



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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A Versatile and Fun Learning Experience: The Student Journal

Description and Objective

The most rewarding instructional technique I have found in a decade of community college teaching has been the student journal assignment. Each student maintains an ongoing account of his/her learning experiences relative to a topic or theme chosen to satisfy his/her own interests or curiosity. The broad objective of the journal assignment is to involve students in a variety of learning experiences which they can relate to those in the real world. The journals are evaluated subjectively for accuracy, thoroughness, originality, thoughtfulness, neatness, and compliance with the general ground rules. The journal experience is especially appropriate for the subjects I teach: World Politics, American National Government, and State and Local Government.

The Journal Project

In World Politics, each student is instructed to choose a nation from a list I provide, follow that nation's foreign policy experiences during the semester, and maintain an ongoing account of those experiences. In American National Government and State and Local Government, students similarly choose topics that are of interest to them, that are compatible with the themes I have selected, and that are timely enough to give them ample material with which to work.

Students are instructed to begin following the news and recording information relative to their topics in their journals immediately. They are instructed to make frequent journal entries and to avoid long periods of inactivity. The idea is for them *continually* to monitor the news and to record in their journals what they read, see, and hear. They should read the newspapers daily, look through the news magazines weekly, and pay continuous attention to radio and television newscasts. Their journal entries should come from a variety of sources, so they are encouraged to be on the alert for opportunities to gather information from books, scholarly publications, government documents, films, lectures, public events, personal contacts, etc.

The students alone decide what goes into their journals. This freedom can quickly cause consternation within students who have been unaccustomed to thinking for themselves. They are told that an *ongoing effort* is a condition for earning a good grade and that they should not have large time gaps between journal entries. As well, they are told that the *quality* of their entries is essential to earning a good grade.

Students quickly realize that they must do more than simply gather information. They realize that a journal with a few entries of high quality will earn them more points than a journal with more entries of superficial one-liners. They realize that they must think about what they read, see, and hear, and learn to recognize what information is significant. They must make value judgments. They must try to make sense out of the real world.

The students are instructed to summarize the information they decide to enter into their journals by putting it *into their own words*. Simply copying material from a printed source and using it as a journal entry is not permitted. However, they may use direct quotes, charts, graphs, and photographs when there is legitimate need for them. *All* journal entries must include the date of entry and complete source documentation. Students are given instructions for appropriately documenting information.

The students are encouraged to enter their own comments, criticisms, analyses, and conclusions. They are not to worry about being right or wrong. They are encouraged to record their thoughts as they develop and to continue to build upon them as the semester progresses. They are to narrow their effort along the way and focus on a particular problem or situation within their overall topic as their personal interests and/or real-world events lead them. This specialization will make their journals easier to handle and will enhance their interest in the topics.

The students are encouraged to search for background information that is relevant to their topics and include this information as journal entries. This im-



proves their general knowledge of the topics, which in turn enables them to better evaluate and assimilate the mass of new information they gather. It is suggested that if their topic should drop out of the news for a few days, they should use the time to search for additional background material.

Students are given a few take-home exercises during the semester which require them to relate textbook information to the characteristics and problems of their specific topics. These exercises become part of their journals, and the information learned is to be used in conjunction with the material they gather from real-world activities.

At the end of the semester, the students are instructed to conclude their journals with a summary statement. They are free to summarize their journal contents; provide lessons learned; offer personal opinions, conclusions, predictions; and raise questions.

Student Progress

It is absolutely essential that the instructor persistently and relentlessly monitor each student's progress *throughout the semester*. This begins by making certain that all students clearly understand the objectives and the ground rules of the assignment. Students need to know what standards of performance are expected, how the journal will be evaluated, and how much it will count toward their final grade. Students must be warned at the beginning of the semester that they cannot "cram" this project into the last few days of the semester, that "building" a journal at the last minute is unacceptable, and that such an attempt is easily detected and will result in lost points.

A few minutes of discussion during each class period can identify those who are keeping up with the task. If classes are small, the journals may be collected, reviewed, and returned with comments. If classes are large, written surveys may be taken periodically, asking students to report how many entries they have made, how many different sources they have used, or how many times they have entered personal comments to date. These surveys should then be returned to students with comments.

Another way to monitor progress is to divide the students into small groups and ask them to review all the journals within their respective groups and within the context of questions or criteria provided by the instructor. For example, the groups might be asked to determine the average number of entries within their group, identify the most unusual source of information, or identify the most original idea or method. Group leaders will guide each group's effort and report

each group's findings to the class. Hearing the findings of all groups and reviewing other students' journals will enable each student to put his/her performance into perspective. Those who have been "slacking off" will realize that they should do better, and they will.

Finally, it is important that the instructor frequently offers to review any student's journal, one-on-one, in private, at a time convenient for both. Students who lack confidence or are naturally shy will often take advantage of this offer. Without an opportunity for private consultation, some students will let their fears overcome them and give up. A little personal attention will go a long way to encourage them, motivate them, and give them the confidence to do a superb job.

Rewards

What do the students get out of the journal assignment? Those who do it properly will have a number of learning experiences: writing, research, library use, observation skills, critical thinking, creative thinking, self-confidence, general knowledge, specialized knowledge, motivation to learn, enjoyment, and pride of accomplishment. These are the experiences and rewards that students have fed back to me in their closing statements, course critiques, or in casual conversation.

What are the instructor's rewards? *Gratification*—watching students come alive and get involved, not only in course material but in the real world to which that material applies. *Gratification*—hearing a student pop into the office unexpectedly and ask, "Have you heard what the East Germans did today?" Through the journal and the personal contact that inevitably accompanies it, the instructor realizes that each student is more than a name, more than a number, more than another grade. The instructor realizes that each student is a thinking, creative, sensitive, unique human being.

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