

A MODEL WEBQUEST FOR STUDENTS

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Although Slovakia is less technologically inclined than East Asian countries where I have taught, the mastery of computer skills is still held in high esteem here and students at City University need to combine their computer skills with problem-solving abilities in order to succeed in the business world. This proposed webquest helps them do just that.

A webquest is a task-based activity oriented towards inquiry and discovery through the use of the internet. As versatile as the internet is, these webquests can be adopted to fit most any curricula¹. While I teach Writing at Trencin's IEP program, the webquest being discussed would be used in an international relations/political science course investigating different models of government and their results. This webquest can be easily adopted to and used by classes accustomed to traditional websites.

A number of websites are embedded into the text of this document, which I originally wrote on a word-processor. The intent was to present this webquest as an online document in the spirit of the internet-oriented nature of a webquest. However, for the sake of paper publications, footnotes are included, directing readers to the sites I mention.

Background

Political science is the study of different forms of government, their foundings and the effect they have on citizenry. The initial student task would be to investigate different forms of government. Then, the knowledge gained would be put into practice through an extended web exercise that puts students in control of a virtual country, allowing them to make decisions on political, moral, social, legal and economic matters. The decisions they make will influence everything in this society from economic well-being to social welfare in ways both obvious and anticipated as well as hidden and unexpected. You control your own nation-state. Through your decisions, your state will evolve into any number of possible scenarios on the utopia/dystopia scale. You will be asked to keep a virtual journal during this month in which you will record the decisions you make, your rationale for these decisions and their impact. Your journal entries must also address if the impact of your decision was one you anticipated or not- and why you did/did not anticipate the computer-generated outcome.

¹ Although I prize brevity in writing, those who are interested in learning far more about the idea of webquests can look at San Diego State University's excellent tutorial at <http://webquest.sdsu.edu/materials.htm>

Preparation

Read this² general introduction on different forms of government, prepared by the Indian Village school district in Ohio. Although generalized, it is a good starting point. Once you have completed this reading, move on over to the Walter Johnson High School (Bethesda, Maryland) website, where Ms. Hagan details models of governance in an easily understood format.

Your next step is to find³ nation-states and register. It is free to use and submitting your email address is optional, although highly recommended so that you can recover your password should the need arise. You will find that the actual nation-states game includes many, many options for government from "Community" to "Democratic Republic" and many more. Choose three possible configurations (i.e. Theocracy, Sultanate and Colony- or any other three) and use the research methods you have learned to find out more about them (The research methods I am referring to are those learned in Intensive English Programs, such as the use of the internet as a research tool and the mastery of the school database.) Write the three terms and their definitions into your diary. This is your first diary entry.

Creating a nation-state

Fill out the settings form. Choose a type of government, a name for your nation, a password for yourself and take care of the founding details, such as the flag you will use (each flag is an actual national flag, representing all nations in the world. Choose any one you like.) Choose the one issue per day setting. Remember that you will need to log in each day to check for pending issues. Try not to let issues and the necessary diary entries pile up. Please note that your progress will be checked at least once every two weeks during the course of the project and will count towards your participation grade. This is an inherent weakness to this webquest- student motivation is key and because this is essentially a course of self-directed study, students can choose to ignore it until the last minute and then put forth minimal effort. However, I have found that virtually all classroom activities are vulnerable to this weakness.

Running your nation-state

All new nations start in the North Pacific region. Take a look at some of your new neighbors. My own page⁴ has evolved over time from a relatively uncomplicated society to one with a population of 166,000,000 as of this writing- however, it is still simpler than some others. For the sake of contrast⁵, some are immensely complex. Take a look around and try to guess how their decisions shaped these outcomes. Return to this theme in your diary.

² http://www.ih.k12.oh.us/msbellb/forms_of_government.htm

³ <http://www.nationstates.net/>

⁴ <http://www.nationstates.net/mipperotamia>

⁵ <http://www.nationstates.net/SlowRoll>

Expected webquest outcomes

At the end of the 30 days (6 weeks- only weekdays count), it is expected that you will be able to reflect on your decisions and how they shaped your country. You will also be expected to know and understand different forms of governance, their histories and their impact on humanity. At this point (end of week 6/beginning of week 7), you will be required to participate in two interviews- one as an interviewer and one as an interviewee. Prepare a list of at least ten questions to ask if you are interviewing. (This is a crucial step. Because webquests do not lend themselves to traditional exams, it is important to be innovative in evaluating the knowledge and skills your class gained 'has gained'. This interview format will hopefully engage your students in the learning process and help the students simultaneously work together and challenge each other. I recommend that student questions be checked ahead of time and vetted by the instructor.) If preparing to be interviewed, expect that any topic is fair game. Review your diary and decisions. Film these interviews and present them during week 10. This project will comprise 100% of your class grade, inclusive of journal entries, web pages and interviews. The grading would suggest a less intensive course, perhaps one that meets once a week or so, such as a seminar.

Conclusions

The foregoing is a model way of integrating textbook knowledge with real-world applications. By understanding the background of government, students will be able to make decisions that form governments and will be able to see that governing is often about compromise and learning to live with imperfect results. In particular, students in Eastern Europe, who may have grown cynical about democracy will be able to see the inherent difficulties in the task of governing.