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A LETTER WRITING ASSIGNMENT FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT: Creating Stakeholder Connection For Policy Advocacy

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to share with leadership educators a writing exercise designed to provide doctoral students enrolled in an Administrative and Policy Leadership course an opportunity to gain experience with building collective will for policy advocacy on a social justice issue. This article describes the use of a letter writing assignment including the background and justification for using letter writing rather than other forms of writing across the curriculum, instructions for students to complete the assignment, and examples and ideas for grading and providing constructive and instructive feedback to leadership students. The article concludes with recommendations and potential assignment modifications for leadership educators that choose to adopt this type of writing assignment within their leadership training curriculum.

Keywords: leadership training, writing across the curriculum, letter writing, policy analysis and discourse

Introduction

Today, the study and practice of leadership continues to expand across the globe. Yet, while it expands, it also appears more complex, and more than ever, the effective practice of leadership is critical to solving difficult and "wicked" problems. Subsequently, leadership educators are compelled to incorporate learning exercises into their curriculum that expose students to difficult and wicked problems, such as issues of justice, equity, and social change (McKee & Bruce, 2021). Organizations today seek employees dedicated and prepared to make greater improvements on these social issues. Therefore, this application paper is aimed at helping today's leadership educators prepare students for more than brief exposures to social issues, they need to help students understand and embody their role as an advocate for social change (London, 2008).

To make changes on difficult and wicked problems requires innovative solutions that engage multiple stakeholder perspectives, values, and aspirations. Where top-down solutions may have worked previously; today, leadership practitioners must engage in what Shields (2020) refers to as the

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"struggle" and engage in moral courage by working together across differences to transform society. This engagement can take on many forms; however, one of the greatest challenges in this struggle is to persuade decision makers to engage in collective change (Wilson, 2016).

Yet, how does a leadership educator prepare future leadership practitioners to engage in collective change? The purpose of this paper is to describe how one Interdisciplinary Leadership program adapted an existing undergraduate English Composition assignment, originally created by Daneen Bergland (2019), into a doctoral-level learning experience designed to engage students in writing an eloquent letter to stakeholders. This assignment, as described in this paper, is an experiential learning exercise in which students enrolled in a required Administrative and Policy Leadership Issues course grow as leadership practitioners and gain experience with social justice policy advocacy.

Origins of the Assignment

Inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," (1963) The Eloquent Letter assignment (Bergland, 2019) is an authentic assignment designed to acquire critical thinking skills, identify and research social problems, examine value systems and diverse perspectives, communicate effectively, and propose solutions based on common ground. This assignment is meant to assess integrative, intellectual, critical thinking, advocacy and writing skills. Unlike traditional research essay assignments, the Eloquent Letter assignment explicitly engages awareness and understanding of the audience (e.g., stakeholders). Therefore, it encourages student writers to "listen" to that person or group, to understand what values underlie their perspective, and to develop solutions based on shared values. This assignment promotes listening as an important concept in research, communication, persuasion, and problem-solving. More importantly, it provides an antidote to the apathy and despair caused by current perceptions of gridlock in policy development and analysis, in which civility appears elusive and arguments unbridgeable (Shields, 2020), thus preparing students to communicate and solve problems as educated citizens and leaders.

This assignment, originally designed by Daneen Bergland 15 years ago, for an undergraduate English Composition course, was later redeveloped with a backward course design process (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) for an interdisciplinary, undergraduate general education course. The assignment started with learning goals – specifically, what students should be able to do upon completion, then considered how this knowledge or skill might be best demonstrated. An overarching question for the course design was "What does a well-educated person in the 21st century need to know how to do?" Inspired by the framework and findings of The National Taskforce on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012), the Eloquent Letter assignment served as both a process and product to practice some of the knowledge, skills, and values outlined in their report. More specifically, the values of empathy and responsibility to a larger good, the skill of "deliberation and bridge-building across differences," and knowledge of political systems.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail (1963) is offered as a model for the Eloquent Letter for its importance as a historical U.S. document, as well as for its literary value and MLK's public leadership. While students may be unfamiliar with this piece, they are intrigued by its story in the context of the civil rights movement. His letter is inspiring for its rhetorical beauty and power. It resonates throughout the historical, political, and oratorical phenomena of our culture. Students experience why King's letter is so powerful in its own rhetorical context (civil rights movement, civil disobedience, as a clergyman) and are asked to consider how they might use some of his rhetorical strategies, recognizing the contexts of their own letters, and writing as their most eloquent selves and as emerging leaders and advocates.

Review of Literature

This section provides the leadership educator an overview of the scholarship of teaching and learning

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related to writing which serves as the background for this adopted and modified assignment. We review three elements of writing across the curriculum, specifically writing in its natural habitat, writing as listening, and writing as civic engagement. When considering what the "product" or evidence students would produce to demonstrate the learning goals of a course, the form of a letter is seldom used by leadership educators. However, citing research from the Consortium for the Study of Writing in College, Bean and Weimer (2011) advise designing writing assignments as "meaning constructing tasks" that require students to use critical thinking to solve an authentic problem. The use of letters as writing exercises can inspire more leadership educators to use innovative teaching and learning strategies. Further, Bean and Weimer also define effective assignments as giving "students a role or purpose, a targeted audience, and a genre" (2011, p. 98). The letter as form makes all three clear.

Writing in its natural habitat. As much as possible, leadership educators want assignments to be authentic, that is, using common and relevant forms, serving a purpose beyond performing for a grade, engaging others outside the classroom, and developing skills that leadership practitioners need, e.g., being articulate and inspiring (Kolditz et al., 2021). Assignments should also be relevant to a student's own interests and goals. In applied leadership courses students are often encouraged to choose their topics, starting with real problems they have identified or encountered within their workplaces or communities (i.e., privacy vs. security, individual rights vs. common good, multiculturalism vs. assimilation, etc.). This is fully in line with the Social Change Model created by the Higher Education Research Institute, as individuals practicing leadership are acknowledged to be instrumental in positive social change (HERI, 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2017). As such, students are invited to better understand these topics by conducting a literature review to understand their topic or claim, including what people, agencies, or policies, might be able to assist solving the problem, and at what levels.

The research essay is perhaps the most common writing assignment in the humanities and social sciences, and yet arguably, has few explicit analogs to the writing students will do post-graduation (Kolditz et al., 2021). On the other hand, the letter is a practical, ubiquitous form. It is likely all of us will write many letters as adults, from professional cover letters to letters of recommendation, to collegial emails. As Beaufort (1999) points out in her book Writing in the Real World, the purpose of writing in the workplace is "to take action rather than leisurely reflect on thought processes or on artistic expression" (p. 4) and is often directed at more complex and varied audiences than the writing we ask of students, for which the audience is generally the teacher.

To demonstrate to students the practical possibilities of purpose and reach of the form, the Letter from Birmingham Jail is shared as an example as "writing in its native habitat," (Bergland, 2019) showing them how everyday writing shapes and is shaped by its contexts, and how by writing for one audience member or stakeholder, their work can circulate and influence other audiences, creating waves that radiate beyond their initial intention. Furthermore, this leadership education assignment engages students in Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning as they research and respond to real-world issues, prepare written communication for identified stakeholders, review peer work, and engage in reflective observation (Guthrie & Jones, 2019).

Writing as listening. Writing instruction for leadership development often focuses on argumentation and debate, therefore impacting the learning itself (Thomas, 2013). In other words, the student writes to prove their point, to win the argument, in turn creating leadership graduates who see everything as a debate, rather than a collective problem to solve. However, in considering the skills necessary for strong civic engagement, especially in the current political and rhetorical climate, students need to be prepared to approach writing as a conversation and as a problem-solving endeavor in collaboration with stakeholders.

The letter as a form makes explicit a relationship between the writer and the reader, or in this case stakeholder(s), and the implicit possibility of dialog (Bergland, 2019). Within leadership development, the practice of stakeholder engagement is crucial because effective leaders need to be able to assess

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stakeholder power, authority, and urgency (Schneider, 2002). As part of the drafting process, students must work to develop empathy, and to listen and understand the values and motivations of another. After students write the first draft (almost always written in the form of a traditional argument essay, listing evidence compelling to the writer, but with little acknowledgement or attention paid to the recipient's point of view) students receive feedback from a peer and continue their review of literature. They must explore the historical and current contexts of their topic, through multiple perspectives, including opposing stakeholder views. Additionally, they must research and understand their recipient. At this point, feedback to students can also emphasize establishing common ground, understanding the position, values, experience, and motivations of the recipient, and using these to establish warrants for arguments, shaping their appeals to address the motivations of the reader/stakeholder. We will have more to say about providing student feedback later, in the description of the assignment section.

Writing as civic engagement. According to Kraft and Furlong (2018), "public policy is what public officials within government, and by extension the citizens they represent, choose to do or not to do about public problems" (p. 5). Unfortunately, many of these problems affect everyday life and some of these problems are categorized as "wicked" - complex, unique, and seemingly impossible to solve (Head & Alford, 2015). Yet, the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise 2007 called for higher education programs to prepare students to engage locally and globally in order to interact with others different than themselves, and together work to solve significant problems (Kilgo et al., 2015). However, many leadership students come into policy courses with limited knowledge or understanding of civic structures and processes. They may recognize a problem but are unable to identify the "political levers for influencing change" (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). In addition, they may express unease and unfamiliarity with civic engagement of any kind, even voting. In an effort to remedy this, during the initial scaffolding for this assignment, students brainstorm the problems related to their topic and potential remedies at local, state, and federal levels. They look for the agencies, policies, processes, and institutions that have influence or authority to apply those remedies, before determining the purpose, claim, and recipient for their first letter draft.

Much of our work as leadership educators is focused on developing communication and critical thinking skills (Kolditz et al., 2021). However, without a sense of agency, the will to look for solutions, or the belief that they have some part in making change, students may have the thinking skills, but feel powerless, paralyzed, or cynical. Indeed, the concept and theory of "critical hope" (Bozalek et al., 2014; Freire, 2007) has arisen, specifically in community service-learning pedagogy, to counter the despair encountered when understanding the complexity of systems and the seeming intractability of social problems and injustice. Quoting the work of Zembylas (2014), Grain and Lund (2016), summarized the praxis of critical hope as "an act of ethical and political responsibility that has the potential to recover a lost sense of connectedness, relationality, and solidarity with others" (p. 51). Examples of pedagogical techniques and assignments that focus on enhancing critical hope include but are not limited to, caring for students as whole people, respecting what students know, engage students in dialogue, and making space for and inviting critical reflection on current practices (Freire, 1998). The Eloquent Letter offers not just a process (drafting and research) and a product, but a way for leadership educators to better prepare leadership practitioners for their role in social change. Clear, articulate letter writing is one tool in the toolbox for leadership and democracy (Kolditz et al., 2021). Writing a letter to an authority or decision-maker gives students the experience, scaffolded and supported by an instructor, of applying that tool, and with any luck, the confidence to try writing more letters.

Description of Application of the Eloquent Letter Assignment

In an increasingly rancorous rhetorical climate and polarized political environment, students might see themselves withdrawing from discourse and wilting

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from a sense of powerlessness. This assignment gives students opportunities to practice and learn from what John C. Bean calls “authentic” assignments, projects that have a life and purpose outside the classroom and in service to the community. Therefore, in 2020 Candace Bloomquist adapted this assignment for inclusion in a doctoral-level leadership course. Specifically, this assignment appears in weeks 3 and 4 of an 8-week course entitled “Administrative and Policy Leadership Issues.” This course examines administrative issues and political power in decision making and the role of leaders in policy analysis and development. The course addresses social, political, and economic influences on administration and policy development, and the relationship between leadership and governance. Learners review and critique analytical frameworks and the application of these frameworks to contemporary policy issues. Administrative and policy leadership issues are also explored as they apply to community relations and governing boards.

The Eloquent Letter assignment was adapted for this course because it meets the broader learning goals of the Ed.D. in Interdisciplinary Leadership doctoral program to (a) utilize leadership theories; (b) integrate critical thinking; (c) practice ethical decision-making; (d) model professional communication; (e) apply reflective practices; (f) lead within complex and diverse societies; and (g) produce scholarly research. Additionally, the assignment contributes to helping students meet the more specific goals of the course, to (a) describe methods of communication and participation among key internal and external stakeholders during the planning and decision-making process and (b) reflect on ethical and social dimensions of policies and the policy creation process.

The majority of students in the interdisciplinary leadership program have backgrounds in education, military, healthcare, and business, so administrative, power, and policy domains are familiar to many of them, but not all. This course and specifically, the Eloquent Letter assignment, helps students learn how to define and analyze policy problems that they face as leaders in multiple career fields. As instructors, the one point we reiterate is to focus on the root of the problem within the policy arena, not one of the symptoms. The goal of the type of leadership we want to encourage our students to practice is to create a viable, healthy society which requires leaders to have situational awareness of the social, economic, and environmental domains of complex and wicked problems.

The Eloquent Letter assignment is introduced to students during week 3 as they continue to read from the course textbook (i.e., Kraft & Furlong, 2018) and engage in supplemental readings focused on frameworks and models useful for policy planning and analysis. Students are reminded that policy development is contextual and that each day they may face situations where the learning from this course will be useful in uncertain and rapidly changing situations. The learning objectives for week 3 are to: (1) identify and analyze social, political, justice, and economic influences related to your chosen policy problem/puzzle; (2) reflect on ethical and social dimensions of policies and the policy creation process; and (3) evaluate criteria for judging policy proposals. The focus of the assignment is to evaluate important cultural, social, political, or economic dimensions of policy problems. In particular, students are asked to look at institutional structures in the context of many of the policy problems the students tend to contemplate during this course.

The power dimensions highlighted in the week 3 readings inform the framework for their Eloquent Letter assignment and their later policy proposal paper which is the culminating assignment for the course. These scholarly articles (including King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail, a redlining resource guide, and the JSTOR institutionalized racism syllabus) introduce students to the social, cultural, political, and economic domains that play a significant role in the policy problems students will be confronting when developing their policy proposals in their final course assignment. As Kendi (2019) states in How to Be an Anti-racist, "nation-states, sectors, communities, institutions are run by policymakers and policies and policy managers. 'Institutional power' or 'systemic power' or 'structural power' is the policy-making and managing power of people, in groups or individually" (p. 141). As emerging leadership scholar-practitioners, the overall course, and in particular the Eloquent Letter

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assignment, challenge students to see beyond the symptoms of the problem they have identified to the policies that structure the systems and institutions that have created and perpetuated the problem.

Instructions Provided to Students. A description of the Eloquent Letter assignment that can be used for undergraduate students in a semester-long course can be found on the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment webpage (Bergland, 2019). For the purposes of this doctoral-level policy course, the original assignment was adapted to contain four main parts: (1) the first draft of the letter, (2) peer exchange and feedback on the letter, (3) the final draft of the letter, and (4) critical reflection on the learning experience. Essentially, students are asked to identify and research a problem or issue and write a persuasive letter to an identified stakeholder(s), asking for specific action toward addressing that issue. The instructions to the students are,

> "Tell your audience why you feel the way you do. Explain what experiences, knowledge, or value systems influenced your point of view on the issue. Explain the arguments, assumptions, values, and biases of one or more stakeholders. Identify and explain at least one other viewpoint related to your topic. Identify an area of common ground with your audience and use it as a way to focus your argument and convince your audience. Use at least one metaphor or simile to create emphasis and grace to your arguments."

During the assignment, students engage in the development of questions to explore the controversial topic, research and compare information from multiple perspectives, understand the system within which the issue operates, and examine, compare, and integrate the positions, values, knowledge, and assumptions of various stakeholders. Students are encouraged to focus on building common ground and to move beyond the model of debate and persuasion to actual problem-solving. To help students shift their thinking toward dialogue and building common ground they are asked to engage in a peer review of each other's draft letters. The specific instructions that integrate all four parts of the assignment are as follows:

Step 1: Study Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail and examine tensions in American values and the "American arguments" that arise from these tensions.

Step 2: Propose a problem or issue (the same problem or issue as in your policy proposal paper assignment) and a stakeholder for your individual letter and send your proposal to your instructor in week 2.

Step 3: After gaining approval for your proposed issue/problem from your instructor, draft a letter (approximately 700 words) using common ground and an understanding of your stakeholders' values, motivations, position, and background to shape your appeals and proposed solutions (Due on Thursday of week 3).

Step 4: Then, engage in a peer review of your classmates' letters during week 3. A peer will be assigned by the instructor (peer review is due on Sunday of week 3).

Step 5: After your peer review, revise and edit your own letter based on peer feedback and submit the final version to your instructor in week 4.

Step 6: During week 8, provide a reflective "Articulation Post" on the week 8 discussion board to articulate what you have learned from the process of writing your letter and your final policy proposal, and how this knowledge will apply in your future.

Eloquent Letter Instructions for Peer Review. To encourage students to shift their thinking toward building common ground and a dialogue with their audience, their draft letters are exchanged with one of their peers. On Thursday of week 3 students are assigned a peer to review their draft letter. Each student is encouraged to take on the role of the audience member (i.e., stakeholder) of the organization their peers' letter is addressed to. Students are reminded that the Eloquent Letter is not just a persuasive piece but is meant to move

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beyond argument and debate to problem-solving and common ground.

The goal of the peer review is for students to help each other understand their audience's position, values, and opposing viewpoints, and use common ground to problem-solve and reach a solution that might be acceptable to all groups involved. For the peer-review portion of the assignment, students are asked to review their assigned peers' letter and write a return letter (at least 400 words) to their peer by Sunday of week 3. In their return letter they are to critique their peers' letter and offer suggestions related to clarity, tone, and structure. Peer reviewers are prompted to, "put yourself in the intended audience's shoes." In the return letter students are instructed to summarize the main claim of the letter and address at least four of the prompts listed in Table 1.

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Table 1
Prompts to Address in Peer Review Letter

Criteria	Peer Review Question Prompts
1. Conviction	Identify the rhetorical devices the writer has used. Are they in the best place in terms of emphasis? Where or how might they be better used?
2. Rhetoric	Describe the structure of the letter. Where are there places where you became confused? Explain where these were and why they were confusing.
3. Structure	Describe the overall tone of the letter. Is it consistent? How is it appropriate or inappropriate given the relationship between the writer and the intended audience?
4. Tone	Identify and explain any potential fallacies in logic or loaded language.
5. Additional Language	Identify whether the writer has established common ground with his/her audience. Is it convincing? What is missing?
6. Common Ground	Where is information unnecessarily repeated or awkwardly stated? Is the writer telling the intended audience something they already know? If so, do they make clear why they are doing this?
7. Clarity	If you noticed any grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors, what were they? What are the main strengths of the draft?"

Instructors can assign grades and provide feedback to students based on their return letter to their peer (5 points possible). Once students receive the feedback from their peers, they are encouraged to edit their first draft letter to redirect their writing to achieve the goals of the Eloquent Letter assignment.

Peer Review Feedback. One example of grading commentary given to students by an instructor in the course was:

> *Thank you for your peer review of [student's name] letter. Your response letter was specific and useful. I found your use of questions and specific examples to be very effective in providing feedback and ideas for improvements. Additionally, throughout your response letter you provided positive examples from [student's name] letter and areas for improvement. This type of feedback is useful for [student's name] to know where to focus her thinking and writing. I think the feedback you provided [student's name] will help her make adjustments that will encourage her and the energy company to find common ground.*

Final Eloquent Letter Assignment Grading Rubric. Overall, the Eloquent Letter assignment makes up 40 of the 860 total points in the course (5% of the student's overall course grade). The Eloquent Letter peer exchange is worth 5 points, the student reflective Articulation Post is worth 5 points and the final draft of the Eloquent letter is worth 30 points. Table 2 outlines the Eloquent Letter rubric which provides the criteria and descriptions of the assignment criteria. The rubric is provided to students at the beginning of the assignment. The learning objective for week 3 is, by the end of the week students should be able to analyze social, political, and economic influences on their chosen policy issue by reading, reflecting, and dialoguing about potential influences. The 3 criteria described as proposed solution and argument claim, ethical use of sources, and evidence and reasoning help the instructor and student assess progress on the parts of the weekly learning objective related to analyzing and reflecting on the influences on their chosen policy issue. The 3 criteria described as context and purpose of writing, common ground, and style and readability help the instructor and student

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assess progress on the part of the weekly learning objective related to dialoguing with the letter recipient about the potential influences.

Table 2
Prompts to Address in Peer Review Letter

PTS	Criteria	Peer Review Question Prompts
5	**1. Conviction**	Identify the rhetorical devices the writer has used. Are they in the best place in terms of emphasis? Where or how might they be better used?
5	**2. Rhetoric**	Describe the structure of the letter. Where are there places where you became confused? Explain where these were and why they were confusing.
5	**3. Structure**	Describe the overall tone of the letter. Is it consistent? How is it appropriate or inappropriate given the relationship between the writer and the intended audience?
5	**4. Tone**	Identify and explain any potential fallacies in logic or loaded language.
5	**5. Additional Language**	Identify whether the writer has established common ground with his/her audience. Is it convincing? What is missing?
5	**6. Common Ground**	Where is information unnecessarily repeated or awkwardly stated? Is the writer telling the intended audience something they already know? If so, do they make clear why they are doing this?
5	**7. Clarity**	If you noticed any grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors, what were they? What are the main strengths of the draft?”

Each of the criteria are evaluated on a scale of excellent (5 pts) to no marks (0 pts), with the flexibility to allow instructors to indicate partial point deductions within that range for each criterion. Instructors utilize the criteria descriptions to look for the inclusion of each of the described elements within the students’ eloquent letter. For example, for the criterion context and purpose of writing the instructor will look for the students’ eloquent letter to be addressed to a specific person, organization, or association, if the letter is addressed to an audience that is too broad or who does not have a stake in the policy issue points would be deducted. Additionally, the instructor will look for appropriate rhetorical choices that demonstrate the set of methods the student used to identify with the proposed recipient of the letter and demonstrate to the instructor the student is trying to understand things from another’s perspective. These rhetorical choices can be related to the tone of the language used, specific references to the audience’s experience, knowledge, and values; and/or historical and current context provided to acknowledge the setting in which the letter is being written and considered. If the letter does not include words or phrases that demonstrate these types of rhetorical choices points would be deducted accordingly. Each group of students are different in how they approach the assignment, however, the following examples of feedback and lessons learned may be helpful for leadership education instructors to consider as they help guide students through this assignment.

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Final Draft Eloquent Letter Feedback. The three instructors in the different sections of the course chose different paths when grading and evaluating the final drafts of the Eloquent Letter assignment. One instructor assigned 30 out of 30 points for all students in the course, while the other instructors graded the assignment with point distributions ranging from 28.1 to 29.6 points (all A's) and 24.9 to 29.7 points (range from A's to B's). Two of the three instructors provided specific comments and questions to students within the body of the letter in addition to different degrees of summative grading commentary. One example of grading commentary provided by one of the instructors on the final draft of the Eloquent Letter assignment was:

> *Thank you for your heartfelt and compelling letter. The framing and focus you have chosen is important. There is some excellent work by Ibram X. Kendi on anti-racism that I think might help support your focus on the systems and policies that are creating inequities. Good job acknowledging that these systems were not put in place intentionally, that works well to help build common ground. I would have liked to see you use a metaphor. This type of rhetorical device really helps shake people from their usual way of thinking and for your CEO recipient may be very useful in helping you communicate the need and call to action. Keep up the excellent writing. [29.4/30]*

Discussion of Outcomes and Implications

The descriptions included in this paper covered five course sections that were taught during the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters while the COVID-19 pandemic was underway. During the pandemic, many colleges adopted pass/fail grading policies that students could request for their overall course grade. While many campuses dropped these adaptations later in the academic year, the pandemic may have a lasting impact on how we as leadership educators think about grading assignments. For example, as noted for this doctoral-level interdisciplinary course, three distinct faculty used identical rubrics to facilitate the grading of this single assignment. For one faculty member, this assignment was graded as pass/fail, no points were deducted on any of the criteria for all parts of the assignment. For the other two faculty members, this assignment was graded in a more nuanced way, with points deducted and constructive feedback provided related to the criteria in which points were deducted to help the students continue to grow.

Leadership educators considering using rubrics in multi-section courses with distinct faculty instructors will want to orient faculty to the use of rubrics and discuss the implications and outcomes of different grading practices. In the context of our interdisciplinary doctoral program, within which this course was offered, faculty are given latitude to use instructional strategies, including grading practices, consistent with their teaching philosophy which often has discipline-specific roots. Attempts to standardize faculty within an interdisciplinary program would be counterproductive to the spirit of interdisciplinary learning. However, effective interdisciplinary teaching and learning instructional practices are not unique from any other forms of productive teaching and learning practices (Dezure, 2017). Therefore, leadership educators whether in an interdisciplinary program or not, may benefit from paying attention to students' demonstration of their abilities to analyze problems from several perspectives, compare and contrast, critically analyze resources, place problems and solutions within a larger context, articulate critical points, empathize with multiple perspectives and stakeholders, and tolerate ambiguity and complexity (Dezure, 2017). Whether leadership educators provide feedback to students on these critical abilities via grading commentary by using the rubric or through group and one-on-one discussions, the important point is that students receive feedback from their instructor that helps to strengthen their policy advocacy skills and their selection of and dialogue with identified stakeholders.

One way we distinguish the Eloquent Letter from other forms of writing is to remind students that the assignment is not an objective, esoteric approach to writing a policy analysis report, but is a personal letter intended to persuade an audience. Students inevitably write the first draft of their letter as a persuasive essay: "writer-based" prose, largely ignoring the audience and focusing on the claims,

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evidence, and appeals they themselves find most convincing. Students believe their goal is to "win the argument" and unfortunately will often focus too much on facts and figures instead of building bridges and working towards compromise. Therefore, peer reviewers are encouraged to look for evidence of these traps in the draft letters. Additionally, when students during their own peer reviews see how their peers have completed the assignment, they are able to see with fresh eyes the mistakes they may have made in their own letter and are able to correct these in their final draft.

In week 8 of the course students shared their reactions to the overall course, including the Eloquent Letter assignment, in their final reflection post. We found that students were transformed by the assignment based on their own assessment of their learning. Due to the reflective nature of the video posts the submissions were not graded, rather a mark of complete was assigned along with the 5 points. The impact of the Eloquent Letter assignment seemed to carry on even after the assignment was completed in week 4. In their final reflection students were asked to respond to a few of the following questions using a video post:

- How have these assignments influenced your identity?
- What were the important milestones in your process of writing the Eloquent Letter or the policy proposal paper? For instance, how did you choose your topic and the audience, what research was important to how you wrote and rewrote your letter and how you wrote your policy proposal paper?
- What were (at least two) challenges or discoveries you made during your process of writing these assignments?
- What were the most significant changes you made between different drafts of each paper? What feedback from your peer evaluation did you use?
- How/what knowledge or skills obtained during this course/process will you apply in your future coursework/career/life?

In their articulation post videos some students highlighted that the writing of the eloquent letter was one of the major milestones for them in the course. Some students mentioned becoming more aware of their writing process and their differing levels of comfort with a new type of writing for them. In fact, several students indicated that prior to this assignment they felt more comfortable writing a research paper rather than a letter. One student specifically mentioned feedback they had received from their peer reviewer about their use of the word "your" in their eloquent letter. The student had used the word "your" to acknowledge that they were writing for a specific audience, however, their peer gave them feedback that the use of "your" came across as blame, which helped the student to consider tone and connection with their audience even more.

In the week 8 articulation posts some students also noted that because of this course, and the Eloquent Letter assignment, they were more aware of their identity and the identity of others. One student noted, 'the assignments were not just valuable in and of themselves, but also in what they have aroused in me.' Additionally, several students

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indicated that the Eloquent Letter assignment opened their eyes to their own biases and perspectives and pushed them to be more curious in order to get to the root of the policy problem. Subsequently, students experienced one of the largest lessons related to identifying the appropriate audience. After choosing their policy issue/problem, some students expressed that they felt the most push and pull when clarifying and homing in on their audience. One student included the following quote from Maya Angelo in their Eloquent Letter, "Without courage we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest." In their articulation post the student acknowledged that the inclusion of the quote was not just for her audience's benefit, but for her own as well.

When students were asked what elements of the online course content and course environment they found to be particularly useful to achieving the course objectives, two students specifically mentioned the Eloquent Letter. In addition, feedback on the course evaluations completed at the end of the course included comments regarding the assignment:

"The Eloquent Letter assignment was an interesting exercise, and provided a unique experience as both a writer and peer-reviewer."

"It was an interesting experience doing the policy paper and eloquent letter.

"I enjoyed reading MLK's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. I had never read it."

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although this specific assignment is roughly 5% of the overall course grade, leadership educators can easily increase the percentage and spread the assignment out as necessary across the term. Additionally, while we have adapted this assignment for doctoral students, it was originally adopted from undergraduate curriculum and can easily be used across undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral level programs.

When drawing conclusions about this assignment's application, one should consider what makes it challenging for students. Based on our interactions with students and observations of their work, including their self-reflections, we found that audience identification and orienting students toward collective problem solving rather than debate, were two of the biggest challenges. Additionally, issues related to rhetorical decisions based on the audience, for example finding a metaphor that communicated the complexity of the situation, was also a challenge. Instructors may want to use critical questions when giving feedback on drafts or to scaffold instruction to include discussions or activities related to rhetorical choices, i.e., tone and register of language, types and sources of evidence, and identifying shared warrants for arguments. For example, a discussion of Dr. King's letter could include attention to his use of metaphor and appeals/evidence as targeted to the intended audience and consider questions about how these were particularly effective given that audience. Students might also brainstorm and workshop metaphors for the problems or issues being considered in the course content.

As mentioned earlier, though the letter is a ubiquitous form that our students likely encounter on a regular basis, e.g., emails, letters to the editor, and published open letters, they may have had limited, if any formal instruction related to the conventions and rhetorical considerations of the form. It is helpful to draw students' attention to these and the ways letters may differ from other forms and genres; for instance, letters are generally short, so revision should focus on concision. Subsequently it is useful to provide examples of persuasive letters, such as Dr. King's. Instructors may want to start collecting letters they encounter for this purpose. In the undergraduate course where this assignment originated, examples include an open letter to President Obama from Natives in America regarding DAPL (2016), a letter to the editor of the Boston Globe on finding common ground in the abortion debate (Merullo, 2013), a letter written by Daneen Bergland to the local school board, and exemplary letters by previous students. New and timely examples become available every day; indeed, a quick internet search brings up a letter from the Student Body President and Trustee, Lamar

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Richards (2021), to students of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill regarding racism, an open letter from college professors to the U.S. Senate supporting the For the People Act voting rights bill (James & Evans, n.d.), and an encyclical letter Laudato Si' from Pope Francis to the world calling on care for our common home (2015). These few, but easily accessible examples further impress that the letter is still an important advocacy and communication tool that leadership educators can incorporate into a multitude of leadership development courses if they seek to provide a unique experiential learning opportunity.

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