

Project Description:

Northwest Academic Computing Consortium “Proof of Concept Grant”

Plateau Portal: Native American Collections on the Web

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Project Description:

The Plateau Portal project seeks to create a web-based environment that allows the Plateau People’s cultural materials in Washington State University’s special collections to be curated, catalogued, and accessed by students, faculty, and Native individual and organizations throughout the Pacific Northwest. The portal will be an interactive and educational space where students, faculty, researchers and Native people can access, document, engage with and learn about the cultural heritage, histories and present-day experiences of Plateau peoples. The site aims to integrate web 2.0 technologies such as custom tagging, geo-tagging, direct feedback loops, and user-generated comments to enrich user experience and drive a collaborative framework for knowledge sharing. Users will be able to explore maps of areas where historical objects were collected and listen to the present-day community members’ recollections at the same time as they can organize materials into their own collections and produce slideshows through the site’s interactive features. By “tagging” content with user-generated metadata the portal seeks to integrate a collaborative framework for knowledge generation—one that includes many voices in the process of building historical records. Vital to this effort is the consultation with Native Tribes in the Plateau region. The Plateau Center has a mission to serve these groups and the portal will allow communities and individuals to access, curate, and narrate content within the site. Each piece of content, then, will have information from Native communities side by side with academic resources, and the input of visitors to the portal. The site will be accessible to these Native communities, not only on the Internet, but also on campus at the Plateau Center for American Indian Studies.

The Plateau Center for American Indian Studies at Washington State University has already begun a detailed digital inventory of the Native materials on the WSU campus with particular emphasis on collections held in the special collections of the University’s libraries and the Museum of Anthropology. This working inventory has valuable metadata for each piece of content surveyed and has been linked together in a temporary website that maintains the links for each piece of content (but not the digital content itself). This inventory will serve as the basis for the proposed web portal’s content. The portal will have several “paths” within it allowing students and others to engage with the histories embodied in the objects they see. The paths—history, culture, and tradition—will link materials to related themes, while also presenting the detailed information in many different formats. The content in each path will be dynamically generated by the database since each piece of content will have been tagged with various keywords. Searching for “treaty” a student may follow the history path and see government documents, artist’s sketches of the events, or images of government and tribal officials

who participated in the process. Or one may follow links through the culture path and see historic and contemporary images of the treaty signing places which have special meaning to the Plateau tribes and current tribal leaders statements about the importance of the treaties as the basis for their current legal and social standing as sovereign nations. Teachers will be able to organize lessons around distinct paths focusing on one aspect of tradition (folklore), a specific time period (1860s) or a Tribal group (Umatilla). In each case the portal will provide a unique learning environment where students' explore and discover at the same time as they are asked to leave comments, tag content or create their own slideshow.

Impact:

In 2005 Washington State House Bill 1495 was passed encouraging “educating the citizens of our state, particularly the youth who are our future leaders, about tribal history, culture, treaty rights, contemporary tribal and state government institutions and relations and the contribution of Indian nations to the state of Washington.” The Plateau Portal will aid teachers throughout the state to fulfill this mission by providing educational information about the rich and abiding traditions, cultures, and histories of Plateau peoples in an easily accessible format. Teachers will be able to access materials that have been available only to those few academic researchers who were able to search through the collections on WSU’s main campus. By digitizing the collections and curating them from the perspective of the Native Tribes themselves, the Portal will offer a powerful antidote to the marginalization of Native peoples and histories in Washington schools. In addition, students will be able to return over and over to the site and access their own “my collections” folder (with a user name and password) providing them with opportunities to further extend their curiosity and research. Teachers will be able to use the portal as a research tool and curricular platform for lessons concerning the history and culture of Plateau peoples.

Innovation:

The portal’s innovation comes from its emphasis on using “folksonomy”—collaborative, organic, and community-generated tags and metadata for content within the database. Unlike traditional hierarchical information structure, using a folksonomy structure allows us to integrate our emphasis on Native and community knowledge within the very logic of the portal’s functions and applications. Whereas in many museum and archive settings knowledge is “given,” here we seek to create a space to open dialogue and allow many perspectives to sit side by side. User generated tags and comments will be layered with Native perspectives in the presentation of all materials. We will also have a discussion forum section where user’s may ask questions and discuss issues in an online format. One of our main goals in the first phase of the project is to get input from Native community members regarding the content. The WSU special collections hold rich treasures that have significant meaning for Native communities in the region. Focusing on these usually marginalized voices will allow us to build a curatorial model that privileges both Native perspectives and gives students and others who use the portal a way to interact with the material.

Collaboration:

The project's cross-cultural goals will be facilitated by the collaboration between Washington State University's Plateau Center for American Indian Studies, Dr. Kimberly Christen in the Comparative Ethnic Studies Department, the Manuscripts, Archives and Special Collections Library and the Museum of Anthropology. The Plateau Center's Interim Director Barbara Aston and Dr. Kimberly Christen have worked collaboratively to develop the model for the portal's goals, parameters, and strategies for outreach to Native communities served by the Plateau Center. The input of Native communities is central to the project. The Plateau Center has already conducted preliminary meetings with Native representatives, library staff at Washington State University, and faculty members to facilitate the best technical solution to allow the Plateau collections to be catalogued and accessed by a wide range of constituencies. In addition, the project will involve Native graduate students on campus working through the Institute for Digital Diversity.

Feasibility:

The project has already taken significant steps toward the final goal of producing a web portal:

1. The Washington State University special collections have already been identified and metadata attached. These collections will be the content for the site once they are digitized.
2. A preliminary website has been launched for review by the relevant Tribes and feedback has already been solicited.
3. Outreach to communities based on specific collections will be facilitated once the collections have been digitized (as proposed in this grant)
4. A database model has already been established for the web portal through the prior digital projects of Dr. Kimberly Christen and software engineer Craig Dietrich. Features including content tagging, "my collections" and interactive comments have already been established within this prior partnership and can be leveraged for this new application.

Given that these steps have already been undertaken, the remaining work to design the interface for the site, implement the web 2.0 features and curate a batch of the content is certainly possible in the year framework of the grant.

Technology Transfer and Outreach:

1. Native American communities in the Northwest:
 - a. The Plateau Center for American Indian Studies at Washington State University conducts outreach to all communities in the region. The web portal will be accessible to all and through the Center on campus communities and individuals can gain training and give input on the content. The Center holds several on campus meetings each year to highlight activities and invite Native input. The portal would be a significant part of the events.
 - b. The Plateau Center for American Indian Studies at Washington State University presents its resources at several Native conferences each year.

These allow individuals and communities to see the research and resources available through the Center.

2. Curricular tool for Washington's public schools:
 - a. Through the Plateau Center the portal will be advertised to schools statewide as an accessible tool to meet the recommendations of House Bill 1495.
 - b. Bill Gillis, the Director of the Center to Bridge the Digital Divide at WSU, is interested in the tool as a possible cross application with some of their on-going projects with Washington Connect to produce curricular modules based on local Native American histories.

Curricular outcomes:

1. The portal aims to be a link for faculty and teachers throughout Washington state (and its neighbors) to gain curricular models for the presentation of Plateau people's histories and cultures in an interactive format. The portal will facilitate compliance with House Bill 1495 by allowing teachers to gain access to a range of Plateau histories and cultures in the region.
2. The portal will be a student accessible website dedicated to teaching students about Native American Tribes in the Plateau region through an interactive framework.

Outcomes Assessment Plan:

In order to track the viability of the web-based tool we will perform assessments at regular intervals throughout the development.

1. Task completion analysis
2. Technical stability testing
3. Quality assurance testing
4. Participant usability questionnaire

Project Schedule:

1. May-September
 - a. Student assistant digitizes sample collection (begin with 50-75 pieces of content from a cross-section of the collection that represents the Tribes and the three "paths" in the portal)
 - b. Technical team develops model for database applications and interactive features.
 - c. Outreach to Tribal communities based on digitized materials—gain feedback and first set of narrations on the content for the site.
2. September-December

- a. Graphic designer begins interface design in consultation with technical team and the specifications for the portal paths and interactive features
 - b. Technical team secures structure of the database and interactive features
 - c. Link content and narrations to the specific paths in the portal.
- 3. January-February
 - a. Get feedback on design and content curation with Native communities
 - b. User tests with WSU students
- 4. March-April
 - a. Implement any changes
 - b. Launch site

Budget:

Technical design (Craig Dietrich)	4,000
Graphic design (Colleen Taugher)	2,000
Graduate Student salary for digitizing (Shawn Lamebull)	1,500
PI summer salary for outreach (Kimberly Christen)	2,500
Total:	10,000