

Gaining Twenty-First Century Employment Skills: Using LinkedIn to Teach Online Presentation of Self

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Abstract

This original teaching activity is conducted throughout an online class unit on maintaining a professional image online. The activity provides online students with authentic experiential assessments that offer them insight into how others view their LinkedIn profiles as presentations of self and how students can use impression management strategies to adjust their public image. This learning activity has students apply Higgins's (1987) three domains of self, including the actual self, ideal self, and ought self, to their LinkedIn profiles, during the peer assessment process, and while conducting a self-analysis. This unit activity is a useful tool for teaching students about their presentation of self and sharpening 21st-century employment skills.

Keywords: LinkedIn, Online learning, Peer assessment, Presentation of self, Self-assessment

Courses: Business and Professional Communication, Corporate Communication, Communication for Professionals, Organizational Communication, Social Media for Professional Use

Objectives: In this unit activity, students in an online class consider Higgin's (1987) actual self, ideal self, and ought self while constructing a LinkedIn profile. Students use peer and self-assessment techniques to demonstrate their

abilities to differentiate between the three domains of self and strengthen their 21st-century employment skills.

Introduction and Rationale

With the increased demand for online asynchronous college courses, there is an influx of instructors who are asked to deliver formal education via the Internet (Lederman, 2018). As more online courses are offered, instructors

seek ways to develop transferable knowledge and 21st century employment skills, such as they would, in a face-to-face classroom. Hart Research Associates (2015) reported that of 400 employers surveyed, 81 percent rated analytical and critical thinking skills as the fifth most important learning outcome to employers. In this unit learning activity, students develop their online presentation of self and hone their critical thinking and evaluative skills through the use of self and peer assessment.

During a unit on maintaining a professional image, online students complete a unit activity that asks them to use LinkedIn to create a professional profile. LinkedIn offers a means to positively affect students' learning outcomes (Crook, & Pastorek, 2015; Chiang & Suen, 2015; Engstrom, 2019; Peterson & Dover, 2014; Slone & Gaffney, 2016; Tifferet & Vilnai-Yavetz, 2018). Students' awareness of their own and others' presentations of selves online is salient because the National Research Council of the National Academies (2012) classified self-presentation as an interpersonal competency that employers view as a valuable 21st-century skill. Despite the importance of maintaining a professional profile, class discussion indicates that students are often unaware of how to create and evaluate their online image. Not only is LinkedIn an online leader in virtual networking but is free for users and provides students with an authentic experiential experience outside the brick-and-mortar boundaries of a university.

This activity uses Higgins's (1987) three domains of self, including the actual self, ideal self, and ought self, as a foundation for teaching students about their presentation of self online. Higgins proposes that people have three domains of self: (a) our actual self is the representation that we or someone else believes we actually possess; (b) the ideal self is the one that we or someone else would like us to possess; and (c) the ought self is our representation of the attributes that we or another person believes we should possess. By completing this activity, students gain insight into how others view their online presentations of self and how they can adjust their public image to appear more professional.

Peer assessment between students in higher education can improve the learning process (Falchikov, 1995); therefore, peer assessment is one method that instructors can use to teach students how to process content and make judgments using established standards. Flachikov and Goldfinch (2000) describe peer assessment as students "engaging with criteria and standards and applying them to make judgments" (p. 287). Peer assessment contributes positively to the development of employability skills, namely critical thinking

(Cassidy, 2006). Since adequate feedback is correlated with effective learning (Crooks, 1988; Kulik & Kulik, 1998), it is essential for instructors to find ways to incorporate peer assessment.

The reflective method of self-assessment urges students to compare and evaluate their actual, ideal, and ought selves based on peer assessments. Students engage in self-assessment when they "make judgments about aspects of their own performance, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning" (Boud & Falchikov, 1989, p. 529). Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans (1999) found that the accuracy of self-assessment improves over time, thus, incorporating self-assessment at all levels of education is warranted. By having students engage in a self-assessment exercise, this activity seeks to improve students' communication, critical observation, and reflection skills before entering the workforce.

The Unit Activity

Purpose

By completing this online unit activity, students consider Higgin's (1987) actual self, ideal self, and ought self as they create their LinkedIn profiles. Students strengthen their abilities to differentiate between the three domains of self and obtain the skills needed to succeed in today's workforce when completing the unit's assessments.

Process

This activity consists of four phases that occur during four, seven-day online learning plans in an upper-level undergraduate Business Communication course. Before completing this activity, students should spend time getting to know one another by engaging in community-building activities. These interactions enable students to have a point of reference when it comes to determining if a peer's LinkedIn profile is accurate in terms of education, experience, and interests.

Week 1. Instructors should use a Learning Management System (LMS) tool to explain the three domains of self and assign readings such as Higgins (1987) and Whitty (2008). It is also important to clarify the goals of the peer assessment project while also training students on how to evaluate a peer's LinkedIn profile, give constructive feedback, and implement the assessment tool accurately. An instructor should locate or construct training videos and practice exercises that teach students how to provide non-judgmental feedback and build a trusting collaborative environment (Topping, 1998). Instructors can read van Zundert, Sluijsmans, & Merriënboer's (2010) review of peer assessment

literature, for example, to find resources for helping students develop their peer assessment skills.

Week 2. As students build their LinkedIn profiles, they should incorporate a professional profile photo and background along with a tagline that uses keywords, skills, or interests that people in their chosen industry recognize. Students are asked to present their actual selves in that they use information that accurately represents the attributes that they believe they actually possess (Higgins, 1987). Students accomplish this by completing the education section and describing all post-high school employment and volunteer experiences, honors, and awards. Students should build their professional networks by connecting with the professor and at least five other people. Students must also identify a minimum of five interests and skills.

After their profile is complete, students create an initial discussion forum post that includes a catchy subject line, first and last name, and a hyperlink to their LinkedIn profile. Students then use content from their LinkedIn profile to write a 75-125 word summary that portrays their actual selves.

Week 3. After students' LinkedIn profiles and initial forum posting are completed, the activity then moves into the peer assessment phase. Similar to Crook and Pastorek's (2015) activity, learners assume the role of a potential employer and assess peers' profiles. Using knowledge gained in the peer assessment training and from previous interactions with the person, students should anonymously, yet publicly, comment on at least two peers' LinkedIn profiles. Providing feedback anonymously is useful because, as Lin et al. (2001) and Tsai (2009) found, students may be more willing to communicate with peers and engage in peer assessment if the grade and feedback are anonymous. To ensure anonymity, instructors can have the LMS match students randomly. The peer assessment feedback should be specific rather than holistic. Also, students should identify and provide examples of when the person's representation of self has consonance or dissonance with characteristics they believe that individual possesses.

Week 4. With Higgin's (1987) research in mind, the self-assessment phase asks students to reflect on their computer-mediated depiction of self and also explain whether their peers' assessments of their profiles confirmed or diverged from their intended representation of self. For instance, if a peer said the person presented more of an ideal self versus an actual self, the student would need to reflect on this finding in their self-assessment.

Additionally, students should also reveal their feelings about their peer assessment abilities, such as whether they had confidence in assessing their peers' profiles, identifying and describing their own feedback styles, and explaining their overall attitudes towards being the assessors and the assessed. This requirement helps the instructor gauge whether students are improving on skills they need to succeed in today's workforce such as being able to regulate emotions and being professional when responding to feedback.

Debriefing

Some online instructors may find it challenging to use an online platform to teach students about the three domains of self while also encouraging student engagement in the peer assessment process and evaluating comprehension of material. Informal feedback from students and their self-assessment posts indicate that this online activity, especially the profile construction and peer and self-assessments, is a useful tool for teaching students about their presentation of self and employment skills. Numerous students wrote that assessing their own and peers' domains of self increased their understanding of how a potential employer may interpret their online profile.

A few students shared their anxiety about the peer assessment process. This is often discussed in research on peer assessment (Topping, 2009). Other students, however, said that they were less anxious about the peer assessment requirement because the feedback was posted anonymously and they received adequate evaluative training. Some students also wrote they would be interested to see how their perception of self was portrayed in other online platforms such as an electronic employment portfolio.

Appraisal, Limitations, and Variations

Instructors implementing this assignment need to closely monitor the peer assessment process to motivate students to provide peer feedback civilly. By evaluating peers' profiles, students gain a point of comparison for what information leads to a more accurate portrayal of self and an understanding of how a potential employer may interpret their online image. The self-assessment phase also served as a means for refuting a peer's misperception of the person's actual self.

A potential limitation is that personal relationships may cause a lack of fairness in peer assessment. Although research indicates that relationships have a negligible effect on peer assessment (Magin, 2001), an instructor

seeking to avoid this obstacle could ask students to complete a form that identifies others in the class with whom they have a personal relationship. The instructor could then opt to have the LMS not pair these students.

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