

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE LEARNING POWER OF WEBQUESTS

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A WebQuest is an inquiry-based activity that poses a challenging problem to the student and engages the student in creating a unique solution to the problem primarily through the use of internet resources. When well designed, a WebQuest will provide web-based activities that assist the student in becoming an independent learner. A WebQuest asks a question that can't easily be answered. It guides the student through a process of information gathering and assimilation, which culminates in a product or presentation. Throughout the entire process, critical thinking is essential. At no point in a WebQuest should the student be able to copy and paste someone else's information into their project. Each task in a WebQuest should require the learner to process data and apply it in a different way. WebQuests must be interesting, intriguing, and multi faceted in order to be a successful learning event for every student. A well designed WebQuest will engage the student and offer multiple opportunities for the learner to collect information, process it through collaboration and artifact generation, and successfully solve the challenge. A good challenge will not have a right or wrong answer, but will allow the student to critically think about the challenge and provide a well supported creative solution.

When properly developed, WebQuests can be an excellent teaching tool. The WebQuest model implements several different teaching models through the use of scaffolding. The components of the WebQuest provide the immediate building blocks for the student to step through the challenging activity. These components are used to frame a scenario in order to jumpstart the learner. Once the learner enters into the scenario, they begin to create their own unique solution. The process of investigation and solution development is where the true learning takes places. "The best WebQuests inspire students to see richer thematic relationships, contribute to the real world of learning, and reflect on their own metacognitive processes." (March, 2004.)

Challenging the learner by posing an open-ended question that requires research and creative problem solving is an extremely effective tool. By expecting the student to solve a problem they have no idea how to solve at the start, the student is instantly put on the edge of their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky as cited in Nakkula & Toshalis, 2008, p. 11). Being on the edge of this zone is where the most learning can occur; however, the appropriate support must also be present in order to prevent frustration in the student. Challenges that are too difficult or not well supported become frustrating tasks. The WebQuest approach is an excellent solution because the support materials are readily available as part of the WebQuest. The WebQuest includes internet resources that assist the student in acquiring the background knowledge needed to solve the problem and include them as part of the activity. Once the background research is completed, the WebQuest challenge truly begins. This part of the WebQuest is where the student will be directly engaged in the problem solving by being given a specific role to view the problem through. As the student assumes this role (either individually or as part of a team), the student has a way to frame the problem and a path to follow. Students who engage in this type of inquiry-based learning increase their motivation and ability to learn independently (Wagman, 2003).

One of the obstacles to implementing a WebQuest is in its creation. WebQuests take a tremendous amount of time and careful thought in order to be valuable. Each of the chosen activities needs to be crafted in such a way as to provide the student the opportunity to process the background information and apply it to the task at hand in a distinctive way. The challenge posed in the WebQuest is that the activities must include a mix of skill sets offering various paths to a solution that will accommodate each type of learner. Students must be given tasks they can integrate with skills they already possess, along with new skills to be acquired.

Because the critical thinking portion of the task can be so challenging for the student, there must be pieces of the activity that allow the student to use skills they have already mastered in order for them to be successful. Finding a set of tasks that will meet these criteria can be difficult. If the WebQuest is specifically designed within the context of the overall curriculum, this goal is more easily attained since the teacher can make sure that some of the necessary scaffolding is already in place before the WebQuest activity is assigned.

WebQuests that have the elements of a good design can be an extremely effective learning tool in the classroom. I would recommend that anyone who desires to use a WebQuest in their classroom think intently about the topic and supporting tasks. A WebQuest's strength is that it is more than just a collection and application of knowledge. It requires the learner to engage themselves in a task that has no right or wrong answer. It expects the student to craft a solution using their own creativity. While this type of learning is extremely valuable, it is also time consuming. Choosing the right topic to delve into is an extremely important part of the WebQuest activity. Using technology just because it exists does not add value to the overall goals the teacher needs to accomplish throughout the course of the year. While a WebQuest appears to be an excellent way to engage the student, I would recommend that it be used purposefully. Since each learner approaches a WebQuest project from a different angle, ensuring that the ultimate learning goal is accomplished may be challenging.

References

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