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# WebQuest: task-based learning in a digital environment

Il cosiddetto WebQuest può fornire a docenti e studenti delle scuole medie e medie superiori un nuovo impulso per l'uso di approcci all'insegnamento delle lingue che propongono lo svolgimento di compiti mirati (task-based) o l'elaborazione di tematiche specifiche (content-based). Il WebQuest è uno strumento che crea buone occasioni di apprendimento basato su internet mettendo a disposizione di studenti e docenti materiale autentico, tematiche interessanti e opportunità di comunicazione reale nella lingua d'arrivo. Il WebQuest ha il potenziale per contribuire al rinnovamento dell'insegnamento delle lingue e creare le condizioni per una fruizione didattica e pedagogica di internet veramente significativa. (Red.)

Content and task-based approaches to language learning and teaching might get a new impulse when teachers and students in secondary schools use so-called WebQuests. WebQuests offer good internet-based language learning opportunities because they provide learners with exposure to authentic material, meaningful content and possibilities for real communication in the target language. WebQuests may innovate language teaching and provide a basis for a sound pedagogical use of the internet.

Internet and language teaching and learning

The internet has been around for about a decade now and schools are gradually getting connected to the web.
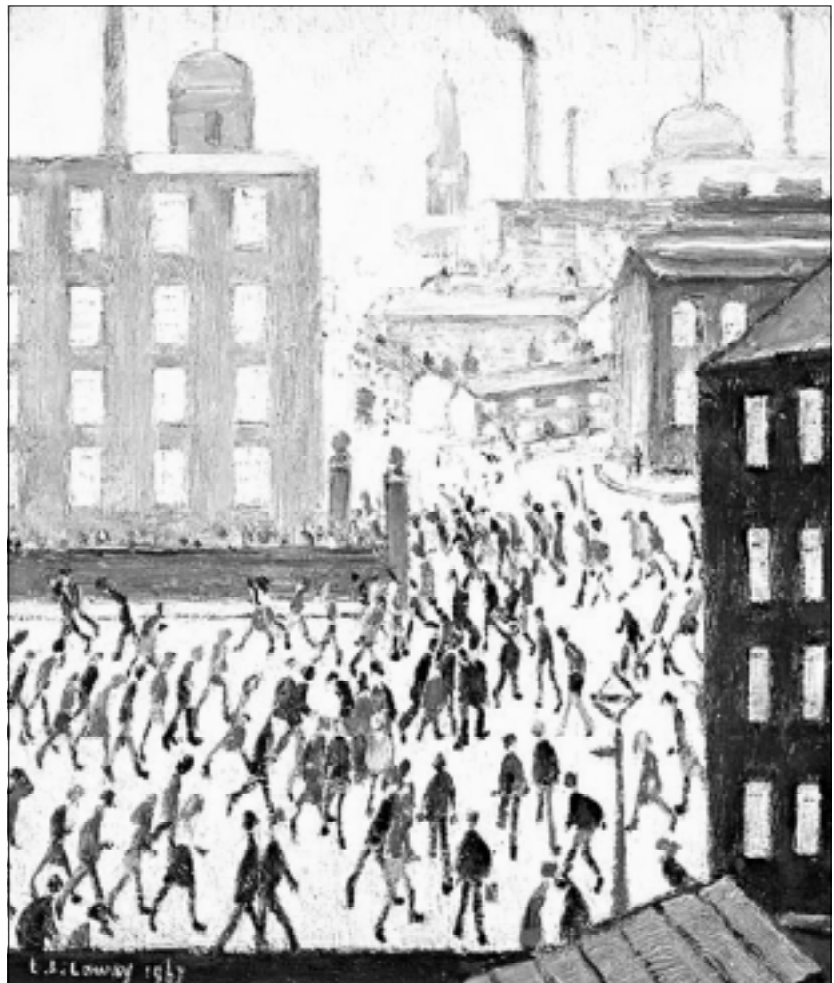
Lawrence Steven Lowry, Industrial scene, 1967

Computers and computer labs have, until now, largely failed to really innovate language learning and teaching. It is true that an increasing number of teachers have discovered the internet as a resource for downloading materials and many have an email address. Many materials, though, are used in a very traditional way. There are texts (written or audio or video-enhanced) with questions. The internet abounds with websites with grammar and vocabulary activities, fill-in-the-gap, true-false and multiple choice exercises that are of questionable value for language learning. Programs that can be used to create exercises such as half-baked hot potatoes (software made available by the university of Victoria in the United States (http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/halfbaked/) seem to be very popular. Although some of these materials may be useful, they do not exploit the full potential of the internet for language learning.

More and more schools now finally have the possibilities to use the computers with (fast) internet access. Moreover, many students have internet access at home. However, many language teachers are at a loss what to do now that they have the technological possibilities.
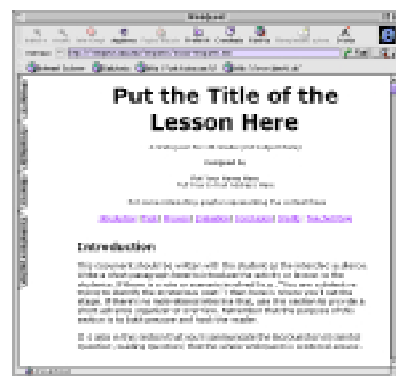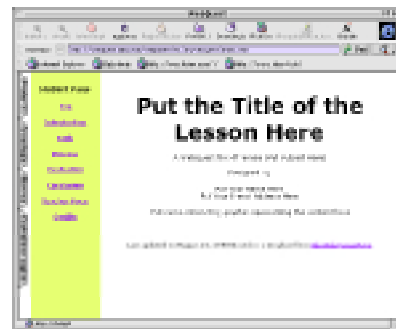
Webquests

An interesting development and a way to exploit the internet for good language learning practice is the concept of a WebQuest. A WebQuest is an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information that learners interact with comes from resources on the internet. The concept of WebQuest was developed by Bernie Dodge of San Diego State University who also created the WebQuest Page http://webquest.sdsu.edu/webquest.html

On his WebQuest Page, Dodge has created a database of WebQuests for many different school subjects cre-

ated by teachers, students, teacher trainers and other educators. Unfortunately, the number of WebQuests for modern languages is limited, probably due to the fact that languages are not such an important part of the American high school curriculum. A site dedicated to WebQuests for modern languages is under construction in the Netherlands (www.talenquest.nl). In this project criteria for good Web-Quests for modern languages have been developed. Most information is, however, only accessible in Dutch, although the WebQuests themselves are often written in the target language (English, German, French, Russian). Some examples of WebQuests for English can also be found on the resources page of the Macmillan's website www.onestopenglish.com. Here the concept is limited to quests about cities (Oxford, Los Angeles, London).

A WebQuest is usually written following a model or template, which can be downloaded from the WebQuest Page. There are easy templates, which the novice or less-experienced designer can use. The template is imported in a web-editor like *Frontpage* or *Netscape Composer*, but with more recent versions of MS-Word editing web-pages is also possible. The simplest template consists of one file, the more sophisticated ones have a menu bar at the top or on the left and are a bit harder to edit. You do not have to be an experienced user to modify the text in the template, which contains the design instructions. More experienced users can make the WebQuest nicer, adding colours, pictures or even sound or video. With each template comes a teacher page, in which the designer can explain the purpose of the WebQuest, the target group, curriculum standards covered etc. Very few WebQuests in the WebQuest Page database contain a teacher page, though.

WebQuest templates

A WebQuest consists of the following components:

1. A **title page**
2. An **introduction**, which provides the student with a first orientation to the task
3. A description of a task that is do-able, motivating and interesting. The task description should make clear what the student will have done on completion of the WebQuest: a presentation, a survey, a poster, etc.
4. A set of **information sources** needed to complete the task. Information sources usually are documents to be found on the internet, but can also be links to experts available via e-mail, searchable databases on the net. However, also documents available on the school's network, on a cd-rom, books and other documents physically available in the learner's setting can be mentioned.
5. A description of the **process** the

learners should go through in accomplishing the task. Depending on the type of task and learner, the process may consist of more or less clearly described steps.

6. **Evaluation criteria** the students can take into account while carrying out the task.

7. A **conclusion** that brings closure to the quest, reminds the learners about what they've learned, and perhaps encourages them to extend the experience into other domains.
(Bernie Dodge, *Some thoughts about WebQuests*, The WebQuest Page).

For WebQuests for modern languages the following criteria may be added:

8. The task encourages the learner to use the target language for communication: it should be content-based.

9. The materials needed for the execution of the task must be authentic, the task as such should be realistic and functional.

10. The task should be flexible and allow learners to make their own choices and choose their own learning paths.

11. The task encourages learners to interact, exchange information and creates a sound rivalry in the class among learners to create a product that is interesting to present to the other learners.

WebQuests may help teachers cross the threshold of the computer lab or to using the internet. WebQuests can be closed and of short duration, especially when designed for beginners, but may also be very open, last for a few weeks, be interdisciplinary, etc. WebQuests are available online, but can be downloaded for use off-line once learners have collected information materials and work with them. It is also possible to ask learners to search the web at home and bring the information into the classroom.

Why WebQuests are good for language learning

What is important is that learners get the possibility to get a lot of exposure to the language by surfing on the web. For other subjects teachers are often worried that students spend too much time surfing the web without finding the appropriate information. By providing the necessary resources (web links) this problem can easily be overcome. For language learning, surfing the web, skimming websites, scanning web documents for relevant information, trying to decode the meaning, possibly making use of translation programs on the web as provided by search engines (Babelfish by Altavista e.g.) is all very good for language learning. The learners interact with authentic materials, they can use the language for real communication if they can ask an expert or somebody else a question by email. By allowing the learners to make their own choices a sense of ownership can be created, it is not the teacher who sets the task and determines all the steps to be taken, but students can be given possibilities to choose their own strategies to obtain information and to plan their work.

WebQuest and Babylonia

Babylonia is committed to the promotion of up-to-date modern language learning. Therefore, we will create a WebQuest section on the Babylonia Website (www.babylonia-ti.ch). We hope to create a database with WebQuests for modern languages and will make templates available in English, German, French and Italian. Readers are invited to suggest translations of the English term *WebQuest* in these languages. We hope teachers will make WebQuests themselves and send them to us. However, it is also possible to put the WebQuest on your own homepage or the homepage of your institute or school and send us

the url (the site where the WebQuest can be found).

Comments or suggestions
Comments or additional suggestions for setting up a WebQuest page on the Babylonia website can be sent to the moderator of the website (g.stoks@idea-ti.ch)

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