The Use of WebQuests to Promote Democratic Education in a Higher Education Context

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the last decades, literature has demonstrated the benefits of WebQuests as a potential resource for promoting critical thinking skills and knowledge. However, in higher education contexts, research on the use of WebQuests as a tool to promote democratic education is extremely scarce. Although there are some studies involving student teachers on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the WebQuest approach to learning, few studies have focused on the development of democratic education by students with the support of other ICT resources. The present study investigated the impact of WebQuests in higher education classrooms and on democratic education in the Region of Murcia, Spain. The design and planning of WebQuests was encouraged along with other electronic resources to help foster learning and networking among future teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies (ICT) have become widespread in recent decades, influencing the evolution of social interactions in the 21st century (Levin-Goldberg, 2014). Their lasting impact on many fields, including health, business and education, has led to a great deal of research into new approaches that seek to engage individuals and groups in new forms of communication, collaboration and networking (Levitt & Piro, 2014).

The development of ICT in education has shown enormous potential to contribute effectively to achieving efficiency, improving quality and fostering innovative methods in this field (Kelly, 2000; Russell et al., 2008). In this respect, there has been a growing interest in addressing the impact of e-learning as

an innovative process that enables the acquisition of knowledge through electronic resources and frees learners from having to attend classes at a specific location and at the same time.

The intensive use of the Internet across the world as a versatile tool for interactive and cooperative study has paved the way for enhancing new learning processes and guiding students to structure their own knowledge. In fact, students' progressive access to the Internet increases their participation in activities both inside and outside the classroom, providing opportunities for cooperative work, research and information acquisition as well as for knowledge exchange with peers and teachers.

As a result, web-based learning approaches have emerged and have left behind traditional approaches, such as oral communication through memorisation and highly repetitive tasks that were once globally accepted. One of these novel approaches is based on the use of the WebQuest, which was first implemented by Bernie Dodge, a professor at San Diego State University, in 1995. He defined it as "an inquiry-oriented activity in which some or all of the information with which students interact comes from resources on the Internet, optionally supplemented by video conferencing" (Dodge, 1995b). The main aim of this study is to examine the impact WebQuests had on students' views on learning about democratic education issues. To achieve this aim, the following research objectives were set out:

RO1: To examine their views on the learning achieved in the core unit at the beginning and at the end of the term, according to participants' sex, experience and level of motivation.

RO2: To analyse their perspectives on the learning developed through the set of techniques and strategies used in the core unit, according to their sex, experience and level of motivation within this ICT-oriented approach.

BACKGROUND

WebQuests aim to foster meaningful learning by combining innovation and technology under a constructivist approach. Kujawa (2006) described it as an alternative solution to explicit teaching instruction that encourages students to uncover meaning and construct new knowledge for themselves. In this line, Churchill (2006) argues, WebQuests promote the active role of learners by shifting the focus of instruction from the teacher to the learners, who are responsible for setting the pace of their learning, improving their skills and developing their autonomy and independence in this virtual learning environment. March (2003) highlighted scaffolding as one of the main processes fostered by these ICT tools thanks to their multifaceted nature that helps learners to progress through various online tasks and, therefore, go beyond their current levels of skill and knowledge in order to lay the foundations for their own learning.

According to such a constructivist perspective, this online pedagogical tool can promote the efficient participation of students in the learning process, using the Internet as a rich source of information that is at their disposal to access, analyse and transform content related to the area they are studying into meaningful learning (Wu, 2021).

Given the wealth of information available on the Internet, WebQuests are very useful in helping students focus their attention on reliable content, preventing them from searching for information in unrelated areas. To ensure that students are on the right websites, WebQuests include tasks for them to complete, designed to make the most of their time and guide them meaningfully in developing their analytical and critical skills (Bansal & Dutt, 2020). In fact, these task-oriented practices are often broken down into clearer, smaller and more manageable steps so that learners know how to proceed in every moment. This "guidance on how to organise the information acquired may take the form of guiding questions,

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