

Teaching leadership through writing: a collaborative course redesign

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Abstract

Purpose – This “Teaching Tool” describes strategies to integrate writing instruction into an introductory undergraduate leadership course and demonstrates how interdisciplinary collaboration between composition and leadership faculty can foster student success.

Design/methodology/approach – The article describes how faculty from composition and leadership collaborated on ways to improve students’ writing skills by incorporating pedagogical best practices for writing, including adding scaffolding and peer review to a leadership course.

Findings – The strategies discussed are designed to strengthen students’ writing skills in an introductory leadership class.

Originality/value – Writing skills are especially essential for students in leadership. This article presents a model for both integrating scaffolding and peer review best practices in a leadership course and for establishing faculty collaboration across the disciplines.

Keywords Leadership education, Leadership competencies, Leadership pedagogy, Teaching and learning of leadership, Leadership education application and outcomes

Paper type Practitioner paper

Introduction

At many universities, students take a single introductory-level composition course, and faculty are convinced that a course will yield consistent writing proficiency. Yet, we are stunned when students do not apply the fundamentals of writing in our courses. When we lament that students do not know composition basics or are becoming over-reliant on artificial intelligence, we concede that we are not committed to teaching writing in our courses. Because it is a fundamental skill, educators have a pedagogical responsibility to emphasize writing-as-process – in all disciplines, but especially in leadership. According to Bushey, “strong written skills, just like strong verbal skills, are essential leadership traits. Strong writing skills are not nice to have: they are a necessity for leaders” (2023, para. 1). According to Choi, Tian, and Stumph (2022) writing helps leaders “make sense of new information, deepen their critical thinking and continuously improve their leadership approach.” In short, writing skills help leaders communicate clearly, accurately and articulately. A process-oriented focus to teaching writing in leadership courses develops valuable professional skills, including critical reading and speaking. As Graff and Birkenstein argue, authors write in response to ideas and each other (2024, p. 20). From the perspective of leadership education, human-to-human communication is an essential and fundamental leadership skill, while viewed from a humanistic paradigm, writing is a way of thinking – of taking what is “inchoate and obscure” and transforming it into “precise and illuminating thoughts through the long, slow, patient work of composition”

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(Arndt, 2026, p. 4). As such, the authors of this article sought to collaborate to synthesize these views of classroom writing and integrate interdisciplinary writing practices into the leadership classroom.

The primary author of this article is a senior lecturer who specializes in first-year writing and literary criticism at Vanderbilt University. The secondary author is a professor of business at Carroll University, a private university in Waukesha, Wisconsin. Seeking advice on how to scaffold written assignments to better prepare students for their future careers, the leadership professor consulted the composition faculty to incorporate additional writing exercises into her class. The results of our collaboration have focused on two best practices for writing pedagogy, scaffolding assignments and implementing guided peer review. We selected these aspects of the writing process because students need a theory of revision that “encompasses the whole of the composition” and that establishes revision as a “sense of writing as discovery—a repeated process of beginning again, starting out anew” (Sommers, 1980, p. 386).

The authors applied the following scaffolding and peer review methods to a leadership course titled “Leadership and Personal Effectiveness,” which introduces students to the leadership theories of Covey, Kouzes and Posner. The learning outcomes for the course emphasize students’ ability to: “communicate effectively in written presentations;” “develop and reflect upon a leadership project” and “evaluate leadership habits and practices in specific contexts” (Wisniewski, 2025). Three written assignments are required in the course. The first is a description of an eight-week-long personal-best leadership project in which students will start a new endeavor or make changes in their lives. They must describe their project, goals, objectives and outcomes. They must dedicate two hours each week leading others in their project. Projects have included shopping for elderly neighbors, picking up litter in the community and collecting donations for humane societies. The second written assignment is a reflection on their projects. This prompt asks them to describe:

- (1) How well they met their goals;
- (2) What aspects of the project proved to be difficult or frustrating;
- (3) What are some adjectives that describe how they now feel about the project;
- (4) How do their feelings compare now to how they felt at the beginning of the project;
- (5) What personal values were most important and,
- (6) How did they incorporate each of Covey’s habits into their projects?

The third written assignment is a final-exam essay in which students analyze a leader through the framework of Kouzes and Posner’s five leadership practices. Possible revisions to the course are described below to further emphasize students’ engagement with writing pedagogy through scaffolding and peer review activities.

Scaffolding

The English department and the School of Business in our respective Universities have similar program learning outcomes (PLOs): to think critically and to communicate effectively. In either department, a set of scaffolded assignments represents one of the most effective methods for developing mastery in navigating the writing process. Such assignments may include daily writing exercises that ask students to: brainstorm, outline, establish a methodology, prepare a literature review, draft text and revise.

Scaffolding is vital to the writing process, because students have increasingly understood academic writing as product-oriented (Haswell, 1988). Scholars have repeatedly found that advanced writers view writing as an iterative, recursive process (Flower, 1979; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Perl, 1979; Pianko, 1979). The written assignments in the leadership course are

perfect for scaffolding. In planning for scaffolding, we utilized backward design. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) describe the backward design process as requiring instructors to: identify desired results, determine acceptable evidence and only then plan learning experiences and instruction. For the personal-best leadership project, a major outcome is reflecting on an experience and how the writer responded to challenges. Therefore, a scaffolding assignment should help students mediate written reflection between the initial project proposal (due week two) and the reflection (due week eight). This can be accomplished by requiring students to draft a weekly journal. Students would use this journal to reflect on their progress by answering the bullet points above in a few sentences. While students can submit their journals electronically for a completion score, the purpose of the assignment is primarily to provide an informal, low-stakes environment to draft and redraft their experiences. With weekly reflections in hand, students need not reflect on their entire experience a few nights before the due date. Instead, they have a collection of notes written during their experiences they can revise while more accurately charting their thought process throughout the project. As these journals are not modular, students will consistently revise their goals, challenges, feelings toward the project, values and Covey's theoretical framework for the process.

For the third project, students should continue to practice revision, as well as demonstrate research skills. The prompt for the third written assignment is as follows:

Choose a well-known leader (political or religious) and describe how he/she has incorporated each of Kouzes and Posner's Practices of Leadership and related commitments in his/her life (Wisniewski, 2025).

The primary author suggested changing this assignment to an actual leadership-related research question so that students can practice research skills, the revision processes, peer analysis, and feedback—essential skills for the workforce. Together, we developed the following prompt:

Investigate the correlation between leaders demonstrating Kouzes and Posner's Five Practices and increased employee engagement, productivity, and job satisfaction in a particular industry or organization. As part of your investigation, you must cite three academic sources in addition to Kouzes and Posner.

As with the personal-best leadership project, backward design is an excellent approach to creating scaffolding assignments. For a research-oriented project students can continue to practice revision in a more formal capacity. To promote a more traditional academic revision process, a first draft of the research project can be due at about the three-quarters mark of the semester. This draft need not be the length of the final project, as students should have their arguments in flux as they continue researching and reflecting. In addition to a first draft, the instructor can require students to create a literature review of the three academic sources they plan to cite in their essay. Requirements for literature reviews can vary, especially in introductory courses. For this example, the primary author recommends that students include a citation, a summary of the author's argument, the relevant supporting evidence and a one-sentence summary relating the source to their essay's argument. This assignment encourages students to reflect deeply about how *and* why they are citing a source. These scaffolding suggestions allow the leadership class to implement additional writing instruction without significantly modifying assignment goals and outcomes.

Peer review

Once students have reflected on their own writing, they are ready to apply what they have learned. Peer review is an ideal method for this application and introducing students to the idea that academic writing is communal. Multiple studies, including Baker (2016) and Gibbs and Simpson (2005), have established the benefits of implementing in-class peer review. While peer review may appear to benefit the assessee disproportionately, most recent research

supports major benefits to the assessor (Brown, Rust, & Gibbs, 1994; Dominick, Reilly, & McGourty, 1997; Li, Liu, & Steckelberg, 2010). Assessors develop critical skills including organization, providing appropriate evidence and identifying sufficient analysis for each claim (Boud, 1995; De Grez, Valcke, & Roozen, 2012; Dochy *et al.*, 1999; Falchikov, 2002). Baker (2016) also highlights student development as independent and autonomous writers as a benefit to assessors. Boud and Falchikov (2006) find that peer review encourages active engagement as a method of learning. Topping (1998) points to “time on task, engagement, and practice, coupled with a greater sense of accountability and responsibility” as key skills resulting from peer review (p. 255). Finally, peer review not only helps with the writing process but also disciplinary content (Cartney, 2010; Herrington & Cadman, 1991).

Such benefits should answer student objections that running a draft through an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot can replace peer feedback. While AI can encourage students to spend more time-on-task and increase their engagement, it cannot provide students with the communal experience of identifying strengths and potential revisions in peer drafts, limiting their metacognitive reflection. In addition to being a valuable pedagogical tool, peer review is easy to incorporate into a class if the instructor provides students with sufficient time and sets clear expectations.

Reigstad and McAndrew (1984) summarize four valuable pedagogical principles of peer review: (1) establish and maintain rapport, (2) the writer does the work, (3) higher-order concerns (HOCs) come before lower-order concerns (LOCs) and (4) peers do not have to be experts. While all four principles are important for peer evaluation, the application of the first two requires less explanation. Students who work together in an extended peer review process learn to trust and respect each other’s insights. A compelling case can be made, however, for switching peer review groups regularly – students encounter different perspectives.

Reigstad and McAndrew’s position that HOCs should take precedence over their lower-order counterparts takes on added importance because HOCs have a significant impact on the reader’s comprehension of a written work (e.g. thesis statement, clarity and structure). Alternately, LOCs include sentence structure, punctuation, word usage and spelling. When introduced to HOCs and LOCs, students are quick to identify each; otherwise, they will often limit themselves to recommending surface-level changes (Baker, 2016). Specific suggestions are a vital part of the peer review process. There is little value in vague comments like “this paragraph needs work.” The purpose of peer review is not to correct mistakes, but rather to identify the author’s rhetorical objectives and assess how effectively they are executed.

While there are many strategies for conducting an effective peer review, students work best when they have seen the process modeled. After students read a sample essay, the instructor should facilitate a discussion focusing on:

- (1) The author’s central argument in, and goals for, the project;
- (2) Which of the author’s choices are most successful at advancing the central argument and,
- (3) Which modifications would more effectively reach the project’s goal.

Modeling peer review for students allows an opportunity to demonstrate constructive criticism, provides students with a low-stakes opportunity to practice and creates an intervention point if participants are over- or under-critical.

To implement peer review in the introductory leadership course: schedule peer review at least a week in advance of the current project’s due date; require students to annotate peer drafts and implement a standardized feedback process that organizes and expands upon peer annotations. While there are many methods for collecting peer feedback, an evaluation form is a straightforward method of introducing students to the process of peer review. The instructor may create a worksheet much like model below, which the primary author uses in his writing courses.

Peer review evaluation tool questions

- (1) (To be completed by the peer reviewer):
- (2) What is the main argument of this essay?
- (3) Which aspect of this essay represents the author's most effective work? Why?
- (4) Please indicate two examples from the essay where the author is using the technique described above in a particularly effective manner. Why are they especially effective?
- (5) What is one HOC which, if addressed, would make the essay significantly clearer?
- (6) Please indicate two examples from the essay where the author could make specific changes to address this HOC. How would you recommend making this change and why would you recommend that strategy?
- (7) Are there any patterns to LOCs that you would like to address at this time?
- (8) Finally, what is one element of the essay that you enjoyed the most while reading?

Assessment of impact on course learning outcomes

As stated above, one of the course learning outcomes is "to communicate effectively in written presentations." When the scaffolding and peer review strategies are implemented in the class during the coming semester, data from a rubric that assesses students' writing ability including organization and structure; clarity of ideas, depth of reflection and analysis and use of evidence will be compared to students' writing in previous semesters.

Conclusion

This "Teaching Tool" presents strategies for incorporating writing pedagogy, including scaffolding and peer review in an undergraduate leadership class. Writing is an essential leadership skill as the written word demonstrates clarity, transparency and consistency. Scaffolding and peer review in a leadership class can make a profound difference in our future leaders' writing skills.

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