

Discussion Draft (3/15/00):
Transforming Black Studies Via Information Technology

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The historical development of Black Studies has been turbulent, and at the cutting edge of many developments in higher education. This history includes linking the campus to the practical concerns of the community, transcending the limits of traditional disciplines, and developing a global perspective. Today Black Studies faces the challenge of information technology, and the transformation of modern institutions of higher education. This short paper is a brief discussion draft to explore the directions this might take.

The current situation is that every campus is being wired and finding ways to increase its use of computers and the Internet. However, resources to develop specific applications of this technology and to maintain web based resources are not readily available at this time. Access is a done deal, but utilization and development are not. This is the main question: How do we go from Black Studies to eBlack Studies (www.eblackstudies.net)? This is the second stage of the digital divide discussion, first access and then empowerment via creative productive utilization of the technology.

We can think about some basic projects and then think about how they can be carried out.

Projects to build eBlack Studies

1. Create a cyber community: There are over 250 academic programs with web sites. This is a major development. The eBlack web site is a comprehensive listing of these sites. These web sites are either administrative sites (basically part of an online catalogue closely maintained by the university administration), or dynamic sites managed by a departmental webmaster. This is a major aspect of eBlack being hampered by a scarcity of resources, but also will. Most programs would be able to use federal work-study money to hire students to serve as the technical assistant to care for a page. The conceptual work and information gathering would have to be managed by the faculty.

There are a few campus hub sites, in that they include a webliography of links to resources for the field. Here is where the anarchy of uneven development can be most readily seen. There are no standardized national lists of degree programs, journals, organizations,

reference works, digital libraries, or digital texts. This slows down the use of information technology, as people will do what is useful and conforms to a national standard.

2. Digitize conference reports: The conference for face to face interaction is an established practice for academics. However, there are now more than 200 conferences a year that might generally have major aspects that deal with the Black experience and be of interest to people in Black Studies. A few have published proceedings, some have useful printed programs or brochures, and a growing number have a conference announcement on the web. What is needed is a national online clearinghouse for Black Studies conference reports. This might be a full program with abstracts, online papers that are available, even audio and video documentation. This is not only using the Internet to keep professionals in the field on a cost effective basis, but it gives more recognition to conferences as a legitimate form of intellectual production.
3. Develop cooperative campus-community action research program: The local Black Studies program is a major technical resource for the community to get wired, trained, and empowered with information technology. Students need the experience and the community needs the work to be done. This can range from linking up with the community technology centers movement, in order to service the labs and teach classes, to building a network via email or linked web pages. A major example of this is the cyber church project in Toledo. Students are assigned to build a web site for a local church, and then they recruit members of the church to attend the weekly cyber church workshop at a local community based computing center. Older church members are encouraged to enroll in this course through a special program designed to educate seniors.
4. Develop statewide research collaboration: As the Black communities of a state get wired and develop web sites, there is a need to gather these sites into a cluster that can be easily accessed. This is the promise of the search engines, but they prove inadequate as their key word searching lacks the careful selection that is possible and needed for academic and social utility. What is needed is a portal to a comprehensive state webliography that covers the Black experience. As part of this campus-community collaboration, faculty and student research projects can be listed so that people

working in the same areas on similar data can know about each other and finds ways to help each other.

5. BRAIN (Black Research Archive on the Internet): this is the penultimate research project to launch eBlack Studies. There is no mega-project to index and codify the intellectual production of Black Studies. Information technology makes this possible on a scale that far exceed anything in intellectual history. We are still working primarily with the limitations of the printed text, from bibliography to biography to anthology to collected works. The printed page is static and scarce. We can move from biography and collected works to archives on line, from anthology to an inclusive collection of all voices, from one text to all texts. The geographically limited archive can be a click away from everybody all of the time.

The beginning of this project can be a new database of intellectual products. Every intellectual of record (a much needed definition is required here) can be listed and a selection of work digitized and made available on the web. Ultimately the goal is everything that everybody ever wrote - a real record of intellectual production. Each network will use the material it values, but the ease of use will lead to combinations and linkages that will create new networks and new knowledge. Remember the maxim: creativity for a new order emerges at the edge of chaos.

Project implementation:

1. Central to all of this is the organization of a network of the graduate degree granting programs in African American Studies. These programs today have at least 300 people officially enrolled in MA or PHD programs, and at least 10,000 taking graduate level courses. These programs will determine the future of the field and must be the basis for transforming Black Studies into eBlack Studies. Graduate students will create eBlack. They will be held to a different standard than their faculty, a standard that includes cyber skills.
2. There is a need for at least one major technical resource center that can jump-start the final phase of getting organizations and journals on line, as well as develop Internet standards for the field. This technical resource center has to be funded and able to provide free service to regional and national level organizations and publications.

3. Every program should be encouraged to develop a course on cyberspace and the Black experience. This course should provide the student with basic cyber skills including the fundamentals of building a web page.
4. Every institution in the USA should be linked through a partnership with an institution in a developing country context in African and/or the African Diaspora. This partnership should involve assisting with acquiring hardware, training staff, wiring the campus, helping to move the curriculum and research online, and distance learning by offering course to the world from Africa.
5. Every Black Studies program should participate in calling forth a community wide dialogue for the development of a strategic plan for the full utilization of information technology in the Black community. In fact, this will hit everyone because at this time very few communities have any such plan at all.

In sum, we have needs and there are ways to meet these needs. This paper is merely a step in the direction we have to go. This paper is being circulated for discussion and criticism. It is hoped that we will critique this paper via our practice as well as our ideas. We need to share the web sites that are our best practices. We need to get real about the information revolution and the need to wire our community and get online.

Please circulate this discussion draft and comment. The more we talk, the closer we get to agreement. Clarity and unity around principles will lead to unity of action. Our task is to transform Black Studies into eBlack Studies. The time is now.