2013

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Published in *Public Relations Review* 39:3 (2013), pp. 235–237; doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.03.005

Submitted September 14, 2012; revised February 12, 2013; accepted March 1, 2013.

Integrating Evidence-Based Practices into Public Relations Education

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Abstract

Public relations continue to play an essential and changing role in society, requiring the regular reassessment of the education of future public relations practitioners. Academics and practitioners often differ in how they view the public relations field, how they define the discipline, and how they view the major pedagogical approaches. This paper explores the impact of integrating three different perspectives in public relations education, including practitioner perspective, client perspective, and the evidence-based perspective. Results from students' reaction papers and an online questionnaire suggest that integrating an evidence-based approach improves the competence and clarity of communications counsel provided by aspiring practitioners.

Keywords: public relations education, evidence-based practice, public relations, social media

In this day of unparalleled activity in college life, the institution which is not steadily advancing is certainly falling behind.

—James Burrill Angell

1. Introduction

Like many other professional programs in higher education, including business, law, and the health professions, public relations is both an applied and theoretical discipline. To prepare students, "the most desirable teaching strategies and assignments are those which enable students to put theory into practice" (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999, p. 57). Klatzky (2009) recommended that universities "teach the fundamental science as a foundation; show how basic research, generally in conjunction with partner disciplines, leads to useful outcomes; and finally, teach applications, not promissory notes" (p. 528).

Evidence-based practices (EBP) integrate three perspectives—the practitioner's expertise, the client's situation, and proven, research-based best practices. Shlonsky and Gibbs (2004) define EBP as involving "a well-built practice question, an efficient search for best evidence, a critical appraisal of that evidence, and action based on the interchange between client preferences, practice experience, and the best evidence" (p. 137).

For this reason, we posit the EBP model be applied to public relations. Unlike service learning, EBP is "bottom-up and begins and ends with the client, moving well beyond a one-size-fits-all model and encompass[es] clients' unique experience with their presenting problems" (Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2004, p. 138). Evidence-based practice within the public relations curriculum can enhance a more comprehensive critical thinking component for both students and professors in the classroom.

2. Methods

Experiential learning blends theory with practice, helping provide rich learning experiences for students (Moore, 2010). The method used in this research study was a quasi-experimental research design composed of three different parts: an in-class scenario exercise, reaction paper, and an online questionnaire.

2.1. Participants

Public relations and strategic communications undergraduate students ($N = 128$) enrolled in an introductory public relations course at one of three universities located in the midwest and southeast areas of the United States participated in this study. The mean age of participants was 21 years old (SD = 1.12). Most were juniors, or in their third full year of undergraduate studies (SD = 0.86). More than three-fourths of the participants had no prior internship experience (77%) or prior service learning experience (62%). None of the participants had been formally introduced to the EBP concept in a prior public relations course.

2.2. Procedure

All participants viewed one of three versions of a PowerPoint presentation regarding the Costa Cruises crisis of January 2012. One class (University 1, $N = 25$) was exposed to a practitioner-focused perspective. A second class (University 2, $N = 47$) was exposed to a practitioner-focused perspective along with the client expectations perspective. A third class (University 3, $N = 52$) was presented the EBP perspective, including best practices as well as insights gained from a similar crisis in the past. All students completed a short reaction paper and a short online questionnaire. The outcomes were evaluated through qualitative (e.g., open-ended questions and responses from reaction paper) and quantitative (e.g., questionnaire items) methods.

3. Results

Participants from University 1 had the highest levels of internship experience (57%) and prior service learning experience (76%). Additionally, more than half of participants from University 1 (60%) and University 2 (70%) had previously discussed the Contra Cruise crisis situation in another course. Given these factors, it may not come as a surprise that participants from University 1 (84%) and University 2 (81%) reported the highest levels of being "somewhat" or "very" confident completing the reaction paper assignment, compared to participants from University 3 (69%).

The practitioner-focused presentation in University 1 seems to have minimized the attention students paid to prior research and best practices. Notably, only one of the University 1 participants mentioned another crisis case when providing recommendations, and only one-fourth of all participants from University 1 cited established sources (e.g., journals, textbooks, experts' blogs) when offering "best practices" for consideration. Students at University 2, who were presented a client perspective, were more likely than University 1 participants to provide counsel. However, like University 1, only a small portion cited references when offering "best practices." Only one University 2 student cited Coombs's crisis communication work, and only two cited best practices from previous cases (Toyota Recall from 2010 and the 1982 Tylenol Case). Interesting, one student approached the case study from a theoretical standpoint, using the cognitive dissonance theory to explain how Costa needs to combat the public perception that its cruise lines are dangerous.

In contrast, 10 students receiving the EBP presentation at University 3 referenced Timothy Coombs's work in crisis communications and discussed several similar crisis case studies such as the Toyota Recall Case study that occurred in 2010 and the BP Oil Spill in 2011. The students connected the use of the apology message strategy from the crisis communications literature from Coombs (2007) with these previous cases and tied them into their analysis of the Costa Cruises case study. Results from this group suggest that integrating an evidence-based approach improves the competence and clarity of communications counsel provided by aspiring practitioners.

Comments about the exercise from all participants were overwhelmingly positive. University 1 participants unanimously reported that they found the assignment to be of value, describing the exercise with words such as "interesting," "enjoyable," and "helpful." Students from University 2 said that the exercise was "relevant to the real world," "a good opportunity 'to work' a real case," and a "great case study to use an introduction into the R.A.C.E. method." University 3 participants felt that it was a "sad" case study to review but a good exercise to work on since it was "eye opening" and a good exercise to learn more about public relations.

4. Discussion

This research raises several issues for the future research on public relations education. Public relations education literature has discussed curriculum issues and trends that need to be incorporated into the classroom to better prepare young professionals for the workplace. The findings of this study are congruent with those (e.g., Todd, 2009, p. 84), suggesting more proactive communication and engagement among academics and practitioners in order to teach students the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in entry-level public relations jobs. It also parallels findings that a public relations education should encompass discussions of practitioners, clients, and best practices. This is especially evident in comments from students, namely those from Universities 2 and 3, where participants reported learning how to "think" like a practitioner in serving clients and how to incorporate research gathered to conduct best practices in solving PR problems.

To a lesser degree, our results indicate that, regardless of the instruction given (participant only, client, EBP), basic PR skills, including writing, research, familiarity with traditional and social media, ethics, and "hands-on" experience are essential. However, one way to improve upon this study might be to invite a practitioner into the classroom to discuss best practices with students. This is in keeping with Todd's (2009) finding that professionals should be involved in student assessment, particularly at the senior level. The researchers also suggest rather than having just one professional come into the classroom from an agency or client-side, professors invite both to come to the class to guest lecture, demonstrating to students multiple sides of a case.

Results of this study also indicate that, while public relations instruction is of course vital for student learning, general communication-related courses could prove to enhance learning outcomes. For example, students found it difficult to manage the goals and needs of practitioners and clients while also recognizing the two can and do conflict. Thus, courses such as persuasion or negotiation could be beneficial in addition to the courses set forth by the Commission for Public Relations Education.

Students should seek programs that are multidisciplinary and innovative in both their research and applied approaches to public relations education. The future public relations practitioners should be not only knowledgeable and expert in public relations but also skilled in both research and practice.

There were several limitations to this study. The sample size was relatively small, participants varied in skill level and expertise, and the case was perhaps more specialized than the typical junior in college is prepared to handle. In addition, there are no known studies of the degree to which EBPs exist within current PR curricula nationally to serve as background.

Exploring how evidence-based practices can be incorporated into the curriculum would offer insight into how to properly implement these principles across public relations courses. PRSSA students and the chapter faculty advisor could visit local PR firms and agencies to learn EBP practices to incorporate into their own projects in public relations.

Public relations education will continue to evolve to meet the growing expectations of young professionals entering the field. However, more discussion, research, and collaboration regarding the implication of evidence-based practices between practitioners and faculty need to occur in order for the public relations profession to advance and improve the current status of public relations education.

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