Title: Implementing Professional Development Exercises to Enhance Engagement and Learning

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Summary: This portfolio examines a teaching project that enhanced student engagement by developing and aligning course assignments with course goals and department goals, including reflective professional development exercises, to help students connect with course goals and master the material.

Background

Public Service Leadership (PUAD 641) is an elective graduate/undergraduate course that focuses on leadership. Students examine the concept of leadership through various lenses (including individual, environmental, and follower perspectives) and in multiple contexts (public, nonprofit, and private organizational settings). Course goals center on:

1. helping students conceptualize leadership broadly (via scholarly treatments and real-world examples), and
2. applying that understanding to personal leadership development.

These goals are built into the course through a variety of resources and assignments, including weekly “professional development” exercises.

These exercises were integrated into the course plan following a separate teaching experience in which weekly attendance/participation constituted 20% of the grade, but where there were problems with chronic absenteeism. As a result of reflecting on this phenomenon, the attendance/participation grading component was replaced with the broader category of "professional development." This change reflects the discipline's focus on professionalism and also captures additional components of professional behavior beyond attending class, including preparation and reflection.

Ten professional development exercises were developed using course materials (including quizzes and questions from textbooks). The exercises were linked to other course activities, including in-class discussions and written assignments. Special attention was given to scaffolding assignments to ensure that course components were aligned and that students were prepared for subsequent tasks. Furthermore, it was expected that scaffolding would contribute to other improved outcomes, including engagement with the material.

The concept of scaffolding is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) work that defined the zone of proximal development, which identifies what the learner can do without guidance, and what the learner can accomplish with assistance. In the world of instructional design, this concept is used to help an instructor determine the appropriate supports that will be necessary to help students meet course goals. Ambrose et al. (2010) note that one way to
apply scaffolding is to “ask students to first practice discrete phases of the task and, later, ask students to practice integrating them” (p. 147). This portfolio considers such a scaffolding application.

For PUAD 641, the scaffolded activities included in-class professional development exercises, individual reflective blog entries, and a final leadership paper. This portfolio focuses on the connection between the professional development exercises and the quality of the final leadership paper. Furthermore, this portfolio presents reflections on the experience and identifies steps moving forward.
Implementation

Professional development exercise: Ten professional development exercises were integrated into the class in order to achieve three key goals:

1. capture attendance/participation,
2. provide opportunities for students to apply course readings to their own leadership development, and
3. scaffold the skills required for the successful completion of the final paper.

These exercises took place at the start of class, and students could prepare in advance.

The professional development exercises included an element of reflective writing that was expected to facilitate subsequent exercises. Suskie (2009) notes that reflection helps students learn by encouraging metacognition and synthesis: “Metacognition is learning how to learn and how to manage that learning by reflecting on how you learn best, thereby preparing for a lifetime of learning. Synthesis is the ability to put together what you have learned and see the big picture” (p. 185). While much reflection occurs at the end of most courses, the professional development exercises provided for systematic, strategic, and ongoing reflection.

Students were awarded up to ten points if they successfully completed the assignment during the time given, and half credit if they were present to sign in but did not complete the assignment. While there is some debate regarding whether reflective activities should be graded or should instead simply fill a role as “low stakes writing” (Svinicki and McKeachie 2010), the exercises were designed to reward students for their attendance, participation, preparation, and reflection. It was expected that the professional development exercises would serve to motivate student performance.

Ambrose et. al. (2010) present a number of strategies that can help motivate students and support overall learning. These strategies include connecting material to student interests. It is expected that students are interested in the ways in which the material applies to them personally, which is captured in self-assessment quizzes and reflection questions. Furthermore, the authors note that opportunities that give students a chance to be successful early in the course can build student confidence and sense of efficacy (p. 86). Together, this information suggests that students who successfully complete the professional development exercises (and connected these reflections with the paper) will have higher quality final products. In this case, quality includes mastery of key concepts, application to real-world leadership challenges, and personal reflection.

Overall, I expected the scaffolded approach to capture professional development and enhance engagement in new ways. First, it would help make attendance (and the other associated components) more meaningful to students as these represent the broader norms associated with professional development. Second, this approach would help maximize class time by incentivizing preparation. And third, it would also encourage the
personal reflection necessary to complete other associated class assignments, namely the final paper.

**Final Paper:** This was an essay assignment that evaluated students’ mastery of the course core concepts, as well as their personal growth as an emerging leader. The paper included three stages: 1) Call to Action: identification of a leadership challenge of interest; 2. Concept Application: leadership themes/concepts from the class that apply to the selected leadership challenge; 3. Plan of Action: integration of personal leadership strengths and ways to address the leadership challenge. Each stage included a reflective component and a formal academic writing component. The finished product included three reflective (blog) entries and a completed paper.

The first stage of the paper asked students to identify one to three public service leadership challenges in a reflective blog entry. A variety of challenges were discussed in class, and students could include these in their choices. The goal was to reflect on personal experiences or career goals to identify notable challenges. Examples of leadership challenges considered included school bullying, gender discrimination, ethical violations, and citizen engagement.

The second stage of the paper asked students to identify leadership themes/concepts from the class that apply to the selected leadership challenges. Some themes of interest included managing conflict, dealing with out-groups, power and corruption, leading through change, and authentic/positive leadership. This portfolio presents papers from three students that each utilized the “building a vision” theme in their work. This theme was connected to the third professional development exercise.

The final stage of the paper asked students to integrate lessons learned throughout the semester together with their reflective work to identify how they could utilize their personal strengths and create a plan for addressing the leadership challenge. Part of this assignment rested on developing reflective practice during the semester. Students were given journal assignments throughout the term that asked them to describe, interpret/explain, and identify lessons learned throughout the semester. The reflective exercises were intended to help students prepare for the final paper (which included reflective components), as well as utilize lessons from the professional development activities.
Student Performance

Overall, the students performed well on the course assignments and on the final paper, in particular. Students were able to identify contemporary leadership challenges, connect those challenges to course themes, and consider the ways in which they might contribute to the solution. I believe that the in-class examples of leadership challenges along with practical applications helped prepare them for the tasks included on the final paper.

I have selected three examples of student work (see below) to illustrate various levels of performance. Each of these students wrote final papers that considered a leadership challenge that connected to the theme of the environment for leadership, specifically setting a vision and tone. The assigned readings and associated class session on this topic helped students answer the questions: what does it mean to develop and implement a leadership vision? And, how do leaders set the tone for effective performance? The primary resources for this section are readings from Northouse’s (2012) Introduction to Leadership: Concepts and Practice.

The professional development exercise assigned for this session (Professional Development #3) allowed students to utilize course resources (including self-assessment quizzes from the textbook), and consider their own skills and abilities in this regard. Students used the resulting information to answer application questions (see Professional Development #3 for full details).

The class session on this topic provided lessons learned from skilled leaders on vision and tone via case studies and video vignettes. Furthermore, students applied these lessons to an in-class activity on visioning. They also engaged in a role-play activity to practice new leadership skills related to the topic. Finally, they were given a leadership challenge (building a tower) to complete as a team. These activities together culminated with a reflective writing assignment to consider lessons learned on setting a leadership vision and tone.

Of the three examples of papers that incorporate this theme, Student A’s work illustrates the best integration of associated resources. Student A’s paper considers the leadership challenge of public education reform, starting at the grassroots level. The student effectively integrates the theme of vision/tone into the paper and applies it to the selected context of public education reform. The student draws upon related course resources, as well as personal assessments of personal leadership skills. The final paper is annotated to illustrate ways in which the student connected with the broad theme (highlighted in the paper) and with the Professional Development exercise specifically (highlighted and underlined). This student illustrates mastery of the concepts and the ability to apply those concepts to a real-world leadership challenge. Furthermore, the student reflected on personal leadership skills and abilities when considering the next steps in the final section.

Student B’s work is a satisfactory example of integrating the theme and the professional development insights with the final paper topic. This paper considers the leadership
challenges associated with managing needs of children in state custody, specifically the educational challenges of children who are placed in emergency care facilities. While this paper includes the vision/tone theme (highlighted portion), this example is not as successful as Student A’s paper in that it does not fully integrate/cite course resources in the discussion of the theme. This presents questions regarding the student’s mastery of the course materials. Furthermore, in the application section, the student connects to themes from the professional development exercise (highlighted in the paper), but not as clearly as the first example.

Student C’s work illustrates a less successful example of connecting the final paper topic with the theme of vision/tone and also the associated professional development exercise. The paper considers the leadership challenges associated with managing “information overload” in the workplace. While the paper mentions the applicable theme of setting the tone (highlighted section), it fails to incorporate the key points presented in the readings and in the related class session on this topic. It does not illustrate mastery of these concepts. Furthermore, the student’s professional development exercise indicates that the student struggled with some components of the exercise. It appears the student considered the feedback when drafting the final paper, but only partially. Also, the majority of the application section of the paper includes ideas that do not connect with the theme of leadership vision/tone. The paper would be strengthened by better connections with, and use of, the professional development exercise (and other course resources) for this topic.

These examples illustrate the value of linking course components. The student who effectively utilized related course resources, and the professional development exercise specifically, had the strongest final product. The course elements were designed to allow students to build understanding and mastery incrementally using scaffolding in the course assignments. The value of this connection is illustrated in Student A’s work, and to a lesser degree, Student B’s work. Student C’s work did not take advantage of the related course materials, specifically the professional development exercise. This student’s final product was less successful as a result.
Reflections

The goals of this course were to help students master the scholarly content, apply that content to real-world leadership challenges, and develop reflective skills that would allow them to assess and apply their leadership skills. Several students achieved these goals.

Caruana (2012) notes that while scaffolding is expected to help identify and develop skills that learners need to achieve course goals, it may also illustrate gaps in the course plan. In the future, I will use this information to provide more detailed writing guidance to students (e.g., provide sample assignments from previous course offerings). Without existing writing samples, it was difficult to provide good, average, and poor examples of sample assignments. Now that I have taught this version once, I plan to make use of the assignments from this semester as samples and highlight how various assignments meet specific goals.

Furthermore, this experience revealed that the expected alignment of course materials may not have been clear to all students. Given the differences related to integration of course resources, namely, the professional development exercises, I will provide additional prompting related to utilizing these resources for the final paper.

Some students struggled to connect these components. In the future, I will engage students in a midterm draft of the paper to ensure everyone is on the right track. Also, while reflective writing was emphasized throughout the semester, the final paper should have been written in formal, academic style. Some students struggled with that transition.

This experience demonstrated the potential of scaffolding in instructional design, as well as some of the challenges. While this was an experimental undertaking, the resulting course evaluations were very positive. Both sections of PUAD 641 had overall scores that exceeded departmental averages for similar courses. Furthermore, student comments specifically addressed the value of the professional development exercises and their connection to course themes and assignments. For example:

“The Professional Developments were so helpful. They made me reflect and stayed involved, a great motivator for completing all the readings before class. The professional developments were also an opportunity to receive feedback from the instructor. This way I knew if I was on track or not.”

“Loved the personal development component.” This student also added, “I would have liked to know more about other’s personal development. I wouldn’t have minded sharing my findings with the group – it would have been interesting to see how we all differ in our leadership style.”

When I offer this course again, I will retain the scaffolded approach and the professional development exercises. The exercises not only serve to help students prepare for class and subsequent assignments, but they also serve to increase self-awareness, which has
other implications for learning. Zimmerman (1989) noted that self-awareness helps students become “active participants in their own learning” (p. 4). Similarly, Bean (2011) notes that exploratory writing assignments can accomplish several broader goals, including changing the way students approach course readings, creating higher levels of preparation, and also helping instructors get to know students better. In these aspects, the approach was successful on all accounts.

References


