

Metamorphosis: The evolution of two practicum classes into a public relations agency

PHILIP GRUENWALD

Northwest Missouri State University

DAVID SHADINGER

Northwest Missouri State University

Restructuring the public relations practicum courses at a medium-sized Midwestern public university resulted in the development of a student-run public relations agency. Teams were created with students of varying levels of knowledge and expertise, and campus-based organizations were engaged as clients. The initial results for the clients were somewhat uneven, and some client-agency relationships were difficult, which mirrored similar experiences at other college, student-run agencies. Active research methodology showed the overall result as positive. Both the student and the course leadership reflections support the experience as a robust learning experience that prepares students for internship opportunities.

How to engage inexperienced students with little knowledge of public relations in a more robust, hands-on, practical field experience was the challenge facing a new faculty member at a medium-sized, Midwestern university. With nearly two decades of professional experience, the instructor viewed the practicum classes as a vital step in exposing

students to the field. Yet, the practicum students unknowingly exhibited what Elmore (2010) describes as Artificial Maturity, in which youth “are overexposed to information, far earlier than they’re ready ... [and] are underexposed to real-life experiences far later than they are ready” (4). In addition, the practicum course had no prerequisites through which students might learn any basic public relations concepts or skills. The practicum course was the prerequisite for the advanced practicum class.

During the fall of 2010 the public relations practicum and advanced practicum courses were conducted in a fashion similar to many traditional college classes with short lectures on a variety of discipline-specific topics, in-class exercises, and homework assignments requiring a variety of application-based inquiries.

The instructor soon realized the practicum students had no preparation, experience, or knowledge when they enrolled in the class; as a result, they had little idea what to do with any of the assignments. All of the advanced practicum students had completed the practicum course, and most had completed the introductory public relations course; however, very few had any relevant or practical public relations experiences. Concurrently, the instructor saw a similar need to enrich the experience for the upper-level students.

The instructor resolved that a different approach was needed in both classes. Schon (1987) introduced the seminal concept of reflecting on one’s action during the actual process, which converts the overall action research process into a dynamic teaching, learning, professional growth, and research experience. In addition, Michaelson, Bauman-Knight, and Fink’s (2004) team-based, learning approach mirrors the professional public relations environment with self-directed teams evolving solutions. Consequently, the curriculum was immediately revised, introducing students to the basic public relations concepts and limited hands-on applications. Within a year major course revisions were instituted, including combining the two practicum classes to allow the creation of teams with advanced students in leadership roles. At the same time, campus-based clients were solicited to provide actual public relations issues and problems to solve.

In the spring 2011 trimester, a project was recruited from the university’s recycling committee for the advanced practicum class. Student

teams were established and charged with developing a promotional plan focused on one of three specific target audiences: dormitory residents, off-campus students, or students and staff in non-residential university buildings. At the end of the trimester, each team made a formal presentation of their plan to the recycling committee. The committee members were so pleased with the three plans that they implemented many of the proposed activities the following year. To further facilitate the recycling plans, one of the previous advanced practicum students enrolled in an independent study class to manage the recycling committee’s promotional activities. Throughout the 2011-2012 school year the advanced practicum’s project was to develop and maintain a social media presence for the university’s speech and debate team.

Every term the instructor reviewed the student work and experiences, along with consideration of what additional exposure and skills development were still needed by the students, especially as those might help students obtain public relations internships. British researcher Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) promoted just such a “commitment to systematic questioning of one’s own teaching as a basis for development; the commitment and the skills to study one’s own teaching; the concern emphasized was to question and test theory in practice by the use of those skills” (144).

Re-organizing the public relations practicum courses eventually resulted in the development of a student-run public relations agency, where the most experienced students would lead a team of inexperienced students while working on an actual promotional project for a campus-based organization. The reason for working only with campus-based, student organizations was that they offered a much lower risk for students who were just learning the basics of public relations, as opposed to working with a community organization or business. The driving philosophy behind this inquiry into the practicum/agency experience is encapsulated by Levin and Greenwood’s (2001) statement that “action research focuses on solving context-bound, real-life problems” (105). The purpose of this paper is to view the public relations practicum experiences through the lens of action research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many traditional-aged college students exhibit the symptoms of Elmore’s (2010) artificial maturity. This view is supported by Allen & Allen (2009):

Generations ago, fourteen-year-olds used to drive, seventeen-year-olds led armies, and even average teens contributed labor and income that helped keep their families afloat. While facing other problems, those teens displayed adultlike maturity far more quickly than today’s, who are remarkably well kept, but cut off from most of the responsibility, challenge, and growth-producing feedback of the adult world (17).

AUTHOR NOTE: David Shadinger is an assistant professor of communications at Northwest Missouri State University, specializing in public relations. He spent over 20 years in professional public relations, marketing, fundraising and advertising positions. Shadinger joined the Northwest faculty in 2009 and started PRomo in 2010.

Philip Gruenwald is a marketing specialist with Lutheran Hour Ministries. He is a 2013 graduate of Northwest Missouri State University with a major in public relations. Gruenwald was the first Executive Director of PRomo.

Elmore's (2010) proposed solution includes four key elements: simultaneous responsibility and autonomy, face-to-face experiences supplementing a technology lifestyle, concurrent information and accountability, and community service.

Dewey (1938) is credited with building the case for the relationship between experience and learning, and he also proposed the need for reflection on school-based problems through disciplined inquiry (Bednarz, 2002). The need for increased student understanding of professionalism, teamwork skills, and improved public relations knowledge is well documented (Educators Academy of Public Relations Society of America, 1999; Neff, 2002; Brown & Fall, 2005; Bush, 2009). Subsequently, the positive impact from the incorporation of action research into the classroom has also been well documented (Calhoun, 2002; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007; Mills, 2007; Pelton, 2007; Sagor, 2009).

Coghlan and Brannick (2005) assert there are three essential concepts for appropriate action research: "particularity," "situationality" [sic] and being "out of praxis" (7). Incorporating these concepts into an introductory course is supported by Motschall and Najor's (2001) proposal for a client-centered class and Benigni and Cameron's (1999) research of campaign courses taught in a team-based environment. Maben's (2012) dissertation survey of undergraduate, student-run public relations firms on American college campuses confirmed the practices of team-based experiences and direct client interaction as central to the operation of a student agency. Maben's (2012) research indicates that students in most undergraduate agencies "are the decision makers and the majority handle the firm's planning, finances, client negotiation, client complaints and new client development most or all of the time" (97).

According to Bush (2009), "Student agencies are highly beneficial to public relations pedagogy in two areas that are most difficult to teach: Process-oriented experiential learning and professional skills" (35). Michaelson, Bauman-Knight, and Fink (2004) posit a team-based classroom learning approach provides a more robust educational environment. Commenting on how students can best gain from immersion in an activity, Gibbons and Hopkins (1980) proposed the extent of a student experience was based on the level of direct interaction, planning, implementation, responsibility for mastery, and opportunity for individual growth.

METHODOLOGY

The process of action research is relatively straightforward and primarily focused on the enhancement of teaching practices and the subsequent improvement of student learning. Coghlan and Brannick's (2005) concepts of particularity, "situationality" [sic] and being out of praxis are central to this inquiry (7). The practicum and advanced practicum students were enrolled in the public relations practicum classes to complete a degree requirement. The client selection was extremely

situational, as they were all campus-based and student-service focused. The ultimate course design was purposefully "out of praxis" as an academic course containing no lectures, review-style tests, or textbooks, while the activities and work processes were team-based and extremely collaborative.

Tomal (2003) elaborated the instructional action research process as "a systematic process in solving education problems and making improvements ... [including] appropriate interventions to collect and analyze data and then to implement actions to address educational issues" (8). Corey (1953) initially hypothesized and Noffke (1997) reemphasized that participant experiences could be improved if the participants reflected on their activities and experiential outcomes and then used that knowledge to adjust the curriculum.

Pelton (2010) summarizes the focus of action research with the question, "How well are my students learning what I am teaching?" (4). Pelton (2010) also counsels that the teacher's response to this question is even more important than the question itself. Reflecting on the experiences of re-designing and implementing a set of college practicum courses is the ideal application for utilization of action research methodology.

To answer the question about learning, the instructor introduced several end-of-course assignments. The student teams were required to write a reflective group paper and make a formal in-class presentation focused on their team's experiences, accomplishments, and learning. In addition, students completed individual assessments of their teammates and their team leader using a peer evaluation instrument based upon Michaelson, Bauman-Knight, and Fink's (2004) criteria. In an end-of-trimester meeting the instructor and the executive director reviewed the collective team reflections and peer evaluations to develop a list of proposed adjustments for the next trimester's lesson plans and team assignments.

CREATING A STUDENT-RUN AGENCY

Having spent nearly twenty years in advertising, marketing, and public relations on both the agency and client-side greatly influenced the instructor's decision to implement an agency-like teaching and learning methodology. Discussions with faculty colleagues in the spring of 2012 identified several campus-based organizations that could benefit from increased promotional assistance, including the student newspaper, radio station, speech and debate team, and the Communication and Mass Media department's social media.

Starting with the fall 2012 trimester, the practicum and advanced practicum classes were scheduled concurrently to facilitate the formation of teams and provide leadership opportunities for the advanced students. In the first class, practicum students were randomly placed on teams with an advanced practicum student assigned as a team leader. The practicum students were given introductory-level writing assign-

ments during the first three weeks to better prepare them for anticipated client/project needs.

As far as it was practical, the advanced practicum students were given their choice of client/project. (Everyone requested the radio station because it was considered a fun organization.) Advanced practicum students were oriented to the expectations of client/contact work and team management. The instructor explained the needs of each client. Team leaders were told to prepare reports from their first client meetings, which were to be shared in class.

A senior with extensive newspaper and public relations internship/field experience was recruited as the first executive director for the student-run public relations agency. The executive director attended all of the initial client meetings with the respective team leader. For the remainder of the trimester, the executive director scheduled individual, weekly status meetings with the team leaders. In a separate weekly meeting he delivered a summary of the team leader reports to the instructor.

Following Maben's (2012) model, the advanced practicum students were the direct contact for each of the clients. The team leaders developed the agency-client relationship and with their team created a promotional plan, public relations materials, and/or a promotional event. The teams also assisted with the implementation of the promotional plans.

The promotional planning process began with a meeting between the client and team leader. The client would list goals for the trimester or year along with expectations of the promotional team. The client-specific needs varied widely, from creating and managing an event or developing media relations to creating a social media presence. The linking commonality was client direction and mutual goal setting.

One team was assigned to produce social media content for the Department of Communications and Mass Media, specifically a weekly Facebook blog and Twitter. At the start, the department's Facebook page had three "likes." By the end of the trimester, it had 115 likes and reached 400 people every week. The team promoted the page by creating content about the department's target markets: students who were interested in communication and mass communication. Each week, the team wrote an article about an interesting student, faculty member, related organization, or graduate. The articles were created on a Wordpress blog and were shared by the team via Facebook and Twitter. Most subjects were happy to promote their own stories, and soon their friends were "liking" the postings and "re-tweeting" the links. The team leader created a content production schedule that alternated personal features, department news, and student organization spotlighting.

A second agency team was initially charged with maintaining the social media for the forensic team, focused on recruiting high school students for the highly competitive university squad. Several weeks into the trimester, the speech and debate coach added an event to the

public relations team's list of assignments: a humorous, political debate with individual tournament speeches showcased between the debates.

The initial goal for the forensic squad's agency team was to reach prospective members by regularly updating their social media with press releases and tournament updates. The forensic team's Facebook page was also updated with individual team member information. However, the team became focused on the event, and the tournament press releases were not followed up. Tweets rarely went out, and the site remained stagnant for most of the trimester. At the political debate and showcase event, the agency team conducted an informal survey and determined that nearly 50% of the event attendees had learned about the event from promotional efforts, while the other half had heard about it from instructor's in-class announcements.

A third agency team was assigned to the student-run campus newspaper. The newspaper benefited from having a public relations student on staff as its promotions manager. As a result, a schedule of promotional events was already in place, and the agency team expanded on those activities. The newspaper's goals were to increase student readership, social media interaction, and website traffic. The agency team reached out to football fans before every home game to participate in a Biggest Fan contest. The contest required fans to have their picture taken in an unusual location while holding a copy of the student newspaper and then submitting the photo to the newspaper's Facebook page. Every Thursday the agency team helped distribute copies of the newspaper to anyone walking through the Student Union building. The team also developed promotions for a new smart phone app and a Twitter "hashtag" for feedback and potential story ideas for the newsroom staff.

As the trimester drew to an end, the newspaper's promotion manager became dissatisfied with the very low participation for the contest, app downloads, and hashtag/tweets. In response, the agency team developed a new concept, a philanthropy directory where student organizations could advertise their fundraisers. There were dozens of fundraising events every trimester on the campus. The idea had the added bonus of creating friendly competition between the various student organizations while developing a new revenue stream. However, the newspaper's advertising staff rejected the philanthropy directory idea because they did not have the staff to handle the potential increase in business.

The fourth agency team worked with the student-operated radio station, which presented a unique challenge by having a promotional staff of 21 students and two promotion directors. With the blessing of the station's management, the agency team developed a breast cancer education and awareness event tied to the Susan G. Komen foundation. In short order the agency team experienced acute frustration with the client. The radio station enjoys its "wild & edgy" reputation. The station's promotional staff quickly took over the entire event and morphed the agency team's educational theme into a fun fair called "Breast Fest."

The station's staff developed "Breast Fest" to be more about the body part than disease education. They also ignored the agency team's advice to tone down either the promotions or the planned activities. The agency team was extremely concerned about the planned bra-removal contest, the bra-decorating contest, a questionable t-shirt design, and the station's purchase of breast-shaped stress balls. However, the radio station staff could not be dissuaded. Throughout the trimester the agency team regularly consulted with the executive director and the practicum instructor while they maintained a supportive, professional demeanor through the completion of the client's event. Ultimately, this proved to be a great educational opportunity as some real-world clients will have internal personnel to supervise and coordinate their promotional efforts, and there may also be times when agency personnel do not agree with the client.

At the end of the trimester each agency team made a formal presentation to a meeting of the combined practicum classes summarizing their work and what they had learned.

DISCUSSION

The revised curriculum included all four of Elmore's (2010) key elements. Each team was responsible for providing the service to its assigned client while also being given complete autonomy to develop whatever promotional plans it felt were appropriate to meet the client's needs. Team leaders were given all the available information concerning the client's public relations situation while being held accountable for the team's work product. To accomplish projects, each team leader facilitated face-to-face interactions with clients and team members. Providing promotional services to campus-based clients offered all practicum students the opportunity to serve the needs of someone and something in the campus community beyond their own self-interests.

The agency/practicum experience also incorporated all of the major elements Bush (1999) had identified as criteria of the more successful student agencies: team-based experiences, paid (scholarships) student officers, dedicated office space, course credit for student work, teaching credit for the instructor, an assessment process, and the emphasis on the direct application of public relations principles and skills in the course.

In the agency's first trimester the agency team working with the Communication and Mass Media department created and posted material nearly every week on the Facebook and Twitter sites. The forensic squad's team created an on-campus event to spotlight the squad but updated very little of the existing social media. The agency's newspaper team actively participated in numerous campus-wide promotions and created an interesting philanthropic promotional concept in spite of a leadership change. The radio station's agency team supported and attended the station's event while learning volumes about dealing with difficult situations and people.

Most client-team relationships were generally functional, but one was extremely problematic. As McElreath (1998) expressed, clients

of student agencies may have different understandings of the working relationship and student abilities and may not provide very motivating experiences. Some team plans fell through because their client ignored emails, missed appointments, and generally failed to respond to communications. Some team-organized events were poorly attended because of an apparent lack of interest by the student body. In a few cases, despite advice from the executive director or the instructor, an agency team started its client's promotional tactics too late to be effective.

Moreover, the lack of client sophistication among student organizations was exacerbated by the agency team leader's inexperience and under-developed interpersonal communication skills. Plus, as Pelton (2010) notes, not only is action research "inherently flexible" (14), but instructors and agency personnel must also be flexible to effectively handle the variety of situations and issues that arise in the normal course of providing services.

Two of the four teams encountered major problems. By mid-trimester the radio station team's relationship with their client became so contentious that the executive director regularly joined the team leader at client meetings, and the instructor periodically stepped in to maintain clear and civil communications. Just after mid-trimester the newspaper team's leader was removed for failing to perform, and the executive director assumed management of the team until the end of the trimester. In the end, making changes and adjusting to mitigating factors are not only part of active research, but also they are a normal part of teaching effectively, serving clients, and simply working with human beings.

CONCLUSIONS

As an evolving process, the agency approach to the practicum classes appears to be a positive and engaging teaching and learning methodology. Despite the challenges, it also provides a useful and supportive service for the participating client organizations. The student experiences in the public relations practicum/agency closely matched the results of Kuh's (1993) study of outside-of-class activities, including knowledge increase and application, improved vocational capabilities, and an overall boost in self-confidence. Student reflections supported the introduction of teams, real clients and their challenges, and the direct, hands-on application of public relations processes.

The instructor and the executive director reflected that the student-run public relations agency was also a truly applied learning exercise in communications studies, interpersonal communication, and promotional effectiveness. Most of the agency students had studied interpersonal and group communication, persuasion, sociology, and much more. Communication between two students often resulted in situations that validated much of what the students had studied in the classroom.

Team end-of-course reflections exhibited an improved understanding of the importance of working in a team and providing service to a client. This outcome is supported by Lev Vygotsky's (1978) zone of

proximal development concept stressing scaffolding, or guided reflection, on an action or experience would result in new learning. In a very similar vein, faculty advisors responding to Maben's (2012) study additionally indicated "Student growth was noted by increases in maturation, confidence, responsibility, problem-solving, leadership skills and teamwork." (102). Agency students also mirrored this outcome.

An encouraging outgrowth of the more active, practical instructional approach was the student behavior in class. The entire experience supports Elmore's (2010) postulation that students are excited about applying their knowledge to something that is authentic and meaningful for them: solving a "real" problem instead of an in-class exercise. The student reflections also indicated that while the teams had solved problems, they also learned how to work more effectively within an intense group setting.

Ultimately, experiences with the public relations practicum classes reinforced Piaget's theory of schema development where the student teams exhibited a cyclical process of cognitive development, utilizing experience and reflection as the basis for the progression of new knowledge, which "certainly validates the action research mindset" (Pelton, 2010, 17). The instructor also believes that being open to learning and applying public relations knowledge in this manner makes the learning experience more robust.

FUTURE ACTIONS

Following Dewey's (1938) lead and refining the practicum's orientation processes to better inform team leaders about the client service process is the first order of business, especially for future advanced public relations practicum classes. Maben's (2012) study also indicated that a majority of student-run agencies had written policy manuals. A step toward creating a more effective orientation for the practicum/agency was taken as one of the spring 2013 team leaders enrolled in an independent study to develop an agency orientations manual.

Bush (1999) identified several additional characteristics for a successful student agency, which have not yet been incorporated into the practicum courses, including concrete business protocols, a competitive application process, and charging clients for the work product. Attention to business practices is being applied; however, since the agency is housed within two practicum courses it is unlikely the latter two characteristics will be met.

Other challenges Bush (1999) uncovered concerned uneven agency student motivation, along with a disparity in respect, value, and resources allocated to existing journalism/mass communication organizations as opposed to the lack of all of these elements for student agencies. Student motivation is a challenge to address, primarily because the students have indicated they do not place much value on a one credit hour course. To begin addressing this concern, the advanced public relations practicum course was increased from one to two credit hours.

At two credit hours it matches the other practicum offerings within the department, specifically the student newspaper, radio station, and cable television channel. Respect and value will continue to be an issue since it will take time for students and faculty to become aware of the work being done by the agency. Resources are not likely to change for a class-based practicum.

As the agency develops a positive reputation for breaking through the conundrum of needing experience to gain experience, students should view participation in the agency as a valuable component of their educational journey. Other disciplines at the university, such as journalism and mass communications, have already realized the value of early student involvement in hands-on, realistic, and practical experiences and report higher-than-average student retention rates. The public relations faculty believes students who have completed the practicum/agency experience will similarly benefit from their participation. Finally, central to the public relations faculty's plans is Elmore's (2010) conjecture that increased student motivation is a direct result of knowledge application to a real and consequential problem-solving opportunity.