Teaching with WebQuests
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In most of our secondary schools, we are still at the stage of using computers only with a handful of students selected to do subjects like Information Science and Computer Science. But if we want our next generation to participate meaningfully in life, we will have to reconceptualise the computer as a learning tool. For there is no getting away from the educational imperative to remove inhibitive mindsets and claims of scarce technological resources from our present teenagers, who will virtually have to shop on TriniShopping.com alongside eBay, and use e-banking for their financial transactions.

Constructivist methods of teaching in all subject areas are being developed using the computer. The WebQuest is but one of them. A cursory check on Google will bring up under Social Studies, Mathematics, English, and Science, titles such as Ancient Civilizations, Learning Roman Numerals, Geometry Meets Poetry, DNA Profiling, and Who Wants to be a Millionaire—all ways of studying concepts in curriculum areas.

And in case it is thought that this is not an educational strategy that teachers in our system can utilise, there is *Follow the Career of your Dreams*, a language arts WebQuest that I developed with a secondary teacher from Korea and another from Holland during the August 2006 vacation period. Since it was done in an American online course, we used US language arts curriculum standards. The WebQuest is mounted on a webpage at Geocities <http://www.geocities.com/callteam2006/>.

What is a WebQuest and how can it be used as an educational tool?

As the pioneer, Bernie Dodge of San Diego State, would endorse, a WebQuest is not a web search. Computers-in-education is long past the stage of involving students in willy-nilly, undirected, and time-consuming Google-ing. A WebQuest begins with curriculum standards and teachers do the searches as part of lesson planning and development of resources. Directing the students to particular websites is a way of building application, motivation, critical thinking, knowledge, and life skills—all in one educational thrust. The point is to embed learning in a mix of virtual and everyday realities that require students to actively use the subject content that they would normally learn in abstraction.

Therefore, to use *Follow the Career of Your Dreams* as an example, we had two main language arts targets for the equivalent of our third to even sixth formers—writing the expository essay, and developing oral competence. We combined these with mathematics in a problem-solving, decision-making, and critical thinking thrust. With the advent of the oral exam for third formers and Communication Studies at CAPE, the two language areas above are important syllabus areas. But let me get to how we transformed these two topics from mere academic study to areas of active learning.

We gave our students identities, subject majors, and finances and asked them to get themselves admitted to universities of their choice. They had to follow five steps: select a university, providing good reasons for their choice; get admitted and outline the procedures; report on the

cost of tuition; write their application essay; and finally ace the college interview. But the students were not left on their own. As teachers, we scaffolded teaching steps on the structural requirements for writing the expository pieces. In order to ace the interview students had to tape and listen to themselves, practice enunciation, and hone their diction in Standard English. All this using carefully selected websites as active language lessons.

The topic "Careers" is merely one of the authentic areas that we could have used to achieve our syllabus aims. It was my choice because "Careers" is one of the themes on our Form 3 Language Arts syllabus, and with the National Training Agency (NTA), SERVOL, the Trinidad and Tobago Hospitality and Tourism Institute (TTHTI), the University of Trinidad and Tobago (UTT), and The University of the West Indies (UWI), to name of a few of our institutions with web pages, we have enough to involve our students in parallel meaningful language learning pursuits under the topic Careers.

Most educationally effective WebQuests are similarly scaffolded procedures, posted on web templates, which involve students in group interaction and the assumption of real-life roles. A WebQuest can be long- or short-term and usually has six parts. An *Introductory* hook, a *Task,* and *Resources* (mainly websites) direct students through a discovery *Process*. Teachers provide interactive guidance, involving the students in *Evaluation* and *Closure* that broaden the relevance of what has been learnt.

WebQuests are but one strategy for curriculum invigoration, using lower- and higher-order skills of comparing, classifying, inducing, deducing, analysing perspectives, constructing support, and abstracting ideas. As for computer access, I have known enterprising teachers armed with their school letterhead to source enough workstations from firms. But let me repeat … WebQuests are not willy-nilly searches done on classroom time. Important issues are reconceptualization of the curriculum and reconceptualisation of the computer as a learning tool.

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