

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Teaching Technique 03

Contemporary Issues Journal

ACTIVITY TYPE

- Group Work
- Learning Assessment
- Project Learning
- Reflecting
- Writing

TEACHING PROBLEM ADDRESSED


- Low Motivation/Engagement
- Lack of Participation
- Surface Learning

LEARNING TAXONOMIC LEVEL

- Application: Analysis & Critical Thinking
- Application: Problem Solving
- Human Dimension
- Caring
- Integration & Synthesis

Contemporary Issues Journal

In *Contemporary Issues Journal* (CIJ), students look for recent events or developments in the real world that are related to their coursework, then analyze these current affairs to identify the connections to course material in entries that they write in a journal.

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- 1** Clarify your teaching purpose and learning goals for *CIJ*
 - 2** Create a prompt that establishes the topic area of journal entries
 - 3** Set assignment parameters (journal medium, frequency of entries, etc)
 - 4** Develop a plan for learning assessment or grading
 - 5** Communicate assignment instructions to students
 - 6** Allow students time to look for and record journal entries
 - 7** Reflect upon the activity and evaluate its effectiveness

Step-By-Step Instructions

In this section we provide you with guidance on each of the seven steps involved as you consider this technique.

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Contemporary Issues Journal is a writing assignment that deepens student understanding of course-related ideas and concepts and guides them in applying them to “the real world.” It is a robust technique that offers many possibilities for modification and enhancement, so think through what you hope to get from this technique in your class. For example, while it is typically assigned as an individual project, it also makes an effective group project. Although it focuses on writing, it can also emphasize reading and reflecting. While primarily addressing learning that involves integration and synthesis, it also can catalyze student curiosity because it makes material from coursework more relevant to students, which stimulates their motivation to learn it. Furthermore, it provides an outlet for making connections between in-class work and areas outside of the classroom, thus deepening student learning.

The *Contemporary Issues Journal* technique is also very useful for assessing learning. The journal entries and the completed journals 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 students are understanding course concepts and their relevance. They may also serve a summative purpose, in which teachers use them after a learning module or even the whole course to evaluate how well students have understood, applied, and integrated course content.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK’S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

In a *Contemporary Issues Journal*, students look for and record or post journal entries that connect course material to news events.

Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)



STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

Decide the parameters for the journal. For example:

- **Medium:** Will the journal be a lined tablet, a computer-based word processing document, a formal bound booklet, an online blog?
- **Frequency and Duration of Entries:** How often should students make entries, and will they be keeping their journals for a course segment or the whole term?
- **Content of Entries:** What should a typical entry look like?
Consider a 3-part entry that includes:

- › **Date** of journal entry and **news source**
- › **Summary** (Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How)
- › **Course principles, ideas, and concepts** the event reflects

STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

Construct a rubric to assess the journal. Consider the following as items for the rubric:

- Clear statement about the relationship between the news events and the journal entry.
- Well-selected points of comparison and/or departure among the events and entries.
- Solid evidence (citation of sources).
- Logical ordering of information.

We have included additional assessment guidance as well as sample rubrics in the **Support Materials** section of this document.

STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

Create a handout that includes directions, clarifies your expectations and assessment criteria, and provides examples.

Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)



STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

- Distribute the handout and discuss the purpose of the journal, allowing time for questions.
- Students look for and record or post journal entries that connect course material to news events.
- Collect and assess the journals, which are your *Learning Artifacts*.

STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Consider what worked. Consider what could have been better and why and how. Consider whether *Contemporary Issues Journal* is something you would like to use in the future. Record your responses so that you can revisit them when you are deciding whether or not to implement the activity in the future. If you are interested in determining course level learning outcomes, use your rubric and add up the total for each rubric trait and enter it in a table or chart. You can also add up the individual scores on each trait and determine a class average. These results can then be displayed in a variety of formats.

Support Materials

The materials in this section are intended to help you with the process of implementing this technique. Because *Contemporary Issues Journal* yields rich data about student learning, for this technique, we provide additional guidance on assessment.

ASSESSMENT GUIDANCE

Contemporary Issues Journals typically are used for formative assessment purposes, in which teachers assess how well students are understanding course concepts and their relevance. They may also serve as a summative assessment, in which teachers use the journals after a learning module or the entire course to evaluate how well students have understood, applied, and integrated course content. Below is some additional guidance:

- 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.
- 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).

SAMPLE ASSESSMENT RUBRICS

Included on the next page is a sample assessment rubric that is a hybrid of two VALUE rubrics developed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities as part of their Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education initiative.

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES JOURNAL ASSESSMENT RUBRIC

Adapted From the AAC&U Integrative Learning & The Information Literacy VALUE Rubric

This rubric combines elements of the Integrative Learning and the Information Literacy VALUE Rubrics created by faculty working with AAC&U.

Integrative learning is defined as “an understanding and a disposition that a student builds across the curriculum and co-curriculum, from making simple connections among ideas and experiences to synthesizing and transferring learning to new, complex situations within and beyond the campus.” Information Literacy is defined as “the ability to know when there is a need for information, to be able to identify, locate, evaluate, and effectively and responsibly use and share that information for the problem at hand.”

Evaluators will assign a zero to any assignment that does not meet benchmark/acceptable (cell one) level performance.

	EXCELLENT 18–20	VERY GOOD 16–17	GOOD 14–15	ACCEPTABLE 12–13	POINTS
EVALUATES INFORMATION & ITS SOURCES CRITICALLY	Chooses excellent information sources appropriate to the assignment and that clearly consider the importance of the multiple criteria used (such as variety of print and internet sources, relevance to course themes, appropriate time frame, as well as authority, audience, and bias/point of view.	Chooses very good information sources appropriate to the assignment and that consider most of the importance of the multiple criteria used (such as variety of print and internet sources, relevance to course themes, appropriate time frame, as well as authority, audience, and bias/point of view.	Chooses information sources appropriate to the assignment and that consider some of the importance of the multiple criteria used (such as variety of print and internet sources, relevance to course themes, appropriate time frame, as well as authority, audience, and bias/point of view.	Chooses a few information sources and/or selects sources using limited criteria (such as relevance to the research question.)	____/20
CONNECTS NEW INFORMATION TO COURSE CONTENT	In every Journal Entry, creates a whole out of multiple parts (synthesizes) and draws conclusions by combining examples, facts, and personal reflections that address the multiple course themes.	In most Journal Entry, creates a whole out of multiple parts (synthesizes) and draws conclusions by combining examples, facts, and personal reflections that address the multiple course themes.	Journal Entries generally draw conclusions by combining examples, facts, and personal reflections that address the multiple course themes.	In some Journal Entries, combines examples, facts, and personal reflections that address the multiple course themes.	____/20
INTEGRATES COMMUNICATION TO EFFECTIVELY ACCOMPLISH THE ASSIGNMENT'S PURPOSE	Fulfills the assignment by choosing a format, language, appropriate visual representations, and general layout in ways that engage and enhance meaning, making clear the interdependence of format, language, and visual representation.	Fulfills the assignment by choosing a format, language, appropriate visual representations, and general layout in ways that clearly connect content and form, demonstrating awareness of purpose and audience.	Fulfills the assignment by choosing a format, language, appropriate visual representations, and general layout in an average manner.	Fulfills the assignment requirements but only at a very basic level.	____/20
ACCESSES & USES INFORMATION ETHICALLY & LEGALLY	Correctly uses all of the following Information Use Strategies (use of citation and references, choice of paraphrasing, summary, or quoting, using information in ways that are true to original context, distinguishing between common knowledge and ideas requiring attribution) and demonstrates a full understanding of the ethical and legal restrictions on the use of published, confidential, and/or proprietary information.	Correctly uses three of the following Information Use Strategies (use of citation and references, choice of paraphrasing, summary, or quoting, using information in ways that are true to original context, distinguishing between common knowledge and ideas requiring attribution) and demonstrates a full understanding of the ethical and legal restrictions on the use of published, confidential, and/or proprietary information.	Correctly uses two of the following Information Use Strategies (use of citation and references, choice of paraphrasing, summary, or quoting, using information in ways that are true to original context, distinguishing between common knowledge and ideas requiring attribution) and demonstrates a full understanding of the ethical and legal restrictions on the use of published, confidential, and/or proprietary information.	Correctly uses one of the following Information Use Strategies (use of citation and references, choice of paraphrasing, summary, or quoting, using information in ways that are true to original context, distinguishing between common knowledge and ideas requiring attribution) and demonstrates a full understanding of the ethical and legal restrictions on the use of published, confidential, and/or proprietary information.	____/20
REFLECTION & SELF-ASSESSMENT	In Pre- and Post-Project Reflections, demonstrates a deep sense of self as a learner, building on prior experience.	In Pre- and Post-Project Reflections, demonstrates very good sense of self as a learner.	In Pre- and Post-Project Reflections, demonstrates good sense of self as a learner.	In Pre- and Post-Project Reflections, demonstrates developing sense of self as a learner.	____/20

Name _____ Total Points _____ /100 (Potential)

Online Adaptation

This section is intended to help you with the process of implementing *Contemporary Issues Journal* in your online class.

HOW TO START

- Determine the journal parameters ahead of time. For example, will they look for news events that relate generally to the course, or will they focus on specific themes or topics?
- Will students write their entries within an assignment pane or create a separate document that they will submit as an attachment?
- How frequently should students make entries? Will students journal during a single course segment or for the whole term?
- What should an entry look like?
- For example, consider a three-part summary:
 - › 1. Date and news source
 - › 2. Who, What, Where, When, Why, How
 - › 3. The course principles, ideas, and concepts the event reflects
- Construct a rubric to assess the journal. An example rubric is available in our free download for this technique.
- In your assignment pane, write out directions, expectations, and provide an example.

VARIATIONS

While we have found the above to be the simplest online approach, consider the following alternative adaptations:

- Have students blog within your LMS, setting preferences so that each student's blog is kept private from other students'. Or you can ask students to set up their own blogs. Either way, students can enrich their text with images, links to web pages, media, and even other blogs.
- Alternatively, you can create a single threaded discussion forum for students to share insights from their blogs or set up multiple forums assigned to separate topics.

Technique Template

Following are two templates to assist you as you think through how you might implement this technique in your own class. The first is a completed template, providing an example of how Elizabeth Barkley adapted *Contemporary Issues Journal* in her course, *Music of Multicultural America*. The second is a blank template for you to fill out to tailor this technique for your course.

Technique Template

Sample Contemporary Issues Journal Completed Technique Template:

Content from Elizabeth Barkley

Music of Multicultural America

Course Name

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

My course is an on campus, Honors Institute section of a lower division General Education course. The course meets my institution's United States Cultures & Communities requirement and also the Humanities requirement. It enrolls about 25-30 students. A significant number are international students. We are also trying to recruit more first generation students. As members of the Honors Institute, these students typically have good academic skills and are highly motivated.

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

I am looking for an activity that will increase student engagement as well as help students move beyond a surface understanding of course topics, particularly the on-going influence of race and ethnicity on the social and cultural context of the U.S. I am also looking for a way to increase students' self-reflection skills, both in terms of their connections to course content and their insights and understanding of how they learn.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

I will ask students to look for and record or post journal entries that connect course material to news events.

STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

Students will do this assignment individually and include a Pre- and a Post-Project Reflection. They will look for 6-10 news items using a variety of print and internet sources that were first published within the current academic term addressing the course themes. I also need to create an assessment rubric and the assignment handout.

STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

I will adapt the AAC&U VALUE rubrics for Information Literacy and also Integrative Learning, and use the criteria of evaluating information, connecting to course content, integrating communication, accessing and using info ethically/legally, and reflection/self-assessment. My standards will include Excellent, Very Good, Good, Acceptable, and the potential of a "0" if the Journal entry does not meet the acceptable benchmark.

STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

I will create a handout that I will distribute in class and also post in the course's Learning Management System. I will also set aside some time in class to discuss the project with students and answer questions.

STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

I need to determine how the journals should be submitted to me. Because I would like students to make visually attractive documents, I may want to have them submit it as hard copy as well as digitally. Also, I will make an example of a journal myself so that I can demonstrate my expectations to students.

STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

After I implemented this technique and evaluated student learning outcomes, I concluded it was such an excellent course activity that I decided to make it a group project. The next term, I put students into groups of 5 and told them they would construct the journal together. I also set aside the last 20 minutes of each class session for students to discuss the news items they were finding and work together on journal construction.

Technique Template

This template is intended for use when planning to implement **Contemporary Issues Journal** in your class. Fill in the blanks below, and use the information provided elsewhere in the Instructor's Guide to assist you in your thinking.

Course Name

COURSE CHARACTERISTICS

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

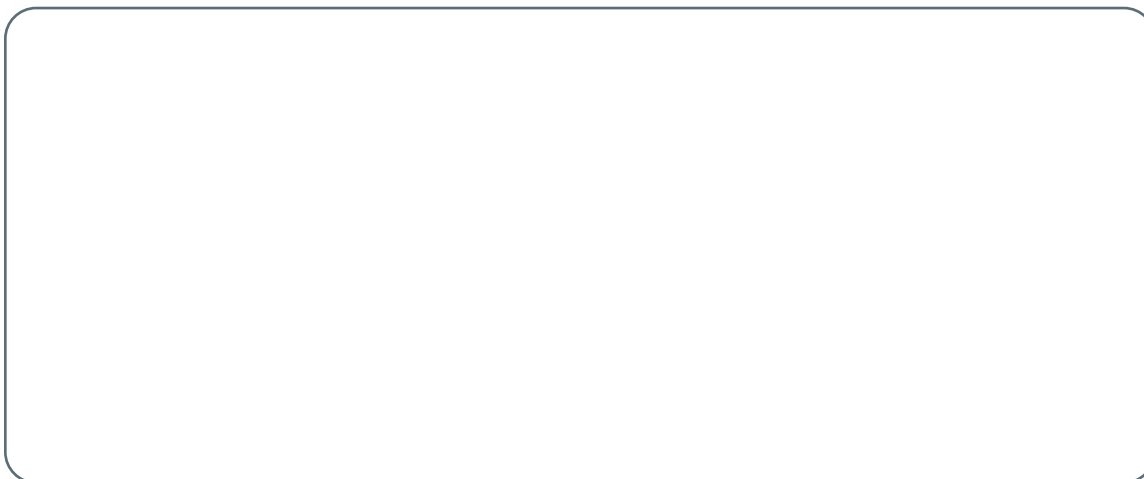
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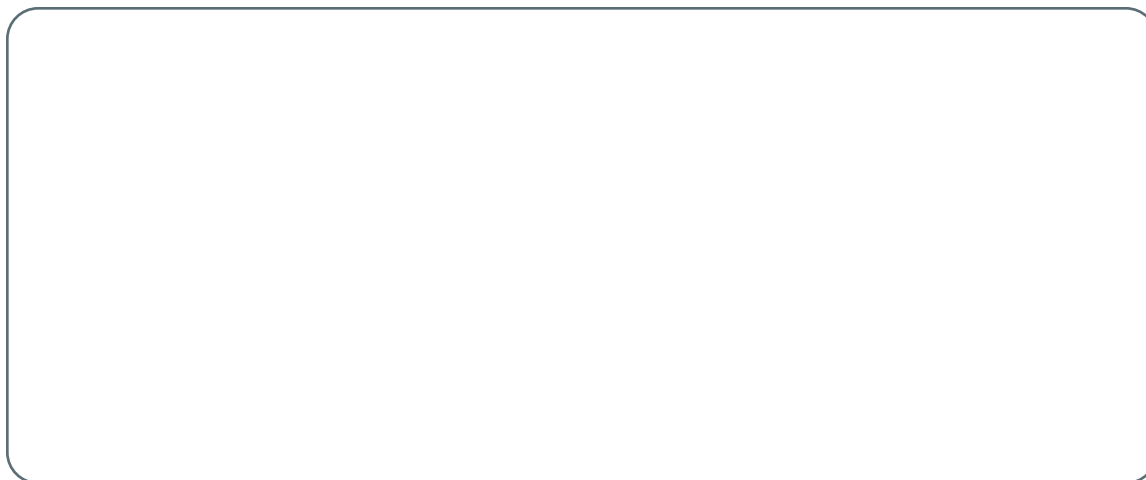
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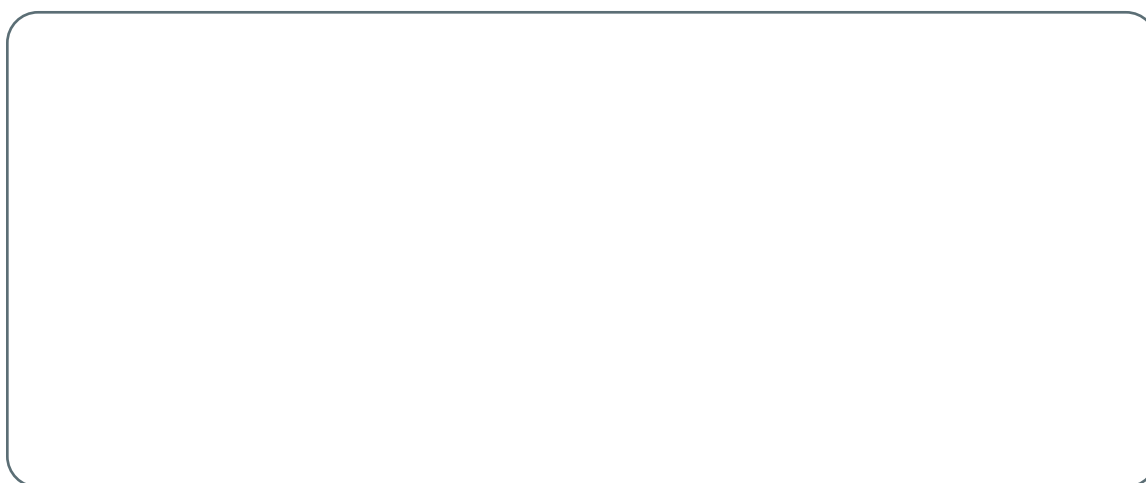
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STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?



STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?



STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?



References and Resources

PRIMARY SOURCE

Content for this download was drawn primarily from “Learning Assessment Technique 24: Contemporary Issues Journal” in *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley & Major, 2016), pp. 225–229. It includes material that was adapted or reproduced with permission. For further information about this technique, including examples in both on campus and online courses, see the primary source:

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H. (2016). *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

CITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- 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.

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