The WebQuest: A Parable

I By Tom March I

Happy Anniversary

This month marks an interesting personal anniversary for me. It was 20 years ago that I posted the first WebQuest ever published for mass consumption. My colleague and the originator of the idea, Bernie Dodge, had created two for students we team-taught at San Diego State University, but I had the honour of writing and posting the first publicly available WebQuest. Because I was on a three-year fellowship at the time with the single task of developing things that would help teachers, students and librarians use the Web, I had the opportunity to become something of a global expert in writing and evolving WebQuests.

Twenty years! Imagine how things have changed in that time. Consider these facts from the circa 1995 world: Apple was a failing computer company; Google, Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia did not exist; few people owned mobile phones; maps were paper, music was played from CDs, photos were in albums, movies were watched on big screens – and only a small percentage of the world's population had even seen this amazing, grindingly slow thing called the World Wide Web.

But the anniversary is something of a bittersweet experience. On the sweet side, that early opportunity allowed me to work with lots of great teachers, schools and companies. On the flip side, the anniversary highlights some lost opportunities – and these do not include the fact that I would be $130,000 richer if I had actually *bought* a thousand dollars worth of Apple stock back in 1995 and not just had the *thought*! No, the lost opportunities relate to education and appear in a few dimensions: student understandings, teacher practices and curriculum re-invention.

Student Understandings: from the World Wide Web to the New WWW

In the mid-90s, schools tended to be the place where most students first experienced the Internet. Given this blank slate, I had a goal: to make students' first interactions with the Web powerful experiences in which they pursued meaningful topics, grappled with complex challenges, got feedback from real-world experts and created engaging ICT productions as part of their solutions. With a start like this, I hoped they would be forever disposed to the positive ways they could use technology. Part of this motivation for WebQuests came from a student in my ninth grade English class. As I tried (feebly) to engage this young man in an activity, all he could do was look up and say, "Ev". Perplexed, I asked him to explain. "It is short for whatever." Somehow, schoolwork evinced not only apathy, but some reduced fragment of it. One of my central beliefs is that the joy of learning is positive experience that unites humanity, so I tweaked WebQuests to maximise research into human motivation, aiming to orchestrate opportunities for students to sense the vitality that real learning sparks.

However, within 10 years I was compelled to write about 'the New WWW': the mobile-based, personally-targeted, immediately gratifying digital world that could provide people, especially children, with whatever they wanted, whenever and wherever. But this was a cautionary tale where 'whatever' was not that of unlimited potential, but the sort uttered by my ninth grader. Psychology and world religions have long pointed out that getting what we want is no road to happiness. Fast-forward another 10 years and few would argue that youth are glued to devices. But are they happier? Parents and teachers are eminently qualified to answer this question and, as a champion of ICTs in education, I have copped their laments, while as a parent, I have shared them.

Teacher Practice: Stand and Deliver Copy/Paste Masterpieces

Improvements in teaching practice have also proved a disappointment. The pedagogies teachers drew upon to shape the WebQuest's structure had a long history of research. More than this, they had been good ideas for even longer. The fields of cognitive science and psychology – going back to Dewey and Piaget and through to Bruner and Bloom and up to the likes of Ted Sizer, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Robert Marzano and a raft of constructivists and writing process researchers – all informed what became a template for WebQuests. The purpose for a template is that it not only scaffolds student learning, but also provides a structure for teachers, where activities can be based not on habit, but on dependable approaches that achieve worthy outcomes.

As suggested, these research-based approaches had long been good ideas, but teachers recognised that with the addition of the World Wide Web, things got critical. It was game over for some tasks routinely used in classrooms around the globe; knowledge as fact gathering would be revealed for the charade it is. Before the Web, some could argue that when students copied source material with paper and pen at least some of the content might stick. When the same task could be completed with control-c/control-v keystrokes, little of the content was likely to cross into the learner's cognition, let alone develop into deeper conceptual understandings.

Unfortunately, I was a little wrong and have data to prove that most teachers

simply used the structure of WebQuests as a fill-in-the-blank, information-gathering exercise. In the early 2000s, wanting to showcase and celebrate true WebQuests, I set up a site called BestWebQuests.com where people could find 'real' WebQuests; those in which students had to apply the information they acquired to a complex task in order to construct new meaning. Typically, the tasks involved inventing new solutions, integrating multiple viewpoints into one argument or creating a new interpretation based on a different context. The data I just referred to arose because a colleague and I meticulously reviewed, one-by-one, nearly two thousand self-proclaimed WebQuests to populate the collection. Of these, the disappointing truth is that less than 17 percent actually went beyond asking students to copy and paste information skimmed from the Web. So much for two things: the power of pedagogies (when superficially understood) and technology as disruptor.

Curriculum Re-invention: Still Calendar-Based After all these Years

Even though students typically used Internet-connected desktops in school labs in those early days, one-to-one access to such technologies was within sight. Today, students' comprehensive digital access and bring-your-own-device programs abound. Just as copy/paste assignments are absurd in a Web-connected world, the same goes for a teacher-delivered, calendar-based approach to learning in any school where students have personal digital devices. Consider it: why would teachers empower students with individual access to infinite resources, communities and interactions merely to limit them to doing these things today, right now. What is the alternative? Going back to why we do what we do, a teacher-delivered, 'seat-time' approach to curriculum was the best approach possible last century and has now become institutionalised. Not too long ago, the situation was that schools had many students, one teacher and limited resources. Today, in effect, schools have one student with infinite online learning opportunities. Furthermore, the old goals of basic literacy and numeracy have shifted because today's world is driven by globalisation, innovation and continuous improvement, which require lifelong learners who take initiative and problem-solve.

So the curriculum should now be tailored to the current reality. Rather than a calendar-based approach to content delivery, teachers need an accomplishment-based approach to mastering complex challenges. For this to work, clearly, a different structure is needed. This is the challenge facing education over the next two decades and in the next issue of *Education Technology Solutions*, I will map out some of the key aspects. But in the current context, teachers can use a set of evidence-based approaches to frame a more human, less industrial era, model that will let individuals in schools choose and pursue their own paths to even greater success.

As unforeseeable as the future is, what I can promise comes from what happened (or did not) with the WebQuest: if teachers do not engage with the challenges and opportunities posed by new conditions, little will change in their practices even as the world around them transforms. Maintaining a status quo scenario reminds me of the witty words from an earlier age. H. L. Mencken said, "Democracy is the notion that the common people know what they want and deserve to get it good and hard." If teachers continue to 'know best' rather than adapt to changing conditions, there will be no one to blame for the disaffection of students, parents, universities and the work world.

The Parable

So what needs to be done to invent this next era of education? Ironically, as someone who has built a career on the back of a buzzword, I would like to argue for a moratorium on new ideas and distractions. I have become fond of a phrase I first heard used by the London 2012 Olympic Committee – make new mistakes. This implies that the organisation is working towards a vision and using a set of hypotheses to reach its goal. When something is tried and it works, organisational knowledge is built. However, when a mistake is made, this is not a problem as long as the lessons come back to inform what is known and refines the next hypothesis – thus continuously improving knowledge and actions. So the moratorium on new ideas targets what is too often merely a churn of *different* ideas.

Similarly, teachers need to question their infatuation with 'must-have' ICTs or the latest gadget. Technology will take care of itself. The ongoing revolution toward smaller, faster, more personalised and powerful devices and software is inevitable and will do just fine without teachers reacting to *every* digital twitch, whereas changing human organisations takes much longer. If teachers let themselves stay distracted, they will not know if they are making new mistakes or merely different ones. They do not know if they are better or worse for two reasons. Firstly, too often the goals are not clearly enough articulated – what exactly is the desired outcome? Secondly, teachers do not collect data on what happened and then compare it to their goals. These ideas lead directly to next issue's follow-up article, which explores the critical elements to invent a school's Next Era Ed.

In closing, for all the WebQuests I ever wrote or coached others to write, I tried to conclude in a specific way. After all the deep learning, collaboration and real-world experiences students encountered through the WebQuest, of course I hoped they would have grown in understanding and attitude. But because I see learning as a continuous process, not a neat package, I tried to challenge any newfound concepts with what might be a next challenge. In other words, I wanted to leave students with a new 'Huh?' that could lead to the next 'Ah-ha!' In that spirit, let me finish this article with the following question, "If you see that personalisation of student learning is the next great challenge for schools and agree that empowering intrinsic motivation is a key lever in achieving this goal, how will you scale the joy of learning?" A hint: smart technology helps.

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