# "I Guess It Was Pretty Fun"
## Using WebQuests in the Middle School Classroom

GEORGE LIPSCOMB

In a recent book, Stanford professor Larry Cuban (2001) argues that computers are "oversold and underused" in America's schools. Although new initiatives have significantly increased the number of "wired" schools across the country, teachers' practices have remained relatively unchanged. Rather than engaging with the new technology in dynamic classroom settings, students continue to learn in traditional ways and rarely use computers for anything more than word processing and simple research. Especially at the middle school level, technology can greatly benefit teachers hoping to supplement their classroom curriculum and make it more meaningful for their students.

One area of middle school instruction that new technologies have the potential to transform is the study of the Civil War. Students encountering this topic in American history classrooms are often overwhelmed with a large amount of data (battles, generals, dates, speeches, etc.). They come away from the experience without any real understanding of this momentous event and the individuals involved in it. Recent research into historical understanding (e.g., Levstik and Barton 2001) has found that students will develop more meaningful ideas of the past if it is personalized for them. If teachers are able to provide experiences that help students identify with historical events and people, learning will become more significant.

With the explosion of the popularity and availability of the World Wide Web in the past decade, previously hard-to-find documents, letters, census records, and other materials are now easily available to students. Although the names and dates of battles are still an important part of the history, the stories of people who lived in the 1860s provide more intimate details of what life was like in the Civil War era.

Braun (1999) suggests a number of ways that middle school social studies teachers can harness the power of Internet technology and integrate it into their instruction. Although the suggestions are intended for social studies teachers, they are applicable to other subject area instructors as well. Braun recognizes that teachers have different levels of computer expertise and provides ten ways, ranging from simple to more advanced, that teachers can improve their classrooms through technology. One of the activities that Braun suggests for teachers desiring a meaningful experience with technology is the WebQuest.

### WebQuests

The WebQuest, an activity that is gaining popularity among teachers, helps students harness the vast amount of on-line resources available to them. First devised by Bernie Dodge and Tom March at San Diego State University in 1995, the WebQuest has become a frequent topic of discussion at both technology and general education conferences. Dodge (1995) describes the WebQuest as "an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with come[s] from resources on the Internet."

Several factors make the WebQuest appropriate for middle school students. First, the WebQuest presents students with a motivational task that is usually realistic in nature. Young adolescents are quick to question school assignments they deem "busy work," and WebQuests provide students with a challenging and useful undertaking. Second, the structure of a

*George Lipscomb is an instructor in the Department of Education at Furman University, in Greenville, South Carolina.*

WebQuest, with its "introduction," "task," and "process" divisions, gives students a framework of how to complete the activity while allowing for varying approaches to the assignment. Finally, the WebQuest encourages collaboration; students usually work in cooperative groups to complete the assigned task.

Even though the WebQuest is a fairly recent development in the classroom, educators are already applauding its impact and encouraging its use (Milson and Downey 2001; Watson 1999; Yoder 1999). Since the introduction of WebQuests, educators at all levels in many subject areas have submitted activities to Dodge for inclusion on his on-line matrix of sample WebQuests. Although the examples in the matrix are evaluated before inclusion on *The WebQuest Page*, at <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/webquest.html>, some of the WebQuests listed are better than others, and there is no guarantee that the content or activities suggested will work in a particular classroom. Because of this, I examined a number of possible WebQuests on the Civil War and eventually found Carter's "Civil War Personal Journal" (1999).

## Focus

Most of the appraisals of WebQuests to date have focused on the impact that WebQuests can have in the schools. Little attention has been given to the "nuts and bolts" of how teachers can use WebQuests in the classroom. Based on a study of two classes of eighth-grade students at a typical Florida middle school, I hope to demonstrate the practical aspects of using this approach in the middle school classroom and suggest ways that it can be most powerful.

## What Students Did during the WebQuest

Although the time students spend on the computer collecting and analyzing resources is the most significant part of the WebQuest, time before and after is also essential.

Because no student in the class had ever completed a WebQuest before, an orientation at the beginning of the activity helped to make the actual computer time go more smoothly. During this initial discussion, the students were exposed to the key elements of a WebQuest, resources available, and strategies for making effective use of time in the computer lab. Most important, students were given a meaningful task: to assume the role of a person living during the Civil War era (Confederate Soldier, Union Soldier, Southern woman, Northern woman, or abolitionist).

During the WebQuest, some students jumped right into the sites that contained primary sources, while others had to visit secondary source sites to find background information about the war. Students were extremely engaged in the material from the beginning of the computer component of the WebQuest. After students explored their on-line resources, they took the information and completed six journal entries: two written before the Civil War, two during, and two immediately following the conflict. The journals showed a tremendous amount of creativity, in both appearance and content. Overall, the students enjoyed undertaking the project, and according to the instructor, they came away with a stronger understanding of the people who lived during the Civil War.

## Suggestions for Teachers

Based on this study and other experiences, I have developed a list of suggestions that, although by no means comprehensive, may help teachers unfamiliar with WebQuests, especially those in the history classroom, to use them more effectively.

*1. Choose your WebQuest wisely.*

For educators in all disciplines, many outstanding WebQuests are available on a number of topics. *The WebQuest Page* is a good place to start for ideas, because topics are broken up by subject and grade level. However, teachers should be aware of several factors that can help them identify a good WebQuest:

*Design.* Although some WebQuests may be more visually pleasing than others, don't be deceived by looks. You want something that appeals to students but has substance as well.

*Organization.* Since students will need to follow the various steps of the WebQuest (introduction, task, resources, etc.), it is important that they can navigate through the site easily. Having to continually help students figure out instructions and details can take up valuable class time.

*Resources.* If there are only a few on-line options, students may be forced to go to major search engines for information. (An on-line search on Google on the Civil War produced over six hundred thousand sites.) Too many resources can overwhelm students, forcing them to spend more time than necessary completing the assigned task. The WebQuest should offer a reasonable number of possible resources.

*Content.* WebQuests need to provide opportunities for students to explore many avenues of a particular topic. Once students investigate their roles, they should be eager to find information to fulfill the task given to them. Teachers need to find WebQuests that are rich in content, so that students will discover multiple perspectives on a given issue.

*2. Gauge student technology proficiency.*

Before starting the WebQuest, try to determine how proficient students are at finding information on the Internet. For younger students, provide more guidance in learning not only how to search, but also how to evaluate information that has been found on the Web.

3. *Determine prior knowledge/content understanding.*

In the discipline of history, students should have skills in comparing and contrasting primary and secondary sources and be able to explain strengths and weaknesses of both. The teacher needs to assess students' prior knowledge of the information covered in the WebQuest. Although new material can be covered in the WebQuest, too much detail on an unfamiliar topic may overwhelm many students. In other disciplines, similar judgments will make the WebQuest process more successful.

4. *Assess the availability of computers.*

March (1998) contends that "perhaps the greatest hurdle some teachers will face in implementing WebQuests relates to technology access," and with this belief in mind, he provides a number of suggestions for classrooms with a few, one, or even no computers. Some of these suggestions include pairing up for student roles, using rotating stations for computer use, and photocopying relevant material. WebQuests were designed to make use of the Internet, but they also can be completed with other resources such as textbooks, magazines, or encyclopedias. Students with home access to the Internet can be encouraged to explore additional sites on their own, if time does not permit in the classroom. March adds, however, that even with limited computer access, teachers should "feel comforted by the fact that no classroom or school is free from dealing with the constraints imposed by limitations in technology."

5. *Have a backup plan.*

Computers in labs are prone to failure from time to time, and having a few books, magazines, and textbooks available if this occurs is important. In addition, having copies of printed material from relevant sites will allow students to stay focused on the WebQuest task even if computer access is not available.

6. *Maximize class time on the computer.*

If students are prepared for the WebQuest, their time on task during the activity should be extremely high. Students in both traditional and block schedules need to be aware of the time they have to look through Web sites and not get sidetracked. In classrooms with fewer computers, time is particularly valuable, so students need to understand exactly how long they will have on the computer.

7. *Clarify student roles.*

Some WebQuests are very specific about student roles during the activity, while others are not as precise about what each student is to accomplish. Even though different roles allow students to make the most of various strengths and interests, some individuals may attempt to slide by, doing as little as possible to fulfill their task. At the beginning of the WebQuest, make sure that each student understands his or her responsibility, and continue to monitor progress throughout the activity. Due to the cooperative nature of WebQuests, individual inactivity can hurt the progress of the entire group.

8. *Continue working even after the computer time is over.*

Some teachers believe that the WebQuest is complete once the computer time is over, but a significant portion of the process remains. Good WebQuests require that students cooperatively answer some sort of "real world" question based on their assigned tasks. This solution usually takes the form of an authentic assessment that, according to March (1998), can be "posted, emailed or presented to real people for feedback and evaluation." If students have this type of motivation, there is usually incentive to put forth their best effort, even after the computer time is complete.

9. *Make assessment clear to students.*

Students should understand how they are being graded, which can usually be accomplished through the use of a well-developed rubric. Pickett (1999) contends that the rubric should include not only teacher expectations, but also student evaluations of both peers and self. Pickett and others have created detailed rubrics for grading WebQuests (available on *The WebQuest Page)* that can be easily modified for teacher and student use in the classroom.

10. *Be excited about the possibilities.*

WebQuests can provide the motivation that students need to be engaged in learning, so long as the teacher understands the importance of this activity. As a researcher and former middle school instructor, I was excited to see eighth-grade boys and girls eager to find out what life was like during the Civil War.

## Conclusion

WebQuests have the potential to be powerful instruments for teachers interested in using technology in their instruction. Although a number of excellent WebQuests are available, teachers should pay close attention to the practical points of implementing them in the classroom. Even though existing WebQuests may be modified for classroom use, this cannot be accomplished on the spur of the moment. Because some WebQuests can last several weeks, educators need to ask themselves if the time spent on this activity meets academic goals and objectives. The ten suggestions above will go a long way toward helping teachers provide a significant learning experience for students at all levels, but the decision to use WebQuests in the classroom should not be taken lightly.

Getting middle school students to offer positive input on any activity is often difficult. But a majority of students in this study indicated that they learned a great deal about the Civil War by doing the WebQuest, and the instructor was able to address many of the state social studies standards through the activity. In addition, many of the students said that they enjoyed the WebQuest process, and one even remarked, "I guess it was pretty fun." If an eighth grader makes a comment like that, the WebQuest can be viewed as a success in the middle school classroom.

*Key words: WebQuest, social studies, classroom technology*

## REFERENCES

Braun, J. A., Jr. 1999. Ten ways to integrate technology into middle school social studies. Clearing House 72 (6): 345–51.

Carter, H. 1999. Civil War personal journal. The WebQuest Page. <http://coe.west.asu.edu/students/hcarter/webquest.htm>. Retrieved 23 August 2002.

Cuban, L. 2001. Oversold and underused: Computers in the classroom. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dodge, B. 1995. Some thoughts about WebQuests. The WebQuest Page. <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/courses/edtec596/about_webquests.htm>. Retrieved 23 August 2002.

Levstik, L., and K. Barton. 2001. Doing history: Investigating with children in elementary and middle schools. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

March, T. 1998. Why WebQuests, an introduction. Ozline.com. <http://ozline.com/webquests/intro.html>. Retrieved 23 August 2002.

Milson, A. J., and P. Downey. 2001. WebQuest: Using Internet resources for cooperative inquiry. Social Education 65 (3): 144–46.

Pickett, N. 1999. Rubrics for web lessons. The WebQuest Page. <http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/rubrics/weblessons.htm>. Retrieved 23 August 2002.

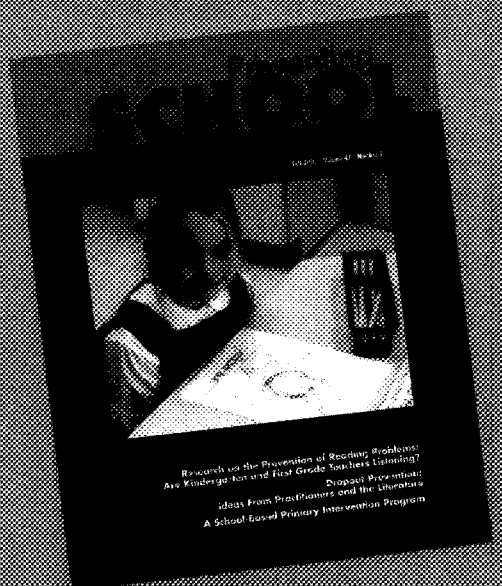
Watson, K. L. 1999. WebQuests in the middle school curriculum: Promoting technological literacy in the classroom. Meridian. <http://www.ncsu.edu/meridian/jul99/webquest/index.htm>. Retrieved 23 August 2002.

Yoder, M. B. 1999. The student WebQuest. Learning and Leading with Technology 26 (7): 6–9, 52–53.

Subscribe

Preventing School Failure

Preventing School Failure is the practical journal for general and special educators looking for proven ways to promote the academic success of students with learning and behavior problems. It includes examples of interventions that help teachers of children with diverse backgrounds and needs in the regular classroom, as well as in special schools, correctional institutions, and other settings. PSF helps teachers stay current with legal developments and requirements concerning students with disabilities and lets them put research results to work in practical ways. Timely theme issues respond to the needs of teachers for practices that promote academic achievement for all students.




HOW TO ORDER

Quarterly; ISSN: 1045-988X
Individual Rate $45
Institutional Rate $99
Postage Outside the U.S. $14

Mail: Heldref Publications
1319 Eighteenth Street, NW
Washington, DC 20036-1802

Telephone: (800) 365-9753

Fax: (202) 293-6130

Online: www.heldref.org

E-mail: subscribe@heldref.org

Libraries may order through subscription agents.

HELDREF PUBLICATIONS
good thinking

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: “I Guess It Was Pretty Fun”: Using WebQuests in the Middle School Classroom
SOURCE: Clearing House 76 no3 Ja/F 2003
WN: 0300103859009

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher: http://www.heldref.org/

Copyright 1982-2003 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.