Encouraging Collaborative Learning through Web Quests

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Summary:

Technology offers us the advantage of being in communication with the world. As teachers of foreign language, we should make use of this opportunity and encourage our students to learn about the target culture and language via the Internet, through the use of web quests and collaborative learning. By motivating our students to work in mixed ability groups, we will not only teach them to identify necessary skills and abilities needed to solve real-life, practical problems but they will learn how to achieve them in a second language.

Web quests focus on questions. They are an inquiry-oriented activity in which, as Bernie Dodge, the creator of the web quest says, most or all of the information used by learners is drawn from the World Wide Web. Web Quests are designed to:

1. Use learners' time well,
2. To focus on using information rather than looking for it, and
3. To support learners' thinking at the levels of analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

By facilitating the acquisition, integration, and extension of a vast amount of information through tasks, web quests engage the learner in an analysis and practical demonstration of understanding (http://webquest.sdsu.edu/overview.htm, paragraph 2).

Web quests do not only promote teamwork, they also give the teacher the possibility to change roles, from a purveyor of knowledge to that of a manager. The independence of learners during their instruction with web quests suggests the teacher the chance to *monitor* the succeeding group activities or tasks and to be *ready and able to intervene in the work of each group when it is educationally necessary and desirable* (Fisher 1993: 59). The methods of constructivism emphasize students' ability to solve real-life, practical problems. Students typically work in cooperative groups rather than individually; they tend to focus on projects that require solutions to problems rather than on instructional sequences that require learning of certain content skills. The job of the teacher in constructivism models is to arrange for required resources and act as a guide to students while they set their own goals and 'teach themselves'. (Roblyer, Edwards, and Havriluk, 1997, p. 70)

In a web quest, the purpose is to complete a task by searching for the answers in the Internet (thus the value of knowing how to identify and select appropriate sources) by doing so, students have the opportunity to interact with each other and practice skills that are important to the learning of a language such as: negotiation, decision making, reaching agreements and setting roles (http://www.thewebquestpage/sdsu).

Because, Web Quests follow the constructivism philosophy, they tend to focus on cooperative learning and scaffolding, and provide an opportunity to work cooperatively allowing the students to exchange

ideas, insights, and opinions on different topics. It is during these exchanges that students continue to build on prior knowledge and understanding based on the information presented through the Web Quest resources. Once the student actually becomes familiar with this type of computer-based activities and with the web, they will have to learn to take responsibility for the proper use of the Internet and its offerings. This means that as they begin to develop awareness of their learning process, they will begin to make use of cognitive (the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses) and metacognitive (awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes) strategies to develop control over what they read.

Jones (1996) states that, a key point about these inquiry-oriented activities is that in some cases, especially when working with online texts, they provide learners with support on improving reading strategies (these are generally presented to students by initially coaching, providing scaffolding, and gradually fading until they have control of their learning process) that provide access to the diversity of content of the WWW. In the same fashion, Benson (1997) agrees that the second language learner, when working with the WWW, needs to have a notion of control over management, content and resources to effectively exploit it. As a consequence, the students will empathize with the thought that working autonomously and cultivating web literacy are vital elements of a successful WWW reader.

Collaborative Learning is a cognitive model of teaching with a set

of common attributes and features. In collaborative learning also called cooperative learning, groups are formed in such a way that there is no opportunity for students to get selective amongst themselves. Low-achievers are placed along with high-achievers, in the same fashion boys and girls, and those with and no computer skills are mixed together. (Arends, 1994: 344). Web quests benefit from collaborative learning because they promote student autonomy. Cooperative learning encourages the learners to take responsibility for their study and that of their team-members thus motivating them to present a well-done product.

The use of web quests in the language classroom as a way to promote autonomy stimulates the students into taking responsibility for their own learning by providing the environment, the content, the experiment, and the place for students to 'put it all together' to share with other students, parents, and the world.

Potentials and challenges of using web quests in the language classroom.

Technology offers the promise to add value to face-to-face language teaching in the form of activities that cannot be realized fully in a traditional classroom. Computers give the teachers the opportunity to offer students, through the use of specialized applications and computer-based activities, an environment for interactive learning that can foster the acquisition of communicative skills and place them in situations similar to real-life. One of the great strengths of the Web is the potential to engage students in creative information gap activities and

real experiential learning in the form of meaningful, process-oriented projects in authentic settings. Some of the benefits of adopting web quests are:

- Introduce reading in a second language with the exploitation of its skills through a complete innovative way,
- Increase the level of general knowledge in young learners, present them with distinct modes of thinking about and viewing world issues,
- Raise their consciousness in terms of their own self as citizens and human beings.

Conversely, some of the challenges of using web quests might be:

- The students' abilities to use the Internet, will they need prior training? Perhaps collaboration among students could allow the less media-savvy students to learn from their peers.
- Do all students, for example, have Internet access at home? This is important to know before setting up a web quest for homework.
- In the case of the younger students, the teacher may need to establish communication with parents; some parents may not understand the educational usefulness of the Internet (Knowlton & Knowlton, 2001).

Once students begin working with Web Quests, teachers will begin to understand the benefits of computer supported collaborative learning and the manner in which it encourages reflection and cooperation. Additionally, by motivating learners to work in tasks consistently, allows them to learn from those with more computer skills

than themselves. With the use of computer-based activities and other applications, learners are faced with a variety of multimedia and become motivated by, what sudden access via technology they might have to the world and yet, this excitement will guide them towards the effective use of collaborative learning. (Warschauer 1997 cited in MD706, Unit 2, p.10)

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