

The use of the Internet by academics in the discipline of English literature: a quantitative and qualitative approach

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Abstract

The Internet and its usage have been well documented during the last decade. The English academic's use of this medium is not so widely known. This paper attempts to summarise research findings in relation to the foci: information seeking, information use and information needs. It also discusses institutional constraints and personal factors that may influence the use of the Internet as a tool for research and teaching amongst this target group. The research is part of a larger dissertation that involved using both quantitative and qualitative approaches for empirical data collection.

Introduction

This research set out to gain a greater understanding about how the Internet is revolutionizing the way that English Literature is currently delivered at higher education level. It was begun in the autumn of 1997, with the fieldwork being conducted mostly between late 1998 and early 2000. The departments investigated were those of the established higher education institutions in Wales. These provide a range of departments, from small to large, ex-polytechnic and pre-1992 universities, which it can be assumed are typical of higher education institutions within English departments.

English Literature, which is part of the Arts Faculty, can be placed amongst the traditional subject areas including, language and linguistics" of the humanities ([Kirkham, 1989](#)). ([Gould, 1988](#)) advocates that "literary scholarship is increasingly interdisciplinary with more than ever, its sources overlapping with those of other disciplines". According to ([Mullings, et al., 1996](#)), "the computer has already become a comfortable object for almost all literary scholars in areas of communication and production of typescript, and it is rapidly becoming accepted as a tool of literary enquiry also".

Studies

The decision to focus on this target group was mainly due to the lack of previously recorded studies and research in the UK to date in this area. Studies relating to the humanities and information seeking habits have been well documented in recent decades, such as: ([Barry, 1997](#)); ([Broadus, 1987](#)); ([Corkill & Mann, 1978](#)); ([Deegan, 1995](#)); ([Dervin & Nilan, 1986](#)); ([Ellis, 1993](#)); ([Fulton, 1991](#)); ([Hewins, 1990](#)); ([Kenny, 1992](#)); ([Kuhlthau, 1991](#)); ([Paisley, 1968](#)); ([Stone, 1982](#)); ([Watson-Boone, 1994](#)); ([Westbrook, 1993](#)); ([Wilberley & Jones, 1989, 1994](#)); and ([Wilson, 1981, 1994](#)).

By comparison, few studies exist to highlight the information needs, uses and habits of the discipline of English in relation to the Internet. [Hopkins](#) (1989) carried out interviews with Canadian literary scholars. The study was an attempt to add to the store of knowledge about the information needs of humanities scholars and the effectiveness of various research techniques utilized in the field of user studies. Evans's research on English People is a portrait of the subject "English" as it is experienced by teachers and students in British Higher education. He makes no apologies for the title, suggesting that the key to knowing your discipline (your group) in this perspective is

knowing your core, your essence, your principle of coherence ([Evans, 1993](#)).

Foci

The key areas of focus for the research were defined as ([Shaw, 1998](#)):

- Information needs
- Information seeking behaviour
- Information uses

Definitions of the above defined by [Wilson](#) (1999). Academics generally have three aspects to their daily work: administration, teaching and research. This research concentrates on the latter two aspects, combined with an emphasis on the use of the Internet and electronic resources. For geographical and methodological reasons, the University constituent institutions in Wales were chosen for the focus of the fieldwork, totaling six in all ([University..., n.d.](#)).

How has this technological revolution impacted on the department that offers English literature? Is it an aid or an add-on? [Shaw](#) (2000) raised questions such as:

- Does the Internet and electronic sources such as an OPAC (Online Public Access Catalogue) benefit the teaching and research process?
- Has communication improved dramatically as a result of the Internet, both internally and externally?
- Would an academic publish in an e-journal as a result of this medium?
- Are web sites and text archives being recommended in a bibliography?
- Are departments endowed with suitable hardware and software to encourage active use of technology?
- Can modules be produced and offered in HTML format to provide a wider circulation of the lecture, and handouts via a series of hypertext links?
- What does the future hold for the academic in the English Department, which has access to the electronic medium for teaching and research?
- Will the graphical, textual, hypertext, archival and remote based style replace the traditional "chalk and talk" and the printed form of delivery?

Background

Tim Berners-Lee's invention of the Web has made a huge impact on the way that a vast number of administrative, teaching and research activities are conducted. For example, online communication via email and discussion lists, and access to the Internet for scholarly information, can be achieved twenty-four hours a day if there are no technical constraints. It is not even essential to physically transport oneself to the library, now that Online Public Access Catalogues and text archives are on-line and generally available at the desktop. Many academics are concerned with typology, i.e., they study genre, period or a theme or specific named authors in depth; occasionally they might interact with more than one of these typologies.

The [Dearing report](#) (1997) provided the biggest review of higher education for more than three decades. This report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education highlighted the potential importance of communications and information technology (C&IT), recommending an emphasis on collaboration between institutions, high quality management of C&IT, systematic quality assurance and professional recognition for work in this field.

In the summarised version of the HEFCE Report 99/60 ([HEFCE, 1999](#)), it was noted that the use of C&IT in teaching does not yet occupy a central role within HE or FE. Concluding that there is a long way to go before the institutional reality matches some of the rhetoric, [Whalley](#) (1996) remarked that teachers who are resistant to technology are unlikely to purvey their skills and knowledge through this route. He believes that the C&IT experimental stage at institutional level will eventually filter down to individual staff over time.

Research methodologies: quantitative and qualitative

Quantitative and qualitative ([Barry, 1995](#); [Berg, 1995](#); [Denzin & Lincoln, 1998](#); [Marchionini, 1995](#); [Norusis, 1997](#)) research methodologies were employed for the fieldwork process. Quantitative to ascertain current usage of electronic sources and build up a numerical picture of this target group. Qualitative to carry out fieldwork in the natural setting of the academic in the workplace. In the words of [Walker](#) (1985), qualitative research can help interpret, illuminate, illustrate and qualify empirically determined statistical relationships.

The fieldwork was collected using a postal questionnaire, a week-long observation, semi-structured interviews, electronic discussion list questions, a focus group and via access log data from information services and the English department web site in Aberystwyth.

Pilot Study and Questionnaire

A pilot questionnaire was completed in October 1998. Slight revisions were made at the request of the academics themselves to a couple of the questions. The purpose of the questionnaire was to ascertain the level of technological use amongst academics in the discipline of English Literature. The twelve questions ranged from status to an opportunity to discuss the matters further with the researcher. A random sample of half the target population of Aberystwyth's English Department was used from the nine staff selected. The response rate was two-thirds, which was considered good.

In January 1999, the questionnaire was sent out to seventy-six academics in the university constituent institutions. All recipients were sent a covering letter in the same format as the pilot study, with a stamped, addressed envelope enclosed, and a request to reply within two weeks. This was followed up by an email to the Head of Department to remind academic staff to complete the questionnaire. Replies were sent back anonymously to encourage participation. 53 per cent of the academics targeted responded to the questionnaire. A sizeable number of academics (just over a third of the respondents) expressed a willingness to discuss their use of C&IT at a later stage.

Attitudes to the Internet

One of the most interesting results of the questionnaire survey was eliciting personal attitudes to the Internet. While most use the Internet for information-seeking purposes, the overall feeling was one of neutrality towards the Internet ([Shaw, 1999](#)).

Not every staff member sees it as a benefit to teaching and/or research. The content in English has not been dramatically affected yet. Comments varied from academics: "couldn't run the module without the Internet and hypertext" or, the "Internet is an additional facility, not a replacement", and finally, "the Internet is not necessary for me in my work". Some staff still fear technological developments. [Shreeves](#) (1992) relates Greenberg's two extremes in the scholarly community, "between which, by implication, fall the vast majority of working scholars in the humanities. The visionaries, who believe that the emerging technologies signal a radical change in every aspect of scholarly communication, and are impatient to get on with the transformation. At the other extreme, the Luddites are unalterably wedded to print and have no use for online catalogs much less online texts of Shakespeare".

Observational Visit

The researcher expressed a wish to spend a week in the company of an English department in their natural setting. An observational visit was arranged in the second year of the research. It was agreed that no records of the informal discussions would be documented. The visit was purely to gain a greater understanding of the way in which a department operates and the levels of access to electronic sources. Almost all of the staff shared an exchange about C&IT in their offices.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a follow-up exercise to the postal questionnaire in the second and third year with a total of seventeen academics. This type of interview procedure allowed the researcher to acquire in-depth qualitative data in a one to one situation that would not have otherwise been forthcoming. The conversation was semi-structured and purposeful. Responses were kept for research use afterwards. A small minority agreed to the conversation being taped, but most preferred to remain completely anonymous.

Academics remarked that as they approach the latter stages of their career, they often feel that it is too late to adapt to C&IT. Why should life be complicated they say, when the printed book, the intermediary and the colleague have always been adequate in the past? There is an awareness that they may be losing out if they do not embrace C&IT, but the sense is that if they can do without it, then they will.

Electronic discussion lists

Another aspect chosen for study was electronic discussion lists and the way in which academics interact with them to answer a query. Certain lists that the researcher subscribes to were selected, for example DUET (Development of University English Teaching), and all list members were asked to respond individually to two questions. The responses arrived from the academic community, offered an upbeat opinion about e-lists, which was in stark contrast to the responses elicited by any other method. This was not surprising in such a self-selecting group of English academics.

Focus group

In the third year of the funding, a taped focus group session took place with a group of six academics in a departmental library setting. The session proved worthwhile for both researcher and academic staff as after an initial uneasy start. A lively exchange of ideas, opinions and experiences revolving around C&IT in English ensued, providing the researcher with plenty of pointers for future reference.

Higher education constraints

In an article detailing a ten year round up of the CTI Centre for Textual Studies, [Deegan](#) (2000) reported that "in higher education in the UK we are increasingly operating in a self-driven learning environment, for reasons which are as much political and economic as they are pedagogical and intellectual. Staff continually juggle their teaching, research and administrative responsibilities within a tight time scale, with motivation and morale running low and a 486 or Pentium I on the desktop".

Technical constraints are accepted as being part of the Arts faculty. It is not unusual for staff computing queries to be a low priority. An upgrade in one area makes it unlikely that versions are compatible between the department, home and library. This adds frustration and wastes invaluable time tracking down the technical help. A senior lecturer pointed out that it "takes six months to get a computer attended to!"

Conclusion

C&IT is an invaluable communications and retrieval tool and means of information provision for those who have discovered it. In English, the two greatest influences of the technological advances have been word processing and electronic mail. A Professor commented: "Email is now essential for any kind of academic business - speed, ease, friendly, almost like talking; has a nice informality about it".

In reality, a core number of technologically minded staff has been converted to aspects of C&IT. Carrying out the occasional PowerPoint lecture or including a singular URL in a bibliography, is hardly revolutionary. Some staff would like to incorporate hypertext in a module, but the resources are not available to do so, or student interest is insufficient.

There are still academics that rely on the paper memo and informal communications to conduct their scholarly activities. C&IT has the potential to alter the delivery of English in the future if institutional and technical issues are addressed. No two English departments and staff within the University of Wales can be classed the same in terms of budgets, facilities, research interests or constitution.

A Welsh academic who has been teaching for almost thirty years in English, offered this sentiment, "the future for English is much as it always was - as long as there is the book" - and he is a fairly active user of C&IT.

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