

DANA BARROW

Networked Collaboration Transforms Curricula

The Case of Arab Culture and Civilization

A group of liberal arts colleges formed a national network supported by three regional technology centers

WHILE THE WEB has become many people's first—sometimes only—stop when they are looking for information, for many academics it remains a slightly suspect source. Aside from a limited number of trusted sites created by major players in the media, science, and arts establishments, academics rely on nothing less than peer-reviewed journals, university presses, primary sources, and their own independent research for the material that fuels their work. These academic sources are everything Web sources generally are not.

Academic sources are written by researchers with traceable credentials and institutional affiliations, vetted by editors, reviewed by other scholars, printed on acid-free paper, and deposited into libraries to be catalogued by professionals. It is no wonder then that Web-based sources, which are famous for appearing suddenly on anonymously created sites, running the gamut from considered opinions to rants from the fringe, and disappearing just as suddenly, are often perceived in academia as second-rate. Faculty may have their own course-related Web sites, but they often have little faith that most students will be discriminating enough to distinguish between

the relative merits of the thousands of sites retrieved in a typical search—especially a search on a hot topic such as “Islam.”

What would you think as a scholar, however, if a Web search for keywords “Arab world” or “Islam” turned up something unexpected: a site with a substantial collection of high-quality, multimedia course materials on Arab culture and civilization, created by academics and for academics, and freely available to anyone with an Internet connection? Such a site exists now and receives around 1,000 hits a day, giving it a much more public face than many academic publications. Conceived and created by the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education (NITLE) and a network of academics from liberal arts colleges across the country, the Arab Culture and Civilization Web site is an interdisciplinary, collaborative project spurred by the spike in demand for curricular offerings on Arab, Islamic, and Middle Eastern studies after September 11, 2001. It offers course modules on history, ethnicity and identity, Islam, Arab Americans, literature and philosophy, popular culture and performing arts, family and society, art and architecture, the Arabic language, and geography. Each module features a variety of materials ranging from major texts on Arab culture, to film clips from classic Arab cinema, to interviews with well-known scholars that were produced especially for the site, to music clips, maps, and a timeline that traces key historical

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The Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem

events in the Arab world. The site has been well-received, and was even named a “Yahoo Pick” in November 2003.

It was Clara Yu, the director of NITLE, who first floated the idea for the site. “The Arab Culture initiative came into being because, right after September 11, we felt we needed to do something useful rather than just be angry or helpless,” she explains. “It turned out that there was—and still is—a real need for rich curricular offerings in this general area... so it was the convergence of need and circumstance.”

Creating NITLE

At that time NITLE was a newly minted organization. The organization emerged from discussions among administrators from small liberal arts colleges who faced similar concerns as they struggled to guide their institutions through the maze of possibilities created by monumental changes in information technology. With funding and support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, a group of liberal arts colleges formed a national network supported by three regional technology centers. The idea behind this “centers strategy” was to coordinate interinstitutional collaboration to make the most efficient use of financial, infrastructural, and knowledge-based resources so that new

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technology could be integrated effectively on liberal arts college campuses. Further discussion and research into the needs of the colleges led to the creation of a national institute to promote innovation in the liberal arts. With approval and funding from Mellon, NITLE was created and became the

first virtual, networked collaborative of its kind in higher education with eighty-one affiliated liberal arts colleges.

For Yu, NITLE is an experiment. At the moment, she says that the Institute’s most important work is “ensuring that the liberal arts college sector remains vibrant and up-to-date, that technology deployment on these campuses is done in well-planned and cost-effective ways, and that curricular transformation takes place in the greater context of information management.” Beyond these fundamental efforts, she adds, “One ambitious goal is to become the research and development arm of education.” After all, she argues, “What other multibillion dollar ‘industry’ does not have a research and development agenda? How can we afford not to have one when our ‘product’ is supposed to be the most informed and thoughtful citizens of the future?”

The Arab Culture and Civilization site is one aspect of this wider agenda. Specifically,

Address <http://www.nitle.org/Arabworld/> Go Links »

Arab Culture and Civilization

A Collaborative Web Project Sponsored by the National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education

Introduction

The [National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education](#) has developed this site, with funds from the [Andrew W. Mellon Foundation](#), as a resource for all who would develop a better understanding of the Arab world. While our principal audience is the students, faculty, staff and alumni of the liberal arts colleges served by NITLE, the site is open to all visitors.

The materials comprising the site are organized thematically into a set of ten modules, each of which contains a variety of original texts, video clips and audio files from online and print sources.

Please note that these materials are not in the public domain, and may not be used without the permission of their respective copyright holders. For more information about citing and requesting permission for copyrighted work on our site, please refer to our [copyright policy](#).

This website represents a collaborative effort between many scholars, technologists, and institutions. You can find a full history of the project on our [about](#) page, or see a complete list of contributors on the [credits](#) page.

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www.nitle.org/Arabworld

it is a single element of NITLE's larger initiative on the Arab world that encompasses a discussion forum called al-Musharaka, a speakers' bureau, and national and international seminars that aim to cultivate collaborative opportunities for a broad community of scholars. The Arab world topic is one of several larger initiatives that NITLE is currently pursuing, including others focused on Bioinformatics, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and New Media. On the research and development side, the Institute runs a census of Weblogs, and designs sophisticated search tools and other applications tailored for the needs of higher education.

NITLE used managed collaboration to bring together the efforts of a fairly large number of contributors to develop the Arab Culture and Civilization site. Conceived post-9/11, the site went live in September of 2002. Despite the swift turnaround, the site was held to traditional academic standards for publication. Materials were created and sourced by faculty from liberal arts colleges, copyright permissions were obtained, content was critiqued and refined by editors and peer review, and the site's contents were sent to college librarians for indexing. The end result is a pool of materials that faculty can dip into when planning a new course, and a foundation for the creation of new, collaborative, intercampus courses to come. This pace and style of development is unusual in an academic context where new curricular offerings or complex projects often take shape slowly, with just one or two people shouldering the responsibility of coordinating them.

The Arab Culture and Civilization site also bucks the trend in the world of academic publishing, where MIT's OpenCourseWare initiative is one of the few examples of academic institutions making course materials freely available online. After all, even if faculty have the desire to organize an online venue for their research and course materials, more often than not finding the time, money, technical support, and professional incentive to make it happen has been very difficult. Academic success has long revolved primarily around the work of the individual and his or her intellectual property. Putting this property "out there" on the Web where anyone can see it raises fears of idea theft, and some faculty refuse to put even a course syllabus online unless it is password protected. Liberal arts colleges

themselves also have reservations about sharing what is essentially a major element of their product for free online.

Idea into reality

So how did NITLE persuade faculty and copyright holders to put their reservations aside and participate in the project? Michael Toler, a Ph.D. candidate at Binghamton University who acted as the chief editor on the project, explains that this was one of the biggest challenges the Institute faced. It was "the unprecedented nature of the project," he says, "which made it difficult for me to convince both the providers of the material and the people we wanted to bring on board to participate. . . . Of course, the publishers we approached . . . had never had a request that would make the texts as publicly accessible as our site does. Several film distributors . . . didn't know how to handle [the situation] or what to charge for a clip from a film that wasn't a preview or promotional clip. . . . The newness of NITLE as an organization didn't help either. . . . What did make people listen was, of course, the Mellon Foundation backing, as well the reputation of our member colleges. Now this process is a bit easier because I can . . . show them that this upstart organization has already racked up some significant accomplishments."

It was not always necessary to persuade faculty to participate. When Toler contacted Azzedine Layachi, a member of the faculty at St. John's College whose work focuses on North Africa and political Islam, and asked him to act as a consultant on the project, Layachi says he jumped at the chance. In his view creating a serious Web site full of resources on the Middle East, especially in light of current events, was a necessary endeavor. "People tend to rely on the Web more than ever for all kinds of information, so this kind of resource is especially important." He worked on critically reviewing all of the materials Toler and the site's other contributors had gathered, making recommendations for what to include and exclude and checking the content for accuracy. He submitted some of his own research, both published and unpublished, and suggested other scholars who NITLE might contact for contributions. As he worked he sensed a difference between this project for an online audience and the traditional academic

publications he had written before. “You feel a huge responsibility,” he explains. “This site would be sent out to a wider audience, and an audience that had been shocked, so one had to do the best one could without watering down the information or being apologetic about it.”

In addition to consultants such as Layachi, NITLE hosted annual summer seminars that brought together faculty from its member colleges to discuss ways of using the Arab Culture and Civilization site to develop collaborative courses or modules that might enhance their curricula. Rachid Aadnani, a professor of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies at Wellesley College, was a seminar participant who later became involved more deeply as a content consultant. He had been involved with other collaborative technical projects before. Despite these experiences, he says he realized that “it is hard to fit new online technologies that you are just getting acquainted with into your teaching style. But,” he adds, “I have to say that after the [NITLE] seminar, I found quite a few ways of using what I learned to improve my teaching and involve students in new communicative and interactive projects.”

Other faculty involved with the site have also been inspired by its potential to create new and interesting learning experiences for students. Doug Davis of Haverford College is a personality psychologist by training, with a special interest in adolescence in Morocco and the United States. He linked his own course Web site to the Arab Culture and Civilization site, and would like to create a threaded discussion between adolescents in the Middle East, Europe, and America to explore what it means to be a Muslim adolescent around the world. “Although you can probably drop into a version of this kind of chat using America Online (AOL), this is a more secure environment where people have an identity and a recognizable address.” He also sees the site as a venue for sharing research and course materials from American colleges with other academic institutions in the Middle East. “Middle Eastern libraries have good Internet connections, but they have libraries that are struggling to keep up with materials from America, which are very expensive for them. They need online materials. I want people in Morocco to be able to read what I write about Morocco and vice-versa, so I put

all of my work that’s remotely ready for prime time online.”

Davis also serves as the director of NITLE’s al-Musharaka, a forum for discussion and collaboration that grew out of the summer seminars. Davis and Toler recognized the need for al-Musharaka as a means of making it easier for faculty to stay in touch and sustain enthusiasm after successful group sessions.

Behind the scenes

Al-Musharaka is a public face of NITLE’s efforts to facilitate collaboration and projects, but there is even more behind-the-scenes work that goes into sustaining these endeavors. It is these unglamorous things—prodding contributors for materials, making agendas, settling the logistics of seminars, obtaining copyright permissions, marking up text for the Web—that are reminders of why the complex initiatives NITLE is tackling have not been seen before on this scale in the liberal arts. These kinds of networked, collaborative projects cannot be managed easily within the traditional, individualistic culture of academe, where a single faculty member trying to coordinate the day-to-day details would be swamped in short order. They require extensive support and a cyberinfrastructure of computing power, communication, and collaboration to make them work.

Recently, NITLE has been a voice representing liberal arts colleges at a meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) that focused on crafting a whitepaper to explore strategies for building this kind of cyberinfrastructure for the humanities and social sciences. Meanwhile, the Institute has been carving out its own approaches to the technical end of its projects to ensure that its initiatives reach as wide an audience as possible.

One of its commitments is to open-source technologies. Maciej Ceglowski, one of NITLE’s lead site programmers who helped to build the Arab Culture and Civilization site, says, “We have several strong reasons for using open source. One reason is economic. Instead of spending money—or requiring member institutions to spend money—on software licenses, NITLE is able to concentrate its financial resources elsewhere. Developing a project like the Arab Culture and Civilization site using commercial software . . . would have cost several thousand dollars and imposed added

costs associated with securing the system. Another reason is pragmatic. We have a small development team, and using open source lets us get the most out of our staff resources. Not only are we able to reuse existing open-source components, we are also able to attract other developers from the open-source community to volunteer time and effort to our projects.”

Despite the complexity of the project, the site was built swiftly by the tech team. Ceglowski says that the site was designed in about three weeks, and then redesigned closer to release to incorporate user feedback and colleagues’ suggestions. The slower work came with the process of preparing texts for the site through scanning and markup. “Markup was the most resource-intensive part of the entire project,” Ceglowski recalls. Since most of the materials were sent to NITLE as print media, they had to be scanned using optical character recognition (OCR) software, and then laboriously hand-checked for errors. There was no getting around the necessity of having a human reader proof all of the texts for typos and markup errors. Ceglowski estimates that a typical article required from five to ten hours of work.

The Arab Culture and Civilization site has been in many ways a proving ground for NITLE’s larger experiments in bringing together fluid, dynamic, collaborative teams of educators to address a wide variety of topics that meet changing curricular needs. Traditionally this is something that has been difficult to do in academia, where institutional structures tend to be somewhat fixed and inflexible. On the one hand, this slightly static model still serves the academic well. It allows colleges to make long-term investments in their knowledge workers and removes some of the pressures of the profit motive so that colleges can address broad as well as niche audiences and continue a tradition of free thought. However, this model can shed liabilities—lack of inno-

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vation, a slowness to adapt to changing needs, and relative isolation for individual campuses—when it is overlaid with the kind of organized social network NITLE can provide to foster shared use of intellectual, technical, and financial resources.

This kind of network has the power to recast the debate over the future of liberal education and break down dichotomies that pit residential liberal arts colleges against distance education, liberal arts education against “practical” education, and elite liberal arts colleges against colleges with modest endowments. Virtual networked collaboratives can draw the benefits from various models of education on an as-needed basis, maintaining institutional individuality while expanding the

options for faculty and students in productive ways. “In a collaborative our colleges are stronger and can have a much greater impact,” argues Michael Toler.

Looking back on the process of creating the Arab Culture and Civilization site, Maciej Ceglowski recalls how “the project came out a year after September 11, in a charged political atmosphere with a lot of jingoistic attitudes towards the Arab world and Islam in general loudly making themselves heard online. I was proud to be a part of a team that made this kind of solid, nuanced, and interesting collection of materials available online, and I was particularly happy that the site would be open to the public without restriction. When you type ‘Arab world’ into Google our site appears on the front page of results. That’s a good feeling.” □

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