Integrating Service Learning into Public Relations Coursework: Applications, Implications, Challenges, and Rewards

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Drawing on a theoretical framework based on "use-inspired" applied research and service learning practice (Honnet-Porter & Poulsen, 1989), this paper argues the relationship between a service-learning approach and Public Relations coursework is a natural and highly desirable fit. Through examination of the goals of both service-learning and public relations curricula, the instructional implications of service learning in Public Relations coursework are explored, with emphasis placed on published standards for good practice. Examples from the authors' own course experiences in promoting service learning are also offered along with specific suggestions for motivating and preparing both students and faculty for a service-learning-enhanced Public Relations curriculum.

Effective Public Relations practice is based on a strong foundation of communication theory, institutional knowledge, practical experience and ethical behavior. By its nature, the practice of Public Relations involves counseling in the service of a specific client: an individual, company or organization in need of reputation management and advice.

For this reason, Public Relations instruction must be grounded in the practical application of lessons learned in the classroom. The study of Public Relations is not abstract or idealized, but rather is most effective when it takes place in the context of its real-world application. Only then can students learn to deal with the incongruities and dynamics of the marketplace or business world in ways that are appropriate, effective, ethical, and a good investment for the client.

There is much about the practice of Public Relations that is subjective. In fact, this is a common critique. However, this is far from a limitation, nor does it mean that everyone's opinion is equal. What makes a given Public Relations practitioner an effective counselor is the scholarship, expertise and, most important, experience to provide wise counsel to his or her clients when it is most needed. Like capital improvements, advertising, and other costs of doing business, Public Relations counseling is an investment for those who choose to purchase our services, and that investment pays off only if our advice is sound and relevant. In that respect, experience counts.

The nature of the Public Relations curriculum in higher education requires that students both know and do. As practitioners, Public Relations students must be able to assume roles of communication strategists as well as counselors for and within organizations requiring their expertise. Service learning provides an ideal opportunity for Public Relations educators to integrate theory, principles, case studies, and application, providing the opportunity for students to practice both roles (Texter & Smith, 1999).

Service Learning Overview

Public Relations practice is highly contextual. Unlike some disciplines, Public Relations practice is based on a relatively small number of general principles and practices. *However*, it is the very generalizability of these principles that enables practitioners to apply them in a wide range of contexts in the service of a nearly endless variety of clients. The content may vary, but the process itself does not.

For any social science such as communication, and Public Relations in particular, to succeed, "it must have some meaningful social and psychological relevance" (Bucy, 2004, p. 373). The obvious key to successful Public Relations instruction lies in the hope of applying its lessons in a way that contributes to positive communication outcomes and constructive reputation management across a variety of contexts. While the process is standardized, the content that is communicated is as varied as the range of clients one counsels. This practical and theory-driven approach is consistent with the conceptual model of *use-inspired basic research* suggested by both Kreps, Frey, and O'Hair (1991) and Stokes (1997).

Certainly, much about the practice of Public Relations is subjective and circumstantial. Unfortunately, many in the public misinterpret the contextual nature of this practice as applied and atheoretical, as if our counsel involved nothing more than "just your opinion." Such a view discounts the rich body of social science research and institutional knowledge that informs our profession. Service learning is consistent with use-inspired research in that it provides a bridge for students between this institutional knowledge and its practical application with actual clients.

Kerlinger (1986) defines a theory as a set of interrelated constructs, definitions and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena. They do so by specifying relations among the variables with the

purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena. For theory to advance, there must be research. But of what nature?

Kreps et al. (1991) define *basic research* as that which is conducted to test, clarify, and refine theoretical issues. Researchers use basic research to discover the laws that explain and predict human behavior. However, purely theoretical research offers no clear practical roadmap to guide practitioners in applying these findings in a meaningful way in the real world.

In contrast, *applied research* is that conducted to examine and solve practical problems (Kreps et al., 1991). Cissna (1982) continues, "Applied research sets out to contribute to knowledge by answering a real, pragmatic social problem" (p. 2). Well enough, but purely applied research lacks the theoretical grounding to produce results that are applicable in a generalizable or easily reproducible way. It fails to leave the confines of its own parochial application.

Both Kreps et al. (1991) and Stokes (1997) reject the notion that the two approaches are mutually exclusive. Kreps' (1991) *Basic/Applied Research* and Stokes' (1997) *Quadrant Model of Scientific Research* offer alternative (and strikingly similar) conceptual models that embrace both the theoretical rigor and practical applicability that a more holistic research approach can embody. Stokes (1997) describes this ideal melding of the theoretical and the practical as "Pasteur's Quadrant," a reference to groundbreaking medical researcher Louis Pasteur, whose work stands as an exemplar of applied theoretical research.

Traditional Public Relations instruction rightly emphasizes applied skills, such as writing, and an understanding of case studies and other practical examples that relate to successful practice. An added service learning component enables the instructor to provide additional emphasis in areas such as context, timing, appropriateness and even client relations in a manner that far surpasses textbook examples. The integration of social science theory coursework informs student "real world" experiences provided by service learning activities in a way that makes our counsel more relevant, predictable, and scalable.

As Public Relations practitioners, we are presumed to have good instincts. But our good counsel is, and must be, based on a good deal more than that. Our practice involves a combination of practical experience and expertise, balanced with a solid grounding in the history of the practice and the social science that informs it. For the Public Relations student, a service-learning approach, combined with actual client involvement, effectively provides this broad foundation.

Integrating service learning into Public Relations instruction is more than mere curriculum enhancement, however. Offering specific service-learning opportunities in the Public Relations curriculum addresses Boyer's (1994) call for commitment to decompartmentalize disciplines, promote public service to generate social action, and encourage synthesis in higher education. Since that call nearly twenty years ago, service-learning "has become a serious goal for thousands of universities, faculty, and administrators across America" (Berry, 2009, p. 37), evidenced both by the growth of dozens of related organizations and by initiatives reflecting the essential role of civic engagement in accreditation processes for colleges and universities. Such organizations and initiatives include Campus Compact, Learn and Serve America, the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE), and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU).

As further evidence of the commitment to service learning in higher education, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) has approved civic engagement criteria as one of the five criteria used by the HLC for accreditation. Public Relations programs that include specific service-learning components, therefore, are also ideally suited to play a pivotal role in gaining and maintaining institutional accreditation, representing the strong "voice" Applegate and Morreale (1999) advocate in their argument that service learning is a perfect pedagogical partner to the study of communication praxis.

How Does Public Relations Instruction Fit into a Service-Learning Model?

The idea that practical hands-on experience should be an integral part of Public Relations instruction is particularly parsimonious. Because Public Relations practice is so contextual, client-dependent, and process-driven, it is essential that students see and experience how these approaches and principles are applied and adapted under real world circumstances.

At Eastern Kentucky University, this service-learning approach has been successfully applied with a number of upper division courses within the Public Relations curriculum, including PR Special Event Management, Web Marketing and Design, Advertising Principles and Production, Social Networking, and Public Relations Campaigns, the program's Capstone course. For example, student teams in the Campaigns class plan, create and present proposals for a complete Public Relations campaign based on a specific client's actual needs and circumstances, including research plans, audience analysis, proposed creative elements, timeline, budget and the program's proposed measurements and evaluation process. Importantly, each team presents their entire plan to faculty and client representatives, often at the client office or facility. Similarly, students in other courses gain valuable

hands-on experience in creating plans or actual completed projects for one or more local businesses or University organizations. Examples include United Way of the Bluegrass, the EKU Center for the Performing Arts, *Freedom Sings* (a concert program produced by the First Amendment Center in Nashville, TN), the EKU College of Business and Technology, and the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity.

Public Relations Instruction and Honnet-Porter and Poulsen's (1989) Principles

Honnet-Porter and Poulsen's (1989) oft-cited Wingspread report for NSEE titled "Principles of Good Practice for Combining Service and Learning" offers 10 standards for developing effective service-learning experiences for students. Below we examine how several are a particularly good fit with Public Relations instruction.

Principle 1: Engage people in responsible and challenging actions for the common good. Rather than creating some fictitious "class project" with little connection to reality, students engage directly with clients who have previously displayed a tangible and specific need for Public Relations counseling and support. Thus, students see a direct connection between their contributions and the resulting positive impact toward the client's goals.

Principle 2: Provide structured opportunities for people to reflect critically on their service experience. As the project progresses, the students are required to provide regular status updates to the instructor and occasionally the client as well. These updates give the instructor the opportunity to probe beyond the actions to explore areas such student/client dynamics, decision-making criteria, and other elements that can affect a project's outcome. Scholars examining student outcomes in service-learning-based courses strongly advocate ongoing and consistent reflection as a core component of service learning, arguing that reflection is the primary means for deep learning and significant experience (Connors & Seifer, 2005).

Principle 3: Articulate clear service and learning goals for everyone involved. The active involvement of the client during the planning and discovery phases of the project ensures that the goals and outcomes of the project are clearly articulated for all concerned: student, client, and instructor alike.

Principle 4: Allow for those with needs to define those needs. In all aspects of the classwork and resulting projects, it is the client's direct input that determines the overall scope and shape of the resulting work. More important, the client also is the arbiter of whether (and to what degree) the work is appropriate, impactful, and of sufficient quality. In the final

analysis, it the client is not happy or satisfied, no one is. Just like the real world.

Principle 5: Clarify the responsibilities of each person and organization involved. Service projects for these classes are typically many weeks long and involve competing teams of students. In the case of the Campaigns class, each team is responsible to produce a complete proposal for a campaign, including conducting and analyzing preliminary research, developing spec creative pieces as appropriate, defining budgets and timelines, specifying detailed evaluation criteria, and ultimately presenting the finished proposal to client and faculty representatives. Elements of these responsibilities are distributed within each team.

Often some kind of agreement or memorandum of understanding with the project client can be helpful in clarifying who is responsible for what elements of the project (New instructors are particularly pleased to learn a documented agreement makes clear the client also has responsibilities in the process, a point that sometimes needs reinforcing over the course of the project.). It is worth noting that most universities also require specific consent or liability releases approved by University Counsel to be on file.

Principle 6: Match service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances. One clear advantage of adopting a service-learning approach to these classes is that using a "living breathing" client demands that students interact with that person or organization on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of the project. Also, since the client is faced with the daily challenges of adapting to a changing business environment, so must the students be. Mid-course corrections are not just possible, but are actively anticipated, planned for, executed as needed and evaluated for success through completion.

Principle 7: Expect genuine, active and sustained organizational commitment. As mentioned above, documents communicating clear expectations between the instructor and the client organization can be helpful in articulating the specific details of this commitment on both sides.

Principle 8: Include training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals. While all Public Relations majors are required to participate in an internship or co-op experience as part of their degree requirements, classes providing service-learning experiences reinforce these experiences in a more controlled and evaluative environment. Instructors can monitor progress and suggest refinements in student/client interactions with far greater clarity and first-hand knowledge than would be possible in a typical internship situation. Further, instructors guide student progress regularly throughout the semester,

ensuring richer learning opportunities both in the final product as well as the development process itself.

Principle 9: Ensure that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interest of all involved. To a degree atypical of most lecture classes, the service-learning component of these classes demands significantly more out-of-class work by students who need to accommodate the schedule and timeline demands of the client. Students consistently report that this approach, although time-intensive, provides a much richer, more authentic and personally rewarding work experience than artificial class project tasks.

Principle 10: Commit to program participation by and with a diverse population. Instructors should consider opportunities that interact with clients and that reflect the overall diversity of the population at large. Such a broadening experience can have the effect of taking students out of their "comfort zone" in the most constructive of ways.

Is Service Learning a Good Fit for Public Relations Instruction and the Profession?

While implementing service-learning into Public Relations coursework clearly makes for good pedagogy, it is not without its challenges. The following section examines some specific issues, applications and recommendations.

Student Motivation

While it is not difficult to convince or motivate Public Relations students about the importance of praxis within their courses, shaping their intrinsic motivations from, "What is in it for me?," to, "What is in it for them?," is more challenging. For this reason, a detailed discussion about the spirit of service learning is paramount at the onset of the course. Emphasis of the service-learning project or approach should be evident in the syllabus. In fact, the Eastern Kentucky University course catalog uses an "S" designation to highlight courses that involve service-learning components. This emphasis reinforces the importance of service learning, both to students as well as outside constituents such as employers or graduate schools.

Placement Quality

Obviously, the richness of the service-learning opportunity for students is highly dependent on the quality and availability of the project clients. The reality is that locating and selecting appropriate community partners is often challenging. For this reason, it is imperative that instructors devote considerable time before the course begins to generate and evaluate these opportunities.

It is often desirable to partner with other offices or organizations on campus that are also committed to service learning. In the case of EKU, these include the Office of Quality Enhancement Programs (QEP), the University Regional Stewardship Committee, the Office of Student Affairs, Campus Compact groups, and the Provost's Office.

Eyler and Giles (1999) identify placement quality as one of the key predictors for positive service-learning outcomes. Ideally, someone on campus serves as the "coordinator" for community relations and can offer assistance in identifying potential community partners. However, it is not recommended that any faculty member take this responsibility on alone. Failure to connect with your own campus resources initially (as the first step to outreach) will quickly result in burnout, as well as (sometimes hard to isolate) difficulties in recognizing and recruiting the best community partners available.

Instructor Preparation

Virtually every book or article related to successful service learning in higher education emphasizes the need for adequate and high quality reflection of experience by students. Eyler and Giles (1999) describe reflection of experience as a significant predictor of almost all outcomes they examined. Many times, however, instructors do not place enough emphasis on reflection of experience when implementing service learning or do not create a meaningful climate for students to reflect.

Many instructors erroneously believe reflection is an activity students "do" at the end of the semester, thus undermining the personal significance of the experience for the then-tired students. In order for reflection to be most successful in terms of student learning outcomes, the instructor should offer activities that are *consistent*, *continuous*, *challenging*, and *contextualized* throughout the service-learning experience (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Applying these "Four Cs" can be particularly important if the service-learning experience spans an entire semester. Furthermore, reflection is not only important for the student, but for (and along with) the client and the instructor as well.

There are many methods for student reflection and excellent resources for instructors to reference when designing the service-learning project. Most popular and effective reflection activities include journal-writing (a "love-hate" assignment for many students, but a great assessment tool) and frequent facilitated discussions about experiences.

It is essential, albeit difficult, for Public Relations instructors to carve out time for reflection within the course. Reflection breeds a meaningful experience for students, faculty, and the client, and is the primary means

by which instructors can elevate the service-learning component of the course from a course requirement to a truly meaningful and life-changing experience.

Resolving Conflict

Instructors committed to integrating service learning into their Public Relations curriculum should also anticipate conflict on various levels and be prepared to successfully manage it. For example, a common problem among students is that they often do not understand that their timetable does not necessarily coincide with the community partner's timetable (As the old punch-line goes, "A lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on my part."). Conflicts and poor communication can be issues even within individual teams. By guiding participants through these conflicts, instructors offer students (and sometimes even clients) new learning opportunities in flexibility, planning, and communication.

Part of the course preparation can include an acknowledgement that problems and conflicts in service learning often cannot be avoided, while providing encouragement that solutions and recommendations are possible. In this way, when conflicts do happen, they can be viewed as additional opportunities for students to learn how to quickly and creatively solve problems. Thus, the potential transformational power of service learning for students will be proven to be worth these efforts.

Conclusion

Service learning is inarguably an essential part of any robust Public Relations curriculum. There is no better way for students to experience the rigorous academic dimensions of Public Relations concepts and theory than through the real world application of this knowledge, as well as by contributing to the good of external organizations while advancing their own professional skills.

Integrating effective service learning requires careful thought, preparation, and significant time for both the instructor and the students. But because service learning is inherently "use-inspired" applied research, the practicality of this instructional design reinforces rigorous and creative thinking in organizational problem-solving in the most pedagogically memorable manner. The payoff is substantial and, in the end, everyone wins.

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