

LEARNING ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUE

Integration

24 Contemporary Issues Journal

Essential Characteristics	
Preparation	LOW
In-class implementation	LOW-MODERATE
Analysis	HIGH

Brief Description

Students look for recent events or developments in the real world that are related to their coursework readings and assignments, then analyze these current affairs to identify the connections to course material in entries that they write in a journal.

Purpose

This technique deepens student understanding of course-related ideas and concepts and guides them in applying them to “the real world.” It helps students understand themselves in relation to that course content. It also can catalyze student curiosity. It makes material from coursework more relevant to them, which stimulates their motivation to learn it. It also provides an outlet for reflecting upon what they have learned, thus deepening the learning.

The journal entries and the completed journals are your Learning Artifacts. These artifacts provide a demonstrable record of what students think are important. They also demonstrate how well students can connect what they are learning in the classroom to their personal lives and the world around them. They are a clear documentation of students’ ability to integrate information from various aspects of their lives. Contemporary Issues Journals typically are used for formative purposes, in which teachers assess how well they are understanding course concepts and their relevance. They may also serve a summative, in which teachers use them after a learning module to evaluate how well students have understood, applied, and integrated course content.

Key Learning Goals

- The ability to think holistically: to see the whole as well as the parts
- The ability to synthesize disparate but related information into a whole
- The ability to connect course concepts to concepts in other disciplines or fields
- The ability to connect course information to their daily lives

Implementation

Preparation

- Decide the journal parameters ahead of time. For example,
 - What will be the journal medium (a lined tablet, a computer-based word processing file, a formal bound booklet, an online blog)?
 - How frequently should students make entries, and will this technique be implemented for a course segment or the whole term?
 - What should a typical entry look like? Consider a three-part entry that includes (1) date of journal entry and news source, (2) summary (Who, What, Where, When, Why, How), and (3) the course principles, ideas, and concepts the event reflects.
- Construct a rubric to assess the journal. Consider the following as items for the rubric:
 - Clear statement about the relationship between text and events
 - Well-selected points of comparison and/or departure among the texts and events
 - Solid evidence (citation of sources) to prove the points of comparison
 - Logical ordering of information
- Create a handout that includes directions, clarifies your expectations, and provides examples.

Process

1. Discuss the purpose of the journal and allow time for questions.
2. Ask students to look for and record or post journal entries that connect course material to news events.
3. Collect the Learning Artifacts.



Online

This can be a simple, regular assignment in an LMS. If you have students blog within the LMS, you can set up preferences so that each student's blog is kept private from other students, but still allows you access as the instructor. Alternately you can ask students to set up their own blogs on which they can post their entries. Either way, students can enrich their text with images, links to web pages, media, and other blogs. To check their work, tell students you will be spot-checking blogs randomly throughout the term, or set up a formal evaluation schedule. As a variation, consider creating a single Threaded Discussion Forum for students to share insights from their Blogs, or set-up multiple Forums assigned to separate topics.

Analysis and Reporting

Check journals regularly or tell students that you will be evaluating them on a random basis to discourage them from waiting until the last minute to do all the entries. When you review the entries, use the rubric that you created during the planning stage to evaluate the journals. Provide a rating across categories, and consider adding comments about what is unique or interesting about each entry. Develop a written response to individuals that includes both rubric scoring and comments about any issues. Because students can see journaling as a “soft” activity, it can be a good idea to grade Contemporary Issues Journals in order to help students

understand their importance. Consider making them worth sufficient points in the final grade for students to take them seriously (for example 10% of the final grade). Alternately, you can keep a simple tally and grade them for participation points.

To analyze and report aggregated information, first look across the rubric for item analysis. Develop mean scores across the different items. You might also consider a key word analysis, in which you look for certain concepts (in your instructions, you could ask students to highlight or bold key words so that they are easy for you to identify quickly). Alternately, consider a thematic analysis, in which you search for the key themes that students identified and compare them with your own list. Report rubric analysis results in a numeric table. If you do a qualitative analysis, consider a narrative table, a Concept Map (for key themes), or a word cloud (for a word count analysis).

Examples



Onsite: Music Business

In this course, students study the legal and business aspects of the music industry with an emphasis on publishing, licensing, and promotion. To help students understand the importance of the content to students' future professional lives, this instructor requires students to monitor the online site *Music Industry News Network* throughout the term, looking for current news stories that relate to course topics such as changing international copyright law in the multimedia industry and the Internet.

To complete their Contemporary Issues Journals, students write the date, source, a synopsis of the news story, and identify the laws or principles involved in a journal in preparation for the first class session of the week. The instructor uses the first 5 minutes or so of class for students to share their findings with partners as he walks around the room, making a +/- next to student names in the grade book based on a quick assessment of that week's entry. He then invites students to share their findings and interpretations with the whole class, using these reports as a basis for discussion and drawing connections to what will be studied during the upcoming week.

He keeps a running record of their journal entry completion, a sample of which is shown in Table 9.16.

Table 9.16 Journal Entry Completion

Name	1/6	1/13	1/20	1/27	2/3	2/10
Mandi	+	+	+	+	+	+
Yianni	+	-	+	-	-	+
Christina	+	+	+	+	+	+
Jingxian	+	-	-	-	-	+
Jasmine	+	-	-	+	-	+
Gagandeep	+	+	+	+	+	+
Roseanne	+	+	+	-	-	-

For the Final Exam, students selected an event in their journal and used the conceptual tools of meta-ethics and normative ethics they had learned throughout the term to write an extensive essay analyzing the main issue from multiple perspectives, and closing with the steps they believed could be taken to resolve the conflict in the specific news incident.

Variations and Extensions

- Ask students to expand their entries by including questions they have about the event, especially aspects that appear to be course-related but which have not yet been covered in class.
- Use the journal for reflective purposes, asking students to think about the event and relate it to their personal lives, answering questions such as, *Have you experienced anything similar in your own life? Given what you have learned about x in this course, what might you advise the participants to do now that would help them to move forward most productively?*
- Consider having students follow-up this activity with a formal essay in which they analyze, synthesize, or evaluate the information in their journal entries.
- If appropriate to course goals, ask students to monitor online news sites from other English-speaking countries and, for example, compare and contrast coverage of a single event from different international perspectives. Or ask students in foreign language courses to look for events or articles in the media of that country and translate and interpret their findings. “News and Newspapers Online” (<http://library.uncg.edu/news/>) provides links to news sites from all over the world and is a free service provided by the University Libraries of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
- Make this a collaborative learning activity by using CoLT 24: Dialogue Journals, in which students exchange journals with a peer who reads and responds to the entry with comments and questions. Journal writing can be particularly effective when writers know that someone who is interested in the topic will read and respond to their entries. Since reading and responding to students can be a time-consuming task, making this a collaborative activity helps ensure students receive timely and critical feedback (albeit from a peer) without adding to instructor workload (see Barkley et al., 2014).
- Consider creating a communal journal. Keep the journal on a desk or table in the classroom or your office or maintain an online forum or blog that is available for entries and responses by any class member.

Key References and Resources

- Barkley, E. F. (2010). SET 29: Contemporary issues journal. In *Student engagement techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (pp. 276–279). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Barkley, E. F., Cross, P. K., & Major, C. H. (2014). CoLT 24: Dialogue journals. In *Collaborative learning techniques: A handbook for college faculty* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bean, J. C. (2009). *Engaging ideas: The professor’s guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.