

# Creating My Own Webquest: Teach the Teacher... National Parks Research Paper

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According to Bernie Dodge, the process for designing a webquest might include considering the question “does it replace a lesson you were unhappy with?” The webquest that I designed, using the Filamentality website, is just that.

About 7 or 8 years ago, I was a classroom science teacher at a public middle school in Northeast Minneapolis. I was working with a group of 8<sup>th</sup> graders and it was getting near the end of the school year. I had been leading them through standards-based lessons on implementing the scientific method for controlled experiments along with teaching them the writing process. I explained to them how real scientists publish the results of their studies in scientific journals for other scientists to read and to add to the overall body of scientific knowledge in a particular area. This hypothetical scenario didn't seem to exactly make the student's work on their own papers come alive. They were doing controlled experiments using live frogs and then writing a formal paper about their findings. The lesson that I did near the end of the year (National Parks Research Paper) was meant to be a more fun, relaxing little “filler” activity. Little did I realize back then how engaging (even much more engaging than any previous lessons) it would end up. I reflected, and have continued to reflect since then, on the possible reasons why students responded so enthusiastically to the short unit.

One reason students may have responded so well to the Parks Project was because it involved a fairly broad choice for each student in deciding what to study. I introduced the assignment by simply telling students that they had been learning from me (supposedly) all year and that now that they were so old and ready to move on to high school, it was time for me to learn some things from them. Each student was to simply pick one US National Park and write a 5-10 page research paper about it. I told students that I was sincerely interested in learning more about the National Parks as I had been to some and wanted to visit more someday. Students seemed to appreciate being the “teachers” for a change. I said to them, “Please research and write so I can learn from what I read.” I was the intended audience, which I think contributed to their motivation because they knew exactly who their audience was and what their audience was looking for. My sincerity in wanting to learn from them eliminated the hypothetical scenarios of previous lessons and made this activity seem real and motivating.

Another reason I think the students responded well was because they could use the internet for doing their research. Now, I had not even heard of a webquest back then, and there were not many good websites on the National Parks, but there were a few. We had 4 or 5 computers for students to share. I also obtained a few dozen magazines about the major national parks from another teacher who used to work for the National Forest Service. Still, I felt that the unit was a little “weak” as students did not really have time to send for brochures, maps and other information in the mail before the end of the year. Yet, even with limited resources, they seemed to really enjoy the project.

Some students really enjoyed picking a unique park that no one else was studying. I would overhear their excitement when they would discover something new about “their” National Park on the internet. Of course, other students would simply pick a major park that others were working on so that they could share research information and complete the assignment more easily. Most students, though, seemed more interested in discovering new information than in just getting the assignment done.

I have also reflected on the success of the unit because of the inquiry framework. Previous units had been based on performance package assessments and were very specific about what students should know and be able to do at the end. The advantages of the standards-driven curriculum were that it was very clear about what was expected from each student. I actually do agree with that whole approach to teaching, except for the State's mistaken strategy of trying to make performance package assessments into something they really weren't: namely, standardized. I used the performance package assessments very effectively more like a teaching unit with embedded assessments for teaching. Yet with all the thought that went into designing the performance package units by me and other teachers, I must say the quickly planned, but inquiry-based unit was much more engaging for students.

So, that's a little bit of what happened back then. I actually did enjoy reading their papers and learning more about the different National Parks. Now, several years later I thought of that teaching experience again when trying to think of an activity that could be improved upon using the webquest strategy.

I was amazed at the number of websites that were now available on this same topic several years later. I don't know the statistics, but it would seem that my observation would support the idea of exponential growth in the number and quality of websites in the last several years. I also think the lesson would be better today using the webquest strategy as students could work even more independently, having the whole assignment available on the website to read and refer back to. Also, the computers are much faster now and students can cut and paste much more easily from the internet. I also didn't have much of a goal back then for teaching digital media literacy, but now, due to what I've learned in this course and due to the pervasiveness of the internet, I embrace this teaching objective.

I find it interesting to observe the parallels between the teacher development tools of performance package assessments back then and today's new websites devoted to helping teachers write what I might call more progressive lessons, with rubric assessments and inquiry-based models. One of the problems with the performance packages for many teachers was the additional paperwork; maybe these computer formatted outlines on the internet will make progressive lesson planning easier for teachers? Back then, the State attempted to build a web-based resource for teachers to download and use performance packages. Perhaps these webquests are a similar curriculum philosophy in a different package?

One reason I chose to design a webquest for my final project was to purposely bolster my own digital media literacy. I don't learn these things new things very quickly, but when I do learn them I can usually implement them successfully as I have a pretty good understanding after having used them myself. I learned a long time ago as a teacher to try the things I am going to teach to students myself first, so that I can anticipate student's needs better. Besides, if I can't even do it, how do I expect them to be able to complete something on their own?

On the San Diego State University website for webquests, there are suggested design patterns. I patterned my webquest after the "Teaching to Learn" model (that didn't have any examples with it). The stated instructional purpose is "To acquire a deeper understanding of a body of knowledge by having to teach it to someone else." Of course, the "teaching" in these lessons is actually happening with the students doing their own research as they teach themselves, but the learning also happens for the instructor as he observes student work. I think I learned this teacher as learner/student as teacher concept way back in undergraduate school when I received high marks on a European Literature paper with a comment from the instructor that it was good work as he "learned a lot."

When building the list of web sites for my webquest, I had a little bit of trouble deciding when enough was enough. I finally decided that I had enough sites when I had the main ones and the last one that I had found contained a link to the first one that I had found. If students are encouraged to save and report the

exact URLs from their own findings, then I suppose I could build a more comprehensive list after using the unit once.

I plan to actually use the webquest that I made in the classroom someday. Eventually, I would like to take the time to figure out how to paste the site onto a program where I can customize it more and then keep it on my own server at work and/or saved on my hard drive. Very soon I also plan to use the Homemaker Online template that I discovered in the coursework pages to make my own little website, which I've always wanted to do. Then, I will feel more comfortable asking students to make their own web pages as part of an assignment.

Finally, I think this teaching unit is especially valuable for its interdisciplinary value. Students learn social studies standards of citizenship and history by studying the national parks. They also build their writing literacy by writing a paper and using the writing process imbedded in the teaching. They apply their reading skills by reading for information on the internet, thus building their reading abilities. They gain exposure to environmental issues and concerns (so important in our world today). Students may also simply just get interested in actually visiting the parks someday and enjoying our countries great natural resources.