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WebQuests: Supporting Inquiry Learning with Primary Sources

Within these columns I have purposely tried to limit myself to discussing strategies and practices that require little in the way of technology. I hope readers have appreciated my intention of recommending strategic moves that are feasible within all types of school and classroom settings, even those with very limited resources. In this issue, however, I have decided to propose and exemplify an approach to teaching that exploits the learning potential of the Internet. Specifically, I want to talk about using WebQuests for learning from primary documents.

WebQuests are inquiry-oriented activities in which some or all of the information learners interact with comes from resources on the Internet (Dodge, 2000). Think of them as focused searches designed to avoid endless Internet surfing and ensure students find quickly and efficiently Web-based source material for answering questions and conducting research. Primary documents are those texts written by and about individuals and groups who experienced the events of history, made or were impacted by the discoveries of science, or logged the development of their own ideas leading to, for example, new geometrical principles in math and engineering. They include authentic pieces of text and media such as letters, photographs, journal notes, blueprints, drawings, etc. These vivid and personal documents have been shown to intrigue students and provoke thoughtful and engaged responses (Barton, 2005; Hynd, 1999). It is worth

noting that American students who read primary documents on a fairly frequent basis, as often as at least once per week, achieved higher scores on a national assessment of history than their peers who rarely saw these sources (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Designing a WebQuest

Beyond the obvious requirement that students have access to a computer with an Internet connection, there are six key features of WebQuests teachers should include in their design (Shiveley & VanFossen, 2001). Normally, students find WebQuest information, directions and questions at a class Website, which makes it easy to explore sites by simply clicking on the available links. If necessary, however, this same information can be delivered to students in handout form.

1. *Introduction.* It is important to provide students with background information that gives them the purpose and expectations of the quest. For example, a history teacher might set the stage for a WebQuest of primary sources during the time period of World War II by briefly defining these sources, giving examples, then overviewing the goal of the quest.
2. *Task.* The WebQuest should be something the students are capable of doing, given available resources and skills, and it should be engaging. The history teacher could describe the World War II WebQuest task this way: *I want you to explore different WWII Websites provided for you. These sites make available many interesting primary documents from people who actually*

experienced and witnessed the war. Read and examine the documents so you will have a better understanding of the realities of wartime life.

3. *Information Sources.* Depending upon the sophistication of the available computer technology, information sources in addition to Web documents, could include experts available via e-mail or real-time conferencing and multimedia. To make sure students are not left adrift in Webspace, the history teacher can create the links to sites for them. These links might take students to an actual diary of a soldier in Central Europe, an oral memoir of a grandmother recounting her childhood experiences during the war, actual newspaper reports and editorials, movie clips and transcripts of presidential addresses.
4. *The Process.* This should spell out in clear detail the steps students need to follow in order to accomplish the WebQuest tasks. For example, the history teacher might present students with these charges:
 1. You will work in groups of four.
 2. Each member of the group will be responsible for reading and/or viewing one of the primary sources.
 3. Each group member will analyze their source for what it reveals about the writer's or speaker's attitude toward the war and write a brief summary of your analysis.
 4. Create a group report which combines the group member's individual analyses into an overall summary.

5. Elect a spokesperson from your group to present your report to the class.
5. *Guidance.* Students may need help organizing the information acquired or with how to approach their analysis of it. Teachers have referred to this feature by other names, such as *learning advice* or *helpful hints*. The history teacher could provide needed guidance in her WebQuest in the form of helpful suggestions that keep students focused on the connection between the writer's or speaker's words and attitudes. For example, the history teacher might pose these queries about a primary source: *What particular words do you find in the source that indicate a bias? How close to the actual war were the individuals and how might that influence their perspective on the war?*
6. *Conclusion.* This feature brings closure to the quest by reminding students what they learned and encouraging them to extend their new knowledge. Concluding statements can be as simple as this possibility from the history teacher: *Congratulations. You are now more familiar with World War II as a result of using primary sources. You are also able to analyze primary sources for what they reveal about the writer or speaker. As you continue your learning and researching use primary documents and sources to better understand the people and events.*

A Final Word About the Benefits of WebQuests

In typical disciplinary classrooms today there remain two ever-present, authoritative information sources—the teacher and the textbook (Brozo & Simpson, in press). This

seems to be true regardless of the availability of technology tools. Teachers can increase student engagement for and critical thinking about topics in the disciplines by introducing them to interesting primary documents and media using the Internet. Properly designed WebQuests eliminate for students the often inefficient process of surfing the WWW, while making available the specific URLs with valuable primary sources. With these sites already identified and tasks clearly described, students can focus their attention on analyzing and thinking meaningfully about the sources instead meandering through Webspaces.

Before the availability of Web-based tools, it is easy to see why primary sources, which were difficult to locate and copy, rarely found their way into most classrooms. The Internet makes instantly accessible to teachers and students every imaginable primary source related to any school-related topic. Teachers who employ WebQuests will see firsthand that primary sources are more attractive and engaging to students than traditional textbook treatments of topics and promote meaningful and long-lasting learning (Lawlor, 2003).

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