

Second Graders Connect to Their Community with a WebQuest

Mary Beth Henning and Danielle Bell

Community workers and community services are a typical part of the second grade curriculum in many American schools. However, the content provided in textbooks often lacks depth and the personal connection that students need to make their learning meaningful.¹ How many times have seven year olds already learned about fire fighters and mail carriers? Rarely do students learn that they can provide community service themselves. To provide second graders with a deeper understanding of community services and to observe how they learn using technology and community resources, we formed a partnership to create a community service unit of study that included a WebQuest, classroom speakers, and service learning.

I (Danielle) teach at Wright Elementary School in Malta, Illinois. It's a small public elementary school where technology and the fine arts are used purposefully and frequently to implement the district's curriculum. This school partners with Northern Illinois University in DeKalb to promote collaboration between classroom teachers and university professors, who undertake curriculum development projects together.

The WebQuest that Mary Beth and I developed for this project, including the worksheet to guide the students, can be viewed online at www.cedu.niu.edu/~henning/DeKalb/CommunityServicesDeKalb.htm. It took approximately three weeks to complete this unit with my 23 second grade students. The springboard for the project was a WebQuest that highlighted three community service organizations that invited children to volunteer or help in some way.

What is a WebQuest?

A WebQuest is a structured teaching tool utilizing the Internet to aid students in social studies inquiry. Typically, a WebQuest follows a standard format that includes an introduction, a task, a process, evaluation tools, and a concluding activity.² Teachers often choose to use a WebQuest because it allows them to closely guide the students' research on the Internet through

pre-selected sites. A great website containing blank templates for such an activity (as well as hundreds of teacher-developed WebQuests) can be found at webquest.org.

WebQuests have grown in popularity over the last decade, yet few elementary teachers are using the Internet regularly during social studies instruction.³ We were eager to see how our second graders would respond to the WebQuest.

Creating a Second Grade WebQuest

WebQuests can provide a safe way for young children to access the Internet, but the activities do take time to plan, and the question remains whether WebQuests are developmentally appropriate at the second grade level.⁴ In this project, I (Mary Beth) spent about eight hours researching local community services, designing the WebQuest, and uploading it to a server. I selected community service organizations that had "kid friendly" websites and offered some opportunities for children to volunteer. Before being included in the WebQuest, a volunteer from each organization had to agree to visit our second grade classroom to talk about the community services they provided. I chose three local community service organizations for our WebQuest: The Epilepsy Foundation; a disability advocacy organization named RAMP; and the historical Glidden Homestead. Two of the organizations focused on assisting individuals with physical difficulties, and the third was created to preserve a historical home that second graders visit on a field trip every spring.

When I (Danielle) introduced the WebQuest to the second graders, I gave a brief introduction to Webquests, as well as the title of the project, "Community Services of DeKalb." Then I asked, "Whom do you think we are going to learn about in this project?" Interestingly, the students guessed that the WebQuest would be about "the government," "doctors," the local university, and "agents." When I asked one student to explain what she meant by "agents," she replied, "The people who own the city." It was clear from this brief assessment of their background knowledge that the children had misconceptions about com-



Students role play the correct way to assist a child who may be experiencing a seizure, under the guidance of an adult guest speaker from the Epilepsy Foundation

community services and local government. I explained that the class would be studying non-governmental organizations (“people who help other people in our community as volunteers”). In particular, I explained that they would be looking at community services in which children could participate. While local government also provides many services, most of its workers are paid professionals.

Students were placed in heterogeneous groups of three and were given a laptop computer to use while completing the WebQuest over three days. The students took turns navigating on the computers, reading information, and recording their findings. A worksheet guided the children’s investigation into each of the pre-selected community services and included some questions specific to each service organization:

- Epilepsy Foundation: What did you learn about Adam? Click on “Kids Club,” then click on “read some stories.” Now click on the first link, “Fifth-Grader’s Epilepsy Website Wins Award.” Check out Alyssa’s website called, “Growing up with Epilepsy.” What did you learn from looking at Alyssa’s website?

- The Glidden Homestead: What makes the Joseph F. Glidden Homestead special? Click on the left hand side of the page where it says “Events.” What is happening at the Glidden Homestead?
- RAMP: Watch the video. What does RAMP do in DeKalb? Look on the left hand side of the page for the link “Support RAMP,” and click on it. What are some things that you could do to help RAMP?

Each section ended with the same prompt: *As a group, write three questions you would like to ask somebody who works for the organization.*

In each group, students worked collaboratively to complete one worksheet, discussing the best questions that they could ask and also editing their own writing. In all, the WebQuest portion of the project took about three hours total throughout the course of a week to complete. On the WebQuest site, students could see the rubric that I would use to assess their work; thus, students were aware of their teacher’s expectations and their responsibilities.



Guest Speakers

Once the students had collected some background knowledge about each organization, they were excited to ask questions of the visiting representatives. On each day over the course of a week, a spokesperson came to the classroom to explain his or her organization's role in serving the community, highlighting ways students might volunteer or get involved. Each presentation varied in style, and on each occasion, students used all the time allotted to ask their questions. Here are sample questions that the students asked:

- Questions to the Epilepsy Foundation representative: What do seizures do? Is it gross? How do you take care of kids with epilepsy?
- To the Glidden House representative: What does it look like in the Joseph Glidden House? How did you make the Barbed Wire Museum?
- To the RAMP representative: What is a wheel-a-thon? Can I help you out with what you are doing?

Having answers to these questions was necessary to help the students overcome fears and prejudices; learn about people, services, social progress, and medical advances; and prepare for the final, and perhaps most important, phase of the project: taking action!

Culminating Activities

With the information gathered from the WebQuest and guest speakers, the class had a concluding discussion about community services and workers. As a final assessment, I created a class concept map on easel paper, with the students' ideas about community services. The children shared some misconceptions about certain government workers and volunteers. It was difficult for them to distinguish volunteer community workers from those who are paid. For example, the children thought

that teachers and doctors were community volunteers, although routinely they are not.

Students wanted to add examples such as firefighters and police officers to their concept map, but I asked, "Can kids go to a fire and save people?" After a chorus of "No," I said, "They have special training for grown-ups only." This example helped the children recognize that they were examining community services where anyone, child or adult, could volunteer. Once these misunderstandings were addressed, the students chose one of the organizations that they would help in some tangible way.

Perhaps because the children knew that they traditionally took a field trip to the Glidden Homestead in the spring, many immediately shouted out that they wanted to help the Glidden Homestead. I encouraged the children to take some time to think about where they wanted to volunteer their time and not make a hasty decision—and to talk with their families about the different organizations so that they would be prepared to come to a decision as a whole class. I reminded the children that they had heard that they could help with a mailing at the Epilepsy Center, a candy sale for RAMP, or planting flowers at the Glidden Homestead. Some children preferred one volunteer opportunity over the other, so I helped the class reach a consensus, which was that they would indeed volunteer at the Glidden Homestead. With that decision finalized, we took on the task of planning a volunteer event. It would be a fitting way for the students to end their project on community services.

Can a WebQuest Work in Second Grade?

Choice, cooperative learning, and pre-planning appear to be three factors that made this WebQuest developmentally appropriate. Students were offered choice in the roles they would assume during the WebQuest (reader, writer, computer mouser) and in the culminating project (writing their own questions to ask the community volunteers, and then voting on which community service they would complete as a class). I cultivated cooperative learning skills by using heterogeneous grouping,

team-building strategies, and coaching the children on listening and turn-taking, for example. The results of the groups' efforts added to the students' feelings of success.

All of the second graders in this class were interviewed about their perceptions of the WebQuest project and what they learned about community services. All 23 children indicated that they enjoyed the WebQuest and learning about community services. In interviews, children were nearly equally divided in claiming that their favorite role in the WebQuest was writer, reader, or mouser.

The children were not deterred by the occasional computer glitch, and they enjoyed using the Internet, writing about their computer exploration, and reading from the Internet. "It's fun!" was the most common response by the children in describing the WebQuest. The most frequent challenge they identified was vocabulary—reading and understanding some of the words on the websites.

Several groups of students struggled to spell their questions correctly as they wrote them in preparation for speaking with the guest speakers. A few of the children were reflective about the challenges of working cooperatively. Student engagement was high during the project, and our analysis of the students' work showed critical thinking.

Cautions

The time that teachers must devote to planning can be a challenge and, in this project, it took some time to set up the computers and to find websites that were developmentally appropriate for second graders.⁵ During this type of project, technical glitches (Internet connection, lack of sound, time to get computers up and running for all the children) can be trying for a classroom teacher. Careful planning to create backup plans for technological failings may increase a teacher's comfort-level with such a project. In this case, extra pamphlets, literature, and printed portions from the websites proved helpful when problems with technology arose, or when one group finished their tasks before the others. Strong classroom management skills are likely to make a WebQuest and service learning experience more positive. We would not recommend that it be the first activity of the year for this grade level.

Lasting Impact

Despite the potential challenges that a teacher may encounter when facilitating a WebQuest, its lasting impact makes the extra effort worth the investment. In this case, the WebQuest project led to additional discussions outside of the classroom about what the students had been learning. For instance, during recess, students role-played how to help someone having an epileptic seizure, and numerous parents mentioned animated conversations taking place at home about the project as well. The students were excited by their new knowledge and were sharing their learning with others. One parent was so moved by her child's enthusiasm that she requested detailed contact

information so that her family could volunteer together at one of the organizations.

Perhaps one of the most favorable outcomes of the project was that students were able to take action in a meaningful way as a result of their WebQuest research. After hearing from all three organizations, the students ultimately decided that they would like to volunteer at the historical home in the community. Approximately fifteen families attended a volunteer work day one Saturday morning. Students and parents together helped with uprooting and planting several flowerbeds and bushes. As families worked, they had an opportunity to hear about the historic scope and layout of Joseph Glidden's land and to participate in restoring some of the Homestead's original landscape features. They learned about Glidden's generosity to others and his vision for progress in the community. Students were made aware of other volunteer and fundraising opportunities which they could attend in the future, and many seemed excited to do so. Finally, the second graders collected nearly \$260 in donations from school staff and students to present to the Homestead. In return, this second grade class will have their efforts memorialized in some of the bricks that will be used in the restoration process on the Homestead's property.

As a result of the WebQuest, the students were empowered to do something tangible for their community, making the project memorable and purposeful. Using the computer to access kid-friendly community service organizations allowed the children to think critically about what different organizations do and how they might help. This sort of authentic learning about their own community went beyond a standard textbook approach and allowed students to practice community involvement. If teachers build on this project in higher grades, perhaps these students will carry on their interest in researching and working to better their communities as adults.⁶

Notes

1. Jere Brophy and Janet Alleman, *Powerful Social Studies for Elementary Students* (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1996).
2. Bernie Dodge, "Five Rules for Writing a Great WebQuest," *Learning and Leading with Technology* 28, no. 8(2001): 6-8.
3. Philip VanFossen, "Using WebQuests to Scaffold Higher-Order Thinking," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 4 (2004): 13-16.
4. Jason Abbitt and John Ophus, "What We Know about the Impacts of WebQuests: A Review of Research," *AACE Journal* 16, no. 4 (2007): 441-456 and Robert Zheng, J. Perez, J. Willimason, and J. Flygare, "WebQuests as Perceived by Teachers: Implications for Online Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 24 (2007): 295-304.
5. Robert Perkins and Margaret L. McKnight, "Teachers' Attitudes Toward WebQuests as a Method of Teaching," *Computers in the Schools* 22, no.1/2 (2005): 123-133.
6. We would like to thank Principal Gina Greenwald and the guest speakers, volunteers, and staff at the participating organizations: Epilepsy Foundation (www.epilepsyheartland.org); Glidden Homestead (www.gliddenhomestead.org); and RAMP (www.rampcil.org).

MARY BETH HENNING is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois.
DANIELLE BELL is a second grade teacher at Wright Elementary School in Malta, Illinois.