Enhancing students' critical thinking in journalism education: An approach using historical primary journalism texts

Grant Hannis, Massey University

Abstract

This paper considers methods to improve students' critical assessment of primary journalism texts, drawing on the experience of a journalism history course taught at a New Zealand university. The course requires students to critically analyse English, United States and New Zealand journalism texts from the 1500s to today. Although some students have performed well on the course, others have encountered difficulties, such as struggling to think critically, avoiding close reading of the journalism, or simply failing to follow the questions' instructions. Several modifications have been made to the course, including abandoning the use of a narrative history textbook, greater use of in-class exercises, and introducing a session focussing on the nature of critical thinking. The paper's analysis is informed by the experience of the United States advanced placement history examinations, which use similar assessment methods and have encountered similar challenges.

Keywords: Journalism history; critical thinking; document-based questions

Introduction

In 2006, Massey University in New Zealand became the country's first (and, to date, only) tertiary educational institution to offer a course on the history of journalism. This third-year undergraduate course considers the development of print journalism from the 1600s to today.

The assessment for the course primarily consists of three essays. Each essay requires the students to critically evaluate primary historical and contemporary journalism texts. That is, the students must critically assess actual journalism articles, rather than simply repeat information obtained from secondary sources (such as from narrative journalism histories). United States history educators would instantly recognise this task as being the Document-Based Question (DBQ)—a long-established form of assessment in the United States for university-level study in history.

In the light of the experience of using the DBQ in the United States, this paper considers the use of the DBQ in Massey University's History of Journalism course. The paper discusses the challenges students have encountered in both countries in answering DBQs, and the strategies developed to help students improve their performance. It is hoped university journalism teachers who ask their students to critically respond to primary journalism texts will find these experiences instructive in helping their students maximise their performance. Indeed, critical thinking and writing clear, persuasive texts are vital skills for all journalism students to learn, not just those studying journalism industry.

The paper begins by considering the United States experience, before describing the method used to evaluate the use of DBQs in the Massey University course. The research results are then presented, followed by the concluding remarks.

United States experience with the DBQ

The DBQ was introduced into the United States annual school examination system in 1973 as part of the advanced placement system, a curriculum equivalent to undergraduate study (Rothschild, 2000). The advanced placement system is administered by The College Board on behalf of the participating educational institutions. Students who perform well in the advanced placement examinations receive credits towards their subsequent undergraduate study at participating institutions, allowing talented students to progress faster through higher education (The College Board, 2012a).

Advanced placement examinations are offered in 34 disciplines, including European History, United States History and World History (The College Board, 2012b). The three advanced placement history examinations all include a DBQ, asking students to argue a case drawing on accompanying primary historical documents. The DBQ was introduced in order to replicate the nature of university-based history study, where students are encouraged to study primary documents so as to learn history "from the bottom up" (Rothschild, 2000, p.496). That is, "working with and interrogating historical documents in an effort to understand and explain the past" (Monte-Sano, 2008, p.1046). The DBQ documents are typically short extracts from speeches, diaries, newspaper accounts, plus some visual documents, such as cartoons, works of art, or graphs.

Some have expressed doubts as to how well they reflect historians' approach to inquiry, given many of the documents are heavily edited and reflect a Western perspective on historical issues (Grant, Gradwell and Cimbricz, 2004). Nevertheless, the DBQs are generally well-accepted and remain an integral part of the advanced placement history examinations.

By way of example, in 2011 the DBQ for the United States History examination was:

Analyze the international and domestic challenges the United States faced between 1968 and 1974, and evaluate how President Richard Nixon's administration responded to them (The Col-

lege Board, 2012c, p.2).

The examination instructions told students to use the accompanying documents to answer the DBQ and to construct a coherent essay that integrated key evidence drawn from their interpretation of the documents plus their knowledge of the time period. The nine documents included short extracts from Nixon's speeches on Vietnam and the energy crisis, a graph of price indices for the period 1968 to 1975, and a cartoon on Watergate (The College Board, 2012c).

History teachers in the United States have utilised several strategies to help their students perform to their best in the DBQs (Pompilio, 2010; Monte-Sano, 2008; Stovel, 2000; Young and Leinhardt, 1998). The nature and breadth of these strategies indicate students have found answering the DBQs challenging, including some of the most basic tasks involved. The first strategy is that teachers emphasise to their students that they make sure they understand the DBQs' instructions (particularly those students doing the European History examination, to ensure they cover all six core elements required for the essay). Second, teachers perform DBQ exercises in class (sample DBQs and model answers are easily available on the internet—see, for instance, Museumwise, 2012). In these exercises the students are given a DBQ and primary documents to read. They then formulate their answer and write the introductory paragraph of their essay. The paragraphs are then critiqued in class by the teacher and other students. This approach saves time (students do not write an entire essay) and helps the students focus their minds on developing an argument (Stovel, 2000). Pompilio (2010) asked her students to read the documents before class (again, to save time in the classroom) and then had the students conduct their discussions in groups, with one student acting as facilitator. Other students in the class observed the discussion and rated the students' input. Such exercises helped the students realise the teacher (or textbook) was not the sole source of knowledge and that students could learn from each other.

A repeated theme in the literature centres on that aspect of answering the DBQs that students find most demanding: thinking critically (Rothschild, 2000). Part of the cause is, no doubt, the lack of clarity as to what critical thinking actually is. As Tian and Low (2011) concede, critical thinking is "notoriously difficult to define and explain" (p.63). The definition endorsed by the United States National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking Instruction is extremely broad:

Critical thinking is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action (Scriven and Paul, 2012, para.2).

In an attempt to convert such a widely defined notion into something students can use, history instructors have used various tools to help students address the DBQs methodically and deeply. Mnemonics have been devised to help students remember the issues to consider in critically analysing DBQ documents. One is DID ACAPS—Document attribution (title, author and date if known), Identification of document type (diary, letter, etc. which can give indication of the nature of the information in document), Description/Purpose of the document, Author and position, Context, Audience, Point of view (what is the document saying and how is it said?), and Significance (how important is the document?) (Pompilio, 2010). Another is SOAPS—Subject, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, and Speaker (Rothschild, 2000).

Research method

Massey University's History of Journalism course has been delivered on campus and by distance since 2006. Every year, about 30 students do the course. In 2012, there were 31 students enrolled in the course: 13 studied the course on campus, the remainder by distance. Most of the on-campus students are young Communication students aged in their early 20s, some of whom intend undertaking postgraduate vocational journalism study to become journalists. The distance students include off-campus young Communication students, as well as mature students—including working journalists—studying a variety of qualifications.

To understand the experience of using DBQs on the course, this paper reports the views of the two academics who designed the course; the three academics who have taught and marked the course; and comments from the course's students, as given in student feedback forms. The experiences of the on-campus and distance-learning versions of the course have been very similar, with any significant differences mentioned below. The research survey period is 2006-2012, covering the six-year period the course has to date been taught.

In light of the discussion in the preceding section on the use of DBQs in the United States advanced placement history examinations, five key questions for considering the experience of using the DBQs in the History of Journalism course in New Zealand were identified. These questions are:

What are the DBQs?

What was the rationale for using the DBQs?

What has been the experience of using the DBQs?

What changes were made to the course in light of this experience?

What have the students said about the course?

Each question is now considered in turn.

The DBQs

The History of Journalism course is divided into three modules, corresponding to three historical time periods. There is no examination; instead, the students complete three essays and participate in class discussions. Each essay must be no more than 1500 words long and contributes 30 per cent of the final mark. Class participation accounts for the remaining 10 per cent.

Each essay question is a DBQ, one per module. Each DBQ instructs students to use a selection of readings (the primary texts) as the basis for answering the question, and each DBQ focuses on one issue (fact versus fiction in reportage, the role of the journalist, and the impact of new media technologies), both in the past and today.

There is a marking schedule for the essays, which notes that each essay must be a piece of critical evidence-based work (50 per cent of the grade); be well structured, including that the essay's argument is contained in the introduction (30 per cent); include evidence that the student has read the readings and accurately referenced them (10 per cent); and be well presented (for instance, the essay details the word count and quotes are accurate, 10 per cent). The course handbook given to the students includes a list of additional instructions, emphasising to the students that their essays must focus on primary texts, with contextual information playing a secondary role:

> You must critically assess the Readings and other examples of journalism. You cannot simply repeat what was said in the lectures/tutorials. Attending the lectures/tutorials will give you the context for your analysis and will help spark ideas in your own mind, so you can to some extent quote the material covered in the lectures/tutorials. But you must directly engage with, and analyse, the journalism itself, and this should form the major part of your essay (Massey University, 2012, p.10).

The course handbook also includes guidance on writing scholarly essays—including ensuring the introduction includes the essay's argument (or thesis), advice on crafting and structuring the essay, and detailing the referencing requirements.

Each DBQ requires the students to engage closely with a selection of historical journalism readings and to think about the issue raised in the DBQ in the modern journalism context. The students must thus seek out relevant modern primary journalism texts, to help them answer that final part of each question. In 2012, the first DBQ (covering the years 1500-1800) read:

> Select four to five Readings from Module One and use them to write an essay critically assessing the distinction between fact and fiction in print journalism. What influence did the merging of fact

> and fiction have on journalism prior to 1800? Looking at specific examples of modern journalism, do print journalists still merge fact and fiction today? (Massey University, 2012, p.7).

For each DBQ, a selection of 10 to 12 documents is provided. All these documents are original pieces of journalism. In 2012, for the first DBQ the documents included 16th-century pamphlets describing the births of a deformed piglet and baby, pamphlets from the English Civil War, news ballads about crimes, Scandal Club pieces from Daniel Defoe's Review, society gossip pieces from The Tatler, the front page of the first issue of The Daily Universal Register (later renamed The Times), and some early American newspapers including Publick Occurrences and the New-England Courant. All the material is sourced and unabridged. As much as possible, all the readings are reproduced as they originally appeared. This means that in module one many of the documents are in early modern English (featuring the long s, v for u, and some older spellings, such as "newes").

The participation assessment requires the students to engage in tutorial work, either in class or, in the case of the distance students, online. Assessment for participation is composed of intellectual quality, including that the student's contributions were relevant, informed and logical (60 per cent); presentation, including that contributions were well written, respectful and scholarly (20 per cent); and frequency, that is, the student regularly contributed to the discussions (20 per cent).

The tutorial work mimics the essay questions. In each case, a reading is given to the students and they are asked to critically assess it. The tutorial readings are not included in the readings for the essays, but the students are asked to undertake the same analysis as that for the essays. So, for instance, one of the module one tutorials considers how Samuel Johnson uses some of the fictional conventions of the ghost story when debunking a story of a girl supposedly possessed by a spirit in 18th-century London. Participation also covers, for the on-campus students, a group presentation that students must give on the readings to the rest of the class. This is not required of the distance students, as asking students to present seminars online is impractical.

Rationale for using DBQs

When they originally created the course, the academics who designed the course quickly agreed that its assessment should be based on DBQs. Although they were not explicitly thinking of the United States DBQs when forming this view, their reasoning was essentially the same. That is, they believed answering DBQs would be valuable for the students in that it would replicate the work of historians, who typically analyse primary texts with their research informed by the documents' historical context.

> "We wanted to emphasise to the students the exciting immediacy of reading historical news," said one of the designers. "We then wanted them to critically think about it, such as considering the veracity of a 17th-century report of a milkmaid who supposedly witnessed blood raining from the sky."

The course's designers anticipated the students would find such a task challenging but not unduly so. As a third-year paper, many of the students doing the course would already have experience writing essays and undertaking some critical analysis in other papers on the undergraduate programme.

The designers anticipated that the students would deepen their understanding of the context of the readings by going beyond the simple introductory material contained in the lectures. In order to properly analyse the journalism, the students would need to research both the events reported in the journalism and the journalism itself, including the background of the journalists who wrote the material and the periodicals in which it appeared. "The contextual material given in the lectures was only meant as a starting point," one lecturer said. "We explained to the students that, once they'd selected which readings they were going to analyse in their essay, they needed to research the material far more. I encouraged them to use the library and to take some of the research tutorials run by the library."

The designers' requirement that four or five documents from the readings be included in each essay was to ensure the students read widely among the readings and had enough source material for a substantial response. By encouraging the students to seek out modern journalism texts, the designers were effectively asking the students to do their own primary-document collection, another common task of the historian. It was also requiring the students to critically respond to the journalism they read every day. As one of the designers explained, "The students are given the historical texts on a plate. We wanted them to find, and critically assess, relevant contemporary journalism texts too." They also hoped asking the students to consider the same issues in modern texts would help make the historical material more accessible to the students.

The designers felt reproducing the material in its original form helped create a sense in the students' minds of the historical nature of the material. For instance, reading text that used the long s and gothic script helped the student appreciate they were reading real 17th-century material. The relatively high number of documents for each DBQ was intended to gave the students a significant amount of raw material on which to work, given they had plenty of time to read it all.

Experience using the DBQs

The course originally comprised lectures, audio-visual material pertaining to the history of journalism, and problem clinics, in which students could ask questions about the material. The three DBQs comprised all the assessment on the course, each essay being worth 33.3 per cent of the final grade.

The on-campus class was also required to form into three groups, with each group giving a 10- to 15-minute ungraded presentation to the class on two simplified DBQs based on the readings from a module. These questions considered different issues from those covered in the assessment DBQs. For instance, one of the group presentation questions for module one reads:

> 1. The issue of The Daily Universal Register includes an editorial statement addressed to the public, positioning the newspaper within the crowded marketplace of the daily press. Read through this statement. How does the editor of the paper attract readers? (Massey University, 2012, p.5).

After each presentation, there was a classroom discussion on the issues raised, and the lecturer gave feedback on the presentations. The distance-learning version of the course originally supplied the lectures in hard copy and the group presentation work as self-tests for students, the questions appearing in the front half of the study guide with model answers at the back.

There was also a textbook for the course, Stephens (2007), which focused on English and United States journalism history. The class lectures referred to the textbook, included additional historical material and gave introductions to the readings, explaining their basic historical context. Originally, the readings also included some journalism history texts. These included a historian's discussion on the accuracy of the film All The President's Men and a media commentator's discussion on the state of the modern newspaper industry.

The academics who have taught the course say that from the outset some of the students answered the DBQs very well, undertaking close reading of the historical journalism documents, finding and analysing modern journalism examples, reading around the topic, and producing well-written essays. As one lecturer commented, "They really understood the material and made it their own. They did independent research and came up with some creative ideas which hadn't been drip-fed to them."

But the academics encountered several major problems with many other students' performance. Many students' essays simply repeated the lecture and textbook material, with only a cursory mention of the readings. Even when using the readings, the students often preferred to discuss the narrative history readings, rather than the primary journalism texts. In many cases, the introductions of essays did not set out the students' central arguments. Indeed, it was often unclear what a student's argument in their essay was, with essays meandering from one point to another. One

lecturer said the possible causes for this were “a lack of training in critical thinking and perhaps increased exposure to opinion writing via media like blogs, Twitter, Facebook postings, print opinion columns, etc.”

The students often made little attempt to cite evidence from the readings. This was particularly the case with lengthier documents, where even classroom discussion of such readings, to quote one lecturer, “fell flat.” After the textbook and narrative history readings, the main secondary source cited by many students in their essays was Wikipedia, suggesting the students were not looking far for secondary sources. In the lecturers’ view, Wikipedia’s open-access policy made it a questionable source.

Students sometimes failed to follow the basic assignment instructions, such as including modern examples of journalism. There were also frequent elementary errors, such as spelling and grammatical mistakes, misquoted readings and poor sourcing.

The material in the group presentations was largely descriptive and the presentations poorly rehearsed. Neither the problem clinics nor the group presentations generated much classroom discussion.

Although there will always be a range of abilities among the students in a class, the lecturers believed too many of the students were having difficulty with the material. They therefore resolved to reform the course with the intention of raising the students’ general performance.

Changes made

Several major changes were made to the course. First, the textbook and narrative history readings were abolished, with all narrative history material now confined to the lectures.

This was to prevent the students simply repeating material from those sources in their essays. One lecturer commented:

> It was perhaps understandable that the students favoured the narrative secondary material. After all, they don’t know that much about the events covered in the journalism or the history of the journalism itself—that’s why they’re doing the course! But just reciting the textbook back at me was not helping anyone. I wanted them to learn the historical context in class and via their own research, and then apply it to the readings. That’s a tougher task, but a more intellectually rewarding one.

Second, the problem clinics were abandoned. In their place, considerable time is now spent undertaking critical analysis, using DBQ exercises in class (initially rendered as self-check exercises for the distance students in their hard-copy study guides). These DBQs use additional readings, not included in the assessment DBQs, but which consider the same issues covered in the assessment DBQs, such as fact and fiction in reportage. This is designed to help the students see how to analyse the readings in light of these issues. The lecturer leads these classroom exercises to help the students engage in deep, reflective analysis and discussion.

As part of some of these exercises, the students form pairs and each pair constructs the introduction for an essay on the class reading. The students write these introductions on the whiteboard and they are discussed in class. The purpose here is to focus the students’ energies on writing a clear introduction that spells out their thesis.

To maximise the time spent analysing the readings and discussing the students’ introductions, the students are required to read the readings prior to class. “To be honest, I thought only a few of the students would take the time to read the material ahead of class,” one lecturer said, “However, nearly all of them do so. That shows how keen they are to come to grips with the material.” Such pre-reading also means the analysis of lengthier documents no longer falls flat, as the students have had time to read and absorb the material.

Beginning in 2012, the students are now graded on their contribution to these classroom exercises. This is the participation assessment element, worth 10 per cent of the final grade. This

helps ensure all the students make full use of the benefits the exercises provide. This applies to the distance students as well. Rather than simply having the questions and answers in a hard-copy study guide, the distance students must use Moodle to undertake a virtual classroom discussion on the texts, guided by the lecturer. As the current lecturer explained, "I have removed the self-help material from the study guide. The more the students must actively think about these exercises and discuss them with each other online, the better."

The in-class group presentation work has been retained, as it complements the DBQ exercises. It is included in the participation grade for the on-campus students. As it is not possible to organise such presentations for the distance students, it is not included in their grading. "The distance students must undertake the tutorial work via emails, rather than just speaking in class," one lecturer explained, "so I think excluding any presentation component to the distance students' participation assessment leads to an equitable workload across the students."

Third, the generic Massey University guidance on essay writing and referencing has been amended or supplemented by specific advice on answering the DBQs. This includes the direct instruction to the students to focus on the readings quoted above and a prohibition on using Wikipedia as a source. The lecturers also remind the students several times during the course to read and follow the essay-presentation requirements, including proofing their work.

The lecturers say these changes have resulted in several positive outcomes. First, the DBQ exercises are generally a very positive experience, with the students clearly interested in the material. The in-class discussions can generate deep insights. In one case, a lecturer was running a tutorial looking at a 16th-century report of a man who had transformed a boat into a wagon, and sailed and wheeled it from Lambourn to London, a distance of about 100 kilometres, attracting great public interest along the way. The lecturer asked whether similar endeavours are reported today. The lecturer had in mind the charity walks undertaken by celebrities such as Sir Ian Botham in Great Britain. But one of the students suggested a much stronger example—a case reported in New Zealand of two men who transformed a van into a boat and sailed it across the strait that separates the country's two main islands. The lecturer incorporated this example into later versions of the exercise.

But these changes have not been an unqualified success. The DBQ exercises have revealed severe weaknesses in the students' critical analytical skills, weaknesses that are carried over into the students' essays. In particular, students take the primary documents at face value. One lecturer recounted the experience over several years of one in-class discussion using a piece by Mark Twain, in which the 19th-century American journalist uses irony to mock American tourists' ethnocentrism. Frequently, the students failed to see any irony in the piece, simply concluding that Twain was a racist.

The exercises have also revealed the students are not accustomed to close reading. "I often must press the students to cite specific evidence from the texts to support claims they make in class," one lecturer reported. In some in-class presentations the students make sweeping statements based on the scantiest evidence, such as using one page from an early 20th-century newspaper to conclude that all newspapers from that time did not favour using photographs.

Turning to the highly fraught notion of critical thinking, a two-hour session on critical thinking was introduced into the course in 2011 to sharpen the students' critical thinking skills (the exercise is conducted online for the distance students). The students are first asked to discuss what critical thinking is. The students are told that, for the purposes of the course, the lecturers take critical thinking to include:

> Not taking a text at face value, but instead reading it sceptically and objectively.
>
> Being an informed reader, by reading around the topic and understanding the text's context.
>
> Analysing the text in light of a specific issue, such as the use of fact and fiction in the piece.
>
> Developing a clear, defensible argument, that will stand up to scrutiny from others.

Citing specific textual support from the text itself and from secondary sources, to support the argument.

The students then critically assess an 18th-century piece from Henry Fielding, in which he recounts his eyewitness tale of a kitten falling overboard and being rescued during a sea voyage to Lisbon. The students are asked to critically assess what devices the piece uses to underscore its factual nature and what fictional writing techniques are employed. Although the story clearly has a ring of truth about it—Fielding was indeed sailing to Lisbon at the time of the incident—during the discussion the students come to understand how Fielding, a great writer of fiction, quite explicitly manipulates his telling of the story to maximise its emotional impact on the reader.

The students then must discuss how the lecturer and class critically assessed the text—explicitly acknowledging the use of relevant historical context (that the lecturer told the class Fielding was indeed travelling to Lisbon on a ship at the time) and that the students undertook a close reading of the text in search of factual and fictional elements. The lecturer then tells the students this is the type of analysis they must do for the essays.

The lecturer currently running the course says these changes have improved the general quality of the essays: "The days when students simply repeated the textbook and barely mentioned the readings are thankfully gone." The tutorials are also far more enjoyable, he adds:

The problem clinics were often poorly attended and short, because the students did not raise any concerns. It was only when we marked the essays that we realised how much trouble the students were having. The tutorials are now a far more rewarding, beneficial experience for everyone.

But the lecturer feels more needs to be done, so plans further changes for the course. First, the essays are to be increased in length to 2000 words and the number of readings a student must consider in essay reduced to two or three. The expectation is that requiring the students to write more about less will encourage them to think more deeply about the texts; undertake closer, detailed reading of the material; and research the journalism's historical context more. As the lecturer explained, "This will further encourage the students to read closely and think critically."

Second, the assessment schedule for the essays will be simplified and restructured. This is because the innovations so far have done little to address a persistent reluctance among some students to meet the presentation requirements, with some essays continuing to be poorly proofed and referenced. The lecturer again:

This has been very frustrating, but I am determined to fix it. We will simplify and increase the share of the total marks given for presentation requirements. Hopefully, that will encourage the students to take the time to meet these elementary requirements.

Student feedback

From the outset the students have generally found the course interesting and well organised. Asked each year to rate the overall quality of the course on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest rating, the students have consistently rated the course at around 4. "This paper is clearly well planned out," one student said in 2007. "Good solid base of both history and journalism," said another in 2011. "Learning to critically analyse print media was well taught and a valuable skill," said a third in 2012.

But the students have found the demands of the DBQs challenging. "The assignment questions were difficult to understand sometimes," said a student in 2008. A student in 2010 criticised the course's "lack of direction with assignments." The following year, a student said the "assignment questions could have been a bit more clear." Another difficulty the students have consistently identified was coming to terms with the historical context of the readings, especially when they were required to undertake the detailed research themselves. As one said in 2007, "Sometimes some historical knowledge is assumed." Another commented in 2010, "Saying, 'Research around the topic' isn't always helpful." Some students also found the gothic text of the early readings hard

to read, with one suggesting in 2012: "You should transcribe the readings. Keep the words the same but have them all in Times New Roman."

The students felt their ability to critically assess the readings improved as the course proceeded, with their third essay being an improvement on their earlier ones. As one student commented in 2007, "It feels like in the first few weeks, knowledge is much more limited than when the third is due." It is likely this is because the third assignment focuses on the more familiar world of near contemporary journalism and, also, by then the students have completed the first two DBQs and the group presentations.

The increased tutorial work in the latter part of the course's life was partly driven by such feedback. This has generated favourable response. As one student commented in 2011, "Doing the exercises in class, analysing texts as essay practice, was very useful." Another said in 2012, "The tutorial exercises were very good for helping to get me thinking on how to approach the assignments."

As such tutorial work was introduced the students asked that it be graded. "It would be nice if the presentation was worth a small amount (10%) as it does involve time and effort," said one student in 2009. This understandable expectation, plus the need for the students to commit fully to the DBQ exercises, saw the introduction of the 10 per cent participation grade in 2012.

Conclusions

This paper has considered methods to improve students' critical assessment of historical primary journalism texts. It has drawn on the experience of a New Zealand university-based journalism history course, the analysis informed by the United States experience with DBQs in advanced placement examinations. It is hoped this paper will be of assistance to journalism teachers seeking to improve their students' ability to critically assess primary journalism texts.

As in the United States, DBQs are used in the History of Journalism course because the academics who designed the course believed DBQs approximate the activities of real historians. Students must argue a case, based on their critical analysis of primary journalism documents. As in the World History advanced placement examination, the students are also encouraged to think about what other primary documents they can obtain, in order to answer the modern journalism aspect of each DBQ.

Again as in the United States, while some students have produced excellent work answering the DBQs, others found the task challenging. For whatever reason, these students clearly were not accustomed to critically assessing texts. They often avoided close critical reading of the journalism documents, preferring to repeat information from secondary sources. Their essays did not contain clear arguments or cite sufficient textual evidence. Some students failed to follow the essay instructions or even carefully proof their work. Several modifications have been made to the course over time to address these issues, including abandoning the textbook and narrative history readings, and devoting much of the class time to exercises that both mimic the essay questions and consider the nature of critical thinking. While the United States approach of using mnemonics has not been adopted, the students have been encouraged to follow a somewhat formulaic approach to undertaking critical analysis, largely because the notion of critical analysis itself is so hard to pin down. Grading students' participation in tutorial work has rewarded their committed involvement in these exercises. The students have appreciated these innovations.

None of these changes appeared to predominate in enhancing the students' ability to think critically. Instead, they have worked as a package, with the changes incrementally improving the students' performance over time.

And the current lecturer has determined that more must be done. To further encourage the students to think deeply and critically, the students will be required to write longer essays based on fewer readings. To encourage them to meet the basic presentation requirements of the paper, more

marks will be allocated to that aspect of assessment.

It is likely such ongoing enhancements to the course will continue to pay dividends, for both students and lecturers. The students enjoy the course more when they feel more confident writing their essays; the lecturers find it more rewarding to read better essays and lead more insightful class discussions. Such paths of discovery and educational experimentation are relevant to all university teachers, who, of course, should always be aiming to enhance their students' critical thinking abilities.

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Contact Grant Hannis at: g.d.hannis@massey.ac.nz