Widening Access to Theology and Religious Studies through the Application of Internet Resources

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Summary

This article explores the advantages and disadvantages of students applying Internet resources in their TRS work, and considers whether the Internet is a means through which wider access to TRS can be facilitated through availability of a broader, cheaper and more comprehensive resource base. The academic quality of Internet resources is considered, and the article also examines the potential for plagiarism through 'essay banks', and whether TRS departments can effectively monitor this development.

Article

Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) practitioners will be familiar with the growing trend towards URLs appearing in essays, as students integrate Internet resources into their work. These sources may augment or supersede conventional textual resources, as research for essays transforms from library and book-based work to the 'cut-and-paste' world of the web. Questions need to be raised as to whether an essay, which demonstrates skill in using **Google** and other search engines, can be as valid as an essay of comparable content utilising traditional sources. In some TRS courses, in batches of essays, the range of essays could incorporate densely handwritten 'traditional' scripts with no reference to the Internet, through to word-processed essays containing substantial material drawn from web sites.

There are some solid reasons for this, and the assumption that utilising conventional source material is somehow more challenging than applying the Internet may not apply. Book purchase is expensive, and many students have limited resources to apply to buying academic texts. The economic scale might mean that students from disadvantaged backgrounds might make greater use of web resources as a means of researching specific types of TRS essays. University libraries may themselves have limited TRS resources, with key texts being available only via restricted access. The Internet, whilst not necessarily having key TRS texts available on-line, can offer a range of specialist materials that is easy-to-locate and inexpensive. There are materials available on-line that cannot be easily obtained elsewhere, including searchable hyperlinked primary religious texts and audio-visual material. Such resources, when appropriately applied, offer new dimensions in the study of religion, providing contemporary and vibrant 'experiences' that can only improve a student's learning experience. Some of these resources were not technically feasible ten years ago.[1]

Determining the validity of academic resources, such as searchable texts, is essential to ensure some form of objectivity. Comparative textual resources are particularly important, so that translations, commentaries and nuances of detail can be highlighted.[2] Training and guidance for students applying these computer-mediated materials is essential. Accommodating these requirements will widen participation, but also requires institutional support. Simply providing a student with a long list of subject-related URLs, without explanation of their relevance, is not constructive. It may be useful to integrate the web into teaching, demonstrating certain sites and their relevance (or not) to a subject within a lecture room discussion. This visual aid and analysis applies key learning skills, identified within quality assessment as significant. Institutional support, providing technical infrastructures and training, can assist in developing this aspect of pedagogy.

The cost factor is particularly relevant for those students using 'free' Internet access via their academic institutions. As such, it could be said that the Internet is a means of widening access and academic participation in higher education, especially for students with limited financial resources. A student may be stimulated through reading TRS related material on-line to study a particular subject in more depth, or even to search out a printed resource. This issue is particularly important for the growing number of part-time students in access courses, further education or higher education, where local resources are inadequate to study a TRS subject in depth. The Internet can also open up TRS resources for people with physical impairments that act as barriers to learning, including some deaf, blind or dyslexic students.[3]

It cannot be assumed that all TRS students necessarily want to apply the Internet as a resource for their studies, and in some cases, a 'backlash' to the medium has been noted. However, the majority of entrants coming from school directly to TRS undergraduate courses are likely to possess some familiarity with the Internet, whilst mature entrants are likely to have had some training in the medium if they have attended an Access course. The widespread availability of the Internet in public libraries, further education institutions, and even Internet cafés indicates a likelihood of Internet awareness. Higher Education institutions also offer training in the technical aspects of using the web. Is it the duty of academics to train students in assessing and reading TRS texts available on-line?

A balance has to be drawn between what is lost and what is gained through reading hypertext. Many Internet users simply print out any material they need. This may be practical for individual pages, but becomes less realistic with major TRS related texts, including forms of Revelation, Scriptures and primary texts. Some TRS courses lend themselves more to the medium than others, for example in the study of contemporary religious movements or world religions, which have a wealth of potential material available on-line. Some distance-learning students in particular TRS disciplines become reliant on hypertext. Questions need to be addressed as to how an on-line document is read in comparison with conventional printed sources. A text may be searched for key terms, and other material ignored. It may link in unconventional ways to other sections of the same site, or external sites. The transition can be confusing, especially when little information is given as to the linked page's origins. The quality of a hypertext may be different to a printed source, which could have been validated by academic referees and proof read. Mistakes occur in typing, and these are not always picked up before a site goes on-line. The variation in commentaries and motivations for putting a site on-line need to be considered, when evaluating them as resources for widening access or improving student knowledge.

Consideration needs to be given by TRS practitioners to the quality of external resources available for students on-line, and lecturers may find that their role increasingly includes being a guide to academically credible TRS Internet resources.[4] The potential is there for courses, especially at access and introductory level, to be built around analysis, discussion and evaluation of TRS related web materials. This can develop transferable skills of student critical thinking, which can be applied in other academic areas. Lecturers may present lists of 'approved' on-line resources, guiding students through their reading of texts and materials, whilst enhancing knowledge of specific worldviews. This is a particularly important issue in the field of TRS, with substantial polemical and propagandist religious websites being made available as 'official' resources. It is not proposed here to analyse the definition of 'objectivity', but there are clear issues of resource validation that would enhance the role of the Internet as a Higher Education teaching resource. Is it practical to require students to produce work only through applying conventional printed sources?

Should training be given in mediating different forms of TRS texts? The Internet can be an excellent means of discovering specific viewpoints in relation to faith, presented by adherents and critics, frequently representing a diversity of views aligned (or not) to a particular religion. However, if students are not equipped to analyse or deconstruct religion on the Internet, then the quality of their work may suffer accordingly.

The Internet can offer regularly updated resources, including news and other information that previously may have taken substantial amounts of time to filter into the academic arena. Issues of representation can be addressed, as most worldviews have some form of presence on the worldwide web.[5] The danger of information overload is one that has to be considered in the context of students, as well as lecturers. Sites can change regularly, and perspectives shift, requiring lecturers to monitor any key subject sites closely. URLs can also vanish without a trace! In extreme circumstances, hacking can also alter a site's appearance and content. This writer recommended a URL on an on-line Islamic Studies course listing, unaware that the URL's contents had been hacked and replaced with pornographic content. Keeping up with such developments can dramatically increase an academic's workload.

Sites may support individual student's worldviews, including religious and cultural backgrounds; in some cases, political-religious views have been influenced by web content, altering student's self perception and attitude towards objective academic study. Sites presenting polemical views, focused against a particular faith perspective, can also influence the academic environment. Some religious groups with an on-line presence have focused on student readers as a means of recruitment and propaganda, leading to ideological 'cyber-wars' that can spill over into a class setting. Such distractions can damage a class, and also distract individuals (students and staff) from academic work.

Within TRS departments, there can be manifestations of prejudice against all materials available on the Internet, and the web may be considered 'un-academic'. However, it has to be recognised that use of the medium is increasing, and new means of access are opening up (for example, via WAP Phone, PlayStations, and digital television), which may lead to increased application of the Internet.[6] If lecturers wish to deny the application and validity of the Internet as a resource for their students, then does this imply that TRS departments (and their institutions) have to guarantee equivalent quality resource availability? This has serious financial implications. If socially disadvantaged students are utilising the web as a primary source of necessity, then denial of its relevance could be seen as inhibiting access to Higher Education.

The issue of students integrating Internet derived work into their essays raises the question of plagiarism, and the availability of on-line essay banks. Essays can be downloaded from these banks on a broad range of TRS subjects. The essays are written by postgraduates and other academics, and are 'graded' according to the quality of content. This ensures that a C-average student does not arouse suspicion by submitting A+-grade essays drawn from the Internet. The availability of subject specific commentaries and other free materials, which can be cut, pasted and adjusted by students into 'original' work, also needs to be considered. Professor John Slater, JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) chairman and Pro Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kent, noted:

"The problem is that there is a blossoming business in websites offering students essays on all sorts of things... I want to stress I am not saying plagiarism has increased - it's that the opportunities for plagiarism have increased."[7]

There are several companies offering essays, so I checked **Cyber Essays** to see what stocks of PRS essays it held.[8] 'Religion' was subdivided into thirteen categories, ranging from Religions of the World to Superstition and Cults. The former category contained 78 pages, each containing descriptions of at least eight essays. The latter category contained six pages of titles.[9] Essays can be paid for by credit card, and the company also offers a customised essay service.[10] I cannot vouch for the quality of the essays contained in the service, but the range of PRS titles was certainly comprehensive.

It is impossible for TRS practitioners to be aware of every web site containing relevant material, so identification of plagiarised texts can be difficult. An American company, iParadigms, developed software to recognise plagiarism, and to deal with intellectual property theft:

"They developed a series of new, algorithm-based pattern matching techniques able to turn any text document into a virtual 'digital fingerprint', which, with the help of a series of automated web robots, could then be used to track sensitive information online."[11]

This 'document source analysis' highlights direct copies of text, word substitution and sentence addition: it then produces a digital summary of its findings.[12] A free trial of this product is available from **Plagiarism.org**. It would be interesting to learn of any TRS departments in the U.K. that have utilised this technology(!). Within Philosophical and Religious Studies, the ethical and moral considerations associated with plagiarism are particularly interesting, especially in terms of student motivation for drawing on Internet resources in this way.

The significance of plagiarism is relevant to monitoring *all* work from *all* students. The relevance in terms of widening access is when students are outside of an immediate university environment, and limited in terms of the resources they can utilise within a course of study: awareness needs to be developed and promoted amongst these students relating to what plagiarism is, and how sources on the Internet can be usefully applied. Monitoring means that all students theoretically should have a level playing field, when it comes to assessment of their work.

Patterns of student work can be influenced by the Internet, given the distractions available on-line, and the illusion that simply surfing and searching for material on a subject is the equivalent of writing an essay. Poor management of research time, and Internet fatigue, can lead to essay deadlines being missed. External and internal factors, including computer breakdowns, viruses and network problems, also influence the patterns of work and the reliance on the Internet as a research tool. Issues that might be tackled through these pages include whether Internet resources damage TRS disciplines, and what coping mechanisms relating to pedagogy need to be implemented in order that the medium can be better accommodated within the academic framework.

Let me know your strategies (if any) for integrating the Internet into courses. Have you resisted applying the Internet as a source for your subject area? Do you grade an essay differently if it has been sourced exclusively via the Internet? Have you used plagiarism recognition software? It is planned to facilitate an electronic discussion on this subject. If you wish to discuss the application of the Internet in TRS, or make a contribution to this page, then please e-mail Gary Bunt.

Notes

1. For example, during the 2001 Kumbh Mela, a documentary website filmed pilgrims' experiences and presented daily diaries of activities. For students of Hinduism, this opens up this significant event, and facilitates a detailed study that could augment 'traditional' materials. See Kumbh Mela - Channel Four Television **http://www.channel4.co.uk/kumbhmela**

2. For examples of searchable TRS-related texts, see Bible Gateway, **http://bible.gospelcom.net/**, and the Qur'an Comparative Browser,

3. See Gary Bunt, **'Visual Impairment and PRS'**, **'Widening Access in PRS for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Students'**, **'Widening Dyslexic Access in PRS'**, PRS Subject Centre

4. For an example of an on-line guide to a subject, see Corrine Blake, **Teaching Islamic Civilization With Information Technology**.

5. See, for example, the Religious Movements Homepage, **http://www.religiousmovements.org** for their A-Z listing of beliefs; and Sacred Texts, **http://www.sacred-texts.com**, for an extensive collection of on-line religious manuscripts.

6. See Gary Bunt, **'From Tomb Raider to Tome Reader: Computer-Mediated Learning, Mobile Learning, and Widening Access in PRS'**

7. BBC News Online, Anti-cheat software to hit UK students, 5 April, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/education/newsid_702000/702953.stm

8. Criticism of the quality of online essays can be found in the article "Download your workload" b*y* Lisa Rivera, http://www.csuchico.edu/jour/catbytes/s99/term.html. Also see Theresa Gillis and Janeanne Rockwell-Kincannon, "From Download your Workload to the Evil House of Cheat: Cybercheating, Plagiarism and Intellectual Property Theft", Online Northwest 2000, http://www.wou.edu/provost/library/staff/kincanon/plagiarism/presentation_files/frame.htm

9. 'Philosophy' contains five categories of essays: Philosophy of Religion contains thirteen pages of titles.

10. Cyber Essays, http://www.essayfinder.com/

11. Turnitin.com, http://www.turnitin.com/static/about_us/ (Turnitin is the educational branch of iParadigms

12. This is discussed at iParadigm's Plagiarism.org website, http://www.plagiarism.org/solution.html

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Created on: April 17th 2007

Updated on: June 4th 2007