

WebQuests in the Training of Teachers of Modern Languages

Gé Stoks

Department of Teaching and Learning of the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (DFA/SUPSI)

1. Context

WebQuests (WQ) have been part of the training of teachers of modern languages at the DFA/SUPSI, formerly Alta Scuola Pedagogica, in Locarno in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland since 2002. After completing their university studies, our students follow a one-year or two-year master's to become teachers of English, French or German at the middle school (*scuola media*) or at upper secondary general education institutes (*gymnasium/liceo*). Apart from general education modules, practice in schools and a master's thesis on action research carried out during the year, the course contains eight modules of general language pedagogy (*didattica delle lingue*), one of which is focused on the development of a WQ. WQs should be developed as an example of a task-based or content-oriented approach in a digital environment (Stoks 2002) or as a literary WQ for upper secondary general education.

In this article our experiences with WQ in teacher education will be described. I will address practical concerns and issues related to the role of WQs in foreign language education, both as examples of task-based learning and as tools in the teaching of literature.

2. Seven years of WebQuests for modern languages

When we introduced the development of a WQ in our training course back in 2002, students had to use the template made available at the WebQuest website (<http://webquest.org>) in the United States. We translated the English version of the template into French, German and also Italian and uploaded them, with permission from the authors in San Diego, to the WebQuest site of the journal *Babylonia* to enable both our students and subscribers to *Babylonia* to work in the language they had studied.

From the start, student teachers tended to focus more on the technical aspects of the development process than on the principles of task-based language learning (TBL) and the contents of the WQ. In those first years we noticed that the nicer the WQ looked from a technical point of view, the weaker the contents and vice versa.

Students used the HTML editor Dreamweaver, software available on the institute's network. Some may argue that Frontpage or a simpler HTML editor would have been better, but in this way, students also learnt to use Dreamweaver in a context relevant to them. Previously students had to take a module on new technologies, but one of the problems was that the applications were not subject-specific, which some students felt to be rather frustrating.

More recently we have given students a two-year subscription for the Questgarden website (<http://questgarden.com>). Since it is much easier to develop a WQ on this website, students tend to focus more on the contents of the WQ. Using Questgarden greatly reduces the time and energy to be spent on technical aspects. Questgarden offers a \$20.- two-year subscription, and we request the formation of a closed group so that students can work together and leave comments on each other's WQs while the work is in progress.

In order to focus more on the content aspects of the development process we have also introduced the LanguageQuest analysis tool (Koenraad, 2002 or www.talenquest.nl). Prior to

developing a WQ themselves students have to analyze a WQ with this tool. Although useful, it is frustrating that not a single WQ on the Dutch TalenQuest site has been awarded the maximum score of three stars, even two stars are rare, so that an excellent example of a LanguageQuest is still lacking. Students tend to be less critical and sometimes give three stars themselves to the WQ they have analyzed. Subsequently they develop their own WQ.

One problem is that students find it increasingly difficult to find a suitable topic. Most students like to develop the WQ around a topic treated in the textbook in their teaching practice. Since the module is always offered in February and March during the second part of the academic year, the topics addressed in the textbook are usually the same each year. This is a major problem in lower secondary education, where the textbook is more strictly followed than in upper secondary. Nonetheless our WQ website shows that many student teachers have found topics of interest to the pupils in their teaching practice. Due to availability constraints of computer labs or other institutional restrictions it is not always possible to carry out the WQ with a class. Contrary to the TalenQuests on the Dutch site (www.talenquest.nl), our WQs have all been developed in the target language, whereas many Dutch WQs for modern languages are actually in Dutch, which greatly reduces their usefulness and above all effectiveness for foreign language education.

The development of a WQ is generally appreciated by the students, although not everybody manages to complete it in the allotted time. This is mainly due to the fact that they tend to start developing the WQ without having a clear idea of what they wish to do. They must hand in a proposal and outline the contents of the WQ, which are discussed in class, but it frequently happens that they get stuck and have to change the topic after two sessions. They then have to complete the WQ mainly at home and as a result have less technical and content support from the trainer. However, everybody has to complete their WQ in order to obtain the credits for the module. We occasionally allow students to work in pairs but we do not encourage it. We tend to allow it when students have very little affinity with the technology and are scared off by the technical aspects. However, it also happens that a student (or his or her partner) has the programming skills to develop a WQ without using a template. We try to get the message across that it is the content that counts and the content that is principally assessed. Technical problems can usually be easily resolved by the trainer.

3. Literary WQs

Last year we introduced the development of literary WQs. In the upper secondary schools (*licei*) in Ticino literature is a very important element in the modern languages curriculum. It is even officially stated that languages are not primarily learnt for communication but to gain access to foreign culture and literature. For the students who wish to become upper secondary language teachers it is important to have a sound knowledge of the literature of the language they have studied at university, but also of ways of presenting literature in ways suitable to the age and development of young adults in secondary education.

Last year we suggested as a topic for their master's thesis *media-enhanced literature teaching*. Most students chose to introduce a literary topic or writer by means of a WQ. These WQs have also been published at www.aspti.ch/webquest and on the Questgarden website where lots of other literary WQs or WebQuests based on literature may be found. Examples so far include literary WQs in German and in English as foreign languages, our students' mother tongue usually being Italian.

The WQs were again developed in Questgarden. An interesting point was that the students also developed a platform for student products and exchanges, either in the form of a wiki or a blog. This turned out to be a solution to the problem of publishing student results.

4. Challenges

The general advantages of WQs and their role in foreign language learning have been explained elsewhere (Dodge 2001; Stoks 2002; Westhoff 2004; Koenraad 2002; Luzón 2007). Its main advantage is that, ideally, a WQ provides students with the opportunity to access and interact with authentic language and language materials. Motivational factors for both student teachers and students in secondary school are the use of media and the fact that the product can be published on the web.

However, we have also found that developing a WQ is very time-consuming, even with such tools as a wysiwyg interface at Questgarden. Another question that students sometimes ask is whether it would not be easier to give the students the task on paper or in a Word document with a list of links. I find this question hard to answer when I look at some WQs and wonder indeed if it would not be easier.

WQs are often fairly easy to use in a given context. We insist that student teachers specify objectives, learner profile, evaluation criteria, etc. on the teacher pages to explain the WQ and its procedures to others, once it has been published. Although some of our student teachers have received positive feedback from other teachers who have tried out their WQ, these remain few and far between. Sometimes colleagues in the same region use the WQ, because they have the same textbook and the topic is suitable to their learners. Analyzing existing WQs, for instance on Questgarden or the Dutch TalenQuest-site, the conclusion is often that the WQ ought to be adapted to local circumstances, as has actually been done in one instance, when teachers in an in-service training course on WQ, adapted a WQ originally published on the Dutch site (Trendy Handy).

WQs also tend to get outdated fairly fast and links become extinct. Students should be warned. Last year one of our students developed an interesting WQ on the Ingeborg Bachmann literary prize organized in the city of Klagenfurt in Austria. The short-listed authors are presented in a multimedia way with readings, interviews, text excerpts and presentations. However, during the year the website was changed to get ready for the new prize in 2009. The student managed to download the videos and text excerpts to keep them available for the WQ. This might have been foreseen, but it is an obvious problem that topical contents are short-lived and change rapidly making the WQ extinct, even though downloading the contents and making them available on another server is a possible solution.

As far as the WQ as an example of a task-based approach in a digital environment is concerned, we have noticed that the “focus on form” aspect that should be part of the didactic itinerary is often left out or left to the teacher’s initiative after the content-specific elements have been addressed. We haven’t found a satisfactory solution to this problem, neither in our own experience nor at other WQ-sites. In some instances students have included exercises created with the Hot Potatoes authoring tool (<http://hotpot.uvic.ca/>), but the results are not really satisfactory examples of focus on form activities.

The WQ project is usually appreciated by the students, but not much is known about the lasting positive effects on language learning. The question as to whether the time spent on a WQ is effective in terms of language learning is not easily answered when we discuss it with the students, in spite of the fact that one can analyze the criteria put forward by Westhoff (2004), but (student) teachers are often uncertain as to the effects of the WQ. The latter is probably also due to the difficulty of assessing learning in a project-like context such as that of a WQ. Teachers used to assessing students’ progress by means of textbook-based tests often feel insecure when they have to determine the effects of a WQ in which not all students learn the same (as they believe to be the case when student study for a test on a chapter in the textbook).

In literary WQs student teachers felt that they had invested too much time in developing a WQ. Time they might have better used to prepare lessons focused on the literary work itself. The same applies to the secondary school students, the target group of the WQ. It may have enhanced their motivation, but that is something that is hard to assess. Generally positive, though, was the use of wikis and blogs to enable students to exchange materials and opinions, even though it was not always possible to motivate students to read and criticize their classmates' work. The project tended to last too long and the curriculum doesn't allow so much time for a single project. In addition, some student teachers felt the WQ distracted students from the literary work and its analysis.

5. Conclusion

After several years of experimenting with WQs I would say that I am less positive about its effects than I used to be. The motivational factor of using computers and internet in the classroom is decreasing since more and more students spend a lot of time on Facebook and related social network sites and are no longer so easily thrilled by a WQ-project in class. The effects on language learning remain hard to measure, though there are complaints that students lose too much time making nice presentations in Powerpoint. A positive development seems to be the use of wikis and blogs to enable students to share the outcomes of their research on the web, even though the experiences are mixed. We have decided to repeat the WQ experience once more this year, both for the TBL-WQs and the literary ones.

6. References

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