



Studio portrait of "Gentleman" Joe McKay and Chief Mistawasis studying a book. Likely taken sometime after the 1885 uprising. Prince Albert Historical Society photograph collection.

## **The Importance of Easy Access to Online Information Resources for Aboriginal Researchers**

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This essay is coming from the perspective of my role as Indigenous Studies Portal Librarian and Team Leader at the University of Saskatchewan. The iPortal, located at: <http://iportal.usask.ca> is an online search tool (like a database), currently with links to over 10,000 full-text resources (including articles, book reviews, e-books, government reports and websites), all related to Indigenous Studies. However, I would also like to acknowledge the importance of having online access to the more than 4000 archival records in the *Our Legacy* database, available at: <http://scaa.sk.ca/ourlegacy/>.

This is also an opportune time to congratulate the team at the University of Saskatchewan for obtaining 3 grants simultaneously and for carrying this complex digitization project through to development of a very successful and usable website. Users will want to check back often to search for forthcoming additions to the *kā-kī-pē-isi-nakatamākawiyahk / Our Legacy* website as it grows with future successful grant submissions.

It is not a surprise that both the iPortal initiative and the *Our Legacy* project are associated with the University of Saskatchewan, given that the Province of Saskatchewan has the highest percentage of Aboriginal people of any Canadian province. This demographic manifests itself at the University of Saskatchewan in that we have the highest percentage (nearly

10%) and number (approximately 1,800) of Aboriginal students of any doctoral university in Canada.

It should also be noted that the University of Saskatchewan is also rich with a critical mass of Aboriginal faculty, Research Chairs, and programming which in turn necessitates a concerted effort by information professionals on campus to assist in meeting the information needs of those who make up this critical mass and those of the students they serve.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of Indigenous Studies, relevant resources are often scattered across campus, including at branch libraries and at various colleges and programs. To reinforce the idea of how widespread the information resources might be, it is appropriate to list the various relevant Indigenous Studies programs offered at the University of Saskatchewan. There is the Native Studies Department, the first such department in Canada to have all Aboriginal faculty members with Ph.D.'s. In the College of Education, there is a wide range of Indigenous programming. This includes the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP), the INEP (Indian and Northern Education) Program in Graduate Studies, the SUNTEP (Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education) Program, the Aboriginal Education Research Centre and the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre.

There is also the Native Law Centre, the Native Access Program to Nursing / Medicine, the Aboriginal Business Education Program, the Aboriginal Justice and Criminology Program, the Indigenous Peoples and Justice Program, the Indigenous Peoples Resource Management Certificate Program in the Department of Agriculture and Bioresources, Aboriginal Public Administration and the Aboriginal MBA Program.

There are also many courses with Aboriginal content offered in the College of Arts and Science, including in Anthropology, Art History, English, History, Political Studies, Psychology and Sociology.

Also at the University of Saskatchewan are some relevant Canada Research Chairs, such as the CRC in Aboriginal Health, the CRC in Native-Newcomer Relations (Department of History), and the CRC in Identity and Diversity: The Aboriginal Experience (Department of Geography).

As a result of the variety of courses and programs that discuss Indigenous thought and knowledge, there is a vast range of information resources that can be relevant for supporting Aboriginal research and scholarship. I would like to stress the importance of those that are available in electronic format. This includes peer-reviewed articles and book reviews available through subscription (i.e. via database vendors); theses (which might also be available via database vendors but also through institutional repositories and the Theses Canada Portal, an initiative of Library and Archives Canada); electronic books (also available through subscription database vendors but also PDF files available through various types of websites, including governmental reports, digitization projects and institutional repositories); and websites that provide information in formats other than PDF files. So, what is the value of having information online for Aboriginal people?

Well, that depends. If the Aboriginal researcher has easy access to the Internet, then online information can open up the world to this individual; however, there is the drawback of encountering too much information via the Internet and the difficulty of finding what is most relevant. But if the Aboriginal researcher is also associated with the University of Saskatchewan (i.e. has University authorization to access

library subscription resources), then the iPortal serves as a filtering tool to provide a one-stop access to online resources specific to the interdisciplinary field of Indigenous Studies. For instance, the iPortal has historically been strong in the areas of Education, Legal, Health, History and Indigenous knowledge resources. More recently, the iPortal has been strengthening its linkage to online resources in the areas of Art, Literature and Women's Studies.

Though the iPortal has its first mandate to serve University of Saskatchewan researchers, we are also interested in providing access to online resources to the global Indigenous community. This is why we invite other academic libraries to link up to the iPortal with link resolver software so that their clientele can also access content from subscription databases directly through the iPortal. In addition, we also link to many online resources that are open access, or available to everyone, rather than just subscription-based resources from database and e-book vendors. We even have an option to search solely by open access resources.

Another feature about online resources, including those on the iPortal, is their availability 24 hours per day, 7 days per week and therefore not restricted to the opening hours of the physical Library setting. This is especially helpful for Aboriginal students who have families (and my understanding is that the majority of Aboriginal students do have families); the online resources are accessible at times of the day when family responsibilities are less demanding in contrast to when the Library's physical building is open. As well, the online resources are available for use from home, from work, or even when traveling, such as to conferences, and to our global Indigenous brothers and sisters, no matter what time zone they live in.

I also think that the issue of Indigenous knowledge being available online needs to be addressed in this essay. There are issues surrounding the easy accessibility of “sacred knowledge” online and this is particularly controversial for archival information. On the one hand, as information professionals, we have a responsibility to aid researchers in their search for information that will be relevant for their research. On the other hand, we also have a responsibility to the Aboriginal community so that information that may harm or offend individuals is protected or dealt with at a different level. For instance, some digitization projects of Aboriginal or Indigenous archival and museum materials have incorporated passwords to access these materials online, thereby allowing people from the relevant community to access those records that pertain to them. With the *Our Legacy* site, we have been quite cautious to not offend communities in that we have attempted to protect sacred knowledge by not digitizing it. We have also explained on the website that some out-dated terminology used in the titles of archival materials has been transcribed verbatim. Further explained on the website, it is important to know that this terminology does not reflect the views of the website project organizers; rather, such terminology has been retained to provide evidence of the mainstream mindset of the era in which the titling of the various archival materials (such as photos) took place.

In terms of published (i.e. non-archival) materials, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, I once asked an Aboriginal student from the University of Saskatchewan what he thought of accessing (via the iPortal) academic papers that contain Indigenous knowledge and their being available on the Internet. He was impressed with the way that Indigenous scholars were able to walk in both worlds, that is, to publish papers in peer-reviewed journals (and thereby meet academic standards) and to do so from an Indigenous world view,

incorporating their cultural traditions but in a way that was respectful of them. In the student's view, he was receiving the best of both worlds by being able to receive cultural teachings one-on-one from Elders (both on and off campus) and by being able to receive cultural teachings by way of Indigenous faculty and researchers (both in the classroom and through their published work).

This example speaks to the sense of identity and empowerment that comes from the academic exercise of Aboriginal students journeying through their post-secondary education. It is very empowering to be able to access resources written from an Indigenous perspective in order to support your own research program. Finding resources that strengthen the researcher's connection to community is extremely important to the individual's personal growth, their development of identity and their healing. Not only that, it offsets the sometimes soul-wrenching experience it can be to deconstruct so many entrenched Western paradigms that dictate the academic environment and that also negate or devalue Indigenous knowledge and world view. Looking through the exhibits in the *Our Legacy* project provides another example of how the archival resources digitized for the website have enabled First Nations and Métis authors to do their research and express themselves with confidence. And when these resources are available online and in open access format (i.e. with no password involved), it encourages a wider audience to do the same.

Perhaps the most basic benefit to Aboriginal people in having access to online resources in the iPortal and in the *Our Legacy* websites is that these online databases each have a very user-friendly and robust (mostly free from system failure) search engine. Because of this, searching these sites saves the searcher considerable valuable time in gaining access to the

information, as opposed to looking for the journal on the shelf and then photocopying the article, or in the case of archival material, physically accessing the finding aid and the box of materials containing the document from the University of Saskatchewan and other archives.

In addition, because of the iPortal search engine, the same subject (or author) can be searched in various journals at the same time or in various issues/years of the same journal at the same time (rather than searching each journal individually). This feature is known as indexing. The value of the indexing feature can be demonstrated by explaining a recent partnership the iPortal engaged in with Brandon University to digitize nine volumes (from 1997 to 2005) of their *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*. In doing so, the iPortal team has provided more than 150 articles and approximately 160 book reviews to users in open access format (open to everyone, even to those people who did not have access to the print version) that were previously only available in print format. Because of its search engine, the iPortal is the only database that both indexes and links directly to content of the *CJNS*. The iPortal is also the only database that indexes and links to two other journals: the *Journal of Aboriginal Health* and the *Justice as Healing* periodical.

Another partnership, with Purich Publishing of Saskatoon, has also provided some unique content online. This publishing company approached the iPortal to assist with obtaining copyright permissions from the authors of essays contained in their out-of-print book, *Continuing Poundmaker and Riel's Quest*, a collection of the proceedings from a Native law conference hosted by the College of Law at the University of Saskatchewan in 1993. The iPortal team then digitized each conference paper for which permissions were obtained and the iPortal hosts these papers on its website for all users to access

and print off if desired. This saves users from both contacting the publisher for a copy of one of the essays or where the book is available in a local library, having to go to the library to find the book on the shelf and then photocopy the essay or conference paper of interest (at least for those papers whose copyright permission was obtained, that is, about 60% of the book). Having these essays online also provides an efficient option for libraries which do not have the book from accessing the essays via interlibrary loan to fulfill user requests.

One other partnership involved the scanning of various archival resources (including photos, pamphlets and other textual materials) that were part of the University of Saskatchewan Library's Special Collections. These digitized resources became a part of the *Our Legacy* website and will soon also become records on the iPortal website. We look forward to adding close to 4000 archival records to the iPortal as a way to enhance the wide range of online research resources available to Aboriginal researchers. The important thing to remember about online archival resources is that they can provide some important information that can't be found elsewhere or can only be found with great difficulty. An interesting benefit of the availability of *Our Legacy* resources is that it also adds to the previous dearth of content for Northern Saskatchewan materials. This is thanks to the active participation of the Pakhisimon Nuyehāh Library System in La Ronge as one of our partnering institutions. As well, many archival resources, such as photos, diaries, and correspondence, are very good sources for expanding community histories and for genealogical purposes. For instance, when these types of original or primary sources are digitized, people are that much more encouraged to research their family roots. And for Aboriginal people, this can have lasting practical implications, such as in the cases of applying for band membership and residential school claims. On a lighter note, two Aboriginal students once told me they

were interested in genealogy because they wanted to find out if they were descended from royalty and to be sure that they wouldn't marry a relative!

At this point, I would like to thank the iPortal team for their scanning, metadata entry and other technical contributions for all three of the digitization partnerships that we completed in the last year (that is, the nine volumes of the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, the Purich book content and the *Our Legacy* website database content). You may never hear how much the resources that you helped to make accessible online have helped people – but please know that these resources will have a huge impact on the lives of many people, now and for the next generations.

Hay hay / meegwech / thank you.

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