

ASSIGNMENT CHOICE AND LEARNING: IDENTIFYING LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS

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ABSTRACT

Students in higher education institutions come from a range of backgrounds with differing home, educational, and life experiences. Institutions and faculty within them must create inclusive teaching and learning environments to enable all students to succeed. A guiding framework to support this aspiration is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which benefits all students, not only those with formally documented learning accommodations. This study examined the effectiveness of a reflection assignment in an online undergraduate leadership theory and application course. The course utilizes UDL principles to provide students with options for illustrating their understanding of course concepts. The study examined student preferences for the options provided and analyzed the reflections through the lens of a leadership behavior taxonomy to determine which types of leader behaviors students found most salient. The findings indicate that when presented with choice, students predominantly represented their learning with an artifact, suggesting a preference for an accessible form of assignment rather than a more abstract or digital form of representation. In terms of leadership behaviors, students focused primarily on relationship-oriented followed by task-oriented with change-oriented and external behaviors much less represented. This finding suggests that students chose to reflect on leader behaviors with which they have had the most experience.

Keywords: *Universal Design for Instruction, UDI, Universal Design for Learning, UDL, assignment choice, online learning, leader behaviors*

INTRODUCTION

Students in higher education institutions come from a range of backgrounds with differing home, educational, and life experiences (American Council on Education, 2023). As such, they approach learning in different ways. To accommodate these learning differences and create an inclusive teaching and learning environment in which all students can succeed, instructors must design courses and assignments that provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their mastery of concepts in a variety of ways.

A guiding framework for inclusive course design is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (CAST, 2024a). The underlying principles of this framework encourage the use of multiple learning pathways in terms of presenting course concepts and giving students assignment and assessment choices (Miller & Humphreys, 2023). These approaches can help

mitigate the completion gap for students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, educational, and cultural backgrounds (Custer, 2023; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

This study examined the effectiveness of a reflection assignment in an online undergraduate leadership theory and application course that utilizes UDL principles to provide students with options for illustrating their understanding of course concepts. The focus of this qualitative study was to determine the extent to which students utilized the choices offered and the saliency of different leader behaviors for students as represented in the options they chose.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two areas of research are relevant to this study. The first is Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the second is leader behaviors. UDL is related to course design while leader behaviors is a lens through which to view student mastery of course concepts. Both provide insights into how students learn.

Universal Design

Universal Design for Instruction (UDI), of which UDL is a curricular application, aims to offer instruction accessible to all learners, inclusive of gender, culture, learning style, age, skill level, and ability (Burgstahler, 2023). UDI's guiding principles comprise of *equity*—accessible and useful pedagogy; *flexibility*—assignment and assessment choices; *perceivability*—clear content and intuitive instruction; *inclusivity*—variation in pace and skill; consideration of physical needs; and *fostering learning communities*—dialogue and communication (Scott et al., 2003). UDI provides instructors with direction for giving students options for gaining knowledge and demonstrating learning (flexibility), for considering the pace of instruction to accommodate students' school, work, and home responsibilities (inclusivity) (Osam et al., 2017), for encouraging learning strategies that enable students to access content (equity), for ensuring comprehension of concepts (perceivability), and for designing interaction and dialogue into the learning experience (fostering learning communities).

The UDL framework focuses on providing options for multiple means of *engagement*; multiple means of *representation*; and multiple means of *action and expression* (CAST, 2024c). Engagement entails motivating students through choice, autonomy, relevance, and support; representation consists of providing options for presenting information such as text, images, and media; and action and expression involves offering options for students to show what they know as well as for timing and pacing. The framework encourages instructors and instructional designers to innovate and transcend traditional approaches and the conventional stereotypes of a university student. All three principles should be considered in course design to support learning gains (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Reinhardt et al., 2021).

Even modest course changes can potentially increase motivation, improve comprehension, and empower students to illustrate learning in their own way. Instructors can provide assignment rationale, encourage students to set goals, identify estimated assignment completion time, suggest study strategies, vary how content is presented, and facilitate peer and

instructor interaction (Goldowsky & Coyne, 2016; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Lepp & Fierke, 2017; Miller & Humphreys, 2023).

Cafeteria-style course design, in which students were offered a choice of assignments, resulted in over a third of students completing more assignments than required to earn the top course grade (Hanewicz et al., 2017), illustrating the impact of multiple means of engagement. A study of pre-service teachers in Australia found that the use of representation and engagement supported increased course activity as indicated by LMS log files and student self-report surveys, and decreased attrition in study units when compared with pre-intervention data (Garrad & Nolan, 2023).

Delivery modality. For online courses in particular, clear and transparent instruction (perceivability), and interaction (learning communities) can help learners from a range of backgrounds develop requisite skills and experience a sense of community, thereby increasing success (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Redmond et al., 2018). Quality standards should guide the development of online courses and ensure the use of a range of learning and assessment activities, media types, presentation methods, and resources to increase accessibility and measure learning (Delisio & Butaki, 2019; Parra, 2018). These directives reflect UDL principles such as providing multiple means of representation and action and expression. UDL principles are particularly valuable in developing countries as higher education institutions transition to online delivery and seek to overcome gaps in inclusive pedagogy, resources, training, and policy (Minsi, 2023). Online delivery must focus on both design and learning facilitation; the ODL framework fulfills these needs (Altowairiki, 2023).

Assessment. Learning assessment in higher education is in transition with students increasingly utilizing AI, thus challenging instructors to devise ways to encourage its appropriate and effective use while also preparing students to apply it in the workplace. Other changes in higher education, such as increasing use of online delivery and diverse student populations have led assessment scholars to identify several areas focus ((O'Neil, 2024). These map to UDI and UDL principles as shown below.

1. Technology-enabled assessment, adopting traditional practice for online contexts, addressing academic integrity issues, rethinking the reasons for assessment [*representation, action and expression*]
2. Increasing transparency through assignment instructions, criteria, and rubrics [*representation; perceivability*]
3. Sustainable assessment with formative and summative measures, partnering with students to design assessments, and peer and self-assessment [*engagement; action and expression*]
4. Focus on equity to address student diversity, reduce structural barriers, and adjust practices [*equity, perceivability, and representation*]
5. Emphasis on employability and authentic learning through authentic and meaningful assessment [*engagement*]
6. Multiple ways for students to show their learning, collaboration and dialogue among students, instructors, and community [*action and expression; fostering learning communities*]

This mapping scenario illustrates the relevance of UDL to current higher education practice, and specifically how to design and support learning outcomes assessment for a wide range of learners.

Implementation. Institutional support, with training that models the framework, can aid the effective adoption of UDL principles (Bastioni et al., 2023). Training for distance learning, for example, can have significant positive effects on helping faculty value diversity and adopt appropriate design principles and supportive pedagogical practices (Rusconi & Squillaci, 2023). Training that entails interaction among faculty with application assignments and course redesign can “further learners’ abilities to access, build, and internalize knowledge,” thereby developing “learners who are purposeful and motivated, resourceful, and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal directed” (Reinhardt et al., 2021, p. 439). These are the aims of UDL.

As participation in higher education widens, institutions must support faculty members’ understanding and response to diverse learners through collaborative planning and the provision resources and technology (Altowairiki, 2023; Davies et al., 2013; Hill et al., 2022; Wilhelm, 2023). Vision, strategy, support, and facilitation on the part of university leaders in parallel with faculty engagement are antecedents for successful implementation (Altowairiki, 2023; Bastioni, 2023; Bowman, 2016).

Empirical support. Studies show that UDL can improve learning and benefit a range of students (Capp, 2017; CAST, 2024a; Bastioni, 2023; Garrad & Nolan, 2023; Hanewicz et al., 2017; Meyers et al., 2014). It also potentially improves retention and degree completion (Davies et al., 2013). However, the empirical validity of the UDL framework needs further support.

Although the CAST organization cites research supporting the validity of the UDL framework (2024b), a study examining evidence for one of the checkpoints, multiple means of representation - alternatives for auditory information, found that the referenced studies are out of date, reflect obsolete concepts, do not represent participants with disabilities, and include irrelevant studies (Matthews et al., 2022). Another review of the framework identified the need to determine its effects on course design (Oliveira et al., 2019), with a further study indicating the need for research to determine how course design in general impacts learning (Minsi, 2023). Others have identified challenges with implementing the framework in higher education institutions (Almeqdad et al., 2023; Hills et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2011), which struggle with effective change management (Fovet, 2020).

Although the framework makes sense intuitively, it needs a strong and current scientific base. The present study sought to contribute to this gap by examining the effectiveness of giving students options for illustrating their learning and determining which leadership behaviors were most salient in their learning.

Leader Behaviors

The reflection assignment implemented in the leadership theory course aims to assess students’ abilities to identify leader behaviors, specifically what successful, impactful, effective leaders do. See Appendix A for details. As such, a leader behavior framework based on decades of research on effective organizational leadership was identified and is used as a lens to provide

insights into students' responses and measure their learning. We briefly review the theory and its conceptualization.

Leader behaviors “should be observable, distinct, measurable, and relevant for many types of leaders, and taxonomies of leader behaviors should be comprehensive but parsimonious” (Yukl, 2012, p. 66). Leadership research has emphasized different aspects of leadership over time and utilized different methods. Early research focused on leader-follower influence with the latter providing their perspective (Yukl, 2012). A limitation to this approach was that subordinates had only a limited view of the various contexts within which a leader operates. Research generally categorized behaviors as task-based and relations-based but with different terminologies (Fleishman, 1953; Halpin & Winer, 1957; Likert, 1961; House, 1971; Misumi & Peterson, 1985). From there, research expanded to include more external leader behaviors and spheres of influence (Kaplan, 1984, 1988; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973; Stogdill et al., 1962.), as well as to account for behaviors related to leading change (Ekvall & Arvonene, 1991; Yukl, 1999; Yukl et al., 2002). While a full review of leader behavior research is beyond the scope of the current study, it is briefly outlined to identify what led to the development of the hierarchical taxonomy of leadership behaviors used in this study to measure student learning.

The taxonomy consists of four broad categories with subcategories as follows (Yukl, 2012). Each aspect of the taxonomy is supported by research.

- Task-oriented – aimed at ensuring that people and resources are used efficiently to accomplish the organization’s mission
 - Planning – setting objectives, assigning responsibilities, allocating resources, determining sequencing and steps
 - Clarifying – ensuring people understand what to do and how to get expected results; communicating goals and deadlines; assigning tasks; explaining responsibilities, priorities, policies and procedures; establishing performance standards
 - Monitoring operations – assessing progress on tasks; gathering information to identify problems and determine needed changes
 - Problem solving – intervening to stop behaviors that disrupt operations; identifying causes of problems; providing direction to resolve problems; distinguishing between operational and complex problems; proactive or reactive identification of problems; taking disciplinary action
- Relations-oriented – aimed at enhancing skills and leader-member relationships; achieving organizational identification and mission commitment
 - Supporting – showing concern, listening, providing encouragement, expressing confidence, encouraging cooperation, mediating conflict
 - Developing – facilitating skill development leading to career advancement; providing advice, training, coaching, mentoring; facilitating teamwork
 - Recognizing – showing appreciation for performance and achievements through awards, ceremonies, promotions or pay increases
 - Empowering – giving autonomy and voice in decision making; delegating decision making

- Change-oriented – aimed at increasing innovation, organizational learning, adapting to external threats; initiation and facilitation of change
 - Advocating change – explaining the reasons for change, providing information, showing undesirable outcomes from current procedures, framing change as an opportunity, proposing strategies, influencing and involving people
 - Envisioning change – building commitment to initiatives; articulating vision and relevancy of the vision behind the change; using symbols, metaphors, stories and emotions to convey the vision; building confidence in success
 - Encouraging innovation – looking at issues from a range of perspectives, experimenting, applying ideas from other fields, creating a safe culture, supporting innovative and creative ideas
 - Facilitating collective learning – improving current work approaches, supporting new knowledge discovery and acquisition, building development teams, showing support for organizational learning from failure;, encouraging knowledge sharing
- External – improving organizational performance by obtaining external information, resources, and help; promoting the organization and its reputation
 - Networking – building positive relationships with those who can influence and provide support and resources; networking at meetings, conferences, events, clubs and through informal socializing; encouraging subordinate networking
 - External monitoring – analyzing the external environment to identify threats and opportunities; scanning the environment; tapping into networks and contacts; studying reports and publications
 - Representing – lobbying for resources, promoting the team and organization, negotiating agreements, influencing external stakeholders

Research on leader behaviors led to the conceptualization of early leadership theories taught in most leadership courses today such as path-goal (House, 1971), situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977), and the managerial grid (Blake & Mouton, 1964). Later leadership theories resulting from research on the effects of leader behaviors include transformational and charismatic leadership (Avolio et al., 1999; Bass, 2008; Conger & Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Shamir et al., 1993).

As these and other theories are taught in the leadership course, it is expected that students would identify aspects of these theories in their reflections on leader behaviors and that the UDL aspect of giving students choice in how to represent that learning would have a positive impact on their ability to provide evidence of their learning. The taxonomy adopted provides the means of identifying that learning. While research continues to build on the Yukl (2012) taxonomy, such as Behrendt et al.'s (2017) integrative model of leadership behavior, for purposes of examining student learning in an introductory, undergraduate leadership theory course, Yukl's more parsimonious model is both adequate and appropriate.

METHODS

The study site was a large, regional, open admission university in the US with approximately 45,000 students. The study met the requirements for human subjects research as

determined by the institution's research board. Participants were enrolled in four sections of an elective online leadership theory course over two 15-week semesters; the course was taught by three different instructors whose courses had the same content and assignments organized into weekly modules in the university's learning management system. The total number of participants was 57.

Qualitative methods were used to analyze the data and understand participants' experiences by means of the final reflective course assignment. The course was designed with UDL principles in mind; however, only the final "your choice" reflection assignment was analyzed for the purposes of this study. See Appendix A for assignment details. Qualitative research seeks to observe, describe, and understand specific phenomena (Kuper et al., 2008; Patton, 2002; Sargeant, 2012), which in this case, was the impact of assignment design on students' ability to illustrate their learning in an online leadership course.

Student reflection assignments were analyzed through the lens of the leadership behavior taxonomy to determine which types of leader behaviors students emphasized (Yukl, 2012). Behaviors in the model include task-oriented, relations-oriented, change-oriented, and external. The goal of the study was to determine the effectiveness of providing students with choice and autonomy in how to represent their learning, and whether some leadership behaviors are more salient in student learning than others.

Reflection responses were analyzed, coded, and categorized into themes using the constant comparative method within the framework of grounded theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each line (i.e., thought) in a reflection was considered a separate unit of observation, resulting in a total of 357 observation units from the 57 participants. Multiple data sources in terms of participants representing different course sections and instructors provided triangulation (Denzin, 2012; Sargeant, 2012).

Assignment Design

Although only the culminating reflection assignment was analyzed, an understanding of the course as a whole and its application of UDL principles may be helpful (CAST, 2024a; Firchow, 2016; Kennette & Wilson, 2019).

Engagement. Engagement emphasizes maximizing options for student interest through choice and autonomy; relevance, value, and authenticity while minimizing threats and distractions (CAST, 2024a, 2024c, 2024d). Students in the leadership course completed assignments that entailed rubric-based peer review and peer review feedback. They completed an authentic project that involved interviewing community leaders to get insights into the application of leadership theories to real life. For the final reflection assignment, students were given a menu of choices for representing their learning. These approaches were designed to motivate, sustain students' effort, and encourage them to be more self-regulated.

Representation. Providing options for multiple forms of representation supports increased accessibility, clarity, and comprehensibility of course content (CAST, 2024a, 2024c, 2024d). Students in the leadership course had overview videos from the instructor, LinkedIn

trainings, slides, videos, and readings to offer auditory and visual information and build their background knowledge. The slides highlighted big ideas and provided visualization. The discussions, quizzes, and peer reviewed reflective essays assisted with information processing and transfer of information to improve comprehensibility.

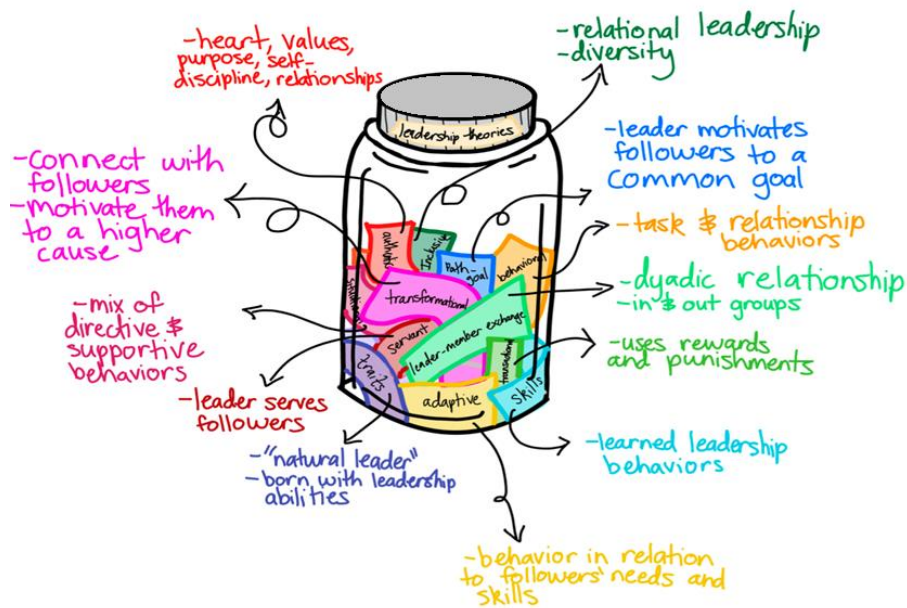
Action and expression. Students need varied ways to respond and navigate learning materials and show evidence of their learning. This enables monitoring of progress, strategy development, and goal setting. In the leadership course, students take open-book reading quizzes, write peer-reviewed reflective essays, and participate in discussion groups where they choose a topic and illustrate their learning in a “your choice” format such as a cartoon or meme, image, news story, personal experience, or concept map. The assignment rubrics and the use of rubrics for peer review guide self-reflection and goal setting and enhance students’ ability to monitor their progress. These design features also provide multiple means of communication with peers and opportunities to practice and improve with feedback from multiple sources.

FINDINGS

Regarding assignment choice, the majority of students (61.4%, $n = 35$) opted to represent their learning via an artifact (see Table 1). For example, one student selected a Swiss army knife as their artifact and stated, “Like a Swiss Army Knife, impactful leaders require multiple tools (behaviors) that can be utilized in multiple situations” (Participant 2). Another student represented their learning with a lighthouse and reported, “Just like a leader, it stands tall through terrible seas, providing a beacon of hope and direction to those navigating through challenges” (Participant 45). The second most popular (10.53%, $n = 6$) choice was a doodle/sketch (see Figure 1, Participant 47), followed by a real-world experience (8.77%, $n = 5$) and an article/blog (8.77%, $n = 5$).

Assignment Choice	Participant Count	% Participants
Artifact	35	61.40%
Doodle/Sketch	6	10.53%
Real-World Experience	5	8.77%
Article/Blog	5	8.77%
Social Media	4	7.02%
YouTube	1	1.75%
N/A (Did not comply with instructions)	1	1.75%

Figure 1



In analyzing the reflection content on leader behaviors, students predominantly focused on relationship-oriented behaviors, which appeared 264 times in their reflections. This was followed by task-oriented behaviors (146 times), change-oriented behaviors (112 times), and external behaviors (52 times). Among the specific behaviors, developing behaviors (106 occurrences), monitoring operations (58 occurrences), encouraging innovation (33 occurrences), and external monitoring (23 occurrences) were the most frequently mentioned within their respective dimensions. The analysis of reflection content on leader behaviors is reported in Table 2.

Table 2
FREQUENCY OF LEADER BEHAVIORS MENTIONED IN REFLECTIONS

Dimension	Behavior	Count	Sample
Relationship-Oriented	Supporting	80	“The machine represents a company, the cogs a team, the employees are the teeth of the cog and the leaders are the bolts holding it all together.” (Participant 55)
	Developing	106	“A leader is someone who brings people up to do their best instead of put them down which causes them to do their worst.” (Participant 57)
	Recognizing	34	“Chess also requires you to assess risk and reward any good chess player will not see results immediately.” (Participant 12)
	Empowering	44	“Teachers symbolize the transformative power of leadership, as they inspire and empower others to reach their full potential and make a difference in the world.” (Participant 29)
Task-Oriented	Planning	31	“Good leaders know how to assess the challenges ahead of them and take precautions to get ahead.”
	Clarifying	31	“Just as the clock tower ensures that Boston's residents and visitors are aware of the time and gives them a point of reference, good leaders offer vision and stability, ensuring their team remains aligned and on track.” (Participant 9)
	Monitoring Operations	58	“Adaptive Leadership and the idea of “Get on the Balcony” is a great example. Leaders “get on the balcony” to look at what’s truly going on behind the scenes.” (Participant 22)
	Problem-Solving	26	“This shows that an organization is a puzzle and the leaders are a puzzle piece that make it complete and operate.” (Participant 6)
Change-Oriented	Advocating Change	22	“The spark plugs signify the leader's innovative thinking and ability to ignite creativity and enthusiasm within the team.” (Participant 8)
	Envisioning Change	31	“A map will show you multiple routes you can take to get to your destination.” (Participant 10)
	Encouraging Innovation	33	“A leader’s vision can provide motivation, and increase productivity.” (Participant 14)
	Facilitating Collective Learning	26	“Whereas, leaders are on the front lines teaching their followers/peers HOW to do it by example.” (Participant 44)
External	Networking	7	“Chess represents strategic thinking and sometimes requires you to make multiple moves before seeing the results of your efforts.” (Participant 12)
	External Monitoring	23	“He informed me that to be a successful player, you must be able to see the bigger picture...” (Participant 40)
	Representing	22	“...it shows the importance of collaboration and inclusion within your company and the leadership behaviors that is presented.” (Participant 6)

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Students predominantly preferred the artifact option to represent their learning and were able to effectively illustrate their learning through this means of expression (CAST, 2024c; Goldowsky & Coyne, 2016; Meyer et al., 2014; Matthews et al., 2022). As such, instructors should consider integrating this option into assignments to a greater extent. The artifact option provided a concrete, tangible way for students to illustrate abstract ideas about leadership behaviors. Perhaps it was more accessible for students who might struggle with abstract or digital forms of representation. Compared to creating a YouTube video or a social media graphic, selecting an artifact and writing a brief explanation may seem less technically challenging. Artifacts also likely allowed for inclusion of things with personal significance.

The students' focus on relationship behaviors (developing) and task-oriented (monitoring operations) is likely a function of their work experience to date. As undergraduates, most students would likely not have had opportunities to see other aspects of the leader behavior framework such as leading change or external-facing behaviors such as networking, external monitoring, or representing (Yukl, 2012). Rather, students focused on their own experience and illustrated what they had learned in the course by selecting a preferred means of expression. Given the lack of breadth in students' depictions of leader behaviors, instructors may want to expand students' knowledge and experience with examples and discussion of other leader behaviors and help them recognize these behaviors in daily life and in the workplace.

Future research should address limitations of the current study by collecting demographic and work experience data. Gender may have an impact on the types of leadership behaviors students identify and choose to represent. Work experience would also be expected to impact the content of students' reflections and the range of leader behaviors with which they connect. A larger sample size would allow for comparisons of students' majors to determine potential differences in views of leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study illustrates the saliency of UDL principles in an online undergraduate leadership course to support student learning. It provides insights into student preferences for assignment options and suggests possible reasons for those preferences. Assignment options offer a flexible method of expression and accommodate a variety of cognitive and creative approaches. The study also found that students relate to the aspects of leader behavior with which they are most familiar, suggesting the need for instructors to expand students' knowledge of additional leader behaviors. Pedagogy that accommodates learning differences and affords multiple learning pathways such as assignment choices provides insights for instructors about student learning and creates an environment in which all students can succeed.

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APPENDIX A

ASSIGNMENT RATIONALE AND INSTRUCTIONS

The purpose of this assignment is to reflect on what you have learned in the class and what successful, impactful, effective leaders do. You can choose any of the options below. Be sure to emphasize leader behaviors in your reflection.

ARTIFACT - choose an artifact (object) that represents what you learned about the behaviors of impactful leaders. Include an image of the artifact and write a short paragraph to explain.

REAL WORLD - connect the course content to your life experiences. Generate an artistic representation of effective leader behaviors. Provide a brief explanation of what the artistic representation means and how it connects to the concepts you studied.

YOUTUBE - choose one meaningful topic you studied and create a 2-3 minute YouTube video. Your purpose should be to teach the concept to others while showing how it illustrates what effective leaders do.

SOCIAL MEDIA - create a graphic you could use in a social media campaign to promote this course. Briefly explain your thinking behind the graphic. Illustrate what you learned about effective leader behaviors.

DOODLE OR SKETCH - create a doodle or sketch documenting your most important takeaway. The map should connect 3-5 items related to how effective leaders impact performance within organizations. Include two (2) references related to the concept.

ARTICLE/BLOG - find an article or blog post related to one of the theories in the course and what successful leaders do. Post the link and explain why you think the article/blog should be included as a reading in the course.

Post your response to the assignment in the discussion.

To respond to a classmate's post, "like" it or add a comment.

You will be graded on the extent to which you show understanding of course theories and concepts, synthesize your learning, and illustrate it in a creative and meaningful way.