

# Interactive Journals to Evaluate Student Learning in Large (Humanities) Classes

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**Department:** History

**Course Title:** HIST-UA 12 Modern Europe

**Number of Students:** 40

## Project Description

The humanities' natural setting is the seminar of about 12 students. Through collaborative discussion of common readings, students learn from one another as they work through unfamiliar texts and concepts. The instructor observes their learning in real time, probing subjects of uncertainty while noting the progress of each student.

Yet an equally common humanities format consists of large lecture courses. These broad surveys do not cater to majors, instead attracting students from all years and schools. Their format mitigates against the intimate discussions that characterize a seminar, making it difficult to know whether any given student has understood that day's material.

The familiar response to this problem integrates moments of discussion into the lecture. The problem, as every lecturer knows, is that these "discussions" tend to involve the same half-dozen or so students. We want to hear from the class, but in practice we are failing to hear from - much less evaluate the learning of - the vast majority of our students.

***How can we better evaluate the learning of all students in large lecture classes?***

## Helpful Documentation

["Using Writing as a Learning Tool"](#) (Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo)

["Why Writing by Hand Is Better for Memory and Learning"](#) (*Scientific American*)

["Frequent Feedback"](#) (Center for Teaching and Learning, University of Colorado)

## Process (Steps/Screenshots, etc)

During the pandemic, Jenny Mann (NYU English) interacted with her seminars via Google Docs. Scaling up Mann's practice, in hopes of replicating her success, the next time I taught a lecture course I distributed journals to all 40 students. We passed these journals back and forth throughout the term.

## 2024 Teaching Innovation Award Projects

Through frequent, often playful questions – “Would you have sided with King or Parliament?”; “Why do you think Queen Elizabeth refused to marry?” – I was now interacting not with 5 or 6 students, but all of them: encouraging their reading, engaging with their questions, and, crucially, using their names.

The results were humbling. I learned that, after seventeen years of teaching, my most polished lectures left a majority of the students baffled. Too often they weren’t make connections with the reading, and most had not developed the habit of supporting claims with textual evidence.

As a result of this innovation, my lectures are now more straightforward, my framing of the readings more deliberate, and I teach – rather than expect – the skill of supporting claims with reference to the texts.

### Advice for Colleagues/Notes

(1) In response to the challenges posed by AI, I distribute paper journals to all students on the first day of class. They respond to each day’s prompt while sitting in the classroom.

(2) Regarding workload, my Course Assistant and I each take 20 journals, which require no more than an hour to engage with - not grade! - each week.