Using WebQuests to Promote Integrative Thinking in Conflict Studies

by Bill Warters

This article encourages readers to consider using WebQuests in their courses or workshops. These web-based teaching and learning tools make the most of the strengths of the Web, while providing a hedge against some of it's limitations. After a brief introduction to the WebQuest concept, readers are invited to explore an example of a new Conflict Studies WebQuest (http://www.campus-adr.org/Webquest/Index.htm) developed by the author as part of a conflict theory course he is teaching this term at Wayne State University. Should you feel so inspired, links to information and tools for constucting your own WebQuests are provided as well.

When you stop to think about it, the World Wide Web, with it's ever churning content, may in fact be the ideal tool for teaching about conflict and conflict resolution. At first this may not seem obvious. Textbooks, perhaps our most cherished teaching tool, are nicely organized and cross-referenced. Meanwhile, the Web is shapeless and chaotic. While textbooks are carefully researched and screened for bias-free presentation, the Web is passionate and full of opinions. And whereas textbooks are written by professionals, just about anyone can write a Web page. How can this "blooming, buzzing confusion" actually be good for teaching?

In part, the answer has to do with your goals for teaching and the level of learning you hope to encourage. Also key are the kinds of learning activities that you choose to use with your students.

Targeting Different Levels of Learning

A common approach to articulating learning goals and related activities is to use something known as Bloom's Taxonomy. This method was developed following the 1948 Convention of the American Psychological Association when Benjamin Bloom took the lead with a group of educational psychologists in formulating a classification of "the goals of the educational process." This work resulted in a taxonomy including three overlapping domains; the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective.By 1956, Bloom and his co-workers had established a **hierarchy of**

Evaluation
Synthesis
Analysis
Application
Comprehension
Knowledge

Bloom's Taxonomy
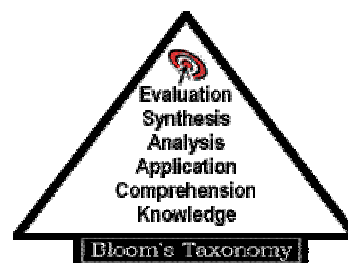
educational objectives which attempts to divide the cognitive objectives into subdivisions ranging from the simplest behavior to the most complex. Each higher level assumes the mastery of lower levels of performance. The focus of the six levels are as follows:

- **Knowledge** refers to the ability to recall facts;
- **Comprehension** refers to the ability to understand ideas and translate them into other formats;
- **Application** is the ability to use ideas in particular and concrete situations;
- **Analysis** is the ability to dissect ideas into constituent parts to make the organization clear;
- **Synthesis** refers to the ability to integrate parts into a unified whole; and
- **Evaluation** is the ability to judge the value of an idea, procedure, etc., using appropriate criteria.

Each level of learning has been associated with the use of different forms of inquiry and learning tasks and assignments. A [large graphic laying out some of these questions and tasks](http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportImages/bloomswheel.gif) (http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportImages/bloomswheel.gif) for each level is attached for your consideration.

Conflict Resolution Requires the Full Breadth of Learning Levels

As an applied field, Conflict Resolution and Conflict Studies programs must work to prepare students to function across the full range of Bloom's intellectual levels. This suggests that students must be active, rather than passive learners. For in addition to being exposed to some of the core **knowledge** of the field, and being able to **recall basic facts** and process models from memory, students need to actually **comprehend** the utility of various theories of conflict and conflict intervention, and then be able to **apply** them to new and changing situations. Students also need to develop skills of conflict **analysis**, as each case and setting is likely be different from the last. Successful students must have the ability to explore multiple viewpoints and develop a **synthesis** that encompasses the whole. And hopefully, students will become skilled enough to **evaluate** the appropriateness of applying different conflict theories or intervention methods to any given dispute. Certainly, conflict studies faculty and trainers have their work cut out for them.

The Web Reflects the World

Earlier I raised the question of comparing traditional textbooks with the Web as teaching tools. Don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating that we do away with textbooks. There is no question that textbooks, with their structured and carefully filtered expert information, are invaluable tools for presenting core ideas and providing frameworks for thought. But ask yourself which tool, the Web or a textbook, you think more accurately reflects the reality around us? And the world that conflict intervenors must work in? Is the world of conflict neatly structured, filtered, and driven by facts and rational experts? I would

argue that the Web, chaotic as it may seem, more closely mirrors our experience of real life, and the experience of working through conflict. We face lots of information, but are unclear about it's quality. We must grapple with multiple perspectives, opinions and agendas. And things change fast.

As more and more classrooms get wired, the Web provides us with the opportunity to bring this world, with all it's lovely complexity and immediacy, into the classroom. And in the classroom novices and experienced practitioners and scholars together can safely work with it and learn from it. Another point in the Web's favor is that as web-based tools like the CRInfo (http://www.crinfo.org/) project mature, we will have increasingly rapid online access to the kind of structured, filtered, expert knowledge about conflict that textbooks now provide. If you like the Web, it's kind of like having your cake and eating it too.

From a student-centered, active-learning perspective, the Web can really be an ideal tool. Students are encouraged to take charge of their own learning. They must make ongoing subtle judgements about the quality of the information they find. They are provided the opportunity to explore many different sides of issues, mainstream as well as fringe, and to grapple with opinions as well as facts and the gray areas in-between. They must learn to decide how much information is enough given their available time and goals. And they must become information detectives, able to track missing links and to use available information and search tools with proficiency. These skills can serve them well in future years.

While the Web certainly has many great features, it has its limitations too. It is so vast and hyperlinked that one can quickly get lost on potentially facinating but irrelevant side-trips. Students may feel tempted to spend time in areas of the web that they stumble across (such as pornography, chat rooms, gambling, shopping sites, or term paper mills) that may be clearly inappropriate from an educational or moral standpoint. And given the sheer amount of available information, one can quickly feel trapped by seemingly endless searches for small nuggets of relevant information buried within piles of useless, misleading junk.Fortunately, WebQuests have been designed with the strengths and limitations of the Web in mind. In the next section we will review the WebQuest method in some more detail.

The Defining Characteristics of WebQuests

WebQuests were originally developed in 1995 by Bernie Dodge at San Diego State University. They are online curriculum modules which engage students in learning about an authentic topic or problem. Generally, WebQuests are cooperative activities where students assume different roles relative to an authentic problem. For example, check out these **screen shots** from a WebQuest exploring different perspectives on the Vietnam War (http://www.campus-adr.org/CMHER/ReportArticles/Edition1_4/MuralQuest.html). The

Internet is usually the main information resource, although other more traditional resources, such as newspapers and journals, can be included. The WebQuest itself provides structure to the investigation of the topic, thereby increasing the ability of students to successfully navigate a highly unstructured environment such as the Web. Students then develop a product which demonstrates their knowledge of the problem and its potential solutions.

The basic components of a WebQuest as described by Bernie Dodge (http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/) include:

1. An introduction that sets the stage and provides some background information.
2. A task that is doable and interesting.
3. A set of information sources needed to complete the task. Many (though not necessarily all) of the resources are embedded in the WebQuest document itself as anchors pointing to information on the World Wide Web. Information sources might include web documents, experts available via e-mail or realtime conferencing, searchable databases on the net, and books and other documents physically available in the learner's setting. Because pointers to resources are included, the learner is not left to wander through webspace completely adrift.
4. A description of the process the learners should go through in accomplishing the task. The process should be broken out into clearly described steps.
5. Some guidance on how to organize the information acquired. This can take the form of guiding questions, or directions to complete organizational frameworks such as timelines, concept maps, or cause-and-effect diagrams.
6. 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.

Dodge also suggests that modules be enhanced by wrapping motivational elements around the basic structure. This can be done by giving the learners a role to play (e.g., scientist, detective, reporter), simulated personae to interact with via e-mail, and a scenario to work within (e.g., you've been asked by the Secretary General of the UN to brief him on what's happening in sub-Saharan Africa this week.) He also notes that a good WebQuest is usually highly visual, taking advantage of available sites with lots of pictures, maps, animations, or even sounds. These are teaching tools that keep students' interest.

WebQuests have become increasingly popular in elementary and secondary education, and the growing list of freely posted examples (http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/matrix.html) is truly impressive. The range of tasks (http://projects.edtech.sandi.net/staffdev/tpss99/tasksimap/) that students are asked to accomplish as part of their learning activities is

also quite broad. Eleven different general categories of tasks have been identified, including:

- Retelling Tasks,
- Compilation Tasks,
- Scientific Tasks,
- Mystery Tasks,
- Journalistic Tasks,
- Design Tasks,
- Creative Tasks,
- Judgement Tasks,
- Analytical Tasks,
- Self-Knowledge Tasks,
- Persuasion Tasks, and
- Consensus Building Tasks.

WebQuests Support Cognitive Development

WebQuests can help students develop higher level cognitive skills in an engaging way. Tom March, one of the early developers of the WebQuest model and a colleague of Dodge, describes some of the inherent learning advantages of the WebQuest model. He notes,

> Built into the WebQuest process are the strategies of cognitive psychology and constructivism. First, the question posed to students can not be answered simply by collecting and spitting back information. A WebQuest forces students to transform information into something else: a cluster that maps out the main issues, a comparison, a hypothesis, a solution, etc.In order to engage students in higher level cognition, WebQuests use scaffolding or prompting which has been shown to facilitate more advanced thinking. In other words, by breaking the task into meaningful "chunks" and asking students to undertake specific sub-tasks, a WebQuest can step them through the kind of thinking process that more expert learners would typically use. Lastly, constructivism suggests that when students need to understand a more complex or sophisticated topic like those that comprise WebQuests, it doesn't help to serve them simplified truths, boiled down examples, or step-by-step formulas. What they need are many examples with lots of information and opinions on the topic through which they will sift until they have constructed an understanding that not only connects to their own individual prior knowledge, but also builds new schema that will be refined when students encounter the topic again in the future. Until the Web, this kind of activity was very difficult for the average teacher to create because collecting such a breadth of resources was next

to impossible. (Tom March, from Why WebQuests? (http://www.ozline.com/webquests/intro.html))

An Experimental Conflict Theory WebQuest

Late this past Summer, after reading through some of the support materials provided below, I decided to jump in and develop a WebQuest for my **Roots of Social Conflict** course. The graduate-level course is part of the Master of Arts in Dispute Resolution program at Wayne State University. The course meets once a week for 3-hours for 15 weeks. It is offered early in our program's sequence of courses and is intended to introduce students to various theories regarding the causes of social conflict and conflict escalation. The theories are presented using a combination of readings from three textbooks and in-class lectures. Students are asked to apply these ideas to short case studies presented in class via video clips or newspaper and magazine articles, and by writing brief reflection papers.

The WebQuest I eventually developed is called **Standoff at Oka**, and is based on a 78-day standoff in 1990 between Mohawk Indians and army and law enforcement officials over the proposed expansion of a golf course in a small community not far from Montreal, Canada. It is clearly the most extended and elaborate case study of the course, and was designed to help reinforce and extend previous learning. I picked the case based on prior familiarity with the dispute, the richness and multiple perspectives reflected in it, and the availability of appropriate online resources. 1990 happened to be the first year that the cell phone was widely used by reporters, and also the first year that CBC Newsworld broadcast 24-hour news coverage. This led to a very well documented conflict. And the 10-year anniversary of the dispute in July of this year resulted in an even richer set of available online resources as various news outlets posted retrospective pieces on the web, including radio and television clips.

Students worked in groups of 4-5, with each group being assigned a different general theoretical perspective. Within each group students took on different roles based on the various parties' perspectives. I would have prefered smaller groups of 3-4, but the class size (23 students) and available presentation time and other factors dicated the larger group size. Three full class sessions were held in a computer lab, so that student groups could accomplish much of their shared work during class time, reducing the scheduling challenges associated with getting working graduate students together outside of class. At the end of the month-long process, each group presented 25-30 minute powerpoint presentations analyzing the case from their assigned theoretical perspectives.

I have to say that the quality and creativity of the student presentations, which occurred just last week, was quite good, and that I've been pleased with the experience thus far. Listening in as students worked on the activities suggests that a lot of useful learning and integration of knowledge was occurring. I invite you to have a look for yourself at the WebQuest (http://www.campus-adr.org/Webquest/Index.htm), with the caveat that it is still in it's first draft. As a class, we still need to debrief regarding the experience, which may lead to some changes or simplifications in the structure or the process.

Other Examples of Conflict Studies WebQuests

It appears that higher education has not yet fully embraced WebQuests, at least to the extent that primary and secondary educators have. Most examples of conflict-related WebQuests that I came across were designed with highschool students in mind, but I have not really conducted an exhaustive search.

Relevant examples of existing conflict WebQuests follow:

Conflict Yellowstone Wolves (A wildlife dispute WebQuest) (http://powayusd.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/mtr/ConflictYellowstoneWolf.htm)
Vietnam War Mural Dispute WebQuest (http://students.itec.sfsu.edu/itec815/mcmullin/index.html)
Headwaters Forest Dispute WebQuest

(http://www.dunkerton.k12.ia.us/curriculum/mcdougall.html) (A multi-perspective environmental conflict)

Little Rock 9, Integration 0?

(http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/BHM/little_rock/index.html) (A high school level WebQuest on Desegregation with good Teacher Notes)

Quest for Peace and Diplomacy

(http://www.angelfire.com/wy/peacequest/) (A WebQuest on the India-Pakistan Dispute over Kashmir by Pakistan teacher Fatemeh Sheikh)

The Field Needs More Conflict Studies WebQuests

The relative lack of college-level WebQuests in general, and conflict-related projects in particular, suggests that there is plenty of opportunity for creativity in this area. WebQuests may be one of the best ways yet developed (aside from actual internships, of course) for conflict intervenors and scholars-in-training to hone their skills and develop higher order thinking abilities. And conflicts are a great topic for a WebQuest because they tend to be inherently interesting. They usually involve multiple perspectives and they invite further investigation and analysis.

Faculty and trainers who choose to create new WebQuest teaching tools will almost certainly enhance their students' learning experience. And by sharing their new tools they may at the same time benefit the field as a whole. If you're intrigued by the idea, there are plenty of tools to help you quickly get started. Why not give it a try?...

Webquest Design Tools

THE WEBQUEST PAGE The center of gravity for the WebQuest world is clearly the WebQuest Page (http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/) maintained by Bernie Dodge at San Diego State University. Dodge provides visitors to his site with a broad range of training and support materials, including links to materials prepared for full summer workshops on the subject. The site includes free WebQuest page design templates (http://edweb.sdsu.edu/webquest/LessonTemplate.html) that can greatly speed up your design time. I used one and found it quite helpful.

Filamentality (http://www.kn.pacbell.com/wired/fil) is a very nice fill-in-the-blank interactive Website sponsored by Pacific Bell that guides you through picking a topic, searching the Web, gathering good Internet sites, and turning Web resources into learning activities that can include WebQuests, or simpler projects such as scavenger hunts or hotlists. Keeping track of the webpages that you find in the planning and design phase of the work can be quite daunting, and this site provides an easy way to manage your info bank. The title is based on the idea that the site helps combine the "filaments" of the Web with a learner's "mentality". Support is built-in through "Mentality Tips" that guide you along the way to creating a Web-based activity you can then share with others even if you don't know anything about HTML or Web servers.

Web-and-Flow (http://www.web-and-flow.com/) is a subscription-based Website (only $25/year) created by Tom March, Dodge's former

colleague from San Diego State University. Similar to, but more robust than Filamentality, Web-and-Flow is also a fill-in-the-blanks Web site that guides you through creating your own web-based activities for learners. Creator March humbly describes it as some combination of an interactive design site, a just-in-time workshop, an interactive book, an expert system, an HTML editor, a Web host, and a learning community. A Guided Tour is available to help you get a better feel for what's available.

CRInfo (http://www.crinfo.org/) is the new Hewlett-funded web portal for conflict resolution information retrieval. As the site matures and gets more fully loaded with content it should prove extremely helpful in locating online resources to use in your WebQuest design work. If you haven't tried it out yet, you should have a go. It's full of good stuff!