

The “T” in the Internet: Identity and Culture Examined

Kevin Clark, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Instructional Technology
George Mason University
4400 University Drive, MS 5D6
Fairfax, VA 22030
kclark6@gmu.edu
(703) 993-3669

Wanda Eugene, M.S.

Doctoral Candidate
Auburn University

Abstract

The purpose of this project was to outline the instructional design approach for further development of an African ancestry learning center to enhance its educational utility, in an effort to use technology in transformative ways that extends the practices and opportunities for African Americans. This goal was accomplished by assessing the needs of learners, performing a content analysis, and designing online resources and systems that meet learner's needs.

Introduction

In North America and the Caribbean there is a growing interest in family history, ancestry and genealogy (Fulkerson, 1995; Winston and Kittles, 2004). In searching ancestral history, it is frequently indicated the best method in beginning genealogy research is to work backwards “from known information about already-identified ancestors, in seeking their ancestors.” The road to discovery is not an easy one for people of African descent. The events of slavery make it difficult to retrace the history of former African slaves, for many the trail grows cold beyond 1870. Thus working backwards, or the present to past methodology, alone can lead to many dead ends because of the unique history of people of African descent in North America.

The growing popularity with DNA research has opened the doors of discovery in the research of family ancestry. DNA research is often the foundational support for a forward or past to present methodology in genealogy research. However, this only answers the question of origin, and can prove to be a more difficult path to follow in tracing ancestral links to the present.

Background

People of African descent appear to be one of the most impacted groups by the digital divide, thus making the internet an unlikely candidate in exploring identity, culture and unification

among them. However, Everett (2001) in “The Revolution Will not be Digitized” examines the role of the internet in the phenomenal success of the 1997 Million Women Movement (MWM) working and so called “under-class” Black women made ingenious uses of the new technology to further their own community uplift agendas. Everertt (2001) states:

“In circulating numerous paper copies of the MWM Web sites for their unconnected sisters in the ’hood, these computer literate and connected black women march members enacted their own brand of universal access to the technology. In effect, they deployed the traditional tactics of grassroots organizing to make the new technology responsive to the changing demands of community empowerment in an information economy. In this way, all the MWM sisters were provided with virtual computing power. Equipped with both print and on-line march instructions and specified platform issues, these inventive women, otherwise known as the information have-nots, nevertheless utilized the new information technologies to mobilize throngs as they marched on the streets of Philadelphia, upwards of a million strong, reclaiming their rights to participation in both the digital and material public spheres.”

The MWM serves as a example of how the internet can be used to strengthen African American communities. However, the effectiveness of this medium is impacted by its design.

In designing interfaces to cater to people of African descent there are several factors to be considered: the audience diversity and design techniques. The literature served a two-fold purpose: to investigate the correlation between Black identity and knowledge acquisition and to demonstrate the impact of identity on the understanding and use of technology. Two Learning theories -- Situated learning and meaningful learning, serve as foundation for discussing Black identity and knowledge acquisition. Entities such as Aaron Marcus and Associates have investigated culture-based interface designs and these theories are also significant to this study.

Situated Learning Theory (Lave and Wenger, 1990) examines knowledge acquisition through active participation in the social, environmental, and cultural aspects of a situation. Through legitimate

peripheral participation, learners are afforded knowledge in the communities of practice that they participate in that serves as tools to shape their understanding of the world around them (Driscoll, 2000). Situated learning theory in cognitive science is the acknowledgements of the life-long learning processes measured according to what people perceive how they conceive of their activity, and what they physically do because of this development (Lave and Wenger, 1990). When a learner's instructional knowledge is divorced from her communal configuration, developed from within her community of practice her ability to associate her instruction to her already learned knowledge is hindered. This may cause a severed connection among learners in Black communities. As a result, the advantages of situated learning are not realized by this community of practice. Irvine and York (2001) present an analysis of the literature on African American, Hispanic, and Indian students as field-dependent learners who prosper academically when taught with comparable field-dependent teaching strategies are premature and conjectural. They suggest that the interaction of culture, affect, and cognition allows the learner to develop multiple intelligences, interpersonal intuition, and deep knowledge of oneself (Irvine & York, 2001).

Ausubel's meaningful reception learning theory is viewed as a process in which the learner connects new material with knowledge that already exists in memory (Driscoll, 2000). Meaningful reception learning operates under certain conditions: the learner must apply meaning to any learning task and materials to be learned must be potentially meaningful to what the learner already knows and how that knowledge relates to what she is being asked to learn (Driscoll, 2000). Meaningful learning becomes essential when the user first encounters new technical information. As knowledge is acquired it is assimilated in what is identified as a schema. A learner's schema operates as a script on which the learner builds with potential meaningful information. Meaningful reception learning continues to support how an individual's experiences shape how she interprets new information.

The question of culture has also been raised in the realm of user interface design. Using the theories developed by Geert Hofstede, there are cultural dimensions that become apparent even in web design (Marcus 2000). He further concludes, while not all members of a cultural pattern fit the same mold, there is enough statistical regularity to identify trends and tendencies of recognizable values and patterns. Recognizing that culture differences manifest in people's choices, it becomes necessary to set and achieve practical goals without requiring everyone to think, act, and believe identically (Marcus 2000). This becomes palpable in viewing websites that have found success with in the African American community.

Gothard (1999) explores the public relations facets to the African-American online community. Websites such Black Planet and AOL Black Voices, that have developed online communities geared towards people of African descent, have gained rapid popularity over the years. There is a growing need for offering Afro-centric products and services ranging from news, resources and entertainment, displaying an African American online community that brings connectivity content and commerce, to the global Black Diaspora (Gothard, 1999). These online communities are often modeled similarly to communities of practice within the communities of people of African descent. Boykin (1986) defines the identity among communities of people of African descent as being a triple quandary. Thus their identity is shaped by their experience in terms of the interplay among three realms of experiential negotiation: the mainstream experience, the minority experience, and the Black culture experience (Boykin, 1986). Websites developed with this in mind are then charged with presenting content that addresses the various facets of this community. Black Planet and AOL Black Voices both provide community forums that include chat rooms, blogs, uplifting stories, history...etc. Websites often visited by the African American online community offer interpretation and analysis of provided information, acting as a democratic inclusive medium (Gothard, 1999).

Problem Statement

People of African descent are often involved in some stage of their genealogy research with their immediate or extended family or are just inquisitive of their origins. Through this project we hope to meet the growing demand of those attempting to piece together their history. Based upon the results, our goals were to enhance an online African ancestry learning center. Upon visiting, subjects will be able to:

- Identify a process for conducting genealogy research,
- Make contact either with their native land or with others of the same descent in the US,
- Identify means of reconnecting with their African ancestry, and
- Share their findings of their genealogy studies with others.

Needs Analysis

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was composed of four main sections. The demographic section is designed to collect information varying from sex, race to highest level of education obtained. The next section explores the learners' computer access and gives them an opportunity to rate their level of proficiency in computer usage. Learners describe their views in the next section, as it pertains to their identity of one of African descent. Learners were asked to rate their overall feelings of the internet regarding trust and privacy. The final section was dedicated to how the learners use the internet. The questions in this section came from two sources. A portion of this final section was an adaptation of the 2000 Pew report on African Americans and the Internet. The remainder of the sections was derived from the literature. The survey instrument was developed and underwent several rounds of revisions and input from the aforementioned parties. The completed instrument included the informed consent form displaying the stamped approval by George Mason University.

The survey, distributed to a sample population of the African Ancestry client base, was fashioned to model data collecting techniques of the U.S. Census Bureau and the Pew Internet and American Life Project, giving a consistent means of measurement. The demographic categories were structured similar to the U.S. Census Bureau categories, while the questions replicated those found in the Pew Internet and American Life Project. In addition, the identity questions of the instrument were adapted from Sellers et al. (1998), Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity: A Re-conceptualization of African American Racial Identity. These efforts were sought to ensure that questions presented were valid, conclusive and reliable.

The subjects were from a sample population of people of African decent living in the United States. The research population encompassed people over the age of 21, of African decent who were randomly selected from a pool of 3000 online users.

To create and utilize a survey instrument evolved from the need to identify the preferences and commonalities of the diverse population of African Ancestry clients. Using this tool, we were able to fulfill this need.

Data Collection Methods

The study was conducted via survey instruments, distributed through mail outs. African Ancestry distributed the instrument to ensure anonymity; however, the completed instruments were mailed to the researcher for assessment. Subjects were told to return the completed survey within two weeks of receipt in the pre-addressed envelope provided. The subjects received a reminder email at the end of week one, and all surveys were administered in English.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The response for each survey question was tabulated and the mean, mode, median, and standard deviations were determined. The responses to each question were summed and then divided by the total number of responses in the list to produce an arithmetic mean explaining the average responses to each question. To ensure that outliers did not skew the means, the mode was also calculated to determine the most frequent responses, thus presenting an overall prospect of what the population thought as a whole.

Results

One hundred surveys were mailed out, and thirty-one completed surveys were received, yielding a response rate of 31%. The survey instrument focused on several specific issues: demographics, perspectives on the identity of people of African descent, identity and the Internet, and Internet uses.

The resulting demographics of the participants were Black or African American female ranging in age from 55-59 with two adults and one child under 18 years old in the home. The participants on average had, at a minimum, attained a bachelor's degree, and reported an annual household income ranging from \$75,000 to \$99,000.

The participants were asked to report the location that they performed their computer activity for personal use, frequency of Internet use, and their level of computer knowledge.

The participants reported utilizing the computer 90% at home, 50% at work and 9% at other locations. Participants labeled their knowledge of Internet proficiency as intermediate; however the frequency of their usage is described as daily.

Perspectives on Identity of People of African Descent

People of African descent reflected strong views in how they identified themselves.

Participants disagreed with the notion that being of African decent had very little to do with how they felt about themselves and slightly disagreed that being of African descent was unimportant to their sense of what kind of person they are. However, participants overwhelmingly agreed that being of African decent was an important part of their self-image, an important reflection of which they are, and having a strong sense of belonging. Although participants strongly reported being proud of being of African descent, they were in strong disagreement with the idea that their views and thoughts generated were Afro-centric.

Participants strongly agreed to the importance of contacts, networks, community, friends, and family in gaining new knowledge and skills. When asked to compare their preference in the labeling of their identity as an individual versus one of African descent and then as Americans versus people of African descent living in the US, participants faired neutral in their response. However, participants disagreed with a label of their identity as American and not one of African descent.

Identity and the Internet

Overall, participants reported a marginal level of trust of information they viewed on the Internet, regardless if it was pertaining to, created by, or delivered from an African American source.

One respondent stated:

“The majority of things on the internet (even those that originated from Black Americans) are shown (usually) from or by a Caucasian or other group (s). Like quilting, southern cooking, even recipes that originated in the home of Blacks. There appears (to me) to be a conspiracy against African Americans not by doing anything to them necessarily, but by not telling or showing the true story (inventions stolen form blacks)-their part

in the building of the Americas-the hero's from war time- Blazing the West, getting the mail through the Indian Country when no one else could. I could go on and on. Oh and lets not forget the "Buffalo Soldiers;" when attempting to locate information on these and other topics related to Black Americans, it close to impossible to the Public Library."

Additionally, participants were neutral with respect to how much privacy they felt when using the Internet. Participants *did* agree that the Internet could be used as a source to strengthen the African American community. Respondents expressed that the internet "allows African Americans to be in greater contact with each other especially in cases where we are few" and "for those that have access, its great for global information and knowledge sharing." One respondent also observed "I have noticed that those of us using the internet share and quickly distribute lots of information about politics, current events and history that may get left out of general conversation. We keep each other up-to-date." These findings paralleled the literature.

Internet Uses

Online, African Americans were more likely to use the Internet to conduct personal research. Subjects were neutral, however, to using the Internet to seek religious, sports, or residential information. Researching products, leisure activity, and travel information, including booking reservations were moderately confirmed as resources subjects used the Internet for. Subjects disagreed with the notion of using the Internet to partake in online games or to access music. Participants somewhat agreed to the use of the Internet as a means of communication (sending and receiving emails), but remained neutral in their participation in instant messaging and online chats. Participants reported using the Internet to obtain financial information and purchase products, but disagreed about participating in online auctions and buying/selling stocks.

Internet use as it related to employment was agreed upon by participants as a means to conduct work-related research and job training but neutral as a means of seeking employment. Participants sought Internet use as a means of staying informed, acquiring political news or information, and visiting government websites. Participants agreed on using the Internet to seek health care information.

When asked what you like the most about the internet one respondent expressed it best by simply stating “possibilities.” The majority of the responses regarding internet use faired neutral. There were no particular uses expressed across the board that respondents strongly agreed as using the internet to cater to, thus people of African descent cannot be generalized for using the internet for any one particular fashion. Instead uses varied from emailing relatives in their homeland, researching product information before making purchase, to the shear convenience, quickness, information gathering available. Therefore, if the internet’s role is viewed as one that presents possibilities then it becomes apparent how the internet or its possibilities are expounded upon in the lives of people of African descent as they attempt to research a lost history.

Discussion

In examining the project goals and objectives the final design of developing an identified process was chosen as the best method to meet the needs of the subjects. The final needs analysis report identified four major types of services people of African descent that utilize the services of African Ancestry seek:

1. A process for genealogy research
2. Developing Ancestral contacts, here and abroad
3. Reconnection with their Ancestral homeland

4. An opportunity to share their results with others who have been similarly identified

Modeling a Process

For people of African descent the proposed process model is a bi-directional approach. Thus, presenting a process that entails a piecemeal effort of backwards and forwards (the present to past and past to present) method places one of African descent in a better position to reconstruct a history that lack credible data to explain its rooted path.

Past to Present Method

Conducting genealogy research by starting as far back as you can trace and working to the present is a method presented by a number of genealogy groups around the world. In an effort not to duplicated well-researched, well-documented processes, it is our goal to make these resources available to African Ancestry users.

The Next Step

Tracing African American ancestry research is a unique journey. The standard genealogy records and methods are applicable for people of African descent until 1870 (White and Quenum, 2004). Prior to that time African Americans were not listed in the census by name. Genealogist Tony Burroughs (2001) presents additional steps needed to seek out genealogical history as it pertains to people of African descent.

Present to Past Method

African Ancestry presents an exceptional opportunity, for people of African descent to discover their place of origin. This proves beneficial in the mist of genealogy research for African Americans. African Ancestry uses advanced genetic research to reconstruct the past (Winston & Kittles, 2004). We can reverse the destructive effects of slavery by looking to strengths in our past and beginning to make plans for our future (Akbar, 1996).

Beginning with the results obtained, the learner can then begin to gather data about their tribe of origin, country and region. This process is fueled by the links provided by African Ancestry on the “Contacts page” in the Learning Center. Most of the Africans enslaved in America came from contiguous areas in the western part of the African continent where there had been a long history of cultural contact and a high degree of institutional similarity, which only a few generations removed from their homeland, would still show evidence of their culture roots (Sudarkasa, 1980). It is important to establish contact with place of origin, obtain their names, ways of life, and tradition to provide insight into their destination and names and traditions that were carried over well past slavery. There is an apparent strength of culture and heritage that African people brought to America’s plantations (Akbar, 1996).

The transatlantic slave trade is the next logical arena to explore. This provides genealogist of African descent a means of connecting their journey from Africa to America. Various databases exist such as *The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* a database on CD-ROM by Eltis et al., which provide detail records of 27,233 trans-Atlantic slave ship voyages made between 1595 and 1866. Its format allows users to track information by time period and geographic region, and includes interactive maps that allow viewers to chart the trans-Atlantic connections. The accompanying data contains materials about people on board, owners and captains, ships’ characteristics, and the geographic trajectory of each voyage (Eltis, Behrendt & Richardson, Klien, 1999). Although a link pertaining to transatlantic slave trade information would be featured on the Contacts page, it could also be provided as a member’s only feature.

Filling in the Gray Spots

Reconstructing African American genealogy history during the period of slavery is a challenge to be performed in parts. These efforts are best achieved if coordinated as groups. A constant, is the notion that the strength in the lives of people of African descent is unity (Hill, 1999). The sharing page featuring chat rooms and blogs, will give such an opportunity for those stemming from similar origins to discuss, exchange information and post their works and findings. There is a shared organizational baseline that enables people of African descent to create culture patterns (Hill, 1999). In order to change the African consciousness we must change the information that is in the African mind.start to restoring the consciousness of Black people about themselves (Akbar, 1996).

Recommendations

The Horizontal Tab Design is highly recommended, because of the many opportunities for development that its layout naturally lends itself to, it combines a tab system and a cross-navigational system.

With respect to usability, this design simulates tabs in a file drawer, thus helping people quickly recognize how to use it. This reduces the number of clicks to provide the same set of navigation links on each page, enables people to quickly navigate from one main section to the next without needing to retrace any steps by clicking the back button.

One way to reinforce a user's sense of place is to use a color scheme. In this scheme each section of the site uses a unique color for its background color and buttons like the yellow pages versus the white pages, the overall background color of the pages can help remind people of the section that they are in.

Contacts

In the search for ancestry there arises a need to reconnect the severed ties with ancestors still within the country land. The contacts page then becomes a resource African Ancestry user's can seek out information to make reconnecting possible and easier, thus serving as a portal. Within it the user would find information pertaining to books, internet sources, ethnic groups, cultural endeavors, contacts to the embassy and etc... for their respective country.

Sharing

Providing members with an opportunity to share their research has several advantages such as connecting with others with similar ancestry and preventing one from reinventing the wheel. There is a strong desire to not only reconnect with ancestry abroad by those within the states. People of African descent are characterized by professing their individuality while operating as a community (Boykin, 1986). Thus online community provides an opportunity rebuild communities in the lives of African Americans, which was destroyed by slavery. A chat feature paves the way for such dialogue. Because so many of people African descent must explore the same path in their genealogy research, efforts are often duplicated. Those that have successfully traced their ancestry or that have developed useful strategies and often want to share their works. Those beginning their research or that have reached a dead end with similar origins can benefit from such collaboration. Features such as blog's provide users with immeasurable power to seek strength within themselves as they journey through a difficult past.

Resources

In addition to the resources currently provided on the resources page, the below resources are brought forth to aid the user in the development of their own process as discussed in the process model above.

Brigham Young University

<http://ce.byu.edu/is/famhist/secure/start.htm>

Free tutorial for beginning researchers from Continuing Education at Brigham Young University

www.ancestry.com

Online classes, access to databases, sharing information online with other researchers, other resources subscription fee or purchase cost required for access to some resources

www.cyndislist.com

thousands of links to family history web sites on the internet, including links by geography (worldwide), ethnicity, experience (beginners), surnames, religious groups, sources (census records, diaries and letters), libraries, and even, “Hit a Brick Wall?”

www.familysearch.org

Computerized family records (35.6 million lineage linked names, and growing) submitted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, card catalog of the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, UT, sharing information online with other researchers, finding a Family

History Center near you for personal help, links to thousands of databases, and genealogy products to purchase

<http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com>

Access to databases, instructional articles, online classes, links, and other resources—subscription fee or purchase cost required for access to some resources

www.mytrees.com

This Kindred Konnections® site includes access to databases, other resources—subscription fee or purchase cost required for access to some resources

www.usgenweb.org and www.worldgenweb.org

Web sites based on location (countries, states, counties, and towns) containing maps, cemetery inscriptions, county courthouse records, and information about how to contact local researchers and county officials for many localities throughout the world

[Christine's Genealogy Website](#)

<http://ccharity.com/>

Christine's is a good general African-American research Web site. It offers a wide variety of information, from selected lists of African-Americans in U.S. census records to freedmen's bureau records, slave entries in wills, and links to museums, libraries, and historical societies that have African-American collections.

[The Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System \(CWSS\)](#)

<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/>

Use this Web site to find out in which unit a particular soldier of African descent served. You simply type in the soldier's name, and the database shows you the matching records. For more common names, the searches can take some time, and of course if there are multiple individuals with the same name, you still must determine which individual is actually your ancestor, but it is a good starting place. It also includes histories of 180 United States Colored Troops units/regiments.

[Colonial Williamsburg](#)

<http://www.history.org/>

The Colonial Williamsburg site gives general information about Colonial [life](#) and includes a selection of articles about African-Americans.

[American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology](#)

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/wpa/wpahome.html>

As described on this site: "...Each narrative taken alone offers a fragmentary, microcosmic representation of slave life. Read together, they offer a sweeping composite view of slavery in North America, allowing us to explore some of the most compelling themes of nineteenth-century slavery, including labor, resistance and flight, family life, relations with masters, and religious belief."

[The African-American Mosaic A Library of Congress Resource Guide for the Study of Black History and Culture](#)

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/african/intro.html>

The Library of Congress has a large collection of materials relating to African-American [life](#) in the United States. This Web site gives an overview of what they offer.

[Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture](#)

<http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html>

The collection of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture includes materials about Blacks living all over the world, including the United States. In particular, they are strong in the history of Harlem and Blacks in New York and the Northeast.

References

- Akbar, N. (1996). *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*. Tallahassee, FL: Mind Productions and Associates, Inc.
- Akoto, K. (1992). *Nationbuilding: Theory and Practice in Afrikan Centered Education*. Washington, DC: Pan Afrikan World Institute
- Boykin, A.W. (1986). The Triple quandary and the schooling of Afro-American Children. In U. Neisser (Eds.) *The school achievement of minority children: new perspective* (pp 57-92). Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers
- Burrough, T. (2001). *Black Roots*. Riverside, NJ: Fireside.
- Eltis, D., Behrent, S., Richardson, D., and Klein, H., (1999). *The trans-Atlantic slave trade a database on CD-ROM*. Cambridge, UK : Cambridge University Press
- Hill, R (1999). *The Strengths of African American Families: Twenty-five Years Later*. Landham, MD: University Press of America.
- Morrison, G. R., Ross, S. M., & Kemp, J.E., (2004). Designing Effective Instruction. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Ringel, C. (2004, May). Genealogy Pathfinder: Getting Started with Family History Research. *Morton Grove Public Library*. Retrieved from <http://www.webrary.org/rs/bibgenealogy.html>
- White, J. and Quednum, J. (2004). *Roots Recovered!: The How To Guide For Tracing African-american And West Indian Roots Back To Africa And Going There For Free Or On A Shoestring Budget*: Booklocker.com
- Winston, C.E., and Kittles, R.A. (2005). Psychological and Ethical Issues Related to Identity and Inferring Ancestry of African Americans. In T. Turner (Eds.) *Biological Anthropology and Ethics: From Repatriation to Genetic Identity* (209-229).