

LinkedIn as a Phronetic Approach to Digital Literacy

Theresa M. Evans, Miami University

Eyman and Ball (2014) noted that nearly all composition today is digital, and they argue that composition studies should emphasize that shift in discussions about digital literacy. Nearly all job search and application processes today are digital, making LinkedIn a practical platform for teaching digital literacy. This essay elaborates on a phronetic approach to composition instruction using LinkedIn, responding to Eyman and Ball's call for classroom practices that focus on "three layers of digital composing": rhetoric, design, and code. As social practices and genre conventions move into the digital realm, instructors must learn how to help guide their students in the practical and ethical uses of those spaces. A digital presence assignment in a business communication course addresses Eyman and Ball's three layers of digital composing through an analysis of LinkedIn's rhetorical situation, creation of a LinkedIn profile page, and production of an elevator-speech video with closed captioning. This multimodal project includes self-reflection, problem-solving, and development of technical proficiency. A phronetic approach uses LinkedIn as a site of critical reflection for reading and composing, alternately asking students to question its conventions, maximize its affordances, and creatively resist its constraints, as they consider their purpose in participating in this professional network.

Eyman and Ball (2014) noted that nearly all composition today is digital, and they argue that composition studies should emphasize that shift in discussions about digital literacy. For composition instructors, Eyman and Ball recommended classroom practices they refer to as "three layers of digital composing": rhetoric, design, and code. This approach relies on phronesis—the kind of wisdom relevant to practical action—which requires an ability to discern how or why to act virtuously and a willingness to encourage practical virtue in others.

As social practices and genre conventions move into digital spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, writing instructors must be prepared to advise their students in the practical and ethical uses of those platforms. For example, courses in technical and business writing often include a segment on creating job application materials, and today nearly all job-search and application processes are digital, making LinkedIn an ideal candidate for taking a phronetic approach to digital literacy.

My interest in LinkedIn comes from teaching an advanced business communication course developed at my institution by an interdisciplinary team representing business, communication, and rhetoric and composition (I was part of that team). Launched in Spring 2016, the course is required for all business majors and open only to business majors. Business students are expected to use digital networking tools to find internship opportunities, so the first segment of the course is devoted to creating an effective digital presence, with particular attention directed to creating or improving a profile on LinkedIn (Students who prefer not to establish an account with LinkedIn have the option to create their profile offline). The evaluation of the assignment is based on the profile itself; however, I design class discussions and activities that interrogate additional aspects of the site, such as connecting and interacting with others.

Peterson and Dover (2014) outlined a similar assignment for a marketing class; however, they focused on the how-to aspect of LinkedIn in an assignment that demanded not only that students create a robust profile, but that they also provide evidence of active participation through connections and interactions. Missing was what Selfe (1999) called *critical technological literacy*, a reflective awareness of “the complex set of socially and culturally situated values, practices, and skills involved in operating linguistically within the context of electronic environments” (p. 148). Also absent was the tempered enthusiasm of Alexander and Rhodes (2014), who raised concern about how we are using technology and how technology is using us: “We must see the creeping kinds of normalizations and disciplinary regimes that condition our experience of available freedom” (p. 197). Peterson and Dover appeared to accept LinkedIn without question as the way business networking is done today: Students were mandated to learn how to use it and to demonstrate evidence of its benefits, not to interrogate its purpose, practices, or design. A phronetic approach to LinkedIn is an attempt to help students notice both the practical concerns of how-to and the wise concerns of why and for whom.

As a relatively new user of LinkedIn myself, I do not set myself up as an expert; however, I am somewhat of a resister and a questioner, a reluctant user who feels obligated to be on the platform, not only because I teach this particular assignment, but also because I am under the constant pressure of job-searching and job-researching, as a tenuously employed, non-tenure-track academic.

In this essay based on my presentation at Computers and Writing 2018, I elaborate on how instructors can use LinkedIn to respond to Eyman and Ball’s call for three layers in digital composing. First, I will discuss the rhetorical aspects of LinkedIn, which provide an immediately practical incentive for students—and a potential for immediate results—no matter what the focus

of the writing course. Next, I make a case for the “code” of LinkedIn, loosely defined as the technical aspects related to plug-ins, file requirements, and image formats (such as the aspect ratio for banner images). Finally, I discuss the multimodal design possibilities and constraints of a LinkedIn Profile.

The Rhetorical Situation of LinkedIn

Ideally, producers of digital texts consider their purpose, potential audience, and the affordances and constraints of the digital platform. Given that conventions evolve from socially agreed-upon practices, I was not surprised to find that LinkedIn practices appear to evolve from “experts” advising on the proper use of the social media network, to users whose activities on the platform shape expectations for its use, and the affordances and constraints of the platform itself. LinkedIn is continually changing, adding, and promoting new features. Users influence the conventions by accepting or rejecting advice about the purpose of and audience for LinkedIn—and by maximizing the affordances and working around the site’s constraints.

LinkedIn merges job application materials with networking and self-promotion. In a study of hiring practices, Gershon (2017) found that resumes have evolved from historical record to marketing strategy, from a paper document directed to a limited set of readers to a digital profile potentially viewed by a wide audience. The results of Gershon’s study indicate that job seekers today are expected to be public about their job search, presenting themselves as branded “bundles of temporary business solutions” (p. 88); by creating a LinkedIn profile, they create a database for recruiters. Gershon wondered how dangerous it is to be public and questioned whether LinkedIn users have much control over their image, given that they have limited control over how an audience is viewing their profiles and interpreting their intentions.

I have so far not been as active on LinkedIn as perhaps I should be. Active is defined as constantly updating one’s profile, daily adding and sharing information and knowledge, making the time and finding the excuses to connect with and continually interact with other people, and shaping and promoting one’s “brand” in ways that also seem to serve the purposes of the site and its advertisers. The idea of presenting a professional self at all times has further added pressure to somehow be genuine, approachable, and to have a sense of humor, without being too transparent, too personal, and too lighthearted to be taken seriously. Then there are the recommendations: Given that companies rarely provide information about former employees beyond their start and end dates, the question is how advisable it is to recommend LinkedIn connections for their work or skills. How much do users really know about their connections?

How connections work on LinkedIn is often a source of confusion. Gershon has stated, “When people first start using LinkedIn, they often are uncertain about how to decide whom to connect to, since a LinkedIn connection is an element of the LinkedIn participant structure that is specific to LinkedIn” (p. 133–34). For example, friends, acquaintances, and family outside of a person’s professional field do not necessarily make good LinkedIn connections; such decisions should be based on how each connection reflects on the professional’s reputation, as a connection could also be seen as an implicit recommendation. Further, a Dutch study (Utz, 2016) comparing Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn suggests that networks of wider, more distant acquaintances have less redundancy of information and thus alert users to more opportunities. Although LinkedIn showed the highest benefit for gaining information, for all three platforms, “posting about professional content and strategically adding relevant people to one’s network turned out to be the most important predictors of professional informational benefits” (Utz, 2016, p. 2700).

There is no shortage of advice on how to use LinkedIn. Articles available online tend to be numbered lists of what to do or what not to do, many echoing similar articles that also rarely dig deeply into the pros and cons of , and just a few suggesting that users might have varying purposes for being on the site or good reasons for being wary of the site. Gershon pointed out that job-seeking advice often presents the self-interested view of the advice-giver, not how things really are. Likewise, advice for specific platforms, such as LinkedIn, often come from self-interested parties, including LinkedIn itself.

Reading the advice is where the class project starts: Students read about a half dozen short online articles offering advice about creating a LinkedIn profile and interacting with others on the platform (See Appendix). During class in small groups, students analyze the articles to determine where the so-called “experts” agree and disagree—and also discuss how the students themselves feel about the advice. They then present their findings and interpretations to the class (See Appendix).

Students spend another class session reviewing profiles of professionals in their prospective fields; for example, they search for other college students and alumni with the same major, along with professionals in fields and at companies they are interested in. Again, in small groups, students discuss and interpret their findings for the whole class (See Appendix). For example, students tend to notice that older professionals, especially those in executive positions, have limited profiles or profiles that appear to be written by a third party. Students may initially assume that older professionals are less technologically proficient or less rhetorically astute in digital environments; however, this observation evolves into a key lesson about purpose and audience. They begin to understand that a person’s position of power—or lack of

power—within the professional network influences self-presentation: older established career professionals may have less need for a polished and expansive presence. Established career professionals with secure positions likely already have an established network of colleagues. They may be on LinkedIn to observe others rather than to sell themselves.

For peer response, I create a discussion forum on Canvas, and students post the links to their profiles. Students who already have LinkedIn accounts choose whether to revise for peer response or to get feedback on their existing profiles. Peers reply directly to each post and their responses are limited to the landing page (no clicking in and no scrolling required). Every student responds briefly to every other student in the class (23 students in a section, which takes up most of the hour-and-15-minute class period.) The purpose of this activity is to simulate the instant impressions a potential employer may have while looking at many profile landing pages; accordingly, students are instructed to offer each peer one positive impression and to suggest one improvement for the final revision. Students can get a better idea of what needs work on their profile when they get multiple compliments or suggestions on the same sections. I participate in peer response along with the students, placing my comments in the grading portion of the discussion forum.

If the course schedule allowed for a second peer-response session, I would offer another peer-response activity focused on the summary and experience sections. We have at most only three class days available for the LinkedIn Profile assignment within the overall Digital Presence module; some instructors have only two days, if their class meeting day falls on a holiday. Students are encouraged to get additional feedback at the business school's writing center and to seek additional feedback from me via email or my office hours.

Technical Aspects of Composing in LinkedIn

Few would dispute that understanding the technical aspects of composing in LinkedIn is a practical skill; however, Selber (2004) emphasized that such functional literacy is inadequate “without the richly textured insights that critical perspectives can provide” (p. 73). By producing their own LinkedIn profiles rather than merely analyzing the profiles of others, students experience difficulties that do raise critical questions and demand problem-solving to overcome initial failures and to work around legal and technical constraints. Eyman and Ball (2014) argued that technical knowledge in digital environments is broader than specialized coding expertise:

Coding as literate practice also includes knowledge of appropriate file formats and technical infrastructure, such as knowing which graphic formats are most effective for a giv-

en image, which encoding schemes will be most usable for delivering audio and video via the Web, and the importance of including transcripts and technical devices that ensure accessibility to the greatest number of users. (p. 116)

Technical aspects of creating a LinkedIn profile include understanding how to customize the LinkedIn page URL, how to link to personal blogs or websites, and how to upload content for readers to download. LinkedIn users must also know enough about digital photos to upload the proper file in the right resolution, to create a banner image with the correct aspect ratio, and to ensure all images are owned by the student, used with permission, or part of the public domain. This knowledge goes beyond the merely technical; for example, a user who posts a professional or banner photo with a digital watermark provides an instant impression of a lack of business ethics.

Another assignment in the digital presence segment of the business communications course asks students to create a potential addition to their LinkedIn profile in the form of a one-minute video of themselves delivering an elevator speech to prospective employers. Posting the video to their LinkedIn profile is optional, and the video is graded separately from the profile. The goal of the video is less about providing information through their words—which are already visible on the profile and through download of their resume—but more about appearing confident, competent, passionate, and likeable through the *techné* of their rhetorical performance, including visual image, stance, gestures, eye contact, pacing of their delivery, diction, and tone of voice. Technical considerations include the timing of the message, the framing of the image, the angle and focus and steadiness of the camera, the audio quality, the use of title slides, and transitions at the beginning and end of the video. Students also learn how to add closed captions to their video to increase its accessibility and how to set their search preferences on YouTube to allow more control over who sees the video by making it available only through a shared link.

Less obvious as a technical strategy, but especially important, is how students work around the constraints of limited technology resources and the limits of their technical expertise. I encourage students to welcome these constraints, which can help focus their efforts because they must be creative with the options available to them, rather than get overwhelmed with an unlimited array of options.

Multimodal Affordances and Constraints of the LinkedIn Profile

Burke (1954) said “a way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (p. 49); i.e., paying

attention to one object means another object is ignored. Lanham (2006) noted that the world is filled with too many objects; he argued that attention is our most precious resource whether we are paying attention or receiving it.

On LinkedIn, a site with more than 500 million profiles, users are both the objects competing for attention and the viewers who see or do not see. As objects, users compete for attention by carefully curating the aspects of themselves that best reflect their “brand,” selecting and shaping what is revealed and not revealed. As viewers, users are attracted or not to profiles or parts of profiles of those they see as potential resources or potential competition. Although the design of the profile page is mostly controlled by LinkedIn, users can enhance that design through their choices of text, image, audio, and video.

Eyman and Ball (2014) called design “a rhetorical function that plays an important role in each of the canons of rhetoric, most obviously related to style (particularly in terms of visual rhetoric), but also of organization” (p. 115). Design has a way of organizing attention: What catches the eye first? A professional and rhetorically appropriate photo, a banner in complementary colors with visual images that reinforce the professional image, and a headline that clearly captures and summarizes the person’s positioning as a professional with experience, key skills, and qualifications. Students must somehow manipulate the standardized elements of a LinkedIn profile so that they can represent themselves as special. Building their professional image requires trading in images and commodifying themselves as a product within a competitive marketplace. Their challenge is also to establish an emerging professional identity that also reflects well on their academic institution.

The summary complements and visually connects to the banner, professional photo, name, and headline, which are immediately visible on the landing page of the LinkedIn Profile. Under the headline, the first few lines of the summary are also visible. Those first few lines of the summary must draw attention and inspire the reader to click into the summary or scroll down to read the experience section. Students tend to weaken the potential impact of their summaries by starting with wind-up sentences that merely repeat what the viewer can already see in the headline; for example, “Hello, my name is...” (their name is already visible) and “I am an accountancy major at...” (their headline already indicates their major and university). They have to be pushed to consider ways to use that visible space more effectively, for example, “I am a junior actively searching for a summer accounting internship. By next May, I will have completed upper-level courses in financial accounting, managerial accounting, and federal income tax accounting.”

Although a cover letter should be brief, a LinkedIn summary can be lengthier. Bremner and Phung (2015) examined the rhetorical structure of LinkedIn summaries and identified four moves that were similar to a conventional cover

letter: “establishing credentials,” “identifying client needs,” “detailing service,” and “indicating value of service” (p. 372). Two additional moves they found in the summaries were identifying the target market and personal branding. Other cover letter moves are already built into the LinkedIn site, including offering one’s services and requesting a response. Bremner and Phung noted that, along with the attention-grabbing elements of visuals and headline, the summary is one of the few parts of a LinkedIn profile that allow for creative expression without constraint.

Students frequently complain that the date-oriented sorting of the experience section on LinkedIn prevents them from arranging their experience to highlight the most relevant information. That’s where the summary can help. By highlighting key experiences in the summary—or even within the headline—students can better ensure that readers will notice those experiences and be more likely to scroll down to find more details.

Conclusion: Practical Wisdom for Composing in Digital Spaces

Providing students an opportunity to analyze and compose LinkedIn profiles and to interrogate the advice for participation on the site offers not just practical knowledge, but also a practical wisdom that will be useful to them as they negotiate their identities and expand their professional contacts. I believe our responsibility as instructors is to help students approach their engagement with social media platforms with an awareness that networked communication practices have always existed and are not unlike anything ever done before simply because they reside in a digital platform—although digital platforms do create new perils and promises.

For the most part, students have been excited about the possibilities of establishing a LinkedIn presence; they are eager to get started. So far, no student has opted for the off-line profile, although several have expressed some misgivings. I encourage them to use those gut feelings to help them develop their own strategies for negotiating that digital space, including what kinds of information to make available on their profile, with whom to connect, whether or not to “recommend” others, and how often to post and interact with the posts of others. My own understanding of job search and networking genres has evolved as the genres themselves have evolved from print into digital spaces. The old rules are changing, but not necessarily in ways that provide students with more agency, which is important for them to understand as they begin the process of networking in the hopes of finding employment and establishing themselves as professionals in a precarious job market. A phronetic approach uses LinkedIn as a site of critical reflection for reading

and composing, alternately asking students to question its conventions, maximize its affordances, and creatively resist its constraints, as they consider their purpose in participating in this professional network.

References

- Alexander, Jonathan, & Rhodes, Jacqueline. (2014). *On multimodality: New media in composition studies*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Bremner, Stephen, & Phung, Ban. (2015). Learning from the experts: An analysis of resume writers' self-presentation on LinkedIn. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 58(4), 367–380.
- Burke, Kenneth. (1954). *Permanence and change: An anatomy of purpose* (3rd ed.). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Eyman, Douglas, & Ball, Cheryl. (2014). Composing for digital publication: Rhetoric, design, code. *Composition Studies*, 42(1), 114–117.
- Gershon, Ilana. (2017). *Down and out in the new economy: How people find (or don't find) work today*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lanham, Richard A. (2006). *The economics of attention: Style and substance in the age of information*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Peterson, Robert M., & Dover, Howard F. (2014). Building student networks with LinkedIn: The potential for connections, internships, and jobs. *Marketing Education Review*, 24(1), 15–20.
- Selber, Stewart (2004). *Multiliteracies for a digital age*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Utz, Sonja. (2016). Is LinkedIn making you more successful? The informational benefits derived from social media. *New Media and Society*, 18(11), 2685–2702.
- Selfe, Cynthia L. (1999). *Technology and literacy in the twenty-first century: The importance of paying attention*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Appendix

BUS 284: Professional Communication for Business
Module 1: Creating Digital Presence

CLASS ACTIVITY: LinkedIn Profile Discussion: Advisers vs. Users

Small-group Google Slides presentations, based on assigned readings and working in groups of 3 to 4

Agenda

- Introduction and Mini Lecture: 15 minutes
- Group Activity: 25 minutes
- Presentations and Discussion: 30-35 minutes
- Closing: 5-10 minutes

Assigned Readings

Note: These would be reviewed and updated each year.

- “17 steps to a better LinkedIn Profile in 2017” <https://business.linkedin.com/en-uk/marketing-solutions/blog/posts/content-marketing/2017/17-steps-to-a-better-LinkedIn-profile-in-2017>
- “60+ LinkedIn Profile Tips for Marketers” <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2016/08/linkedin-profile-tips/>
- “The 31 Best LinkedIn Profile Tips for Job Seekers” <https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-31-best-linkedin-profile-tips-for-job-seekers>
- “29 LinkedIn Tips for Professional Networking, Business and Marketing” <https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/23454/The-Ultimate-Cheat-Sheet-for-Mastering-LinkedIn.aspx#sm.0000onkwrIw-vdfd8upwxnxtvn2g3l>
- LinkedIn User Agreement <https://www.linkedin.com/legal/user-agreement>
- LinkedIn Privacy Policy <https://www.linkedin.com/legal/privacy-policy>
- [University website and/or video materials about LinkedIn]

Day 1 Activity: What are the experts saying about LinkedIn?

Note: If time constraints do not allow for two class sessions, the activities can be combined.

1. Review the advice provided in the readings (and video) assigned. At what points do authors agree? Where do they disagree? What do you suspect might be influencing those similarities and differences? What is at stake for each expert in providing the advice?
2. Based on what you have learned, create a slide show that presents and analyzes your findings. Consider using screen shots to help illustrate your group’s key findings.
3. Share your group’s Google Slides with me and be prepared to present to and discuss with your classmates.

Day 2 Activity: How professionals are using LinkedIn

Note: Students do not need to be grouped by major.

1. Look at LinkedIn profiles of professionals (including alumni) in your field of study or who work for companies you are interested in. Also look at profiles of college students with similar majors as yours (especially students you know who are getting ready to graduate). What do

you notice? How well does LinkedIn advice match up with what users are actually doing? Do you notice any differences in LinkedIn use, depending on the career field or the purpose for being on the site? Hint: Not everyone is looking for an internship or entry-level job.

2. Based on what you have learned, create a slide show that presents and analyzes your findings. Consider using screen shots to help illustrate your group's key findings.
3. Share your group's Google Slides with me and be prepared to present to and discuss with your classmates.