geographic and curricular barriers. Multiple class visits (be they physical or digital) are still advised whenever possible.
- On-site support staff, coordinators and teachers are invaluable resources to librarians as well as students. As they have the most knowledge of the learning approaches that work for their class, seek their advice (McMullen & Rohrbach).
- A formal data collection period is advised, and both individual interviews and focus group sessions should be conducted to understand student experiences with the library's existing web presence as well as identifying preferences for future services (Kawalilak et al.).

3) Select Appropriate Technology

- Whenever possible, libraries should highlight web services that are compatible with the connection speeds of the community and the comfort levels of students.
- Video-chat, interactive games, videos and other web tools can be effective, but have higher connection speed requirements. They should be employed sparingly, if at all.

4) Ongoing Design

- Particularly soon after launch, the learning portal will need to be updated frequently and adapt to user feedback.
- Several Aboriginal students voiced frustration with the number of library tutorials (Luthor & Lerat). The design of the portal should incorporate concise directional aids into web pages to minimize tutorials and save users' time and frustration.
- Whenever possible respect the preferences of adult learners rather than asking them to adjust (Simon et al.).

5) Incorporate Culture

- When designing web portals, traditional images and heraldic colours (Figure 2) may serve as aesthetic guidelines when treated respectfully.
- Correspondence need not always be text-based. In Aboriginal communities knowledge is traditionally imparted using experiential learning or through stories. When feasible, videoconferencing software such as WebEx or Skype is worth integrating (Simon et al.).
- Resources on history and community development can be popular, particularly when highlighted in instructional sessions and connected to the community's past (Luthor & Lerat).



Figure 2: A Mi'kmaq star

Conclusions

Historically, distance education initiatives have achieved mixed levels of success in Aboriginal communities, yet several scholars contend that difficulties were the result of a failure on the part of traditional educational approaches rather than any deficiency in distance students (McMullen & Rohrbach).

Librarians must identify barriers, and strategize around them. Services can be scaled to accommodate for slow internet connections or few personal computers when possible. Moreover, accommodating for and embracing Aboriginal approaches to learning will only further enhance the diversity of learning approaches in the classroom.

Collaboratively undertaken design of a virtual space providing tailored resources and reference services could prove integral to the success of students. Distance education in Aboriginal communities may even contribute to the long-term sustainability of rural communities that would otherwise suffer a drain with every student departing for a physical institution. Distance library services in Aboriginal communities deserve further scholarly attention in the LIS field.

The importance of flexible instruction approaches and soliciting feedback from students regarding their preferences was stressed repeatedly in multiple pieces of research. Particularly in the case of adult learners, every effort should be made to seek their input directly. Evidently, any librarian interested in creating a web portal specifically for the needs of Aboriginal distance students would be well advised to design the portal in collaboration with the students themselves.

Limitations & Implications

Limitations

Although worthy of consideration by any academic library interested in a distance education initiative, the main limitation of this project is a lack of focus on a specific institution or community. Without the benefit of a specific context, primary research was not feasible and instead secondary research was employed exclusively.

Implications

- The research gathered would suggest that distance librarians may wish to be reactive to better adapt to the context of their own partnerships.
- The digital divide persists due to technological, financial, and other barriers in remote communities.
- This poster is but the first step in a larger research undertaking that could be carried on by other professionals.

Selected References

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