Reporting on the Process of Legislation: A Civics WebQuest

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The American citizen must investigate, filter, analyze, and evaluate information. Ours must not be a couch potato democracy. – James Crimmins, The American Promise

America’s elementary students, many of whom spend two hours a day in front of a television, seem to be at risk of becoming couch potatoes. As a fifth grade teacher, how could I engage my young students in civic life? For example, the educational standards of our state (Washington) require that fifth graders learn about the basic structure and work of government at the state and federal level. How could I make this apparently cut-and-dry civics topic interesting and relevant to this age group?

I decided to add some excitement to this unit of study by challenging my students:

• to choose one bill currently under consideration, either in the U.S. congress or in the state legislature;
• to research that bill by reading information at relevant Internet sites; and
• to apply what they learn by writing a brochure giving the pros and cons of a proposed law.

The vehicle for doing all this, I decided, would be a WebQuest.

Over the winter break, I designed a WebQuest unit of study in which students would take on the role of news reporters on the legislative beat. Working in groups, students would research bills currently under consideration in the state legislature or U.S. Congress. They would create brochures giving the pros and cons of specific items of legislation, and then distribute these brochures to peers, parents, and neighbors.

Eight weeks is devoted to our unit of study on the structure and functions of government. If less time were available in the curriculum, at least three weeks of classes (at one-hour per day) would be needed to conduct this WebQuest.

Getting Started

A WebQuest should include very detailed instructions so that students know exactly what they need to accomplish and where they can find the resources to accomplish it. The teachers act primarily as a guide during a WebQuest, not as a lecturer. The students are responsible for their own learning and the final work produced by their group. Students find it exciting to have this degree of control over their own learning.

WebQuests generally follow a six-part structure.

1. **Introduction**: Hook students to the Quest with an imaginative opening;
2. **Task**: Describe the end product or goal to be achieved;
3. **Process**: Write out the steps students need to follow and list questions they should answer during their research;
4. **Resources**: Create links to informative, accurate, and understandable websites on the subject;
5. **Evaluation**: Provide rubrics for the student’s work;
6. **Conclusion**: Invite students to summarize and reflect on what they have learned.

Let’s discuss each of these steps briefly in turn.

1. **Introduction**

   In previous years, when teaching about a topic like Colonial Boston, I had observed that students enjoyed learning history through the Storypath approach, in which they would roleplay characters who might have lived during that period. With these memories of success in mind, I tried to think of a role that would fit into a study of government. The role of newspaper reporter seemed a natural choice. Research is a big part of a reporter’s job. Reporters present their written work to the public. Thoroughness and accuracy are essential. Thus, I wrote an introduction to the WebQuest that prepares students to fill the shoes of the reporter.

2. **Designing the Task**

   The next step was to create a task that would require students to apply their research in an authentic way. I would divide the class into “teams of reporters,” each of which would create a brochure presenting various points of view on a bill before the U.S. Congress or state legislature (Figure 1). I could make copies of the finished brochures, and students could distribute them to family and other community members. I might put a few online, adding them to the WebQuest as examples of students’ work.

   The possibility that this brochure would actually be read by adults immediately grabbed students’ attention. There would be a larger audience for their work, beyond their teacher! Students also realized that they would need to carefully research their bill to ensure that their brochures presented accurate information.
3. Process and Procedures

The “Process” section of the WebQuest took the form of eight essential questions that students needed to answer through their own research:

1. What is the problem that this bill is meant to address?
2. In your own words, what is the bill proposing?
3. If the bill becomes law, who (or what) primarily would be affected?
4. How would they be affected?
5. What will happen if the bill does not become a law?
6. Will citizens have to pay higher taxes to fund the new policies?
7. What are other possible positive and negative effects if the bill passes?
8. What are other possible positive and negative effects if the bill does not pass?

When it came time to assemble their findings into a coherent brochure, a division of labor was needed. I created four main jobs, which helped delegate the workload and promote communication within the group, two of the biggest challenges that student groups normally face:

- The editor types out the text;
- The designer lays out the text, pictures, and pages;
- The photographer draws or finds and prints required pictures; and
- The supervisor assures the neatness and quality of the brochure and keeps an eye on deadlines.

I found that creating the brochure consumes at least four one-hour class periods.

4. Resources

In January, I prepared the resource section of the WebQuest. It included a list of bills that students could choose from (Figure 2), with links to the actual bills (Figure 3) and to informative websites about the proposed legislation (Figure 4). These webpages were hosted by legislators or government agencies, city newspapers, university departments, or civic groups. I skimmed over the bills pending in our state legislature and the U.S. Congress, creating links to those that met my criteria. I was looking for bills that were

- appropriate for students to read about;
- comprehensible (with some teacher assistance) at the level of fifth grade readers; and
- interesting to fifth graders (for example, dealt with environment, education, transportation, or fire and rescue).

Figure 1
A Student Brochure
“Criminalizing Failure to Summon Assistance”
At schools.shorelineschools.org/echo_lake/staff/Wennik/governmentSP.html
In class, each team of reporters read the bill summaries and listed its top three choices of bills to study. (Participating in the decision of which bill to study gave the students a sense of ownership in the project.) I then assigned a different bill to each group, usually from the first or second choices.

The biggest challenge for students was trying to understand the language of the bill itself (Figure 3). In all cases, the vocabulary, sentence structure, and topic were fairly complex. In order to increase comprehension, we spent four one-hour class periods analyzing the text of the various bills.

Students printed a copy of the complete bill, read the summary, and discussed the general meaning or purpose of the bill. If the bill was in sections, these were assigned to the various team members. Students then employed the reading strategies we had been working on all year—circling words they needed to look up in the dictionary, summarizing in their own words paragraphs or groups of sentences, and writing down questions they had about the bill. Next, students researched the issues involved in the bill by visiting links on the WebQuest. Students worked separately, then reassembled in their groups to share their knowledge. Students used a K-W-L chart to track what they already knew about the topic, what they wanted to learn or information they needed to find, and then what they actually learned.
5. Evaluation
To evaluate students' work, I developed rubrics that were very specific with regard to content and format so that students could use them as checklists to make sure that their work was complete. Individuals rarely question the grades I awarded for these group projects because there were not any secrets about what I expected.

There is an array of things that students can produce as the culmination of a WebQuest. In addition to making a brochure, my students wrote a letter to a legislator, advocating a position for or against a specific bill. This was their opportunity to state a personal opinion on the bill and try to persuade the legislator. A rubric for such a letter would list elements of form (Does the student use the proper heading for addressing a senator, for example?) as well as content (Does the writer give solid reasons for his or her opinion?). My students have also created a PowerPoint presentation about a bill and shown it to other students (sixth graders, in fact). They have even held a press conference in which real reporters arrived to examine their work and ask them questions.

6. Conclusion
The final project—whether it’s a brochure, a constituent letter, or a presentation to a live audience—takes my students far beyond just drawing a chart that shows “How a Bill Becomes a Law.” They have to apply the information in that chart in order to understand the development of an actual piece of proposed legislation. By working through the WebQuest, my students must indeed “investigate, filter, analyze, and evaluate information.” They become active participants in democracy, and couch potatoes they are not.

Notes
3. To view many different examples of WebQuests and to learn more about this teaching tool see the website of one of the creators of the form, Bernie Dodge, at www.webquest.sdsu.edu.
4. The WebQuest I created is at www.shorelineschools.org/echo_lake/staff/Wennik/governmentSP.html
6. Students could just turn in the letter for the assignment or send it to the legislator, if they wished.

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