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# Teaching Students to Apply Foundational Knowledge Through the Use of Vignettes

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## Abstract

Students seeking degrees in recreation, park resources and leisure services (RPRLS) need to learn how to apply their foundational knowledge to address issues in professional practice. This paper describes the Vignette assignment, which is a conceptual paper that provides students the opportunity to develop complex thinking and advanced writing skills while demonstrating how they can apply theory to practice. Vignettes require students to explain *what* they do in their RPRLS specialization (e.g., recreation program design, program delivery, and program evaluation) and *why* they do it (i.e., provide a valid rationale). Theoretical bases, assignment instructions, teaching tips, a rubric, an example student paper, and learning outcomes are provided.

KEYWORDS: Recreation education, learning outcomes, writing, vignette, application

## Introduction

Students seeking degrees in recreation, park resources and leisure services (RPRLS) need to learn how to apply their knowledge to address issues in professional practice. Outcome 7.03.03 from the 2013 Council on Accreditation (COA) requires RPRLS students to “demonstrate the ability to apply relevant knowledge of professional practice, and the historical, scientific, and philosophical foundations to develop valid and sound arguments on which to base decisions about professional policies, procedures, practices, techniques, and related ethical and professional issues” (COA, 2008, p. 8). This writing assignment, called a Vignette, was developed over an eight-year period to help students learn how to develop this important ability. Completed papers, evaluated by rubrics, provide RPRLS teachers with evidence that students have met this COA learning outcome. The Vignette is a conceptual paper that requires students to explain *what* they do in their area of RPRLS professional practices (e.g., policies, procedures, practices, techniques and related ethical and professional issues) and *why* they do it (i.e., provide a valid rationale based on historical, scientific and philosophical foundations).

## Theoretical Bases for the Vignette

Collegiate Learning Assessment (2009) informed educators that traditional modes of assessment fail to assess students’ abilities in the authentic activities of their discipline, and assignments need to require complex performances that are central to the field of study. The Vignette assignment was developed to address this need.

The Vignette assignment requires complex thinking and advanced writing skills. Huba and Freed (2000) stated that students learn better when expectations for learning are high but attainable *when* these expectations are clearly communicated from the beginning. Therefore, students are provided with detailed learning outcomes, assignment information, a grading rubric, and a self-evaluation before they are coached on how to write their first Vignette paper.

The Vignette paper is assigned in a senior-level core course entitled “Philosophical and Current Issues in Leisure” taken by Recreational Therapy and Recreation and Park Management majors in a Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies. Many students struggle with conceptual papers like the Vignette because they are being asked to integrate and synthesize knowledge as well as write. The Vignette’s implementation models six principles indicative of a high-quality undergraduate education (Fink, 2003; Huba & Freed, 2000). These six principles are explained below with corresponding teaching tips for integrating each principle into classroom instruction so teachers can better assist students as they navigate this writing assignment:

1. Principle one informs educators that emphasis should be placed on students integrating knowledge from early years of study to their future professional careers. Teaching tip: this paper should be assigned in a senior-level class after students have completed entry-level courses in programming, leadership and other entry-level courses in their RPRLS area of concentration.
2. Principle two informs educators that students should be actively involved in their learning by using assessment to promote and diagnose their own

learning, and they need to engage in ongoing practice throughout the course. Emphasis should be on generating better questions and learning from errors. Teaching tips: set aside a day in class for each paper where students are required to bring their completed, typewritten draft to class for evaluation. There are several ways to accomplish this. Using the rubric, peers can evaluate each other's papers, students can evaluate their own paper, and teachers can project student papers on a screen for public evaluation. It is critically important to utilize the rubric during class for self, peer and/or teacher evaluation because in so doing, students will develop the skills to reflect on the quality of their ideas and writing in order to learn how to make improvements. The authors have students place the evaluated draft into a learning portfolio, which is turned in at the end of the semester to document in-class participation in the evaluation process. Students will take peer evaluation more seriously when the teacher spends class time teaching what is expected, and if the teacher spot checks evaluated papers for high-quality comments. Students are asked to write three Vignette papers during the course of the semester for repeated practice, and they are urged to place their best copy in their portfolio.

3. Principle three informs educators that classes should be structured to provide opportunities for prompt feedback and formative assessment, collaboration, adequate time on task, and out-of-class contact with faculty. Teaching tip: in addition to the suggestions under principle two, discussion boards, or other Internet chat venues, can be utilized to promote student-to-student and teacher-to-student exchanges. When a student willingly posts a paper in a public arena for teacher and/or peer evaluation, multiple students can benefit by reading the feedback.
4. Principle four informs educators that true learning takes place when students are required to devise solutions to ill-defined problems because ill-defined problems contain divergent subject matter. When addressing ill-defined problems, students learn to work towards multiple, equally valid interpretations. Teaching tip: the Vignette is purposefully designed as an ill-defined problem because it requires students to choose, define and defend important issues, concepts, ideas, which they support with professionally credible evidence. The authors recommend that teachers require students to select issues themselves, and teachers need to expect that this will challenge the students because it requires integrative thinking.
5. Principle five informs educators that assignment instructions must provide a clear vision of what excellent work looks like and feedback should be used to continually improve work and performance. Teaching tip: students receive a detailed assignment that includes a worksheet that walks them through a model thought process, a teacher written example (on a different topic), and a grading rubric.

6. Principle six informs educators that students who are required to reflect on their own learning learn more. Wiggins pointed out that, “despite the importance of this idea [self-assessment], it is a misleading phrase. Self-assessment is not the goal. *Self-adjustment* [emphasis added] is the goal” (cited in Huba & Freed, 2000, p. 35). Teaching tip: in addition to the tips discussed above, students are required to turn in a narrative self-evaluation with each Vignette. The self-evaluation requires them to comment on their paper’s strengths and weaknesses. When grading the papers, teachers can provide feedback to the students regarding the accuracy of their self-evaluations.

### The Vignette Paper Assignment

The Vignette assignment is a one-page, single-spaced, conceptual paper that requires students to compose a story containing four distinct paragraphs that demonstrate their best thinking about how to apply foundational concepts to address issues that arise in RPRLS professional practice. Just like the real world, there is no one right answer on how to best address an issue. Even when students write a Vignette utilizing the same issue and concept, they differ remarkably. Due to space limitations, each of the four paragraphs that comprise the Vignette will be described briefly along with the rubric’s criteria for excellence. An example student paper is included. Complete copies of the assignment, rubric and student self-evaluation can be obtained from the first author.

In the first paragraph, students choose an issue, describe the issue, and provide evidence. The issue should be related to the students’ anticipated area of RPRLS practice. Also, the issue must be suited to the concepts from the unit at hand. Students are instructed to be as specific as possible in terms of agency, population and setting, because being specific helps them create good ideas later in the paper. Students are also instructed to locate and supply credible evidence that supports the relevance of the issue in their area of practice. Since students often have difficulty identifying issues, they are provided with a list of potential issues adapted from the National Council on Therapeutic Recreation Job Analysis Study (NCTRC, 2008) and the *Candidate Handbook for the Certified Park and Recreation Professional exam* (NRPA NCB, 2010). Criteria for excellent performance from the grading rubric are: (a) The student begins the paragraph by identifying an issue suitable to address the unit(s) concepts; (b) The student provides a thorough description of the issue and provides evidence supporting its relevance in their area of RPRLS service delivery; and, (c) The issue is suitable to address with one of the concepts contained in the unit assigned for the Vignette paper.

In the second paragraph, students name the concept, describe the concept, and provide an example of the concept. The chosen concept (or theory) should inform potential solutions to the issue. This requires that students understand course concepts and demonstrate the critical thinking ability to select a concept that fits the issue. The purpose of this paragraph is to demonstrate a clear and complete understanding of the concept, which the student will subsequently utilize to guide the development of ideas for potential solutions. Criteria for excellence from the grading rubric are: (a) The student begins the paragraph by clearly identifying the concept; (b) The student

provides a complete and accurate description of the concept that utilizes paraphrases and quotes from credible, relevant sources; (c) The paragraph ends with an example that shows the student clearly understands the meaning behind the concept; and, (d) The concept is an excellent choice to address the issue identified.

In the third paragraph, students develop their ideas for addressing the issue, which should be informed by the concept they chose. It is recommended that students search for evidence in conjunction with idea development, because evidence often contains ideas students can build upon. This paragraph should be constructed from general to specific. Criteria for excellence from the grading rubric are: (a) The paragraph begins with a general explanation, in the student's own voice and informs the reader about how he or she plans to apply the concept to address the issue; (b) The student develops his or her ideas into two or more specific examples of ways the concept could be applied via programming, facilitation, management or other techniques; and, (c) Application ideas are creative and critical thinking is evident.

In the fourth paragraph, students provide evidence from professionally credible sources to support their ideas. They are instructed to locate and evaluate quality evidence from credible sources that supports the efficacy of their ideas. For the purpose of this assignment, professional association websites, textbooks, and recognized experts in their field are considered credible resources. Once the evidence is selected, students synthesize and present the information. Criteria for excellence from the grading rubric are: (a) The student begins the paragraph with a statement that explains, in clear and specific terms, what the evidence supports; (b) The student presents evidence that includes research, statistics and facts and/or statement(s) from an expert, professionally credible, source; (c) The evidence provides strongly supports the quality and importance of the ideas developed by the student; and, (d) The evidence presented is an excellent fit with the issue, concept and ideas paragraphs. The example paper that follows was provided with permission by Nicholas E. Bringolf, Recreation and Park Management major, East Carolina University.

### Sample Student-Written Vignette

**Issue:** The outdoor recreation profession often uses adventure games to help participants grasp certain concepts. Adventure games can also be used for fun, or to help group members get to know each other. However, if we are teaching a certain concept with an adventure game, the concept is often forgotten during the fun or challenge of the game. To help our participants understand why we play certain games, whether to build teamwork or communication, it is important to debrief and process following the game to help people better understand the concepts we are trying to teach. As stated by Cain and Jolliff (1998), "Processing, debriefing, and reflecting on the challenge and adventure experience is the part of adventure programming that allows the participant to incorporate new understanding into their knowledge base" (p. 297).

**Concept:** The concept I am applying to professional recreation practice is the Socratic Method. The Socratic Method is a method to gain knowledge through the use of open-ended questioning designed to draw knowledge from the participants (Gaarder, 2007). When a facilitator debriefs an activity, it is very common for them to use the

Socratic Method. A facilitator will ask the group open-ended questions to encourage the participants to start a dialogue and reach their own understanding of the concept portrayed in the game. For example, after an adventure game, a facilitator would start with a simple question such as “What did you observe about the group during the game?” and then move into more in-depth questions such as “What do you think the group could improve on during the next game?” Other Socratic Method-type questions would depend on the specific situation of the game and the behavior of the participants.

**My Ideas:** As a recreation professional, I can use the Socratic Method to help participants process adventure games. This system of question and answering allows participants to discover for themselves what they did well, what problems they had, and develop their own ideas for improvements. In a personal experience with a game I like to call Beach Ball Hold Up, two groups have to race while each member of the group holds up a beach ball with a certain body part. During this experience, one group was having trouble holding the ball up and they were getting frustrated and yelling at each other. During the processing, I asked Socratic Method-type questions to get the group to open up and discuss how they felt and why they felt that way. The participants began coming up with their own ideas about how they could improve their teamwork and avoid frustration. The Socratic Method can also be used to encourage people to want to learn (as seen in the Beach Ball Hold Up game), as well as in classroom situations like Johnson’s question and answer sessions (explained further in the Evidence section).

**Evidence:** There is evidence to support the Socratic Method. Johnson, a teacher that used the Socratic Method in her sixth grade class, had her students write down questions they wanted answered and then had a research and discussion session with the students (as cited in Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). This method of learning, the Socratic Method, proved to give students a higher willingness to learn (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999). There is also evidence to support the processing of adventure games. Cain and Jolliff (1998) stated that “processing the events that occurred while the participants were engaged in the activity allows the knowledge gained by a single participant to be available to the entire group” (p. 297). Thus, the Socratic Method can be used as an effective tool in processing adventure games.

### Learning Outcomes

In addition to COA learning outcome 7.03.03, as discussed in the introduction, two learning outcomes from the Philosophical and Current Issues in Leisure class relate to this assignment. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Critically examine the tenets of two philosophical belief systems (rationalism and empiricism) and selected psychological and sociological issues in order to describe creative and practical ideas for how these concepts can be applied to program design, delivery methods, and program evaluation in your area of professional practice.
2. Learn how to learn and to engage in inquiry into their own thinking and learning as evidenced by being self-directed, preparing drafts, and critically evaluating their own and others’ written work.

## Recommended Applications

This assignment is recommended for upper-level undergraduate students in RPRLS programs. It could be adapted for lower division students by assigning specific issues and/or telling them which concepts to use. The Vignette paper could be assigned both as an introductory course and a capstone course in order to measure students' acquisition of learning outcomes as they mature. Students with excellent papers should be encouraged to display their best paper in their portfolios. Data from rubrics used to grade student papers can be compiled in order to demonstrate how well students have met COA learning outcome 7.03.03.

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