

USING WEBQUESTS FOR LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

WHAT ARE WEBQUESTS?

A Webquest is an inquiry-based activity, carried out largely using information resources that are online. The most common sources of information are found on the World Wide Web, and by their nature they tend to be in multimedia formats.

Effective Webquests demand higher-level thinking and discrimination. Instead of having pupils merely recite what they have learned, a good Webquest requires them to acquire information, evaluate it, and present or transform it to suit a particular purpose, format and audience. In our kashrut unit, pupils are not as free as in many other webquests. They are directed to some practical information about keeping kosher and then firmly guided to create original, practical resources that demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in an accurate, comprehensible and interesting manner. Other webquests may be less directive, allowing pupils more choice in resources, direction and outcome.

There are several benefits to using Webquests. They, and the technology on which they usually depend, tend to motivate learning, and when pupils are motivated, they are likely to put more effort into their work. Using technology helps motivate pupils, but so does working on a question that honestly needs answering. How would *you* design a menu that met kosher and nutritional needs? How would *you* describe the process of *kashering* a kitchen and then keeping it kosher? These are authentic challenges that reflect a Jew living in modern society and because they are meaningful beyond the school classroom, pupils will want to participate in trying to find solutions.

There are other features in webquests that are not always found in standard teaching and assessment materials. First, instead of just being tested by reiterating the knowledge they have just learned, webquests demand of pupils to apply the information to a new context. For the pupils to succeed in such application, they must have a thorough understanding – their very own brand of understanding - of the material. Secondly,

webquests allow pupils to move forward at their own pace. Less knowledgeable pupils may learn the basics about *kashrut*, while more advanced pupils may choose to learn more detail an aspect, e.g. in our case, about *shechitah*.

Thirdly, webquests give pupils opportunities to learn cooperatively. Each pupil develops an expertise or skill and teaches it to the rest of the team. Working as a team means that pupils have a chance to listen to one another, help each other, and learn to respect different perspectives.

THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Using webquests in the classroom requires a change of roles for the teacher. This is popularly referred to as moving from being the “sage on the stage” to being the “guide on the side”. The teacher must cease to offer all the answers but act as a coach and a facilitator, aiding and encouraging pupils to move through the material on their own, and to search for material that is meaningful and relevant to their quest.

In this unit of study, pupils are supposed to learn the practical side of keeping kosher. Pupils will be at different stages of experience and levels of knowledge as they start on this topic, with some being considerably more advanced than others. Teachers should probe pupils to help build on current knowledge and encourage them to develop it as independently as possible. They should also guide them toward the right information if they are off track.

To be able to do so, a teacher needs to be familiar with the main websites that pupils are likely to encounter in a Webquest. They do not need to be expert in every page of a relevant website, but aware of what each prepared website, and its various sections, can contribute to pupils’ enquiries in the chosen topic . Teachers need assess quickly whether pupils are progressing in their enquiry or held back, e.g. through being slow readers, or being sidetracked by pictorial information. They need to be able to enjoy learning new ideas and insights with their pupils and to reward clear thinking and evaluation of, say, unexpected information sources found on the Internet or other source.

It is a poor Webquest experience for both pupil and teacher if the main support provided by the latter is in sorting out technical problems, such as clicking the correct hyperlinks, or in issuing mainly administrative advice about the collection or display of information. The educational value of a Webquest lies in the pupil developing his own understanding about a topic through extensive research and debate. The pupils must decide what is true and what is false; what is relevant in terms of content and what is dispensable; what is useful for presenting to what audience and what is not—how we link ideas together, how we acknowledge other people’s ideas, and what values we learn from the resources encountered.

INTERNET ACCESS

Optimally, webquests should be implemented in a classroom or lab where there is one computer per pupil. If this is not the case, do not despair! Webquests have been implemented in schools that have just one computer. Some ideas:

- When Internet access is necessary, pupils should be paired or grouped according to role. For instance, if a Webquest calls for a team of three pupils and each has a separate role, pupils should be grouped according to roles and share one computer to go through the resources.
- Rotate the pupils so that some pupils are online while others are doing offline work. Offline work may include reading through previously printed articles from the resources listed, etc.
- Rotate the pupils so that some pupils are online while others are completing other class work not associated with the Webquest.

Note that reviewing the online resources is only one portion of a Webquest. Pupils still have to process the information and then create original material.