

CD ROM in the large class is in what Hunter labels the “anticipatory set” (25–30). The anticipatory set is an activity (statement, question, or brief written exercise) that focuses students’ attention on the day’s content. It “can hook into students’ past knowledge and trigger a memory or some practice” which facilitates learning (28). It can be used at the introduction of any new subject. Various features of “Capitol Hill” would work in this capacity; remarks by scholars are particularly appropriate.

### A Tool for Motivation

Let’s be clear about what “Capitol Hill” will not do. It will not replace a well-planned and insightful lecture. It will not bestow an understanding of the complexity of the legislative process that is instilled by a careful case study such as Birnbaum and

Murray’s *Gucci Gulch*. In general, it will not explain and validate competing and/or contradictory points of view, a trait that is the hallmark of sophisticated thinking.

“Capitol Hill” will, however, provide an insightful supplement to traditional teaching strategies. It succeeds in motivating students by generating heightened interest. Used selectively, this multimedia experience is an instructional strategy worth a try. Even under less than ideal conditions—the instructor operating the mouse—the program was worth using for at least one class period, if not more.

### Notes

1. Amazing Media, The Software Toolworks Inc., 60 Leveroni Court, Novato, CA 94949, (415) 883-3000.

2. Software Toolworks, who produce the disk, sale “labpacks” for \$129.95 for pack of five. However, there are various regional educational distributors (Software Toolworks will give you the name of one in your area), that may sell the pack for less. For example, School Vision of Texas (800-324-1672) sales the pack for \$91.00. These could be sold to students individually or put on reserve in a computer lab.

3. See Madeline Hunter, *Mastery Teaching* (El Segundo, California: TIP Publications, 1982), for an excellent discussion of motivational techniques.

### About the Authors

**Cynthia Opheim** is professor and chair, department of political science, Southwest Texas State University.

**W. B. Stouffer** is professor of political science, Southwest Texas State University.

Both are co-authors of the text, *State and Local Politics: The Individual and the Government*, 2nd ed. (1996)

## The Interactive Journal: Creating A Learning Space<sup>1</sup>

Dean Hammer, *Franklin and Marshall College*

Much of the recent work on critical thinking and collaborative learning has alerted us to the limitations of a traditional, lecture-centered approach to teaching and has called, instead, for a more active student role in the acquisition and formulation of knowledge<sup>2</sup> (Perry 1981, Bruffee 1984, Bodner 1986, Nelson 1989). The emergence of new technologies in the classroom is seen by many as an opportunity to foster this active learning (Hartman 1992, Slatin 1992, Ferrara 1991, Faigley 1990). The present article seeks to contribute to this literature by focusing on how these technologies can be extended to the traditional journal assignment, a topic that has received little attention. This essay will have two purposes: first, to suggest one approach to setting up a journal over a computer network; and second, to point to some pedagogical implications of composing a journal in this environment. I suggest that the network significantly alters the

nature of a journal by creating a space in which the student and teacher more closely enter into a discourse. This discourse is made possible by three key factors:

- 1) There is a greater sense, somewhat ironically, of the security of the space. It is a space that is private, created by the students, and one they do not have to surrender to be graded, as they would with their written journals or computer disks;
- 2) The space is interactive, which allows student and teacher to share it. This allows for the development of rapport within that space; and
- 3) There is a sense of continuity in the space which allows the participants to see their comments as part of a continuing discourse.

### Logistics

The interactive journal was used in my Introduction to Political Theory course. The course, consisting of

34 students, was conducted at Franklin and Marshall College and met three times per week. The campus, including each dorm room, is wired to a network and a majority of the students own their own computers (mostly Macintoshes). There are also computer labs that provide student access to the network.

A class folder was established on the network. In the class folder were two other folders: one for Assignments (to which everyone had access) and one for Student Folders, which consisted of a folder for each student in the class. Only the student and I had access to each personal folder.

In these folders, the students wrote their journals and I provided comments in them as they worked through and thought about the texts we were reading in the class. Part of the journal entry was to consist of a response to a particular question I asked. These questions were designed both to lend the students

some guidance in their reading and to help them develop skills in textual analysis. But the journals were much more than that. I encouraged the students to experiment: to write down passages from the texts that they liked or found provocative; to pursue questions of interest to them and ask questions of me; to suggest connections to other classes or readings they had encountered; and to refer to their own experiences in approaching the texts.

I did not grade each journal entry (as this seemed unnecessarily intrusive and extremely time-consuming). Rather, I told the students ahead of time when I was going to grade an entry. I read all the entries (not necessarily on the same day) and provided a check, check plus, and check minus to the entries not graded. I also developed what I called the “spontaneous A,” a grade I reserved for the “non-graded” entries that I thought were exceptionally thoughtful. Every three weeks, I provided a journal grade (which consisted of the graded entries modified by the “checked” entries) and then started over. This broke the grading down into manageable portions and gave the students greater feedback.

One last logistical note: I strongly recommend a test run on the first journal entry to make sure the logistics are right (accessing the network and folder, creating a document, etc.).

### Critical Reading: Learning to Question

The journal is noteworthy for its adaptability to a number of different assignments, from highly focused entries designed to develop particular reading, writing, and analytic skills to opportunities for students to provide more personal responses to the readings. I will focus on one assignment I made through the journal; namely, that of having the students early in the semester develop their own topics for a five page paper on the *Iliad*. I will look at this assignment not only because it drew upon the interactive nature of the journal but because it addressed some of the goals of critical thinking. First, having the students develop their own questions encour-

aged them to approach the text not as closed and static but as something that itself contains questions and is continually subject to questioning. This moved students from being passive recipients of knowledge to being more active players in the construction of knowledge (Perry 1981, 92). Second, as students provided their own questions, they learned how to orient themselves to the texts: to raise questions of their own, to narrow their questions from the myriad possibilities, to provide criteria for sorting out data, to wrestle with contradictions and ambiguities, and to work toward offering and committing to an interpretation (Perry 1981, 93–4, Belenky 1986, chapt. 6). We will see evidence of this development in excerpts from one student’s entries over the course of this assignment. I use these entries not to offer scientific proof but to provide some indication of the types of student responses one might expect.

For their first journal entry, which occurred after the students had read four books of the *Iliad*, I asked a deliberately open-ended question: “What do you see as a central question raised in the *Iliad*? What makes this question interesting to you?” In these first entries, there were some good hunches, as suggested in one student entry:

Entry 1 (concluding paragraph): The crux of these arguments [about honor] is not to judge the *Iliad*’s view of honor, but rather to show the chasm between its view and the modern view. It is extremely important to acknowledge this trench, for an understanding of honor in the *Iliad* is central to understanding the book, and the tools of modern definitions will aid little in solving the riddle as to what is honor in the *Iliad*.

What was perhaps most surprising about these first entries was how all the students raised some interesting questions at this early point in their reading. In retrospect, it may be precisely because we were so early in the reading that the students did not yet see the text as closed and were not yet able to abandon their questions for what they would guess to be my interpretation.

I used these early questions of the students as a wedge for their entrance into the reading. That is, in

subsequent journal entries I had them continue to “develop, find evidence, suggest hypotheses, and refine the questions [they] asked earlier in the journal.” Since the students had very little practice at doing this, it was incumbent that I provide examples and suggestions of how one narrows a question and sorts through evidence, and of some different ways in which one makes a question interesting to the reader.

We see in an excerpt from the third journal entry of this student an increasing attentiveness to the text and, importantly, a growing willingness to puzzle over parts that were not immediately explainable.

Entry 3: At this point, Zeus decides that the Achaians must suffer. The mind-set of Zeus is quite sudden, for it seems that his anger is driven by the Achaian-construction of a fort without dedication and a feast begun without honor to Zeus (7.454-81). For this, Zeus supplicates all of the immortals and himself wages war on the Achaian men, bringing honor to Hector. This scene strikes rather oddly, for it paradoxically flies against promise and destiny, and yet fulfills it at the same time. In aiding the Trojans, Zeus now seems to be fulfilling his promise to Thetis (8.370-1), yet his motives are one of anger, not fulfillment, and just the day before he allowed Hera her way (in fact, he gave his word to allow Hera to do as she pleased) and brought much destruction to the Trojans. . . . It intrigues me that the notions of honor and fate can co-exist so strongly in Greek society, where often the actions of men are those of the gods or the fates willing.

By the end of the second week, I had the students provide a “focused question for [their] paper on the *Iliad*” and asked them, as well, “to provide an explanation of why [they] think this question is interesting for understanding/interpreting the *Iliad*.” I was not expecting focused questions and, indeed, I did not get them. The students at this point gave every indication of being overwhelmed by the enormity of their task. It was no wonder, then, that many students stepped back, providing a tepid resolution to the work they had done so far. Wrote the student:

Entry 6: Both the mortals and the immortals refer to the effects of fate in life. Yet, what is this fate and to what extent is its power, especially in relation to the gods?

In my responses in their journals, mindful of not resorting to writing individually tailored questions for them, I often just referred them back to some interesting entries they wrote earlier.

The next week would prove to be critical for this assignment. In their journals the students were to “begin accumulating evidence/examples that deal with [their] paper topic and begin suggesting some tentative explanations of this evidence.” They were also to “continue to refine [their] thesis statements as [they] explore this evidence.” I continued to provide examples of how to do this, including using selections from other student journals. I also raised questions in their journals that might help them focus further and pointed to particular scenes that might relate to their topics. The next series of entries, which followed from these directions, showed significant progress as the student began to sort through the evidence and, importantly, began to reflect on how this evidence affects the process of formulating questions that are both interesting and manageable.

Entry 7: As I began searching for examples of the invocation of fate or destiny in the *Iliad*, I was able to categorize fate into four main sections: dreams, signs (mostly consisting of animals), obedience to or dictation by the gods, and invocations or recognition by humans. . . . The signs interest me, for they seem to be the most fickle and ambiguous representations of fate. [The student then cites a number of examples from the text].

Entry 9: [The student returns to specific occurrences of signs and develops thumbnail sketches of them].

Entry 10: As I began to think about signs in the *Iliad*, I wondered at how the signs fit into the over-all picture of the *Iliad*. This led me to the question, Why are the signs positioned in the manner they are, and how do they interrelate? I see all of the signs as being interconnected since most are sent by Zeus, and even those whose sender we know not invariably involve a bird (often with a snake), the symbol omnipresent in the signs. From this question, I see five subsec-

tions that need address: who sent the signs, why were they sent, how were they interpreted, what effect did they have, and why were the animals used in the signs chosen. [The student then began a preliminary sketch of answers to each of these questions, always citing from the text].

Entry 11: [More evidence collection. This gave me a chance to point to examples that may help to confirm or challenge their interpretations].

In the fourth and final week of the assignment (before the weekend in which most of them would complete their papers), I had the students “clearly define in two sentences” their argument and what they saw as the importance of this argument. The purpose was to make them focus before they began writing, recognizing that in the process of writing still more questions and, perhaps,

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*The purpose was to make them focus before they began writing, recognizing that in the process of writing still more questions and, perhaps, more focus, would come about.*

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more focus, would come about. These entries were exciting as almost all the students by this point had become thoroughly immersed in the text and were able to provide more sophisticated renderings of questions that interested them early on. Thus, we see in the student’s entry a combination of two earlier areas of interest: fate and honor. One need only compare this entry with Entry 6 to see how the student’s language became more precise, the question more focused, and a statement of why this question was interesting clearly articulated.

Entry 12: The signs in the *Iliad* are windows to ‘interactive fate,’ where human will and divinity combine to narrow and follow the path to destiny’s conclusion. This is important, for it helps to reconcile the notion of divine intervention and destiny with the

Greek individual still taking or accepting responsibility for the act of destiny.

There was not sufficient time (nor teacher energy) for students to develop all their own questions for their papers. In fact, I would recommend that the specific assignment of developing paper questions be used for classes under 20 students. A seminar setting would be ideal. But the great virtue of an interactive journal is that it allows one to get at many of these same issues of critical thinking through smaller assignments that engage the students in questioning and analyzing the texts. As the students in this class were not only responsible for, but also had practice in formulating interpretations each time they encountered a text, they became more active participants in their acquisition of knowledge. In the final journal entry, the students were asked to reflect back over what had grown for many to over fifty pages of entries. The student whose entries I have excerpted above wrote, “As I started to think about what to write, I realized that I don’t need to go back through my journals to reflect. The reason for this is that I have been able to trace the effect of the development of my journals in relation to this class as well as others, and that I am able to recall much of what I wrote. . . . Too often the information learned in class ends with that class. I feel that there has been real growth. It is almost tangible, in that I can easily see where I developed.” Indeed, it was a development (and no small amount of work for both the student and the teacher) that was engendered by a sense of mutual commitment as we came to see ourselves as participants in each other’s discoveries.

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## Notes

1. My thanks to Carol Scheffner-Hammer and Stan Michalak for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
2. The classic statement of this is Dewey 1963.

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## About the Author

**Dean Hammer** is assistant professor, department of government, Franklin and Marshall College. He has published articles on political theory in *Polity*, *Classical World*, *Phoenix*, *Philosophy Today*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Religion and American Culture*, and *Journal of Popular Culture*. His current work is on Homeric politics.

# Teaching American Government: An Alternative To Ogg and Ray

Daniel G. Stroup and William Garriott, *Centre College*

If textbooks provide a reliable indication, the introductory American government course follows much the same format almost everywhere, and has changed very little since Ogg and Ray's classic *Introduction to American Government* was published in 1922.<sup>1</sup> The order in which topics are considered may vary slightly from text to text, as do emphases and theoretical approaches, but American government textbooks are more alike than they are different. These texts (and, we believe, most of the courses in which they are used) focus on institutions and processes, studied sequentially, often in great detail.

Until 1991, "American Politics and Institutions," a course at Centre College, was the very model of a traditional format. But as we gathered information from our students for a departmental self-study, we confirmed what we had already strongly suspected: American Politics and Institutions was not, to put it gently, a peak experience in their undergraduate education. We instructors sympathized, because we were not very fond of the course either. As we began to think about alternative ways to introduce our students to American government,

we concluded that, whatever its merits (and we admit that there are many), the traditional approach has some serious deficiencies.

## What's Wrong?

We certainly are not the first to criticize the traditional American government course, and we agree with many of the criticisms. With no claim of originality, therefore, here is our own bill of particulars.

1. *The traditional approach presents a piecemeal view of American politics.* ("Do we have to know anything about the president for the midterm?"—*student inquiry*) The one-institution-at-a-time approach compartmentalizes the political process. Students are often left with a miscellany of disjointed facts rather than an overall understanding of how those institutions interact to produce public policy. Some textbooks try to overcome this problem by using a central theme or approach, but the organization of the course around slices of the political system makes this difficult to accomplish. Others make no attempt at change. After reviewing several high school civics and college American government texts, a panel

of political scientists concluded that, "Many of the books are largely disembodied expositions of principles and facts. . . . If these books are representative of how government is being taught, then government is a dead subject." (Carroll, *et al.* 1987, iv)

2. *The traditional approach presents an incomplete view of American politics.* ("A thousand circumstances . . . facilitate the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States."—*Alexis de Tocqueville*) The traditional approach fails to convey adequately the context within which American politics takes place. Minimal attention is given to the economic, social, demographic, intellectual, and technological realities that shape the issues these institutions are required to resolve. The role of political ideas is rarely emphasized (except in the broadest sense—American "democratic values," for example) and is too often almost completely ignored.

3. *The traditional approach presents a static, snapshot view of American politics.* ("[Departments] should . . . encourage instructors to treat adequately the historical dimensions and aspects of topics covered in their courses."—*Wahlke 1991, 53. Emphasis in the original.*) Any historical context provided in the traditional