

Applying Constructivism to Improve
Public Relations for Education

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December 2005

Abstract

Educators are often hesitant to use techniques of public relations and marketing communication to attempt to alter undesirable understandings of the rationale and processes of education held by external constituencies. This paper shows that contemporary practice in public relations and marketing communication can be conceptualized as an application of Constructivism, with the same theoretical basis. A process and practical strategies are outlined to help educators use Constructivist principles to engage and change the public's frame of reference about Education, moving it toward understandings that are more favorable to the current practice and theoretical basis of the discipline.

Applying Constructivism to Improve Public Relations for Education

The domain of public relations is alien ground for many educators. Why doesn't the general public see Education the way we do? Where should we start in explaining what we do, and why? Is there a way we can look at advocacy for education and promoting educational institutions that makes these things easier for educators, themselves, to understand?

It seems to be almost a truism that the field of Education does a poor job of telling its story to the public (Phillip, 1995; National Commission on Cost of Higher Education, 1998; Allen, 2003). Education has many publics and stakeholders, such as current students, current faculty and staff, alumni, prospective students (of higher education, if not K-12), community members, governing board members, legislators, and granting agencies. The implicit assumption is that if these stakeholders understood Education better, they would be more supportive of the way Education wants to do things. But instead, the general public seems locked in a mindset in which vocational and economic factors are the only measurements of educational quality, learning is understood as memorizing black and white facts, and accountability is a priority (Dana 2004), rather than, for example, seeing education as an endeavor that should be about "learning to learn," to produce life-long learners who are, thus, prepared to function effectively in the marketplace.

Education and educators do not operate in isolation from the public and the process that sets social agendas. Educators, then, must face up to the external

influences and engaged in ways that shift “common sense” to more favorable ideas (Apple, 2004).

This paper suggests, from an interdisciplinary perspective, that the way today’s professionals conduct public relations and marketing can be conceptualized as an application of Constructivism, with the same theoretical basis, grounded in Educational Psychology. The goal is to help educators better view public relations through the lens of Constructivist theory, because public relations *is* the process by which public opinion must be shaped, if such opinion is to be moved toward metaphors and understandings that are more favorable to the current theoretical basis and practice in education (Gumport, 2001).

Because this paper is interdisciplinary, a brief review of terminology and concepts is appropriate. There are two main paradigms or ways of knowing that determine how individuals understand the learning process (Simpson, 2000). The first is *Realism*, which postulates that there is an absolute truth, that facts don’t change and, thus, that knowledge is fixed. As a result, realists see learning as a straightforward process of identifying those facts and understanding them. *Relativism* is the understanding that knowledge is subjective and based on interpretation. Relativists feel that people can never totally master a subject because there is always more information that may modify their understanding. These two paradigms make up a continuum with realism and relativism at the extremes. Each leads to a different approach to teaching.

Constructivism is based on the relativist understanding. It holds that learners construct meaning by selecting information and fitting it with previously known

knowledge structures (Bruning, 1995). The teacher's job, therefore, is to help the learner with this process of constructing meaning (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1954).

For purposes of this discussion, *marketing* is the sum total of activities that keeps an organization focused on its stakeholders and, with good management and a little luck, ensure that the organization's offerings are valued by its stakeholders and constituents (Hiam, 2002). In higher education, "marketing" is often a synonym for "recruiting." The mass communication discipline, however, has a broader perspective of "marketing," also applying the term to intangibles. It includes the promotion of ideas (Cornelissen, 2000), such as the perceptions educators want the public to hold about the educational institution, its priorities, and methods.

Integrated Marketing is an approach to communication in which each marketer or promoter has a fundamental message to deliver to each consumer that is clear, concise, easily understandable, and competitive. Advertising, sales promotion, direct marketing, packaging, personal selling, and even internal employee communications function as a single system (Schultz, 1995). Integrated Marketing has become the standard in the Mass Communication field. If a school were to hire an advertising agency, the agency representatives would almost certainly base their work in the principles of Integrated Marketing Communication.

Older models in both education and advertising assumed that when new information arrives, a person simply discards older information and replaces it with the newer understanding. In Education, this is sometimes called the *Blank Slate Model* and in Public Relations, the *Replacement Model*.

Integrated Marketing theory is based on the newer *Accumulation Model* in which the consumer continually gathers information, taking in, processing, and storing the information away, but matching it against what the person already knows or believes. Each bit of information received is a *Brand Contact*, coming not only from paid advertising but also from many other intangible sources, such as word of mouth, customer service experiences, newsletters, and other intentional and unintentional messages between organization and constituent. This is why Integrated Marketing treats *all* communication from the organization as a single system, so that the organization can strive to manage *all* of its contacts with its constituents (Schultz, 1995).

Accumulation Theory employs what Constructivism and Educational Psychology call *Cognitive Schema* – the structures in memory in which information is stored. Storing information, in Constructivism, is a process of fitting in new information with information already held, or constructing knowledge (Bruning, 1995).

The Public Relations Zone of Proximal Development

Constituents receiving public relations messages can be understood to be novices undergoing a developmental process, with the higher education institution in the role of mentor, through an interactive process of social interaction. The mentor manages the discussion, creates contexts for discussion, and frames the discussion by directing attention to certain materials. The implication is that educators need to be aware of the realm in which niche audiences need assistance to make meaning, their Zones of Proximal Development, and to provide tailored support to help niche members build on prior knowledge, known in Education as Scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). A teacher's process of selecting learning goals that are consistent with the student's

current needs is conceptually the same as the marketer focusing on the disparate interests of different stakeholders and providing information and interaction relevant to those interests.

Conceptual Model

The parallels between Integrated Marketing and Constructivism, at the theoretical level, are clear. So what do the common elements of Constructivism and Integrated Marketing say about how educators should help their different constituencies construct knowledge to benefit the field of Education?

Figure 1 shows a conceptual model comparing how Constructivism and Integrated Marketing work, supporting the following point-by-point discussion.

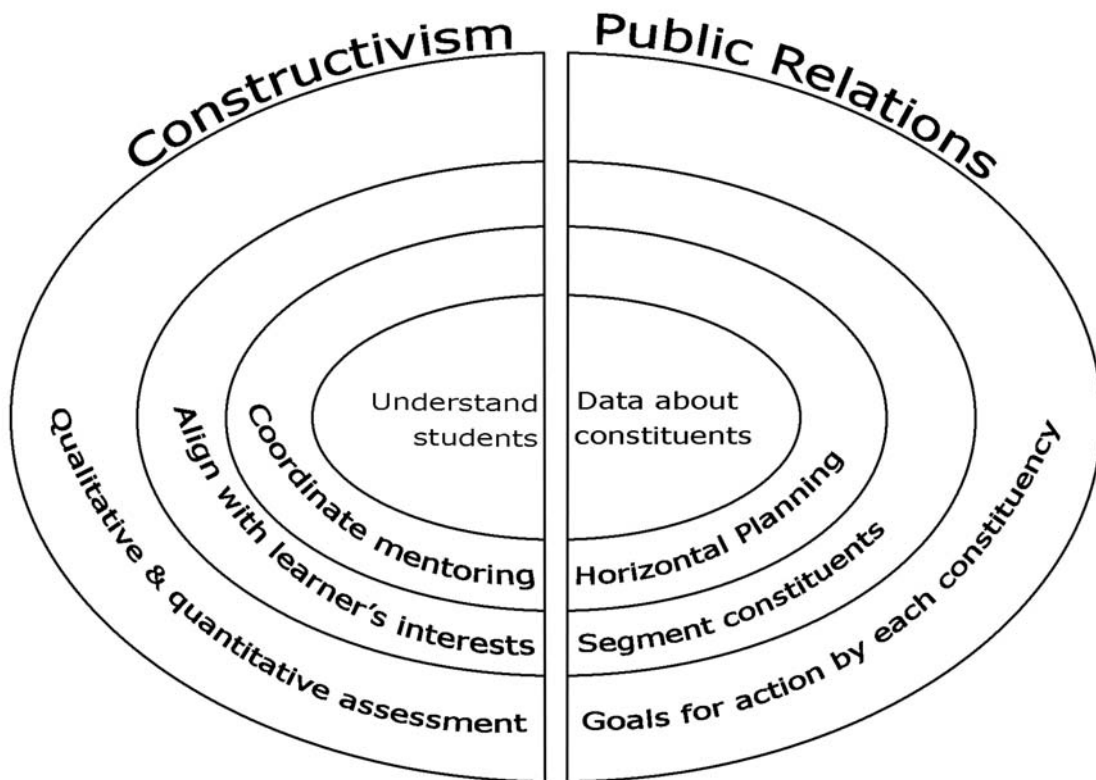


Figure 1

Beginning at the center of the model, Constructivist education is learner-centered (Stroh, 2002). Therefore, faculty members seek to understand their students' past experiences and orientations. Integrated Marketing also starts with a thorough understanding of constituents, both demographic and psychographic (including their lifestyles, habits, beliefs, and values). In Integrated Marketing, this is usually compiled using modern database technology as opposed to anecdotal sources.

In Constructivist education, everyone guiding the learner's efforts (administrators, teachers, aides, lab monitors) needs to be coordinated and moving in the same direction so the student does not receive conflicting guidance. Similarly, Integrated Marketers plan horizontally. Because all communication functions as a single system, all of the players in the organization need to be involved, causing them to be invested in the message and to communicate it naturally.

One of the most important foundations of Integrated Marketing is segmentation of the constituents into logical groups, based on understandings rooted in knowledge of the constituent, therefore based on facts, not guesses or emotional attitudes. One size does not fit all in public relations, so messages are sent to each constituency that are most relevant to each group, and therefore to which group members will be the most receptive. This parallels the Constructivism strategy of aligning content with the learner's goals and interests with the understanding that not all students in a class have the same needs.

Finally, the Integrated Marketing process of setting goals for measurable change in each constituency parallels the sometimes-thorny issue of assessment in education. The goal of older marketing communication models was to change opinion. Today,

evaluation of marketing communications is based on success in getting recipients to change or take action, with measurements that are directly attributable to the communications plan.

An overall university goal might be to increase enrollment, but this goal has too many confounding variables to be also a goal of the institution's marketing communications program. Rather, the communication goal might be to get prospective students to provide their names and contact information, so the Admissions team can actively recruit them.

Figure 2 illustrates the full model of Constructivist Public Relations as a higher

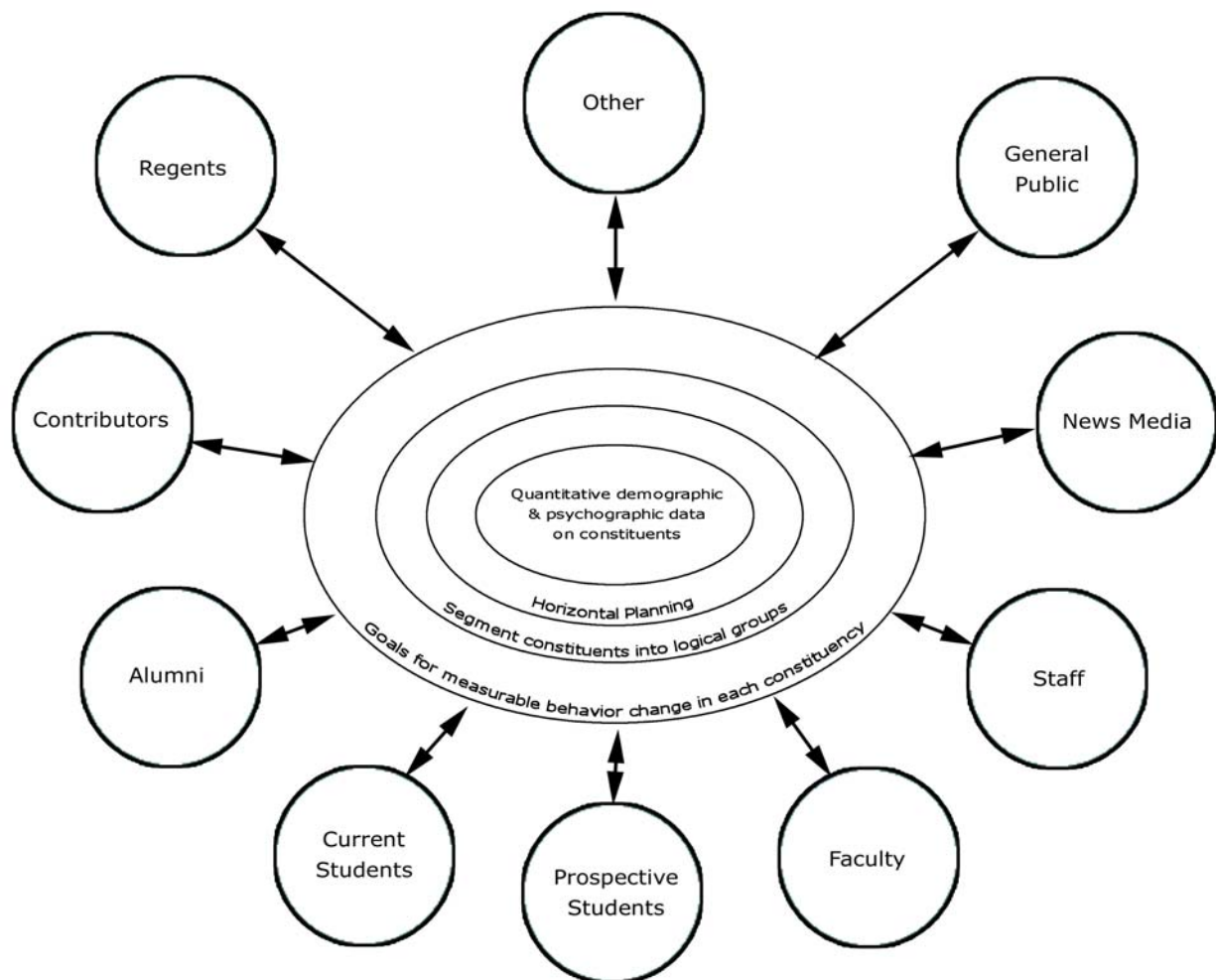


Figure 2

education institution might apply it, including two-way interactive communication that engages constituents (Dana, 2004), not just treating them as recipients of one-way messages. This two-way process is, in effect, an undertaking in collaborative learning, because as the educational institution receives feedback from each constituency, it can better tailor the next round of messages (McIntosh, 2004). While this figure suggests the kinds of constituency groups a higher education institution might typically identify, K-12 schools also have multiple internal and external constituencies to which this model is equally applicable. As the wants and needs of each group become better known, it becomes possible to provide more information focused to those wants and needs, the same way a Constructivist teacher focuses classroom content to the interests of the students as a means of engaging them in the content that needs to be learned.

Practical Application

At one level, the application of this idea is intuitive. If an administrator were going to speak to the local literacy council, the main subject would probably be literacy, not the prospects for the football team next year. On the other hand, if the administrator were going to the Quarterback Club, the subject *would* be athletic programs. In public speaking, often a public relations tool, tailoring remarks to the audience is expected. The same should be true of other promotional communication.

There is one major difference between Constructivist teaching and Integrated Marketing practice. The Constructivist teacher helps learners make their own meanings and those meanings may be different from the meanings held by the teacher. Public relations and marketing practitioners, however, function in an advocacy role. They have

a preferred meaning that they want people to construct, and they do their best to lead constituents in that direction through a four-step process:

1. Choose a single message that constituents see as believable, relevant, and important.
2. Segment constituencies into logical groups based on what is known about them, preferably rooted in hard data. There will almost certainly be several internal and external constituencies.
3. Identify the channels of communication that are best suited to reach each constituency.
4. Tailor messages for each group and delivered them proactively. The core message is always the same, but the “story” interpreting implications and ramifications may be significantly different for the various groups. In each case, the message starts with an understanding of the group, and then shows how it relates to them, basing it on THEIR perspective.

This approach would work for external functions such as recruiting and fund raising and for internal functions such as program planning and board relations.

Although it is advocacy, it is still a Constructivist endeavor.

Here are some practical strategies for the field of education to use in telling its story, within the context of the process outlined above:

- Tell your success stories at every opportunity. If you don't create the message, someone else may (like the media or your critics), and you may not like how they tell your story.

- Find a newsworthy “hook” on which to hang each message -- something that is new, different, or out-of-the-ordinary. This piques the interest of constituents. Starting with this “hook,” you can then address all the other important points you want to make.
- If we sound like we are whining, many people will tune us out. We have to use logical arguments, not emotional ones.
- Every time we state a fact, spell out why it is important, or how it affects students. Facts are more persuasive than rhetoric, but educators understand that people have different worldviews, so we can’t assume that our constituents will draw the same conclusions as we do.
- Sneak up on the subject of criticism of public policy. People will discount statements that imply that their beliefs are wrong. If, for example, we want to change *No Child Left Behind*, we should champion the goal of higher quality education while using factual information to lead people to question the validity of the NCLB tactics. The same principle applies no matter what public policy we may address.
- Finally, make public relations an on-going endeavor. There are always people out there who have not yet constructed the meaning we wish them to hold about the field of education. So, never stop telling your core message, highlighting things that demonstrate quality, and explaining why they are important to your audiences and to your students.

This process is more time consuming than, for example, simply sending an occasional news release to the local newspaper. It is, however, more effective in the long run. It provides our various constituents with information most relevant to their interests, and thus to which they are most likely to be receptive. That *is* making things “meaningful, connected, relevant, and useful,” just like good Constructivist teachers do for their students.

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