

# NEWS

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## Some Strategies for Teaching Students Critical Thinking

By W. Rick Johnson, Southwestern College

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Like many other teachers, I have found that the way in which course requirements are structured has a significant influence on the learning outcomes of a course. In particular, I have found that the standard mixture of exams and term papers is often simply not the most effective way to encourage learning and stimulate critical thinking. There are several different types of alternatives to the exam/term paper format which I have tried and which have had positive results. Exams and traditional term papers certainly have their place and I use them in certain cases, but there are also other possibilities which provide a better opportunity (and a more effective "prod") to encourage independent critical thinking.

In my mind, the development of critical thinking skills is a particularly important goal in education, particularly in college level political science courses. As many teachers will attest, it is also one of the most difficult pedagogical goals to realize. I would like to share several types of strategies which are effective ways to help students clarify their own thoughts about changing and often competing conceptions and analyses of political life, problems and issues.

One possibility that works well here is to require students to keep a "journal" throughout the term. The journal is intended to be the focus for a running dialogue with and commentary on the course. Typically this is an entirely new concept to most students and they need a significant amount of explanation, advice and feedback in the early going. The expectation is not scholarly research but careful and critical thought. Although there are many ways to use the journal idea, the usual expectation is that students will use the journal to develop their own ideas about what is going on in the course. They are asked to comment

on anything in the lectures, assigned readings and class discussions that particularly interests, stimulates or infuriates them. A *very important* point to stress is that what matters is not total page length but incisiveness and careful thought. Length, in and of itself, is not the aim of the journal and page count is not rewarded if thoughtfulness is not demonstrated. I require students to make a minimum of two entries per week in their journals. As always, some "go-getters" will do substantially more than this, but there are also some who barely meet the minimum. I require students to go significantly beyond simply saying that they like or dislike, agree or disagree, or are "interested in" something. Sometimes I will ask a student to do some research to explore the evidence on a particular topic they are writing about. The idea is to provide a "laboratory" for students' critical thinking, experimentation, development and evaluation.

The journal concept requires substantial teacher involvement. I generally pick up the journals every other Friday to read them and write comments on them, then return them on Monday. For the journal concept to work effectively, a teacher must read the journals carefully and faithfully. Students depend on the questions and comments of the teacher — to learn how to use the journal, as a "sounding board," and as a partner in dialogue. Often debates are carried on throughout the semester in the journal — by the student with himself, with a set of ideas, or with the instructor. Critical thinking has two components: learning to thoughtfully evaluate ideas and evidence, and to thoughtfully accept and evaluate criticism of one's own ideas and evidence. The journal can help develop both of these sets of skills. Teacher/

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## A Data Center for an Undergraduate College

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Acrimonious and seemingly interminable debates have surrounded the introduction and dissemination of systematic empirical methods in political science. Nevertheless, for better or worse, these methods and this mode of analysis are here to stay in political science and the other social science disciplines. No one can deny the general leaning towards behavioralism that is evident in the programs of the major P.H.D. granting institutions. Scholars may debate the ultimate validity of these approaches for understanding politics, but all must agree that a thorough understanding of today's social science requires at least some familiarity with the behavioral approach, even if this familiarity were to be conceived of as "self defense" in the struggle to keep up with the literature in the major journals, and even if that familiarity were to breed contempt.

The large, degree-granting institutions are graduating scholars who enjoy easy familiarity with a wide range of computer assisted research techniques. These scholars view empirical analysis, data processing, and quantitative techniques as valuable and necessary, if not always sufficient, parts of the discipline. As the discipline of political science has become more dominated by the practitioners of empirical methods, the impact of this behavioral revolution has begun to be felt more fully at the level of undergraduate instruction. Indeed, undergraduate students nowadays need some familiarity with empirical methods, for the purpose of understanding the literature as well as enabling them to make informed political judgments.

Larger universities often have extensive computer facilities, which can provide a variety of support services for all kinds of users, including stu-

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