

THE BRIEFING BOOK CONCEPT

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Teaching at an open admissions public university affords a variety of frustrations and opportunities. In my setting, for example, we offer a traditional major in neither history nor political science; however, we do provide an array of upper-division courses in both areas. Our students are for the most part career-oriented (read: "relevance seekers"), hence they gravitate more towards training rather than education in the classic liberal arts tradition. Put differently, our students tend to seek course information/data that are specific, useful, and current.

The people who populate our classes are a clear reflection of the demography of the Houston community, i.e., 41% white, 28% black, 17% Hispanic, 12% oriental, and 6% international. Moreover, they arrive in our upper-division courses with a panoply of backgrounds and skill-levels that promotes "the dilemma." How do you motivate those students who are there only to get their "ticket punched" so that they can move on to hurdle the next "barrier" that academe quaintly calls the curriculum? How, indeed, does one teach the requisite reading, writing, and research skills necessary for academic integrity (extant from whatever benefit students may derive), yet provide assignments that stimulate, intrigue, and motivate? How can one overcome the classic "I dare you to teach me anything or make me work" syndrome? I hasten to add that this phenomenon is not unique (or all-pervasive) to my institution. From discussions with my colleagues at various sized institutions--both public and private--they, too, have observed this mind-set of their charges.

I am hesitant to admit that I have consequently become somewhat of an academic con artist in an attempt to overcome this hurdle. Traditional research and writing assignments such as the term paper and/or book review(s) did not seem to work in my current environment. The quality of effort and results were abysmally absent. Many students were mindlessly and minimally attempting to meet course requirements after repeated admonitions that such behavior would be rewarded appropriately. Therefore, to surpass this quagmire, the concept of the Briefing Book was born.

The germinal seed of the Briefing Book arose during a conversation I had with an educational representative of the *Christian Science Monitor*. He suggested various ways in which the *Monitor* could be used in the classroom aside from the traditional method I previously employed (i.e., quizzing the students on current events). As we talked, I began to broaden his suggestion that has evolved into its present form.

BRIEFING BOOK ASSIGNMENT

Assume that you are the State Department Desk Officer for country X. You monitor the daily activities of not only your nation, but the immediate region. Your task includes compiling data from newspaper articles, scholarly articles, economic data bases, maps, etc. on certain salient political variables relevant to your nation. Such variables might include, but are not limited to, the following: regime type, stability index, party system, elite recruitment, interest groups,

decision-making structures, political culture, imminent domestic and foreign policy issues, *inter alia*.

A newly appointed ambassador to your country will be stopping by your office in two months (assuming his nomination is not tagged with a "hold" by Senator Helms). You will brief him orally and then give him a copy of your report. Your "gift" to the new ambassador will be a compendium of your research. Your categorical summary will appear either in the front of the book, or at the beginning of each section. Your appendix is composed of relevant newspaper clippings, scholarly articles, maps, etc. You will include an annotated bibliography of "must reads" on your country. Obviously, you will not be able to include everything worthwhile, and it is realized that any book is time-bound. Attempt, however, to make its shelf-life as long as possible--at least until the ambassador reaches his new destination! A word of advice: Use the professor as a resource.

Below, are some journals and newspapers you may wish to consult:

Foreign Policy

Foreign Affairs

Orbis

World Politics

The American Political Science Review

The American Historical Review

The Christian Science Monitor

The New York Times

The Washington Post

The Times of London

The Economist

There are a host of journals that are country/issue specific as well.

These aforementioned sources are NOT the only ones. Search widely.

Be bounded only by your imagination and creativity. GOOD LUCK AND HAVE FUN!

PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS

Students (with prior approval) have the opportunity to choose the state they wish to explore. This choice, obviously, can motivate students to explore other cultures. Most students, as one would predict, choose a nation from the first world, usually Western Europe. In my comparative western European course, I restrict students to those nations, but not necessarily to those that we study. In the U.S. foreign policy and international relations courses, students have free range in which to choose. Occasionally, a student will choose a third world nation. Several weeks into the assignment, the student will inevitably drag into my office and state: "Can I change my country? I can't find any information on Belize!" Normally, I do not allow such changes. This information deficit, nonetheless, is instructive to the student. It shows the dearth of information available on such nations in the U.S. "elite" daily press. This condition also requires that the student dig even deeper--probably into academic journals, foreign magazines, and other materials.

Recent briefing books that I have received have had anywhere from 15-20

sections, dependig upon the country. Many students are now summarizing each section with a 3-5 page introduction! When I first assigned this project, I requested that all sections be summarized at the beginning of the book. That had a tendency to diminish the quantity of the writing.

Research quality often varies. Students do indeed use the *Monitor*, *The New York Times*, etc. What I need to shore up is their research into academic journals. My better students are laboring in this vineyard, but the "C" students and below are not. For many students, the *American Political Science Review* or the *American Historical Review* are too esoteric and exotic. Others do not even know that such journals exist. My advice (as distasteful as it may be): Take them by the hand to the library for one period. Most reference librarians will be helpful in providing a resource briefing.

As an additional requirement, I ask that the students append an annotated bibliography on their country/region. I suggest to them that this bibliography be viewed as a list of "must reads" for anyone arriving in his new home. Again, some students prefer to disaggregate their list and place it at the end of each section. I do not require that the student read every book on the list, but they should be familiar with the seminal country literature.

Researching a nation/region also requires some geographical awareness. I request a political map; some students even go further by providing other maps as well. (One student even provided maps to Rome's finer bistros.)

Our Houston environment allows some students to consult the local consulates. An abundance of data are available from such sources. Students even receive some first-hand experience in conducting interviews with consulate personnel. Cassettes have been included in some books.

Should you decide to adopt this technique, be prepared to have some internal grief over grading. Discerning a well researched, well written book is not the problem. Quality shines. But what of the book on Belize? There may indeed not be a wealth of information available--especially in the daily press. Evaluating the degree of research then becomes a problem compared to information on first world nations.

I recommend a grading sheet for each student's book. The sheet I use contains the following weighted variables:

1. Quality of Research 30%
2. Writing Style, Content, Quality 30%
3. Organization/Originality 30%
4. Bibliography/Appearance 10%
5. Comments

The "Briefing Book" has several additional benefits. First, it cannot be readily purchased like term papers. Relatedly, it cannot be recycled because of its short shelf-life. Moreover, I randomly collect and review the books during the semester,

spot checking for burgeoning research gaps. This spot check mandates that students work (almost) daily on the project, thus promoting the values of diligence and systematic effort--two attributes roundly void in many undergraduates.

STUDENTS' REACTIONS

Overall, my students' reactions to the project are positive. In the words of one budding scholar:

The development of a good briefing [book] requires both extensive research and creativity. The ability to take raw material and to bind it together in a coherent form is the challenge before us. Due to the time involved . . . in combination with the other requirements of the course, productive use of one's time is of the essence.

In addition, the Briefing Book helps to: 1)increase one's familiarity with various periodicals such as *The Statesmen's Yearbook* and *The Europa Handbook*; 2)it tends to broaden one's perspective of how other countries operate in comparison to our own; 3)it increases organizational skills; 4)increases one's ability to manage time more effectively; and, 5)has for me renewed enthusiasm to study harder and to learn more.

This same student (and others like him) have told me that the skills gleaned from this project help to prepare them for the job market. "The ability to read, comprehend, and to put one's thoughts down on paper is vitally important to an up and coming corporate executive. A student's ability to undertake a project of this magnitude serves as both a method of socialization and preparation for future job-related functions."

Other positive comments include these: ". . . an excellent way to combat cultural illiteracy," and "[it] shows how interdependent the world really is," and "a term paper usually covers only one subject and forces the student to compare nothing unless it is part of the assignment."

Lest you think that all comments were of this ilk, let me reassure you that they were not. All students were likely to comment on the amount of time involved. "The student must read on a daily basis, or at least a weekly basis, in order for the project to be completed," stated one. It "lasted too long," lamented another student. "Why not use it as a group project and have section due dates, e.g., History, week one; Government, week two; and Economy, week three, etc."

While these constructive criticisms do indeed have merit, the overriding statement of my students regarding this opus was, to paraphrase, "Damn it. When are you going to quit thinking that your class is the only one I'm taking?"

VARIATIONS ON THE THEME

I have several students who, for some unknown reason, take me for several upper-division courses. Making them do another country briefing book seems

counterproductive. Therefore, in my Foreign Policy and International Relations classes, I assign an Issue-Area Book to these students. I had three such projects this past semester: Human Rights in Eastern Europe, Pan-Americanism, and SDI. This variation met with a great deal of success.

For historians, consider this permutation. In a diplomatic history course, one could have the students pick Germany in 1932, and take a more historical approach. The categories could largely remain the same as now, but from the time frame of say 1870-1932. This would mean that the students would have to live in this era and use historical documentation. Everything since 1932 would not exist to them. This would force your students to live during the collapse of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler.

In the four semesters in which I have tried this technique, students have researched the Soviet Union, the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, Sweden, the People's Republic of China, Switzerland, France, Nigeria, Spain, and Mexico, among others. Almost without exception, students turn their books into me with the comment, "this was so !@#* much work, but I had so much fun doing it." After smiling and nodding approvingly, I think to myself, "a good con man never gives up."