

Learning About the Cold War Through WebQuests

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Abstract: In the Hawaii State Department of Education, state standards dictate the scope and sequence of the curriculum. This action research project addressed two U.S. history benchmarks. One asks students to explain the origins of the Cold War. The other asks students to determine the relevance of sources and assess their credibility. The vast majority of Cold War content resources available at high schools on neighbor islands were textbooks. By utilizing online primary source documents, students would be able to access a wider selection of materials and then determine their relevance and credibility. This research determined the effects of using a WebQuest to enhance learning about the origins of the Cold War for 9th grade students at a rural high school on Maui. Online primary source documents embedded within WebQuest were used to analyze and explain the origins of the Cold War. Participants were asked to produce either a PowerPoint or VoiceThread that explained the origins of the Cold War from at least three different perspectives. Data analysis indicated that WebQuests with primary source documents can help students explain the origins of the Cold War. These findings suggest that WebQuests engage secondary students to higher order thinking.

Introduction

There are many challenges to learning United States history, especially in public school districts that encompass rural areas. This is a time of teaching historical themes and concepts as part of a standards-based movement. State mandates, although at times controversial, do help give teachers a guide as to what should be taught. According to the Hawaii State Department of Education Hawaii Content and Performance Standards database, one benchmark that should be taught in United States History is about the origins of the Cold War. Typically, textbooks are the main resource for historical content. One difficulty with relying on textbooks is that they usually rely on secondary source documents as the main content on the origins of the Cold War. In addition, textbooks printed before 1989 tend to only have one or two points of view or perspectives.

One way to address these challenges is to help students get access to more primary source documents that delineate different points of view and to challenge them to analyze and

evaluate these primary source documents, which are important in determining the reliability of the historical record. In rural areas, primary source documents are a scarce resource, but the Internet helps make them more available. So, how can teachers use the Internet to teach secondary students effectively?

Dodge (1995) introduced an inquiry-oriented online learning activity called a WebQuest. Dodge (1995) suggested that a WebQuest is an instructional strategy that effectively integrates technology into the curriculum by creating a lesson or unit of study that uses all or most of the content online. Dodge (1995) stated that learners often needed different higher order thinking skills to complete WebQuests. WebQuests consist of several components. Most WebQuests have the following components: Introduction, Task, Process, Evaluation, and Conclusion. The performance objectives, content information resources, learning activities, instructional directions and assessments of this activity are all embedded in one or more of the components.

A WebQuest is a way to incorporate primary source documents and multiple perspectives for the content. Thus, by designing and implementing a WebQuest on the Origins of the Cold War, students have a better opportunity to learn and demonstrate proficiency of the HCPS III benchmarks. When students have a better opportunity to learn, the climate and culture of the classroom environment is more oriented towards content knowledge.

Literature Review

There are several studies on WebQuests. Abbitt and Ophus (2008) note that substantial research studies that connect higher order thinking, active engagement and motivation to WebQuests. Abbitt and Ophus (2008) indicated that it is very important to focus on the learner when creating WebQuests. Abbitt and Ophus also suggested that WebQuests were a technology-enhanced teaching strategy that could be an authentic learning activity for today's media-savvy learners. Ikpeze and Boyd (2007) studied how multiple WebQuest tasks boosted literacy skills. Polly and Ausband (2009) studied WebQuests in terms of higher order thinking skills [HOTS] and levels of technology implementation [LoTI]. March (2007) examined the role of WebQuests and Web 2.0 in authentic learning. Schweizer and Kossow (2007) examined WebQuests and differentiated instruction for gifted learners. While all of this research documents the positive aspects of WebQuests, there is no research on WebQuests that focus specifically on the Origins of the Cold War

Project Purpose

This action research project was intended to address the need for analyzing primary source documents and the need to explain the origins of the Cold War. These mandates come from the Hawaii Content and Performance Standards III Benchmarks in 3rd quarter United States History. Benchmark 10.2.24 has students evaluate the quality of historical accounts based on the arguments they advance and the evidence they use. Benchmark 10.3.20 has students explain the origins of the Cold War.

Project Description

The WebQuest had students use information found online to create a PowerPoint or VoiceThread that explained the Origins of the Cold War. The WebQuest templates were created by Zunal.com.

The participants have had exposure to using computers in the classroom. They have seen and used many different programs prior to coming to the 9th grade. Students in grade 9 are normally using computers at least once a week and have already developed partial skills in keyboarding, Power Point, and web browsing. Although computers are integrated into the core curriculum (Science, Social Studies, English, and Math), they have not had to create a PowerPoint or VoiceThread presentation to demonstrate meeting a Hawaii Content and Performance Standards III benchmark.

Procedures/Methods

To implement this project, students needed computers with high speed Internet access. Students needed approximately 275 instructional minutes to complete all the requirements of the WebQuest. Students had the option of working on this WebQuest asynchronously.

In order to implement this project, the first step was to make the Origins of the Cold War WebQuest. The first step was to determine the performance objectives (explaining the origins of the Cold War). The next step was to determine how those performance objectives would be met (by creating a PowerPoint or VoiceThread). Once this was done, it was necessary to determine and secure the resources required to complete the Web Quest. For example, each student already had a Gmail account, but they needed an individual VoiceThread account.

In order for students to complete the WebQuest, they needed to be able to effectively use PowerPoint and/or VoiceThread. Part of the project that was not included in the WebQuest was teaching these skills. For example, students were shown how to create PowerPoint Slides, insert images into PowerPoint slides and how upload PowerPoint files to VoiceThread.

For the Cold War WebQuest, students were required to create a PowerPoint or VoiceThread presentation. The PowerPoint review process and the process of teaching students how to create a VoiceThread took place over the course of the second quarter of the school year, prior to the implementation of the WebQuest. Success of the Cold War PowerPoint or VoiceThread was based on a content rubric. Students needed to analyze and evaluate primary source documents online, create their file, add images and save.

Once all of these materials were developed, it was time to create the WebQuest. Getting started involved searching the Internet for primary source documents relating to the origins of the Cold War. Next, each component of the WebQuest had to be created.

Once the Introduction, Task, Process, Evaluation and Conclusion components were completed, they were reviewed and edited. After that, the WebQuest was published to the Internet.

Results

The study took place as planned over two 76 minute class periods. Data from teacher observations, the Power Point and a self-reflection journal were analyzed to determine the effects of using a WebQuest on learning. Table 1 shows the rubrics used to evaluate the content of the Power Point presentations.

Based on the state-mandated rubric criteria, 15 students (68%) scored proficient for benchmark 10.3.20. 7 students (32%) scored advanced for benchmark 10.3.20. Figure 1 shows a student Power Point slide that explains with detail the origins of the Cold War from an economic perspective.

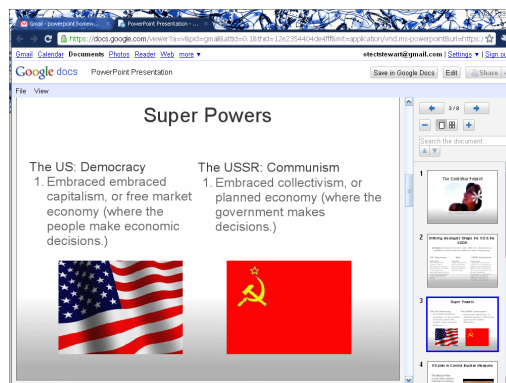


Figure 1. Screenshot of student meeting performance objective

Based on similar state-mandated rubric criteria, 18 students (82%) scored proficient or for benchmark 10.2.24. 4 students (18%) scored advanced for benchmark 10.2.24. Figure 2 shows a student Power Point slide that evaluated primary source documents on the Marshall Plan and the Molotov Plan with detail as part of explaining the origins of the Cold War.

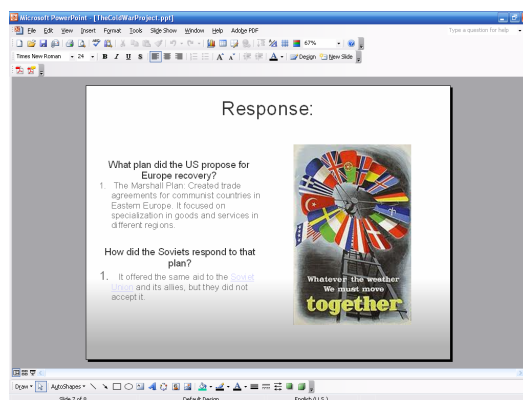


Figure 2. Screenshot of student meeting performance objective

Table 2 summarizes the data collected overall. The value N represented the number of participants completing a Power Point that explained the Origins of the Cold War using primary source documents found on the Internet. There were no participants during periods 1 or 5 because the researcher did not teach United States History during those times.

From teacher observations, all 22 students were engaged in completing the WebQuest. Students were observed examining primary source documents. They were also observed searching the Internet for Cold War images. Additionally, these students were observed creating content about the Origins of the Cold War.

Part of the Conclusion section of the WebQuest was completing a self-reflection journal. The criteria for that journal was three things learned, two things about the WebQuest that learners liked and one thing the learner thought would make the activity more interesting. Different themes emerged in each section.

One pattern in content from the things I learned section was oriented towards the United States or the Soviet Union. However the theme of this content was from a political, economic, military or nationalist perspective. For example, one student took a political [and economic] perspective by writing “I also learned about the Marshall Plan and the Molotov Plan which were plans to help rebuild the conditions of Europe after WWII.” Also, another student took a military [and nationalist] perspective by writing “Communist rebels attempted an armed take over of Grecian Government in 1946.”

The main themes in the things I liked section were content knowledge, the task and the process of learning. A student liked “learning about the Cold War.” Also, a student liked “that we used computers to do our work.” Another student liked that “the websites [were] given so I could find the information.”

The main themes in the things to make this more interesting were additional multimedia, extra summative assessments, and improving available resources. Some students thought it would be more fun “to make posters” or “watch videos.” A few students suggested giving “a quiz” or “a test.” Many students suggested getting “better computers” or “better internet access.”

Implications

United States History classes should have students think critically about the issues that have confronted or influenced American society using ideas of multiple causations and multiple effects. One way to do this is through a process that integrates the assessments of primary source documents and conflicting viewpoints or interpretations to form and express thoughtful historical opinions. A WebQuest can be designed to have students examine the past from multiple perspectives, and is a technology-enhanced instructional strategy that works when learners have limited access to authentic primary source documents.

Conclusion

The data shows that the WebQuest is an effective instructional strategy. The WebQuest has engaged participants with Cold War content. The use of technology facilitated learning the course material and showing what they knew. The participants learned developmentally appropriate historical content through the use of primary source documents found on the Internet. Students indicated in their self-reflection journals that they liked the task and process components of the WebQuest over several traditional learning activities like taking hand-written notes, answering section review questions in complete sentences, writing essays and completing worksheets. Students learned and engaged in higher order thinking by using a WebQuest to address two HCPS III benchmarks in United States History.

Prior to this study, the participants did not refer to primary source documents in class discussions. After completing the WebQuest, students have frequently referred to primary source documents (or the lack thereof) in class discussions. Prior to this study, the students would often attribute a single cause or effect when interpreting historical events. After completing the WebQuest, more students have suggested additional causes and effects when interpreting historical events. Further research is needed on the effects of learning other historical themes like reform or environment using WebQuests.

Table 1.

| Origins of Cold War Rubric for Benchmark 10.3.20 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Advanced | Proficient | Partially Proficient | Novice |
| Explain, with clear and precise detail, the origins of the Cold War | Explain, with detail, the origins of the Cold War | Explain, with minimal detail, the origins of the Cold War | Ineffectively explain the origins of the Cold War |

| Historical Perspectives and Interpretations Rubric for Benchmark 10.2.24 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Advanced | Proficient | Partially Proficient | Novice |
| Evaluate, with clear and precise detail, the quality of historical accounts | Evaluate, with detail, the quality of historical accounts | Evaluate, with minimal detail, the quality of historical accounts | Ineffectively evaluate the quality of historical accounts |

Note. Rubrics adapted from Hawaii Department of Education

Table 2

| | N | Proficient 10.2.24 | Advanced 10.2.24 | Proficient 10.3.20 | Advanced 10.3.20 |
|----------|----|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Period 2 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Period 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| Period 4 | 11 | 9 | 2 | 9 | 2 |
| Period 6 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Period 7 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 |

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