International Internet Use Project – Supporting international understanding in the classroom

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Summary
The International Internet Use Case Studies project employed four international students and one home student with relevant local knowledge to produce teaching case studies about internet use in their selected country. The aim of the project was to use the students' local knowledge and language skills to produce a series of case studies on internet access and use in countries experiencing different barriers to internet use.

Four country profiles were completed: China, Iran, Malawi and Ghana.

About the project
The project addressed how to make the most of international students’ knowledge to enhance and internationalise our teaching. This is a major topic of interest applicable to all courses provided by the Information School and the Department of Journalism Studies, many of which have significant numbers of international students.

We aimed to draw on our international students’ knowledge to improve teaching staff’s access to learning resources that they would otherwise have had limited capacity to source due to lack of local knowledge and language skills. At the same time, the project aimed to increase student input into and understanding of designing learning materials and the use of case studies in teaching.

Methods
We developed a job profile for the five students we wished to recruit for the project. The job advertisement was sent to all Information School and Department of Journalism students in April 2013. Five students were selected competitively, based on a statement they submitted regarding internet use in their selected country and their suitability for the post.

The project began in late May 2013. At the start of the project, the students met with the staff leading the project, and began work on drafting a case study template, and agreeing some standard indicators and headings for the case studies.
The students then worked independently to collect case study material on their country, and produce a case study document using the draft template.

Towards the end of the project, in late June, a second workshop was organised with the objective of sharing the resources discovered, integrating the different case studies into a single narrative, and finalising the case study template.

A final workshop was held in mid-July at which the students reflected on their experiences working on the project and the approach taken to the production of case materials on this topic.

**Benefits**

The project brought together staff and students from L1 undergraduates to PhD students from five different countries to work together to produce a range of teaching resources. Both students and staff reported positive experiences:

“It is fantastic to join the international internet use project and work with excellent staff and students from different national backgrounds. I found the world was so different between different countries through the discussions. Students from Africa and Middle East’s views of the internet use and government’s policies inspired me to think further of what happened in my own country. More importantly, it was quite enjoyable experience to work with them without too much cultural obstacle to understand each other!” (Student participant)

“My participation on the project accorded me an opportunity to learn about internet use in other countries. I was particularly amazed with experiences of colleagues from China and Iran… I learnt a lot from staff and fellow students.” (Student participant)

**Learning and Teaching Perspective**

The case studies produced have been used in various modules, including:

- **Informatics in Society L1 undergraduate module**
  - The case studies are required reading for sessions on the Digital Divide, and students used knowledge gained from these cases in taking part in a Model United Nations role play on the digital divide.
  - Sections of the Iranian and Chinese case studies are used as in-class teaching cases, alongside two cases from the UK, on a session on Freedom of Expression and Censorship, allowing students to explore these issues from an international perspective.

- **Information Systems and the Information Society L3 undergraduate module**
  - The cases have been used as templates for the individual assignment. This will result in current students (a cohort of about 50 students) creating their own profiles, which could potentially be used in the future.
  - Sections of the Iranian and Chinese case studies are used as in-class teaching cases, alongside two cases from the UK, on a session on Freedom of Expression and Censorship, allowing students to explore these issues from an international perspective.

- **Information Systems and the Information Society PGT module**
  - Extracts were used in sessions as discussion points.

The students reported that they were pleased to see their work being integrated into the curriculum in this way: “I am really pleased our work is useful for teaching.” (Student participant)
Students also reported that the project was a learning experience for them, and improved their understanding of internet use issues in their home countries:

“Working on my case study produced some surprising information about my country Malawi. I had not previously reflected on the issues that were required on the project.” (Student participant)

LESSONS LEARNED

- Student produced work yielded many insights on local conditions in the countries profiled, significant aspects of which are not readily available in the public domain – e.g. conditions of Internet use in Iran.
- The research process clarified the importance of local language skills and knowledge for researching internet use across a range of countries, yet highlighted the popularity of common search tools such as Google across differing national contexts.
- The experience of producing the case studies was a fascinating exchange experience for staff and students. This was a key aspect of the learning experience.
- Across the two schools we discovered a lot of common ground in our interests, including the ways in which students from particular countries discover information.
- If we were to conduct the project again, we would give the students clearer guidelines about some presentational aspects, such as citation, and include more opportunities for reflection on the research process throughout the project.

This project was supported by the Internationalisation of Learning and Teaching Fund.

As part of the Think Global project, we aim to provide resources to support the internationalisation of the learning and teaching environment. If you require further information, please contact us: m.kane@sheffield.ac.uk

www.shef.ac.uk/lets/thinkglobal
Sample case study
Internet access in Africa: The case of Ghana

Facts about Ghana

Land area: 238,535 km²
Population: 24.97 million
Capital city: Accra
Official language: English
Common language: Twi
Currency: Ghana cedi
Mobile penetration:
GDP: 14 billion USD
Economy: Mainly agricultural, employing 60% of workforce, and accounting for 37% of GDP
Literacy rate: 65%

Facts and historical landmarks

- Ghana was the first West African nation to be connected to the internet in 1994, a time where there were 3 computers per 1000 people
- The first cellular mobile network in Sub-Saharan Africa was launched in 1992
- It is a rapidly developing country, though much of the population is rural
- In 1997, there were only 100,000 phone lines in the population of 15,000,000
- Broadband ASDL services were introduced in 2003
- Ghana benefits from a location which borders the Atlantic ocean, allowing fibre-optic cables to be laid which are connected to the UK, meaning access to very fast internet speeds

Government and organisational policies regarding the internet

- There exists a non-profit professional organisation called The Ghana Internet Service Providers Association (GISPA) which aims to, “effectively lobby the government and regulatory bodies in order to grow the internet in Ghana and make it easier for Ghanaians to access effective but affordable communications services”
- GISPA members are comprised of companies who are authorised to provide internet equipment such as dongles and modems
- An example of the lobbying GISPA have been involved in includes the removal of taxes on modems, believe it will improve internet accessibility, thus improving the countries’ internet access rate
- The Ghana Investment Fund for Electronic communication aims to facilitate the provision of “electronic services” (ICT’s, mobiles etc) to underserved locations in Ghana. An example of a project they are working on is called “The Community Information Centers Project”. Its aims include: to provide formal and informal ICT training to deprived communities; to bridge the
digital divide between rural and urban areas; low cost computer training to students in rural areas.

**Innovative uses of internet**
- Recently, the Ministry of Food and Agriculture announced that in June they intend to pilot a scheme to provide farmers with agricultural information to increase their productivity.
- With just 0.95% of farmers in Ghana owning a phone line, the scheme aims to tap into Ghana’s increasing digitalisation and use internet resources to improve agricultural output.
- Another innovative use of the internet involves GPS mapping and locating of rice farms in the Volta Region. The farms and farmers are then profiled allowing potential buyers and traders up to date information regarding the availability of rice on specific farms in the region, directly to their mobile phones, and also accessible online.

**Use of the internet**
- As internet accessibility in Ghana is still growing, the presence of online social networks are not as great as they are in more developed nations, though Facebook is gaining ground in the country. According to the 2011 Internet World Statistic Report, “The Facebook subscription for Ghana as of 31 March 2012 was 1,146,560, representing 4.6% penetration rate”. This is expected to grow as internet uptake and efficiency grows.
- Much of the internet accessed via the computer is done in the cities, as many rural areas are still lacking the needed technology to allow internet connectivity. However there has been an increase in phone masts in rural regions, allowing mobile internet connectivity. Google recently announced its idea to introduce Blimps across Sub-Saharan Africa in order to allow for wireless connectivity in all areas, particularly rural regions. This would also combat the issue of theft of copper cables.
  - This would also circumvent the issue of internet service providers (ISP’s) reluctance of setting up in rural areas due the low incomes of people in the area meaning they won’t be able to pay the high costs.
- Ghana is also a developing country, with a literacy rate of 65% which is relatively low. It must be remembered that this directly affects internet participation, and that this must be tackled in order to increase internet accessibility. Other issues affecting internet access include cost and lack of infrastructure. Ghana still suffers from an erratic electricity supply which also affects internet services. This problem is worse in rural areas hence the reluctance of ISP’s to operate there.
- Many Ghanaian websites are in English, which is a hindrance to those only speaking Ghanaian languages.

**Internet cafés**
- Since the emergence of the internet in Ghana almost two decades ago, internet cafés have played a key role in providing internet services.
- The majority of people could not afford to own their own computer, so internet cafés were a place where people could access mainly email services on the internet as well as printing, copying and binding services.
Information regarding the set-up of internet café ventures was and still is often spread by word of mouth and through contacts.

About 85% of internet cafes are located in Ghana’s main cites Accra and Kumasi which could be seen as a major issue regarding Ghana’s internal digital divide; those in more rural areas have fewer opportunities to access internet services due to the distinct lack of internet cafés.

Arguably, unlike internet cafés in Western nations, in Ghana, going to an internet café is also a very social activity with many people frequenting in groups, sharing a computer.

People’s internet activity has also changed throughout the past two decades – in the 90’s the main use Ghanaians would have on the internet was checking their email, but now the most commonly accessed websites include Facebook, Yahoo, Google, Youtube, Ghanaweb and BBC.

- The internet in Ghana is not censored by the government, who actually welcome the benefits that the internet may bring to the country in terms of e-Commerce, education and the participation in democracy.

The future of internet cafés in Ghana

- Today in Ghana, smartphone penetration has risen significantly and this poses a threat to the once thriving business of internet cafés.
- Also the increasing availability of computers and laptops means that people are able to access the internet from their own homes or areas that they would wish to browse from, decreasing the use of internet cafés.
  - USB dongles are now available in Ghana, with an average price of 60GH (roughly £20). This is a highly convenient way for Ghanaians to access the internet, as the use of cables is omitted, thus the user avoiding their service being cut off due to the continuously erratic internet supply Ghana experiences.
- In the case of “Busy Internet” which was opened in 2003 and was once seen to be the best internet café in Accra, and possibly all of Ghana, providing 70 computers for the use of customers, business is no longer booming.
- Internet connectivity is unpredictable, and keyboards now often have character that are not part of the English alphabet, much to the obvious inconvenience of customers.
- This decrease in the quality of services has been linked to the decline in regular customers due to their being able to access the internet by other means.
- Many internet café owners are turning their attention to providing services that mobile technology does not offer such as printing, copying and binding.
  - These services were usually provided by internet cafés, but the focus is shifting from providing internet services to secretarial and admin services.

About the Author

Denisha Koramoah is a first year Informatics student at the University of Sheffield. She is of Ghanaian heritage and her academic interests include information literacy and international development.

Online resources