Teaching Culture as Social Constructivism

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Abstract. Teaching complex learning domains such as cultural awareness relies on individual perspectives. In this paper we present the process and technology to develop an online system to share multiple experiences of Aboriginal Culture in NSW, Australia within a social-constructivist framework.

The focus of the material is the Kinship system used for thousands of years in this region. This topic exemplifies the knowledge used to maintain societies and provides the setting for social conflict with the non-Aboriginal people who came here in recent history.

We are using stories from the community to augment the learning material. Using innovative web services, teachers can select the stories that are relevant to their course, and link these within a range of scenarios being developed. The scenarios enable students to select the way they relate to the characters, listen to their stories, and become aware of their own role in the community.

Keywords: Indigenous Knowledge, Community Narrative, Cultural Awareness.

1 Introduction

The paper describes the design and implementation of an online cultural training workshop based around the complex Kinship system used in NSW, Australia. It is to be used at Sydney University as part of the professional training of lawyers, teachers and social workers and at Edith Cowan University for health workers. The project arose from the fact that Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are still alienated and dispossessed within a highly affluent western society and their culture and values are rarely considered in decision-making.

Since commerce and education now involve the sharing of information electronically across the globe, it is important that Indigenous people are not excluded. Hence this research proposes software architectures and web services that can provide an

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environment in which Indigenous people will share knowledge for the maintenance of their culture and the education of others, while maintaining control of what is presented and how this is done.

The project is based on a face-to-face presentation developed by Riley [14] with the aim of making it available to many more people as a video and then enhances it with community narratives. In particular we wish to reflect where possible the Aboriginal knowledge sharing process, traditionally through interwoven stories, song and dance at a community ceremony or corroboree [13]. These dances provide for re-enactment and an environment for experiential learning of the subject matter. While web services provide a form of mediation that is representational and more static than previous methods of knowledge sharing [15] this medium does provide ability to combine material from many informants [6]. Furthermore we wish to emulate a performance, and develop the individual narratives into a coherent story, in this case using simulation or game environments.

2 Learning Design

We have developed an online workshop that teaches NSW Aboriginal culture relating to certain aspects of life, such as knowledge sharing protocols and communications strategies between distant groups. The understanding of these aspects of the Aboriginal culture is crucial for Australian professionals who will work with Aboriginal people as colleagues and clients. This knowledge is diachronic in that it presents the evolution of the culture and the environment over time. This differs to mainstream teaching that is concerned with generalising in a synchronic form, analysing processes and material at a certain point in time but differing contexts.

The original presentation has proved highly successful and has previously been evaluated, but the focus of this work is now to evaluate the process of converting the material to online format, and how to provide a learning format that is more interactive and incorporates the knowledge of the community, not just an individual. In particular, we wish to support the updating of information to mimic the changing choice of stories presented at Aboriginal ceremonies, to present material that relates to the changing conditions.

A video of this original presentation has been developed and is now online. Further information has been added to update the workshop, by linking new information to time slots in the presentation. Also the interactive role-plays have been presented as short flash videos with simple user interaction, and inserted into the workshop.

At the end of the original presentation students are placed in a European context that conflicts with the new knowledge they now have. We wish to expand this aspect of the learning for the online workshop by adding more stories of such experiences, and immersing students in relevant role-plays. The online workshop has been reviewed with feedback for improvement, and the next stage of the project is to run more workshops and assist users to upload their narratives and link them to the appropriate section of the workshop video.