

Making your own Webquests

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Abstract

This paper describes a Technology in Teaching workshop presented at JALT 2014 by the author to assist attendees with developing webquests for their own teaching context. I briefly comment on the importance of blended learning and developing multiple literacies and how this relates to using webquests. I define webquests in detail and discuss webquest tasks. I next describe how webquests are structured and why language teachers should use them. I then illustrate two examples of webquests that I have created for different purposes. Finally, I present a method for constructing webquests. This procedure includes setting objectives and tasks, creating a step-by-step process, determining what resources to use, deciding how to evaluate students, and selecting a method for delivery of the webquest to the learners. I also describe a resource that can be applied during the development process to critically evaluate a webquest so as to improve it.

Introduction

James Paul Gee (2013) makes a detailed persuasive case for effective education requiring the development of digital literacies as well as other skills for engaging in collaborative inquiry and problem-solving. He notes that effective application of digital tools is essential to solving our complex real-world problems, and that education needs to encourage the development of skills related to using these tools. He states, "The point is ... to build on experiences with these media to create a pathway toward higher-order and complex thinking, skills, talk, and texts, just as we want to do with books" (Gee, p. 201). In other words, just as exposure to, analysis of, and applied use of a wide variety of written language are needed for developing effective reading and writing skills, so too are exposure, analysis and use of varied digital media required to develop digital literacy. Webquests are a method of blending learning which allow for some of this exposure and skill development. While not designed specifically for language teaching – they were primarily developed by San Diego-area educators (Dodge, 2007) – the structure and methodology of webquests provide second language teachers a model for engaging learners in scaffolded practice in authentic use of both the target language and digital resources, as well as having them take part in guided disciplined inquiry and cooperative learning.

Definition

There are several elements to defining webquests, but foremost is that they are inquiry-oriented. Learners should be engaged in genuine investigation and analysis. Of equal importance is that they be web-based. If learners are not using the internet to gather information then it can't be properly called a *webquest*. According to webquest.org, "A WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented lesson format in which most or all the information that learners work with comes from the web."

Webquests can be considered constructivist in approach. Healy and Klinghammer (2002) state the following about webquests and the constructivist approach:

In a constructivist environment, the learner is the center of the learning process, the one who constructs knowledge and meaning, linking incoming or new knowledge and information with existing knowledge. The teacher provides the environment for relevant learning by creating whole, authentic, inherently interesting activities and by setting up multiple representations of reality and actual experience for learners, thus enabling them to construct their own knowledge. Webquest designs are expected to fulfill these constructivist criteria. (p. 3)

Webquests do not simply turn learners loose on the whole of the world wide web to find information, but scaffold the learning through defining a specific set of online resources and setting out clear steps for achieving an overall task.

This principal task is the basis for a webquest. Levy and Stockwell (2008) discuss that while what exactly constitutes a task in language teaching is still being negotiated, tasks can be considered not simply a goal, but also a medium that is central to both the learning process and to the design process of guided learning experiences. A webquest task "provides a goal and a focus for student energies and it makes concrete the curricular intentions of the designer" (Dodge, 2002). The task is considered so fundamental that Dodge created a detailed taxonomy of a dozen types of webquest tasks, with examples and tips. The "taskonomy" (available here: <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/taskonomy.html>) includes tasks such as retelling, in which students simply gather new information and reiterate it in some new form to show they've grasped it; design, in which learners create something within defined parameters; and persuasion, in which the goal is to convince others of a position (Dodge, 2002). Many of the types and examples of tasks are probably familiar to the experienced language teacher and may be part of their practice already. Webquests provide a model for scaffolding these tasks and for including digital media use as an element in them.

Tasks vary in complexity and, therefore, in the time and effort required to accomplish them. Consequently, webquests can also be short- or long-term lesson plans. Short-term webquests may only take one or two class periods to accomplish, while longer-term ones may require several weeks. Short, simple webquests may be designed for individual learners to accomplish independently, but ideally a webquest involves cooperation between multiple learners to complete a complex task. In language learning, this cooperation can encourage or even require learners to engage with each other in authentic use of L2.

Structure

Webquests have a specific structure, though there is variation. Dodge (1997) describes a number of parts a webquest should contain in order to effectively focus learner activity. He asserts that in general webquests need to have at least an introduction, a task, a set of resources, a process description, guidance, and a conclusion. The introduction lays the groundwork and the task is a description of something manageable and of interest to the students. The resources are primarily links to online sources of information needed to complete the task, but may include other information. The process is a step-by-step description of how to proceed with the task, while the guidance section includes such things as frameworks and idea maps to help with information organization. Finally, the conclusion wraps up the task in much the same way a conclusion to an essay or presentation does. Dodge also describes a number of desirable but non-essential

components, which include being group activities and having motivational elements built in. Gavin Dudeney (2007), describes a further refined guideline of four major sections, which are an introduction, the task, the process, and evaluation. In this conception, the resources and guidance elements are built into the process section, while evaluation refers to a rubric defining how the accomplishment of the task will be assessed.

Reasons for use

Why would a language instructor choose to use webquests? Dudeney (2007) presents a handful of reasons for using them. One reason is that webquests are a manageable way for most teachers to incorporate Internet use into their teaching. Another is that they offer opportunities for communication through being cooperative activities. Also, they can involve learning and tasks related to subjects the learners may be studying in other classes or otherwise interested in. Furthermore, by design they tend to foster critical-thinking skills, and they can be motivating and rewarding for learners by engaging them in realistic and interdisciplinary activities. A reason I will add to this list is that, unlike topical materials that can quickly seem dated and stale in a printed textbook, the resources in a Webquest can be easily updated by changing the links to the latest available materials. In addition, since online resources can involve a variety of media, including traditional text, voice recordings and static and moving images, we can also accommodate varied learning styles when designing and using webquests.

Examples

To illustrate, I describe two webquests I developed. The first webquest was created for a required English Oral Communication class for first-year Business majors. It can be found online at this link: <http://bieriswebquestforbusinessenglish.weebly.com/>. In this webquest, the learners are put in groups and are expected to act as a team of investment advisors. Their task is to present relevant information on several companies, explain a set of investment criteria they have developed, and state how much to invest in each company they have investigated. The task is designed to mimic and develop skills for an activity they may actually have to do in a business-related job or may choose to do for themselves. It is most closely related to a persuasion task as described by Dodge (2002), but also includes analytical, compilation, and consensus building elements.

The process involves students working both in and outside of class over several weeks to complete the task. Each group member needs to learn some useful vocabulary and research a company, including company history, products or services, earnings, and stock performance. As a group they also need to investigate several sites with varied investment criteria and ways of presenting the criteria; then restate, analyze and synthesize the information; next they discuss, develop and describe in writing their own set of criteria; and then apply the criteria to make and justify investment choices. At the end they must do a group presentation, which is evaluated based on performance, suitable use of vocabulary, comprehensiveness of information, and appropriateness of the application of criteria.

In terms of English language development, it is expected that learners will engage with a significant amount of authentic target-language input, discuss and negotiate meaning with peers in English, and practice public speaking skills in English. The project is also explicitly linked to the following course objectives: talk for 3 to 5 minutes on a

topic related to your major, give opinions on topics related to your major, describe past events and report changes, and understand and explain schedules, dates, and times. At the end, learners are asked to reflect on how well they have achieved these objectives and how they may use these skills in the future.

The second webquest, a short-term one, was created to help learners in required English Reading courses understand and begin to engage in extensive reading. A version that can be used by anyone can be found online at this link: <http://extensivereading-intro-webquest.weebly.com/>. This webquest requires students to work in pairs, or possibly a group of three. Their task is to select three graded readers that are of interest to, and at the proper level for, their partner. The task is designed to require them to understand basic concepts of extensive reading, to know how to determine the levels and topics of graded readers, and to consider level and interests when selecting readers. Choosing for a partner also creates an element of cooperation and of external accountability.

In the extensive reading webquest, the process involves ten major steps and sub-steps that can be accomplished within two class sessions. The learners need to learn some basic concepts about what extensive reading is and how it differs from intensive reading, then in pairs or small groups they discuss what percentage of the course they think should be ER and present this. Next they read about graded readers, how they are leveled, and the concepts of headwords and running words. They do an activity to show understanding of these concepts and then go on to an online placement test to help determine their own level. Once they have noted their own levels, they interview their partners, asking what their placement test level is, what levels of graded readers that corresponds to, and what kinds of stories they are interested in. They next use several publishers' sites and the university library site to select three readers for their partner. The final step is to find one of the recommended books, read it, and report back in the next class to their partner what they thought of it. They are evaluated based on task completion, demonstrating understanding of the concepts, and making an appropriate selection for their partner.

The English language learning goals in this webquest are largely indirect. The primary aim is to have them understand and start to engage in extensive reading. There is reading and discussion practice built into the lesson, and the activity is also designed to help them start achieving one course objective: read, show understanding, explain, and discuss short reading passages and graded readers at an appropriate level.

There are a number of other English-language related webquests that can be found online simply by searching such terms as ESL webquest or English webquest, or searching in the questgarden.com site. They are well worth exploring as you can use many of them as is, adapt them to your teaching environment, or use them as inspiration for creating your own webquests.

Construction

Next I turn to a process for creating your own webquests. It is paramount that you start by determining what your objectives are and what the main task is. With these in mind you can create a process for the learners that will be required to achieve the objectives and complete the task. You should brainstorm as many steps or sub-tasks as you can. Next, use this list and think about what order they should go in to create a coherent flow, whether any of them need intermediate benchmarks and assessment activities, and perhaps which ones might be combined or discarded. After or during this step, consider

what resources and scaffolding will be necessary to complete the tasks. Not all of them need to be online, and in fact some may be best done as classroom instruction or be elements in the course book. However, you do need a variety of online resources for the students to access, and need to know the links to them. You will need to take some time to search for and evaluate appropriate resources. To use the web element to the best advantage, you should try to find a variety of media delivering information. Don't limit your sources to text only. Instead, find sites that are visually rich, are interactive, and use sound and video. These multiple modes of input will help engage your learners in the task. Likewise, you can include a variety of assessments or activities requiring language production. With the task and all intermediate assessment activities, you should have a rubric which describes how they will be evaluated. It can help to have this rubric already defined and in mind as you build the process, and a web search for webquest rubric will return hits on several examples and templates you can use.

Another rubric that can be helpful during the design process is one for evaluating webquests themselves. Dodge, Bellofatto, Bohl, Casey, and Krill (2001) presented a rubric that can be used to evaluate any webquest (available here: <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/webquestrubric.html>). This detailed rubric outlines criteria related to aesthetics, effectiveness in various areas, level-appropriateness, clarity, scaffolding, resources, and evaluation criteria. By studying it in advance, and then using it to evaluate your own webquest once you've initially developed it, you can create a higher quality webquest.

Additionally, you need to consider how you will deliver your webquest to students. The webquest itself does not necessarily need to be online, it can be a printed handout with the task and process outlined and including the links to be used. Another simple option is to create it as Google document, with active links, and then simply publish the document to the web and direct students there. You can see a simple example here: `<iframe`

`src="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1NZhLkjz3XPnWj60ga_3iKRqE29dDvw4QQaZablhg8src/pub?embedded=true"></iframe>`

At the other end of the spectrum, you can put everything online in a multi-page website with embedded resources and links to external sites, such as the two examples I described in detail above. This kind of site can be developed on your own server, using a service such as Google Sites or Weebly.com, or on a dedicated webquest building site like QuestGarden or Zunal.com. The decision of how to present your webquest will have to take into account the access to technology that you and your students have, the technical competencies of your students and yourself, and time and budgeting constraints.

Conclusion

I hope that I have persuaded you that webquests are an effective way to have students undertake scaffolded, directed investigation in collaboration with their peers while developing digital literacy. I also hope that you will use the information here to develop, and share, your own webquests.

Additional resources

A site for all things webquest: <http://webquest.org/>

A webquest about webquests: <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/webquestwebquest.html>

Making your own WebQuests slides (“JALT2014 WebQuestWorkshop Online”):
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B8KrAxOHSm0WZUc0dWM4ZEK5a2M/view?pli=1>

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