

Developing Social Studies WebQuests with Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

WebQuests are discussed in terms of how pre-service teachers have worked to construct useful and appropriate Internet activities for students. A set of WebQuests that meet high standards for use with students is presented.

About seven years ago I began introducing the WebQuest to teacher candidates in elementary and secondary social studies methods courses using *The WebQuest Page* <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/> by Bernie Dodge. Even though I consider this site the single best source of information about WebQuests, a deep understanding of any instructional strategy comes through the challenge of preparing a meaningful social studies lesson that properly uses the strategy. Whereas experienced teachers can use this site effectively, teacher candidates need more than the prompting of words and graphics. This article shares procedures that I have developed over the years to assist teacher candidates in making high quality WebQuests and shares four examples of WebQuests created by elementary teacher candidates during the spring semester of 2005.

My first instructional experiences in assessing *The WebQuest Page* during class and having the students work through, and discuss, the WebQuest on WebQuests, did not motivate a single teacher candidate to replace one or two days of lessons in the required unit by preparing a WebQuest. Moreover, not one student incorporated an available WebQuest into a unit. Therefore, I felt forced to require each student to create a WebQuest during the methods course in social studies.

Although all students during the next year rose to the challenge and succeeded, some with excellent examples, this second experience was frustrating. I confess that I considered eliminating this requirement for future classes, but I am stubborn when it comes to promoting innovations. The staff of graduate students in the computer center helped me to identify and correct problems as I graded the WebQuests and were pleased that the undergraduates were trying to learn to use computers effectively for teaching. They explained the types of problems being encountered, suggested solutions to me, and helped students to correct technical problems. Many of the teacher candidates wrote words of thanks and praise for the computer center staff members into the credit section of their WebQuests. Some teacher candidates thanked me for providing the assignment!

I assessed my students' skills and attitudes toward the use of computers prior to instruction and making the WebQuest, and again after completion of the experiences. Even with the frustrations, mostly related to lack of computer skills in that first year, almost all students indicated that they would probably use, if not develop, WebQuests in their future lessons. Many candidates expressed the belief that they would be able to make additional WebQuests, and I later learned that some did. These positive responses indicated that I should continue using the assignment. The assessments, personal observations, WebQuests, and discussions with the computer staff all provided additional ideas on how to change the procedures. I also believed that future students would have had more experiences with technology and would approach the assignment with a more positive attitude.

Because the teacher examples of WebQuests available on the Internet are made by teachers possessing experience in writing lessons who know the abilities of the youth who will use the WebQuest, I introduce the WebQuest very early in the methods classes so that I can integrate a set of assignments, procedures, and assessments related to the WebQuest. These help me prepare the teacher candidates for making their own WebQuests. The social studies methods class stresses the analysis of content, skills, and attitudes/values associated with meaningful social studies. Candidates today have greater computer experience, but the vast majority of them still develop their first webpage as a WebQuest in my methods classes. I am happy to report that the frustrations mostly are gone and the products have increased in quality over the years. Occasionally a student complains about the assignment indicating he or she does not care for computer encounters, but I have many supportive comments from former students, other faculty in the program, the director of the computer center, and those evaluating student exit portfolios who view social studies WebQuests as artifacts. Teacher candidates are coming to recognize that computers also have quirks and get confused just as students do. Therefore, the remaining frustrations are usually short lived. Additionally, the growing presence of computers in the schools prompted the addition of the statement "West Virginia teachers are responsible for analyzing the benefits of technology for learning and for integrating technology appropriately in the students' learning environment", <http://wvde.state.wv.us/policies/p2520.4.pdf>, to each of the descriptive statements in The Social Studies Content Standards and Objectives for West Virginia from Kindergarten through grade 11. This statement supports my efforts, and I point it out when addressing the standards for teaching social studies.

Integrating WebQuest Development into a Social Studies Methods Course

One objective for the social studies methods course addresses the various skills students need to learn social studies content including gathering and communicating information through the use of the computer. Teacher candidates do not recognize all the skills that need to be used in order to assist students to critically analyze information. Added to that is the role of the Internet in providing a wide range of potential instructional resources with varying accuracy, usability, and perspectives. I reinforce this in class by using the Internet to show pictures of some Hate products. The CD Digital Terrorism + Hate, also is used to illustrate the shocking terrorist and hate sites present on the Internet (see <http://www.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=fwLYKnN8LzH&b=259242>).

After this experience, teacher candidates understand the need to select sites appropriate for youth, especially for trusting students who have not yet learned how to evaluate social studies information.

A WebQuest is a very complex concept with many critical attributes. This fact demands the examination of more examples than can be presented in a class period. I quickly show several examples before I introduce the template. Learning to edit a template usually is a new skill for teacher candidates. The computer center staff instructs the class and provides a printed tutorial to help the teacher candidates download the template and begin editing it. I reinforce and explain important points, based on past experiences, and help with minor problems. We do this early in the semester so everyone leaves the session having performed several simple changes to the template and with a saved page that looks nice. Over the years we have found that the template, as downloaded from the Dodge site, does not work with our equipment at all times. So the computer center staff has created a template that works on our system, and I have worded particular sections of the template to match my assignment requirements. We anticipate that the new template will remove some of the past problems with editing the template, reducing problems for teacher candidates and the demand for staff help at a busy time.

Teacher candidates have two additional assignments that involve learning more about WebQuests and how students respond to a WebQuest. These are completed outside of class, but the findings are briefly discussed and highlighted in class. Teacher candidates are assigned to discussion groups at the course website and examine several WebQuests created in previous classes. The discussion thread centers around three questions:

1. What differences do you notice in the way the WebQuests are constructed?
2. What do you think is creative about each?
3. Which set of rubrics do you think evaluates the task most completely? Explain why you think it is most inclusive.

While at their field placement, the teacher candidates do an assignment that requires them to examine three additional WebQuests from the website of the National Council for Economic Education. <http://www.econedlink.org>. The candidate selects a WebQuest to use with four to six students of varying abilities whom they observe noting the ways in which the students approach the program and any problems the students encounter. In a written report, teacher candidates:

1. justify the selection of WebQuest for the students.
2. describe the students' responses to the use of the WebQuest.
3. describe the accuracy of their predictions on students' interests and attitudes.
4. explain what they learned about the students through the experiences with them.
5. explain how they will use this information in making their own WebQuest.

I explain that the WebQuest is an instructional strategy students should, ideally, complete on their own without teacher help. Therefore, students need to be able to read well enough to complete the WebQuest. Generally, this means students need to be in grade four or above. This assignment validates my comments. I provide students with a set of written instructions for making a WebQuest that begins by referencing Dodge's *The WebQuest Page*, and several examples of WebQuests that deal with a variety of popular

topics in the social studies curriculum. I indicate which of these have strong introductions, conclusions, and evaluations: the three required parts of the WebQuest that I find are the greatest challenge for teacher candidates. Many candidates follow these carefully, and some read the recommended article by Tom March (2004), “The Learning Power of WebQuests.” I have students bring their completed WebQuests to class and a classmate examines the WebQuest using the rubric and specifies in writing what he or she likes and what recommendations are for the author. This form is shared with the author and turned into me. When the revised WebQuest is turned in to me on a disk or CD-Rom for grading, each candidate turns in a short report form indicating what changes were made based on the classmate’s review and specifying what was done to add an element of creativity to the WebQuest and its task. The peer assessment procedure is helpful because it requires students to give attention to the rubrics and because their fellow students really apply the rubric and make helpful and pointed comments along with positive responses.

Teacher Candidate’s WebQuests for Elementary Grades

The sample of WebQuests described here is representative and specifically illustrates the range of topics and the variety of creative approaches the teacher candidates include to make their WebQuests cognitively strong, age appropriate, and motivating for students’ learning of social studies.

Jessica Channell, like many teachers, shares her personal travel experiences in preparing a unit for 5th graders on England. After questioning several students and learning that they were interested in other nations. Jessica developed a five-day unit that placed major focus on the Culture and People, Places, and Environment themes of the NCSS Standards (1994) through such questions as:

1. Where do people live in England?
2. What is the environment like?
3. What is the culture of England?
4. What are their traditions?
5. What is school like in England?

Jessica’s WebQuest, “What is it Like to Live in England?” is used at the end of her unit. It engages students in a review of previously learned information and expands learning through a virtual tour of sites in England,

<http://www.hre.wvu.edu/mhaas/spring2005/jchannell/index.htm>

Students visit sites on proper English manners and procedures a traveler performs before touring selected cities and sites. Other teacher candidates admire Jessica’s creative presentation. The first word in the introduction, “Swoosh”, dramatically conveys a change in location. The task of making a postcard requires students to be careful observers of the many pictures and to present knowledge in multiple ways to make an appropriate picture for the postcard.

Holly Vandevander’s topic “Child Labor During the Industrial Revolution” is a popular topic that allows students of today to compare their lives with those of children in the past, <http://www.hre.wvu.edu/mhaas/spring2005/hvandevander/index.htm>

Holly stresses higher order thinking through asking questions and creatively combining several webpages and WebQuests to serve her learning objectives. She begins by using pictures taken by Lewis W. Hine using questions that require careful examination of the pictures illustrating the various jobs performed by child labor in multiple industries. She uses narratives to link and introduce two other WebQuests that use additional types of primary data and multiple perspectives to examine issues in the debate on child labor. The task requires students to work together and present the views and perspectives of a historical character in both written form and orally to recreate the debate. Holly's mother used the WebQuest with sixth grade students who were particularly interested in the photographs by Lewis Hine. Holly says that completing her WebQuest requires five to six days instead of the three she originally thought would be needed. It is possible to reduce the time requirement by having all students complete the Hine's picture examination and have student groups select one of the additional WebQuests to complete.

Michael Linder enjoys making webpages and other teacher candidates admire his WebQuest's appearance. The appearance and knowledge sources are enhanced with the use of Civil War paintings by Mort Kunstler. The artist's Website has granted permission to include his pictures on the version of "Front Lines: A View of the Civil War" linked to this article, <http://www.hre.wvu.edu/mhaas/spring2005/mlinder/index.htm>

The Civil War is a popular topic of study in social studies at several grade levels and especially in states where battles were fought. Fifth graders responded well to this WebQuest. Students must critically analyze the resources at the links to write newspaper articles to present local perspectives in describing events and participants during the Civil War. Teacher candidates comment on the evaluation rubric because it includes and awards points for both the content and skills required to complete the task. Michael, a veteran, wants his teaching of the Civil War to help fifth graders view warfare as very serious and costly rather than with the misconception of glory and excitement. In the process section, Linder suggests that students examine their own written newspaper articles by using such questions as:

1. Does the article include information about the effects battles had on the losing and winning armies, along with the communities surrounding the battlefield?
2. Does my use of descriptive language in the article give the reader a sense of what I witnessed during each battle?
3. Is the information that I have presented in my article correct, even though it may be biased toward one side or the other?

Angela VanSickle's unit and WebQuest focus on the 1950's as this is the time period during which most of the fifth grader's grandparents were in elementary school. In the past many students selected this topic for units, but the availability of webpages provides many interesting pictures and details not available locally or through interviews with grandparents. Angela found websites that add a personal connection, understandable to today's youth, to the 1950's time period and focus on several of the big historical events. She asks students to think of recent events that might be similar to 1950s news events. The social studies concepts of time, continuity, and change are clearly present in this WebQuest that has as its task the making of a timeline. The WebQuest also blends

technology and culture themes in examining the 1950s.

<http://www.hre.wvu.edu/mhaas/spring2005/avansickle/index.htm>

Summary

Teacher candidates are pleased with their efforts and look forward to using their WebQuest with students. Each of the WebQuests, as demonstrated by those above, takes advantage of the flexibility of the instructional strategy and requires the writing of clearly worded instructions and the selection of appropriate resources. The creativity comes when the teacher candidate uses knowledge of the experiences and interests of students and matches it to appropriate social studies knowledge and skills. By using a series of related class and field experiences designed to bring about an awareness of students, social studies information on the Internet, and the social studies curriculum, idealistic teacher candidates become much more successful in preparing quality WebQuests. For my part, I believe I still maintain the social studies focus of the methods course and use authentic instruction and assessment through requiring the development of an innovative instructional product. I now look forward to grading WebQuests even though it takes lots of time. I learn much about teacher candidates and their individual talents, thoughts, and efforts in preparing social studies lessons.

References

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