

# Assessing students' use of primary sources: A case study from the emerging discipline of Journalism Studies in New Zealand

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## Abstract

*Journalism Studies, and the discipline's use of primary sources as part of an assessment tool known as the "document-based question", are recent innovations in New Zealand Communication pedagogy. This paper considers the use of document-based questions in one of Massey University's Journalism Studies courses, History of Journalism, in light of the use of such questions in the United States' advanced placement examination system.*

*As in the United States, document-based questions are used in the Massey University course because the academics who designed the course believed the assessment tool approximates the activities of professional historians. Again as in the United States, although some students have produced excellent work answering document-based questions, others have found the task challenging. Students struggle to think critically, preferring to focus on narrative description, and avoid close reading of the documents. Some students fail to follow the questions' instructions or to carefully proof their work. Several modifications have been made to the course to address these issues, with some success. It is likely more tutorial work—particularly early in the course—would help students answer the document-based questions more successfully.*

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## Introduction

Until relatively recently, journalism education in New Zealand was focused on teaching industry competencies, equipping students with the skills they needed to enter the journalism workforce (Thomas, 2008). That changed in 2006 when Massey University became the first (and, to date, only) tertiary educational institution to offer tertiary students courses in Journalism Studies. Massey University students can include Journalism Studies in their Bachelor of Communication degree (including majoring in Journalism Studies) and can include Journalism Studies courses in other undergraduate degrees. The Journalism Studies courses have proven remarkably popular with students: the number of Massey University students studying at least one Journalism Studies course in the Bachelor of Communication rose from 16 in 2006 to 222 in 2009 (Hannis, 2009).

Journalism Studies differs from Journalism in that, while Journalism Studies may include some industry-competency-based material, the discipline requires students spend a significant proportion of their time reflecting critically on journalism and journalistic practice (see, for instance, Calcutt & Hammond, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2008). One course wholly concerned with critical reflection is History of Journalism, a third-year course that considers the development of print journalism from the 1600s to today. In 2010, there were 42 students enrolled in the course. The author is aware of no other similar courses taught elsewhere in New Zealand.

The assessment for the course comprises three essays, each of which requires students to critically evaluate primary historical journalism texts, with their views informed by their understanding of the historical context of the journalism. For journalism education in New Zealand this is a radical departure from the past, but United States history teachers would instantly recognise this as the Document-Based Question (DBQ)—a long-established form of assessment in the United States for university-level study in history.

This paper considers, in the light of the experience of using the DBQ in the United States, the use of the DBQ in Massey University's History of Journalism course. In doing so, this paper evaluates a shifting of the boundaries as to what has been traditionally seen as the scope of journalism education in New Zealand. The comparison with the United States was made because, with its long tradition of using DBQs, there is a relatively significant amount of research on the use of DBQs in that country, which the current author was able to draw upon to analyse the New Zealand experience.

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, 2010a).

In 2010, advanced placement examinations were offered in 33 disciplines, including English, calculus, statistics, foreign languages, and three history courses—European History, United States History and World History (The College Board, 2010a). That year 3,134,686 students did at least one advanced placement examination. The most popular examination was United States History, taken by 384,566 students (or 12.3 percent of all students who took an examination). The second most popular was English language and composition, with 369,163 students. World History was also in the top ten subjects, attracting 166,023 students. European History attracted 100,660 students, placing it thirteenth (Data derived from The College Board, 2010b).

The three advanced placement history examinations all include a DBQ, asking students to argue a case, drawing on accompanying documents. It is clear, then, that DBQs are seen as an important element in testing student competence in history. 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). In this way, students learn to approach history in the same way professional historians do, by focusing on finding and analysing primary sources. As one commentator has observed, the use of DBQs helps students realise history is not a single, uncontested story of what has occurred—the type of story often found in textbooks—but rather an evidence-based interpretative process, involving “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 letters, speeches, diaries, newspaper accounts, plus some visual documents, such as cartoons, maps, or works of art. For instance, in 2010 the DBQ for the United States History examination was:

In what ways did ideas and values held by Puritans influence the political, economic, and social development of the New England colonies from 1630 through the 1660s? (The College Board, 2010c, 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 10 documents included short extracts from settlers’ accounts of colonisation and violent confrontations with the indigenous American people, and a map of a typical colonial village. All of the material was rendered into modern English (The College Board, 2010c).

The structures of the DBQs for the other two history examinations were broadly similar, but there were some differences. The 2010 World History DBQ specifically asked students to identify another type of document that could be included in the analysis (The College Board, 2010d). The 2010 European History DBQ listed six core elements the student must include in their essay (including that they must present an acceptable thesis that does not simply restate the essay question, support the thesis with evidence from the documents, and take into account both the

sources of the documents and the authors' points of view). The European History DBQ also included information on the historical context of the documents (The College Board, 2010e). For both these DBQs, all documents originally in a foreign language were translated into English.

History teachers in the United States have utilised several strategies to help their students do well in the DBQs (Pompolio, 2010; Stovel, 2000; Young & Leinhardt, 1998). The nature and breadth of these strategies suggest 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, 2011). 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). A history teacher herself, Pompolio (2010) asked her students to read the documents before class (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) is not the sole source of knowledge and that students can learn from each other.

A repeated theme in the literature, however, centres on that aspect of answering the DBQs that students find most demanding: thinking critically. Rothschild (2000) notes this, pointing out that when first introduced, the United States History DBQ required students to read an average of 18 documents in the examination. With little time to read so many documents and then write an essay, many students simply took the documents at face value. In response, in the early 1980s the DBQ was reduced to eight or nine documents. Despite these changes, however, Rothschild says many students continue to take the documents at face value. This suggests students' lack of critical thinking skills are caused by something deeper than merely a lack of time. Monte-Sano (2008) agrees. To help students think critically, Monte-Sano recommends frequent DBQ exercises in class, with the teacher giving the students frequent feedback on their interpretation of the documents.

Other tools have been used as ways to help students address the DBQs methodically and deeply. For instance, mnemonics have been devised to help students remember the issues to consider in 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?) (Pompolio, 2010); another is SOAPS—Subject, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, and Speaker (Rothschild, 2000).

More broadly, the techniques of literary analysis have been suggested as a helpful way to discuss historical primary documents. Connors (2010) points to the importance of close reading—that is, reading a text in detail—to generate insights about it. Students can consider, for instance, how authors have used literary devices (metaphor, alliteration, personification, vocabulary, etc.) or structured the text (how the text has been assembled, how one part of the document echoes another, etc.) to convey their meaning. Students can also consider the author’s stated intentions (if any), and any insights from the application of, say, psychological, feminist, Marxist or post-colonial theory.

Although acknowledging the usefulness of the DBQ, not all researchers are satisfied with the DBQs as currently framed in the advanced placement examinations. Grant, Gradwell and Cimbricz (2004) acknowledge the DBQ potentially can offer a useful simulation of historical inquiry—rather than a simple rote learning of facts and events, students must sift through evidence to construct an argument drawing on the evidence and their own knowledge of history. But Grant et al. said actual DBQs found in advanced placement examinations may not fulfil this potential. For instance, DBQ documents are often heavily edited down, thereby reflecting the editor’s interpretation of the original writer’s main points, when “reliance on another’s interpretation of a document strikes most historians simply as bad practice” (Grant et al., 2004, p. 328). The researchers also argue that the documents often solely reflect Western perspectives.

## **Research method**

To understand the experience of using DBQs in Massey University’s History of Journalism course, this paper reports the thoughts and recollections of the two academics who designed the course, the three academics who have taught the course, and comments from the course’s students (as given in student feedback forms). The research survey period is 2006-2010, covering the period to date the course has been taught.

The History of Journalism course has been taught on two of the university’s campuses—Wellington (2006 to present) and Manawatu (2009, after which resource constraints precluded its continuation)—and via distance learning (2006 to present). One of the academics who designed the course subsequently taught it on campus in Wellington for the entire survey period, and taught it via distance learning until 2010, when another academic taught that version of the course. The second academic who designed the course taught it on the Manawatu campus, and has since left the university. The experiences of the on-campus and

distance-learning versions of the course have been very similar, with any significant differences mentioned below.

In light of the discussion in the preceding section on the use of DBQs in the United States advanced placement history examinations, three 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 were the DBQs?
- What was the rationale for using the DBQs?
- What was the experience of using the DBQs and were changes made to the course in light of this?

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 assignments. Each assignment is a DBQ, one per module. The wording of the DBQs themselves has not materially changed over the time the course has existed. 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.

In 2010, 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? Do print journalists still merge fact and fiction today? (Massey University, 2010, p. 8)

The second DBQ (covering the years 1800-1900) read:

Select four to five readings from Module Two and use them to write an essay critically assessing the changing role of the print journalist from government propagandist to independent commentator. Why were 19<sup>th</sup>-century journalists able to criticise social ills and governments? How truly independent were those journalists? What influence did

the changing role of the journalist have on print journalism through to the present day?  
(Massey University, 2010, p. 8)

The third DBQ (covering the period 1900 to the present) read:

Select four to five readings from Module Three and use them to write an essay critically assessing the impact of radio, television and the Internet on print journalism. How did print journalists respond to the competitive pressures of these new media? How has new technology influenced print journalism? What future do you see for print journalism? (Massey University, 2010, p. 8)

Each DBQ thus requires the students to engage closely with a selection of historical journalism readings. But each DBQ requires the student to think about the issue raised in the DBQ in the modern journalism context too. This suggests the student would be wise to seek out relevant modern journalism texts too, to help them answer that part of the question.

Following the DBQs in the course handbook is the marking schedule, which notes that each essay must be a piece of critical, reflective, evidence-based work (50 percent of the grade); be well-structured, including that the essay's argument is contained in the introduction (30 percent); include evidence that the student has read the readings (10 percent); and be well-presented (10 percent). Following this, there is a list of additional instructions to the students. These include further presentation requirements (word counts, referencing, etc.), and a statement 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, 2010, p. 10)

For each DBQ, a selection of 11 to 18 documents is provided, known as the readings. All these documents are original pieces of journalism. For instance, for the second DBQ the documents included news reports from the Yellow Journalism of Hearst and Pulitzer, an 1805 news report from *The Times*, William Russell's reportage from the Crimean War, and news reports from the early days of New Zealand's European colonisation. All the material is sourced and unabridged. While some of the news reports are short (less than a page), some of the lengthier pieces, such as Russell's reportage, run to 20 pages or more. As much as possible, all the readings are reproduced as they originally appeared. This means that, for instance, in module one many of the documents are in archaic-looking, albeit modern, English (featuring the long s, v for u, and some older spellings, such as "newes").

## 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.

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. 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."

Although some of the readings were lengthy, the designers felt it was preferable to leave the material unabridged rather than, by editing it down, impose their views as to what were the most important passages in the texts. 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. The relatively high number of documents for each DBQ gave the students a significant amount of raw material from which to work, with 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, problem clinics (in which students could ask questions about the material), and group presentations. These presentations were designed to give the students specific assistance in answering the DBQs. For each module, the Wellington on-campus classes were required to form into three groups, with each group giving a 10- to 15-minute 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, 2010, p. 6)

After each presentation, there was a classroom discussion on the issues raised, and the lecturer gave feedback on the presentations. Due to its small class size, the Manawatu on-campus class did the presentations simply as class discussions. The distance-learning version of the course 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 and model answers at the back).

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

The course's handbook included guidance on writing scholarly essays—including, for instance, ensuring the introduction includes the essay's thesis, advice on crafting and structuring the essay, and detailing the referencing requirements. This was generic Massey University material, found in many of the university's course handbooks. After each assignment, the students were given written feedback and the assignments were discussed in class. The students were also given some general feedback in class on their group presentations.

From the beginning, some of the students have 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 many other students' essays simply repeated the lecture and textbook material, with only a cursory mention of the readings, which often favoured the narrative history readings at that. In many cases, the introductions of essays did not set out the students' central argument. Indeed, it was often unclear what a student's argument in their essay was, with the essay 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 the lengthier documents, where even classroom discussion of such readings, to quote one lecturer, "fell flat." 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 at best.

Students sometimes failed to follow the basic assignment instructions, such as including modern examples of journalism or, in the case of the third DBQ, discussing the future of journalism.

There were also frequent elementary errors, such as spelling and grammatical mistakes, misquoted readings and poor sourcing. Likewise, 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.

Several major changes were made to the course in response. First, the textbook and narrative history readings were removed from the course. This was to prevent the students simply repeating material from those sources in their essays. Second, the problem clinics were abandoned. In their place, considerable time is now spent on undertaking DBQ exercises in class (these are rendered as additional self-check exercises in the distance-learning course). These DBQs use additional readings, not included in the assessment DBQs, but look much more explicitly at the same issues covered in the assessment DBQs, 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. Third, the generic Massey University guidance on essay writing and referencing has been amended or supplemented by specific advice regarding 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 student essays now contain far less historical narrative material, and what historical contextual material is contained in the essays is far more often derived from the students' own research, including books and (non-Wikipedia) internet sources. The DBQ exercises are also a generally positive experience, with the students clearly interested in the material and the discussions sometimes generating deep insights. In one case, a lecturer was running a tutorial looking at piece of 16<sup>th</sup>-century journalism reporting on a man who had transformed a boat into a wagon 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. One of the students suggested a much stronger example than any the lecturer had in mind—the wisely reported case of two man who transformed a van into a boat and sailed it from Waikawa across Cook Strait to Wellington—an example the lecturer incorporated into later versions of this exercise. The group presentation work has also been retained, as it now forms a good complement to the DBQ exercises.

But these changes have not been an unqualified success. Students continue to rarely present their arguments explicitly in their essays. Students too often rely on internet sources for secondary material—it may not be Wikipedia but, again, the students appear reluctant to look far when it comes to finding additional material. There is a similar reluctance among some students to meet the presentation requirements, with some essays continuing to be poorly proofed. Of greatest concern, 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 often take the primary documents at face value. One exercise looks at a piece by Mark Twain, in which the 19<sup>th</sup>-century American journalist uses irony to mock American tourists' ethnocentrism. Frequently, the students fail to see the irony in the piece, concluding that Twain was simply a racist. In another exercise the students struggle to see how Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate books were written in a cinematic fashion, despite the fact the journalists consciously did this to expedite transforming the books into films. The exercises have also revealed that the students are not accustomed to close reading—the lecturer must usually press the students to cite specific evidence from the texts to support claims they make in class.

In terms of student feedback on the course, the students find the course interesting and well organised. The students also believe the assessment procedures for the course are appropriate, an endorsement of the use of DBQs. One student said the course “made you think” and another noted it was a third-year course and, as such, “I could really notice the step up in research for assignments.”

In terms of the difficulties they had with the course, the students said they wanted more exercises and feedback on assignments. It seems the students were challenged by the analytical demands of the DBQs. One student commented, “The assignment questions were difficult to understand sometimes.” Another said, “Sometimes felt that the conclusions were a bit difficult to find.” A third criticised the “lack of direction with assignments”. As discussed above, the lecturers are striving to help students by increasingly running mock DBQ exercises in class.

The other main difficulty the students 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, “Sometimes some historical knowledge is assumed.” Another commented, “Saying, ‘Research around the topic’ isn't always helpful.”

The students felt their ability to critically assess readings improved as the course proceeded, with their third essay being an improvement on their earlier ones. As one student commented, “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 contemporary journalism and, also, by then the students have completed the first two DBQs and the group presentations.

## **Conclusions**

Journalism Studies and the use of DBQs in the discipline are two recent innovations in Communication pedagogy in New Zealand. This paper has considered the experience of using DBQs in Massey University's History of Journalism course, in light of the use of DBQs in the United States' advancement placement examination system.

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. Rather than relying on textbooks—which can give students the impression that history is a single, uncontested story—DBQs require students to argue a case, based on their analysis of primary historical documents and informed by their knowledge of the documents’ historical context.

Unlike United States practice, the Massey University DBQs are unabridged. This avoids the situation of the course’s designers imposing their views on the readings. Of course, the designers of the Massey University course were better placed to do this than were the designers of the advanced placement examinations in the United States, as the Massey University DBQs are assignments, not examination questions—Massey University students have far more time to read and analyse a wide selection of documents and write their essays. However, the Massey University designers still do impose their views on the readings in that it is they who select the historical readings, although this is mitigated by the fact the students select whichever modern readings they wish to analyse.

As in the United States, while some students have produced excellent work answering DBQs, many others have found the task challenging. Students often avoided close reading of the journalism documents, preferring to focus on narrative history. 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 DBQ exercises.

Such changes have met with only partial success, suggesting more must be done. It is likely more tutorial work would help the students think critically, particularly early in the course when the approach is new to many of the students and the material unfamiliar. This could include asking the students to encapsulate their arguments in an introductory paragraph, a strategy favoured by some teachers in the United States (Stovel, 2000). It could also be beneficial to give the students the documents some days prior to each exercise, so they have longer to closely read and reflect on the material, and perhaps to find some additional background information and/or modern primary documents for the discussion (Pompolio, 2010). Mnemonics may be helpful too, but not if this simply results in formulaic essay-writing. There may also be an argument for work-shopping basic presentation and proofing skills.

Such additional practice in answering DBQs is likely to pay dividends, for both students and lecturers. The students already enjoy the course, but would likely enjoy it more if they feel more confident answering the DBQs. Likewise, the lecturers would find it more rewarding to read better essays and lead more insightful class discussions.

More broadly, as journalism history is not yet widely taught in New Zealand, it is likely the experience of using DBQs on journalism history courses will prove valuable to other institutions

should they seek to offer courses in this clearly important aspect of Journalism Studies. Certainly, a number of the students on the distance-learning version of the course are working journalists, who generally are highly motivated to learn about the history of their profession, including engaging directly with their predecessors' reportage.

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