

GIFT: Demonstrating Course Competencies and Student Expertise through a Thought Leadership Assignment

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ABSTRACT

This teaching brief presents an end-of-course essay assignment that tasks graduate students to share their expertise publicly through a thought leadership-style article. Through stepping out of the role of “learner” and into the role of “expert” and publishing their articles on LinkedIn, students face the heightened stakes of sharing their insights beyond the classroom walls. By highlighting key knowledge, skills, and abilities they have gained through their graduate education, students can demonstrate the unique perspective and value they offer future employers while further developing their own professional brand. This assignment was developed for a course focused on accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media; however, the thought-leadership style essay can be adapted to fit the learning outcomes of many public relations courses.

Keywords: graduate education, thought leadership, reflection, social media, writing

Assignment Overview

Aligning with the public relations strategy of thought leadership, this assignment creates an opportunity for students finishing their master's in public relations to demonstrate their expertise in a professional, public way. This end-of-course essay was developed for an elective on accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media for a professionally oriented graduate program. The assignment prompt asked students to reflect on the course material and offer practical recommendations for public relations practitioners (and others engaged in the development and approval of digital content). Students had to determine, from all the knowledge they have gained through a class, which ideas they can write about in a novel and interesting way to communicate their expertise.

Students were tasked with publishing their essay as an “article” on their LinkedIn accounts and submitting the URL to their article through our course learning management system. Finally, students were asked to read and engage with at least three of their classmates’ articles to underscore the dialogic affordance of the social platform and role of dialogue in thought leadership. The core competencies for a course focused on social media content and strategy were particularly germane for this assignment design. However, many courses across public relations curricula could incorporate thought leadership assignments to encourage students to highlight the knowledge, skills, and abilities they have gained through their graduate education to their professional networks.

Assignment Rationale and Connection to Public Relations Practice

According to the *Standards for a Master's Degree in Public Relations: Educating for Complexity* (CPRE, 2012), professional graduate programs should “provide students and their present and future employers with a competitive advantage” by teaching the “nuances of public relations and management techniques as well as leadership, business, and communication skills” (p. 5). Additionally, the Commission on Public

Relations Education recommended that “educators and practitioners need to forge closer relationships in order to share the latest knowledge, skills, and ethical practices with students” (CPRE, 2023, p. 8). Therefore, to best prepare students for their future careers, educators within professional graduate programs must stay on top of changes within the field and teach our students to do the same. By modeling attending to trends, participating in professional organizations and networks, and collaborating with practitioners, we can help ensure that our programs set our students up for where the industry is headed. However, providing such training is insufficient for students to be competitive on the job market. As written communication is a critical hard skill and interpersonal communication is a necessary soft skill for public relations practitioners (Brunner et al., 2018), our students need to feel confident in their ability to communicate the unique value they can bring to an organization. Thus, our programs must incorporate opportunities for students to practice demonstrating their expertise.

Thought leadership provides industry-specific insight and guidance publicly, which helps brands, organizations, and individuals stand apart from their peers and competitors. As explained in Thelen et al. (2020), thought leadership is generally viewed as “the act of creating and publicizing valuable and innovative ideas that influence the way people think about a wide range of topics” (p. 28). For example, the Arthur W. Page Society has shared thought leadership content focused on the role of Chief Communication Officers over the last two decades (Bolton, 2022). When our graduates enter the workforce, they may propose a thought-leadership strategy to a client to help establish or maintain the client’s reputation as an expert in their field. Therefore, the assignment presented in this paper provides hands-on practice drafting and posting the kind of content this strategic recommendation requires. Being a thought leader means becoming a “source of trusted intelligence that people feel inspired

to follow" (Anderson & Marshall, 2025, p. 70). The Communications Network's (2023) research-based, online tool kit on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) promotes thought leadership as one of eight specific communications areas, arguing it is "critical to equip leaders with messaging that uplifts the values of DEI" (para. 1). As such, this assignment gave my students the opportunity to further establish their own professional brands and identities as industry experts by demonstrating their authority over the specialized knowledge related to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media acquired through the course.

Young (2013) argues that effective thought leadership generates dialogue and inspires thinking and learning. The dialogic affordances of social media platforms make for fertile ground for thought-leadership tactics. With this in mind, the present assignment had students share their thought-leadership essays with their LinkedIn networks because this social media platform caters to users who want to connect, network, and build their professional brand. Students were then asked to read and respond to a few of their peers' articles, engaging in thoughtful dialogue about their specialized knowledge, demonstrating their ability to appreciate a colleague's work, ask follow-up questions, and develop ongoing conversations about relevant public relations topics. This engagement with their peers' articles created an opportunity for students to engage in the primary ways that leaders show empathy: (1) paying attention and listening well, (2) identifying other team members' strengths and limitations, (3) always asking questions to be sure they understand others, and (4) caring about the personal well-being of others and showing sensitivity and understanding (Meng et al., 2024). As an empathetic leadership style is predominant within communication teams and is positively associated with workplace satisfaction (Meng et al., 2024, p. 41), public relations graduate students are better prepared for the industry when given opportunities to develop this skillset.

LinkedIn's article feature allows members to share long-form, in-depth content that can be distributed beyond their personal connections, which is ideal for gaining recognition as an area expert in a relatively easy and low-cost way. The wide reach of the LinkedIn article feature offers the additional benefit of extending course discussions beyond the walls of the classroom, inviting engagement from practitioners whose feedback otherwise would not be accessible and introducing students' ideas to professionals with whom they may not connect otherwise. This directly corresponds with CPRE's (2023) recommendation to "develop course content with a strong focus on students communicating on a personal level with key audiences, including effective networking for the short and long term" (p. 22). In addition, this potential network-building outcome can positively impact employment opportunities, as Harrison et al. (2024) found support for a positive, indirect effect from network building on the probability of obtaining an interview and being hired.

In addition to the course's explicit learning outcomes discussed below, this assignment can meaningfully impact students' presence within their online professional networks. Although graduate student-specific data is not available, Carmack and Heiss (2018) found that undergraduate students tend to be infrequent and passive users of LinkedIn. Passive and infrequent use of the social platform limits the ways in which students can benefit from the networking site. Through publishing their articles, students who tend to passively use LinkedIn experience a new way to actively participate on the site. Beyond recognition as an expert, proving knowledge to one's followers through thought leadership has been shown to build trust with the audience and gather social capital (Barry & Gironda, 2018). By providing students with the opportunity to show what they have learned through their graduate education to potential employers and colleagues, this assignment can also help students build trust and social capital within their networks. Finally, these articles can also advance

students' ability to communicate effectively in writing, a critical skill for public relations practitioners (CPRE, 2012).

Student Learning Goals and Evidence of Student Learning

The student learning goals for the thought leadership assignment aligned with the overall goals of the Social Media Strategies for Accessibility, Diversity, and Inclusion course. By completing the thought leadership assignment, students demonstrated their ability to:

1. Distinguish unique characteristics and concerns related to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion.
2. Distinguish contemporary social media trends and trend forecasts in relation to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion.
3. Recognize concepts related to accessibility practices for social media.
4. Recognize concepts related to concerns connected to diversity and inclusion for social media planning and practices.
5. Understand and apply the mechanisms for evaluating social media efforts.
6. Adapt theory and research findings to practical social media planning and content.
7. Participate in interactive and collaborative discussions about various accessibility, diversity, and inclusion concerns.

Specifically, the content of the articles and comments served as indicators of what the students learned from the course by providing space to demonstrate expertise on material of their choice related to accessibility, diversity, and inclusion on social media (learning goals 1-5 and 7). Students brainstormed topics, researched and wrote articles related to various relevant topics, including the perils of inauthenticity for DEI efforts (Scalenghe, 2024), the value of SMARTIE goals (Taylor, 2024),

why digital accessibility must be a priority for public relations (McIsaac, 2024), the public relations practitioner's role in guiding accessible content (Gass, 2024), and the importance of having a diverse public relations team (Marks, 2024). Moreover, students had the chance to apply best practices presented in the course within their articles, such as adding alternative text to images embedded in their articles, using #CamelCase for any hashtags included, and using people-first language (learning goal 6).

As their submissions were shared publicly, students received feedback from connections outside of the class roster, a unique aspect of this assignment design. This feedback included reactions available within LinkedIn (e.g., like, love, celebrate, insightful, curious), comments, and reposts. The average number of reactions each student received on their LinkedIn article ($M = 12.5$, $SD = 5.1$) was greater than comments ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 2.0$). The comments on the articles were markedly positive, regularly featuring adjectives such as “informative,” “insightful,” and “actionable.” In addition, five of the 12 published articles were also reposted at least once.

Students reflected on their experience drafting and publishing their articles in a follow-up discussion. Some students described initial apprehension about what topic(s) to focus on in their article, and several more expressed concern about how they would frame their articles or what example(s) to use to best inject their own insights and point of view. They acknowledged that once they decided on a particular topic and example, they felt more confident about how to approach the assignment. The discussion also highlighted that the class varied on how frequently students tended to log in to LinkedIn and the ways in which they used the platform. This assignment was the first time anyone in the class had used the article feature, and students described this experience in the following ways:

- “I’m glad to have learned more about the article feature. I’ve read many thought leadership articles on there

before, but I didn't know I could publish one myself.”

- “I am surprised by how many people have read my article already. A previous internship supervisor of mine commented on my article and tagged every member of their team!”
- “I like how much more substantial and professional an article looks than normal post.”
- “Having professionals and peers on LinkedIn as my target audience [instead of my professor] made me pause and think about how to show my learning in a different way than we're normally asked to do. It was a fun mental exercise, and I'm proud of what I ended up publishing.”

After this discussion, a few students also shared with me that members of their LinkedIn network private-messaged them to ask about their experience in the graduate program because they were impressed by their articles. This was an unforeseen outcome, and we expressed our pride in their ability to represent our program so well.

Assignment Template

Format Instructions

Instead of submitting a Word document or PDF for this assignment, you will be posting your writing as an “article” on LinkedIn and then submitting the URL to Blackboard. Your article should be between 500-750 words and must include at least one image. Guidance on how to publish an article on LinkedIn is [available here](https://www.linkedin.com/help/linkedin/answer/a522427) (<https://www.linkedin.com/help/linkedin/answer/a522427>) and [here](https://theinacademy.com/how-to-write-great-linkedin-articles/) (<https://theinacademy.com/how-to-write-great-linkedin-articles/>).

Prompt

This assignment is designed to help you further develop your professional brand through the drafting and publishing of a thought leadership article on LinkedIn.

To begin, you need to reflect on the material from this course and decide what topic(s) you would like to share insights about. A few example topics include current best practices for developing accessible content, why it is important for PR practitioners to understand the distinction between allyship and activism, or what multidimensional diversity means for campaign planning and implementation. Take some time to think deeply about what content you found most valuable from the course that you believe would resonate with other public relations students, practitioners, and others engaged in the development/approval of digital content.

As a piece of thought leadership, your article should demonstrate mastery of the topic and offer insightful recommendations. The strongest articles will include an actual scenario or example to illustrate your point(s) more fully – this should NOT be an example from our course material. Additional guidance on writing a thought leadership article is [available here \(<https://www.clear2b.com/news-views/Howtowriteathoughtleadershiparticle/>\)](https://www.clear2b.com/news-views/Howtowriteathoughtleadershiparticle/). Moreover, as your article will be published through the social media platform LinkedIn, be sure to follow the best practices for accessible and inclusive content that we have focused on throughout the term.

Finally, you will need to read and comment on at least three of your peers' articles to further develop the discussions happening there.

Assignment Grading Rubric

The following rubric corresponds with the thought leadership assignment. The three primary concerns considered in the grading of the articles were the quality of insights offered, the integration of relevant course concepts, and the application of best practices in accessible content (60% of the grade). Of secondary concern, the structure, clarity, and professional style of the writing and engagement with peers' articles were assessed (30%). Finally, the inclusion of a visual element and formatting were assessed (10%).

Table 1*Thought Leadership Assignment Grading Rubric*

Criteria	Excellent (Full Points)	Good (85%)	Fair (75%)	Needs Improvement (65%)	Points
Content & Insight	Deep understanding, original insights, strong example not from course material	Good insights, relevant example	Basic understanding, limited insight, underdeveloped example	Lacks clarity or understanding, no or inappropriate example	/30
Structure & Clarity	Clear, logical structure, smooth transitions, concise and engaging writing	Mostly clear, minor flow issues	Some structural or clarity issues	Disorganized or hard to follow	/10
Professional Tone & Style	Professional, confident tone, strong personal voice and branding	Generally professional, minor inconsistencies	Tone may be too casual or inconsistent	Unprofessional tone or style	/10
Use of Course Concepts	Effectively integrates key concepts with clear application	Appropriate use, may be surface-level	Limited or unclear use	Missing or misapplied concepts	/15
Accessibility & Inclusivity	Follows best practices (alt text, plain language, inclusive language)	Mostly accessible, minor issues	Some practices missing	Lacks attention to accessibility/inclusivity	/15
Visual Element	Relevant, high-quality image enhances the article	Image included, may lack relevance or quality	Poorly integrated or low-quality image	No image or inappropriate image	/5
LinkedIn Publishing & Formatting	Properly published with appropriate formatting (headings, spacing, etc.)	Minor formatting issues	Major formatting issues	Not published correctly	/5
Peer Engagement	Thoughtful, constructive comments on at least 3 peers' articles	Comments present but lack depth	Fewer than 3 comments or superficial	No peer engagement	/10

Teaching Note

As previously stated, the thought leadership assignment design could be adapted to a variety of course contexts. The primary component of the grading rubric that would require revision is the “Accessibility & Inclusivity” row, as it is unlikely that these best practices are a student learning goal for public relations courses focused on other topics. Regardless of course content, it is recommended that this type of assignment only be implemented toward the end of a graduate program. By extending the audience beyond classmates and the instructor, this assignment comes with higher stakes than most traditional assignment types. Assigned too early in a graduate program, students may feel they have not yet gained enough critical knowledge or skills to serve as a content expert, and the resulting articles may be less effective at demonstrating the impact of the program’s curriculum. Furthermore, students’ professional networking and job hunt can particularly benefit from being more active on LinkedIn in the semester leading to graduation.

If students have not been introduced to the strategy of thought leadership previously in the curriculum, it would be helpful to incorporate class time focused on what thought leadership is and how it can be used by both organizations and individuals to build and maintain relationships. The Anderson and Marshall (2025) article cited previously offers clear and succinct recommendations for drafting thought leadership content. Prahl et al. (2022) present thought leadership within an issue management context. Thelen et al. (2020) specifically examine thought leadership efforts by U.S. public relations agencies on Twitter. Additionally, I recommend finding some examples of thought leadership articles on LinkedIn relevant to the class materials so students can familiarize themselves with both contemporary, professional discussions on the topics they have been learning about and the format of LinkedIn articles.

Finally, it is necessary to confirm that all students have a LinkedIn profile and understand the value of developing their professional brand and

network through the website, well ahead of introducing this assignment. It should not be taken for granted that all students are on the site – or even that they wish to be. In a situation where a student has a legitimate reason why they would prefer not to create a LinkedIn account or publish a publicly available article (for example, safety concerns related to being publicly searchable), then you can adapt this assignment to remove the requirement to publish their article on LinkedIn. The student(s) can submit their article draft directly to the instructor, and copies of their peers' articles can be provided to the student to read and develop comments to be submitted back to the instructor as well. Depending on the specifics of the student's concern about publishing a publicly available LinkedIn article, it may be appropriate to encourage them to explore other avenues to gain the experience of publishing their work, such as student media outlets on campus or some other industry publication.

Conclusion

Offering graduate students the opportunity to step out of the role of learner and into the role of expert through a thought-leadership assignment helps to prepare them for the next step in their career, where they will be expected to offer insights and recommendations in professional settings with regularity. The assignment also gives them experience thinking through both the conceptual and practical aspects of developing thought leadership content via LinkedIn's article feature. Plus, unlike a traditional assignment due directly to their professor, by publicly publishing their ideas as articles, the assignment helps students further develop their own professional brand as they begin their job search ahead of finishing their degree program. Having implemented this assignment last spring, students reported positive experiences sharing their expertise with their professional networks and received encouraging feedback on their articles. As soon-to-be-graduates and alumni are key representatives of any university program, the work produced through a thought-leadership

assignment shines a light not just on individual students' knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also on the educational and professional development opportunities provided by their graduate program.

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