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Online Learning Environment Descriptive Paper

Strategies for Online Teaching and Learning

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Description of the Project

The purpose of the Eighth Grade Washington, D.C. online learning environment is to give eighth grade students at Barberton Middle School in Barberton, Ohio a virtual field trip experience to the city of Washington, D.C. Each February, the eighth grade class takes a class trip to Washington, D.C. and Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. This class field trip has been taking place since at least the 1990s, perhaps earlier. However, there are always some eighth grade students who are unable to join their classmates on the trip. In some cases, the cost of the trip could be too expensive for families to afford. In other cases, students have other responsibilities at home that prevent them from going on the trip. Traditionally, the eighth grade students who remain at school during the class trip complete some kind of alternative assignment. According to one of the eighth grade social studies teachers at the school, Mr. David Cassidy, students who were remaining at school this year watched a video presentation about Washington, D.C. There was no graded assignment associated with the video, but students were introduced to important landmarks and history of the nation’s capital. According to one of the eighth grade language arts teachers, Ms. Claire Hauser, students this year also completed test prep activities for the Ohio Achievement Assessments in the spring. Since some of the eighth grade teachers go on the class trip, which usually lasts for two or three school days, the students who remain at school have a modified class schedule from their daily routine.

The Eighth Grade Washington, D.C. online learning environment is designed to give those students who remain at school during the class trip a virtual experience of our nation’s capital and learn about buildings that are important to our nation’s government and historic monuments and memorials honoring Presidents or veterans who have fought and died in wars during our nation’s history. In addition to learning about historic places in Washington, D.C.,
this online learning environment is designed to help students make connections between the three branches of our federal government and the buildings that help these three branches fulfill their responsibilities, find examples of symbols of the United States or overall symbolism in the buildings or monuments, and compare and contrast monuments and memorials. This online learning environment is not designed to be a travel website for Washington, D.C. Instead, it is designed to help students learn about the deeper meaning behind the buildings and monuments that make these places important to our nation’s government and symbolize historical events. Another primary goal of this online learning environment is to have students share what they are learning and engage in online conversations by using communication and collaboration tools.

Students can complete the virtual field trip using this online learning environment while the rest of their eighth grade class is attending the class trip to Washington, D.C. By including images, interactive websites, and videos within the online learning environment, the students who are remaining at school will be able to visualize the buildings, monuments, and memorials in a similar way to the students that are attending the actual class trip.

Related Standards

According to Ohio’s New Learning Standards for Grades K-8 Social Studies, one of the standards that should be taught in eighth grade social studies under the Government strand is that “The U.S. Constitution established a federal system of government, a representative democracy and a framework with separation of powers and checks and balances.” This standard was used as a basis for the content included in this online learning environment. Instead of just learning about important government buildings, students would make connections between the buildings and which of the three branches they represent and determine examples of checks and balances that could take place within each of the buildings. In addition to related government standards,
this online learning environment also addresses history standards from Ohio’s New Learning Standards for K-8 Social Studies. Standards that are included under the history strand for social studies in eighth grade include concepts related to the Declaration of Independence, the outcome of the American Revolution, Westward Expansion, and the events that led to the American Civil War. By studying the features of the Washington Monument, Jefferson Memorial, and the Lincoln Memorial on this virtual field trip, students would indirectly learn about these important events. For example, since Thomas Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence, the Jefferson Memorial features inscriptions from this historic document. Students can evaluate this inscription and determine its relationship to the ideals that our Founding Fathers thought were important at the time. In another example, the Lincoln Memorial features the inscriptions of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address. When looking at these inscriptions using websites and videos, students can learn about causes and effects of the Civil War related to the history standards.

In addition to eighth grade social studies standards, this online learning environment, to some degree, meets the Ohio Visual Arts Standards for grades 6-8. One of the Progress Points for these standards says that students will “recognize that examining the artistic works of others leads to understanding about cultural traditions, history, politics and their world.” In this online learning environment, the artistic works that students would be looking at include the paintings inside the Capitol Rotunda, statues outside of the Supreme Court building, the statues inside the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, and the monuments and memorials themselves. By looking at these works of art, students can learn about important historical events, American values, famous leaders, and symbols that represent the United States. Students can also reflect on the feelings that they experience when looking at these works of art.
Learning Objectives

There are several specific learning objectives for students who would be using this online learning environment. Here is a list of these content-specific learning objectives:

- Students will identify the three branches of U.S. government
- Students will identify examples of checks and balances that exist among the three branches as stated in the U.S. Constitution
- Students will recognize buildings associated with each branch of government
- Students will differentiate between purposes of monuments and memorials
- Students will compare and contrast features of monuments and memorials
- Students will analyze buildings, monuments, and memorials for examples of symbols that represent the United States
- Students will communicate ideas about learning using digital communication tools

Learning Content with Aligned Assessment

The following is a guided tour of the Eighth Grade Washington, D.C. online learning environment with a summary of the content included on each page and examples of assessment.

Home Page

The Home page includes a welcome message describing the purpose of the website to students, directions about how to get started, a video about Washington, D.C., and a map of the Washington, D.C. area. In addition to written directions about how to get started, a Voki is also provided that features an audio recording with a summary of the directions. Students would be completing a Washington, D.C. Travel Log, answering questions about the websites and videos on the website related to the learning objectives. This Travel Log is provided to students as a link on the Home page. After watching the video about Washington, D.C., students would be
asked to share what they learned by participating in the Before You Start discussion topic on the Discussions page.

**Start Here Page**

The purpose of the Start Here page is to help students review, or perhaps learn for the first time, content that would help them be successful in the later lessons found within the online learning environment. This page features four presentations: three branches of U.S. government, checks and balances, symbols of the United States, and finding symbolism in statues, landmarks, and other buildings. Students would be able to take notes on these presentations. After learning about these four topics, formative assessment to take place to determine how much students have learned. Students would complete two practice quizzes about the three branches of government and American symbols. These practice quizzes would not be graded, but would help the students evaluate their own knowledge before continuing with other learning activities.

**Lesson One**

In Lesson One, students will learn about three buildings in Washington, D.C. – the U.S. Capitol Building, the White House, and the Supreme Court. These buildings are directly related to the three branches of government – legislative, executive, and judicial. By visiting interactive websites and watching videos, students will complete questions on their Travel Log and connect these buildings to the branches of government and describe examples of American symbols that are found inside or outside these buildings. After completing Lesson One, students would share what they feel is the most important of the three buildings for the Lesson One discussion topic, providing specific examples from the websites, maps, or videos to support their answers. Once multiple eighth grade students have posted responses, students can reply to what their classmates have posted.
Lesson Two

In Lesson Two, students will learn about important monuments and memorials that are located in Washington, D.C. At the beginning of the lesson, students will meet Paula and Vic, two students who are interested in different things. Paula is interested in learning about U.S. Presidents, while Vic is interested in honoring U.S. veterans. After students will listen to Vokis about these two students, students will use interactive maps with links to websites and videos to find examples of monuments and memorials that Paula and Vic would be interested in visiting, based on the descriptions of them from the Vokis and corresponding text. Students would look for examples of symbols or symbolism within the monuments and memorials, recording this information on their Washington, D.C. Travel Log. Students would also look for interesting features that are significant to their design or architecture. After completing Lesson Two, the eighth grade students would share what monument or memorial is the most symbolic and give reasons from the websites or videos to support their answers by participating in the Lesson Two discussion topic. Students would also be asked to reply to at least one classmate.

Lesson Three

Lesson Three would serve as a form of summative assessment of what the eighth grade students learned in Lesson One. Students would use the answers to the questions on their Travel Logs, as well as anything else they learned from Lesson One, to create a graphic organizer that illustrates the relationship among the three branches, showing the major government building that support each branch and examples of checks and balances. Students would also include a room or place inside each building that is symbolic to the United States. Students would also add images of each building. Students are also provided with a checklist within the lesson that would help students evaluate the progress of their work and determine if they have met all of the
necessary requirements for the assignments. Students would create their graphic organizers using Google Drawing and share their work with their teachers to be graded.

**Lesson Four**

Lesson Four would serve as a form of summative assessment for what the eighth grade students learned in Lesson Two. Students would use the answers to questions on their Travel Logs to create a chart comparing two of the monuments and memorials in Washington, D.C. that were featured in Lesson Two. In this chart, students would need to describe the purpose of the landmark, identify categories that could be used to compare the landmarks, describe the features of the landmarks that fit into these categories, give examples of symbolism in the two landmarks, and interpret the meaning of these symbols. Students would have the choice of which landmarks to compare and what Google Drive tool to use to create their charts. Examples of how students could start their charts using each Google Drive tool, as well as a sample chart comparing the Capitol and the White House, would be provided as links on the website. Students would also be provided with a checklist within the lesson that would help them evaluate their progress on the assignment and determine if they have met all of the necessary requirements. Students would share the charts with their teachers to be graded.

**Discussions**

The Discussions page gives students a chance to share what they are learning about Washington, D.C. in the online learning environment and develop community among learners. In addition to detailed directions about how students should use the Discussions page and post responses, there are five discussion topics. The Need Help topic gives the students a chance to share questions about anything on the website and provide peer support. The Before You Start gives students a chance to share what prior knowledge they had about Washington, D.C. or what
knowledge they learned from the video on the Home page. The Lesson One topic gives students a chance to share their opinion about the most important building or branch of U.S. government. The Lesson Two topic gives students a chance to share their opinion about the most symbolic monument or memorial and describe what examples of symbolism were the most meaningful to them. The Wrap Up topic gives students a chance to reflect on their entire learning experience during the virtual field trip and share what building, room, monument, or memorial they liked the most and how their knowledge of history and government increased as a result of completing this virtual field trip to Washington, D.C.

**Pedagogical Considerations**

The Eighth Grade Washington, D.C. online learning environment is a blend of self-paced, independent learning activities and collaborative discussions. This blend was chosen because it gives students the ability to work at their own pace, but also share ideas with others. Since most of their classmates would be attending the class trip, the collaborative discussions would enable students to feel that they are part of a group and not isolated in their own classrooms. In fact, the discussions would engage students who would be participating in the virtual field trip in different classrooms at school. Students from one classroom could post comments about what their peers, or travel companions, are learning in another classroom. The amount of learning that takes place and the level of communication would not be limited to the small group of students that might be participating in a classroom or computer lab.

Since some of the students interacting with this online learning environment might not be highly motivated to complete any assignments (having the attitude that they don’t have to work since most of their classmates would be on the class field trip), this online learning environment is as interactive as possible. Instead of just using websites to help students learn about the three
important government buildings in Lesson One, there are interactive tours for each building that give students the chance to click on different rooms and read text, see images, or watch videos that describe the purpose of each room and illustrate examples of American symbols (e.g. flags, statues, paintings, sculptures, inscriptions) that can be seen in each room. By having a mixture of text, images, and videos, this would appeal to students with diverse learning styles. Students who are visual learners would be interested in looking at the images and videos, students who are auditory learners would be interested in hearing the audio in the videos, and students who are kinesthetic learners would likely be interested in the hands-on nature of clicking on the different rooms in the interactive tours and moving from one floor to the next within a building.

Using interactive tours to support student learning, however, could be overwhelming to some students. Students could easily get lost navigating from one floor or one room to the next or get distracting by other links on the same website. Therefore, to use these interactive tours effectively in this online learning environment, the students needed to be given a clear learning purpose for what they needed to use and what they needed to find. Instead of having students just explore each of the interactive tours, clear instructions about the specific rooms, floors, and links that students needed to visit were provided in the Washington, D.C. Travel Log and on the website. The directions tell students exactly what places to visit and what floors or areas those places could be found on the interactive tours. In addition, specific rooms or places on the tours that would help students meet the specific learning objectives were chosen and added to this online learning environment. For example, on the White House Interactive Tour, the students are specifically asked to go to the Oval Office, the Cabinet Room, the Situation Room, and the State Dining Room because these rooms help the President or the executive branch as a whole
fulfill its overall responsibilities. While it might be interesting to learn about other rooms at the White House; such as the Blue Room, the Red Room, the Library, the Diplomatic Room, and the Vermeil Room; these rooms do not correspond to the learning objectives and match the purpose behind this online learning environment. In addition to giving the students clear instructions, another method that was used to make the interactive tours less distracting and overwhelming to students was embedding them directly into the website. Above each interactive tour, the website has clear directions for how students can navigate around the tour or what links or icons students need to use to find information that will help them achieve the objectives. Even though there are clear directions and these interactive tours are embedded in the website, it would still be possible for students to click on the wrong link. Therefore, external links for each of the interactive tours in Lesson One are given to the students.

There were also pedagogical considerations taken into account in planning Lesson Two. First, in order to have students engage in problem solving, the idea of having two students who would be interested in different types of monuments and memorials emerged. Vokis with audio recordings with the two students’ voices (Paula and Vic) were added at the bottom of the first Lesson Two page. To assist the learners’ comprehension of the recordings and the learning situation that was being presented, the text that corresponded to what was heard in the audio recordings was added under each of the two Vokis. Having the eighth grade students figure out which monuments and memorials Paula and Vic would be interested in visiting would engage the students more than just giving them a list of websites or videos to look at about the different monuments and memorials. Second, in order to make Lesson Two more interactive for students, the idea of having maps with icons that took students to websites or videos about the monuments and memorials emerged. Since this might be confusing for some students, clear directions were
provided that explained what students needed to click on to get to the websites and videos. Also, since it might be confusing for some students to have websites and videos included on the same map, one map only had links to websites, while the other map only had links to videos. To make the navigation of the maps easier, both maps were embedded directly into the website.

Since students would be using this online learning environment while their classmates are on a field trip out of state, it would be more appropriate to have assessments that do not focus so much on having right or wrong answers (like a quiz), but give students the chance to be creative and share what they have learned. This is the reason why the assessments of graphic organizers, compare/contrast charts, and peer discussions were chosen for this online learning environment. While students do need to have a certain amount of required content on the graphic organizers, such as the three branches and specific examples of checks and balances, students can still be a little creative in what rooms they choose to describe in each of the three buildings, what images they want to add, and what colors or fonts to use. Students would have more choices to make when creating their compare/contrast charts for the two monuments and memorials. Students would get to decide which landmarks to compare, what categories to use to compare them, the examples of symbols for each landmark, and how to interpret the meaning behind the symbols. Students would also get to choose which Google Drive tool to use to make the compare/contrast chart. At the present time, the discussions would not be graded by the teachers. However, the discussions would still provide the teachers with formative assessment to evaluate what students have learned. Also, since it might not be practical for the eighth grade teachers to grade three assignments for each student from this virtual field trip, at the present time the Washington, D.C. Travel Log would be used as a formative assessment for students. Since the students would still need the information from it to complete the graphic organizer for Lesson Three, complete the
compare/contrast chart for Lesson Four, and fully participate in the discussions, completing this
document would still benefit students by allowing them to keep track of the websites they have
visited and monitor their own learning progress. Students could feel a sense of accomplishment
from learning about many different places. If the eighth grade teachers wanted to look at the
students’ Travel Logs at the end of the virtual field trip, students could easily share them using
Google Drive.

Technology Considerations

The eighth grade students would be using computers in their classrooms or computer labs
to complete this virtual field trip to Washington, D.C. The eighth grade teachers also share a cart
of netbooks that students could use to participate in this online learning environment. Since the
students have Google accounts, Google Drive was chosen as the primary tool by which students
would create and share documents. Students use Google Drive on a regular basis to complete
assignments and create presentations. Google Drive was also chosen because it gives students
the ability to auto-save their work and easily submit work to teachers for grading. Weebly was
chosen as the web creation and hosting program for this online learning environment because
students can click on big buttons to access important pages or documents instead of just links,
students can easily use the top menu to navigate between pages, and teachers would be able to
password-protect the entire website or certain pages. The specific design theme for the website
was chosen because of the image of Abraham Lincoln and the American flag across the top,
corresponding to the patriotic idea of taking a virtual field trip to Washington, D.C.

Several Web 2.0 tools are integrated into the design and development of this online
learning environment. Here is a list of these tools along with the rationale for their use:
• Voki – Three Vokis with audio recordings are included in this OLE. On the Home page, a Voki with Uncle Sam summarizes directions for students under the How to Get Started section. Two additional Vokis are included in Lesson Two to help students learn about Paula and Vic, the two students who want to find monuments and memorials to visit. Voki was chosen because of its ability to create simple audio recordings with characters that motivate and interest students.

• Quiz Revolution – Two practice quizzes are included after the Start Here page in this OLE to help students review what they learned about the three branches of government and American symbols. Quiz Revolution was chosen because the quizzes give students instant feedback about whether their answers are correct or incorrect, allow teachers to insert images or videos that go along with the questions (making quizzes more interactive and more appealing to visual learners), and can be embedded into a website without having students log in or create accounts.

• Haiku Deck – Two Haiku Deck presentations are included on the Start Here page about symbols of the United States and finding examples of symbolism in statues, landmarks and buildings. Haiku Deck was chosen because it allows you to create presentations that focus on stunning photographs, which are all licensed under Creative Commons. Since the purpose of these presentations was to illustrate symbols and introduce to students the idea of figuring out the meaning of a symbol by looking at it, having photographs of what the symbols look like would help reinforce the meaning more effectively than just having text to describe it.

• ThingLink – Two interactive ThingLink images are included on the Monuments and Memorials page under Lesson Two. Both images are a Google map of Washington, D.C.
The first image has blue stars that link to different websites about different monuments and memorials, while the second image has red stars that link to videos about the same landmarks. Groups of stars represent that there are multiple websites or videos to help students learn about the same monument or memorial. ThingLink was chosen because students can learn the location of the monuments and memorials and it gives students a more interactive experience than just using a list of links to websites or videos on the website. In addition, if videos are added to an image using ThingLink, the videos will play inside a pop-up box. Students do not have to go to YouTube to watch the videos.

**TPACK Development**

The intersection and integration of content, pedagogy, and technology known as TPACK played an important role in the development of this online learning environment. In the original plan for this project, the basis for learning was to have students visit monuments and memorials and learn more about the life of the people that were honored. Students would get to visit the Washington Monument and learn about George Washington and his leadership style and how he lead our nation through American Revolution and as the first President of the United States. Next, students would visit the Jefferson Memorial and learn how Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence and then was a leader in westward expansion with the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark expedition as President. Then students would visit the Lincoln Memorial and learn about Lincoln’s childhood, the Lincoln-Douglas debates while he ran for Illinois senator, and eventually how he led the nation during the Civil War. While these topics are important to our nation’s history, it was decided that having the students learn details about a period of time that was about 100 years long would be too confusing. It would also be confusing to have students learn about the “present” landmarks in Washington, D.C., take a trip
back to the “past” to learn about one of the Presidents, and then “jump back” to the present to learn about the next landmark on the virtual field trip. In its current form, students in this online learning environment are still going from one landmark to the next, but the students don’t have to learn as much about the history behind the landmark or the person. Instead, the students are looking for examples of national symbols or symbolism in the landmarks. This theme ties these monuments and memorials together, rather than going back and forth in time.

From the beginning, the vision behind this online learning environment was to have the eighth grade students use interactive tours of different places in Washington, D.C. to make this virtual field trip as real as possible. However, what was missing has a theme that brought these interactive tours together. The pedagogical and technological components were there, but not the content, other than finding interesting things. Eventually, after looking at the social studies standards more closely, the idea of bringing the interactive tours of the White House and the U.S. Capitol Building together to help students learn about the three branches of government started to develop. Once this idea was both, a virtual tour of the Supreme Court was found to support student learning of the judicial branch. Originally, an interactive timeline with numerous events related to the history, design, and construction of the U.S. Capitol Building was included in the online learning environment. However, since this timeline no longer related to helping students learn about the legislative branch of government, it was taken out and replaced by websites that represented the House Chamber and the Senate Chamber.

In the original plan, this online learning environment included a project where students researched one of the people who have statues that are featured in Statuary Hall in the Capitol Building. Students would sign up to research one of the honorees in the hall and work with a partner to research the honoree and present their findings. The original plan also included a stop
in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, since the eighth grade students who go on the class trip visit the battlefield there on their way home from Washington, D.C. However, since the research project about the honorees in Statuary Hall did not fit with the learning objectives of having students learn about the three branches of government and symbolism, it was taken out. Also, it was decided that adding a learning activity about Gettysburg might be too confusing for the students, since the rest of the website and online learning environment is related to Washington, D.C. The online learning environment did not need to replicate the actual field trip. Instead, it needed to meet the learning needs of the students who would remain at school.

The overall goal of this online learning environment was to give the eighth grade students an interactive online learning experience that allowed them to take a quality, virtual field trip to Washington, D.C. just like their classmates. However, unlike their classmates who might just be visiting parts of a landmark or driving by it on a tour bus, the students who embark on this virtual field trip might get to see more of our nation’s capital. More importantly, while the students who are on the actual class field trip might just be sightseeing, the students on this virtual field trip are learning more about the deeper meaning behind the buildings, monuments, and memorials that make up our nation’s capital. This online learning environment would give eighth grade students who are still at school a chance to develop a greater appreciation for our nation’s government. Students could look at a monument or memorial and not just be able to recognize it, but be able to make connections with the American values or symbolism it represents. Students would have a chance to compare landmarks and illustrate how key government buildings are linked by the separation of powers and checks and balances from the U.S. Constitution. The hope for this online learning environment is that it becomes more than just busy work for those students who do not attend the eighth grade class trip to Washington, D.C. This online learning environment
could become a special opportunity for students to communicate and collaborate with classmates and experience our nation’s capital from the comfort of their classrooms.

**Plans for the Future**

This online learning environment will be presented to one of the eighth grade social studies teachers at Barberton Middle School. Here are some ideas that describe how this online learning environment could be implemented in the future to illustrate best practices for online teaching and learning:

- In its current form, students complete the Washington, D.C. Travel Log individually. However, since the students would be using Google Drive, it would be easy to have students work together with a partner to complete the questions. Students could sign up for partners to complete the virtual field trip. If the students were working in partners, only one student would have to save a copy of the Travel Log to their Google Drive. The student would then just share the file with their partner, so both of them would be able to collaborate on the same document. The partners could figure out how to divide up the work. Perhaps students could use different colors to figure out whose work it is. In addition, students who are in different classrooms could even work together using Google Drive. If students were in different rooms and collaborating on a document at the same time, then they could use the chat feature in Google Drive to communicate with each other and ask questions. If students completed this assignment as partners, then it could also make less grading for teachers who might be coming back from the actual class field trip.

- In its current form, there is no introduction to the website by the instruction, since the creator of this OLE would likely not be the instructor to implement it. Therefore, it
would be helpful to have the eighth grade teachers add their own personal touches to the website. These personal touches could include adding their names to the Home page and providing directions to students that include their names and room numbers.

- Since some of the students could be part of the accelerated program at the middle school for seventh and eighth grade, enrichment activities could be added to the online learning environment. One enrichment activity could be related to the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial. Since this memorial does not honor a President or does not honor soldiers who have died in wars, it was not included in Lesson Two. Students could research the features of the memorial and reflect on the symbolism found in the memorial. Perhaps students could post comments in the Lesson Two discussion topic and try to persuade their classmates that the Martin Luther King Memorial is the most symbolic. Since the National Cherry Blossom Festival takes place in Washington, D.C. every spring, and the city of Barberton has an annual Cherry Blossom Festival with rides and entertainment every May, students could research the history of the National Cherry Blossom Festival and create a presentation to share with their classmates.