

Metamorphosis Stage 2: Year Two of a Student-Run Public Relations Agency Experience

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In the second year of a student-run public relations agency, the instructors discovered a need for improved client and student feedback. Using student end-of-course reflections and survey questions posed by Hon and Grunig (1999) in the Institute for Public Relations booklet, "Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in Public Relations," clients and enrolled student responses were analyzed to determine their satisfaction with the agency/practicum experience. Mid-year significant follow up measures were enacted to address emerging client service problems. Using the lens of action research, the survey results and subsequent managerial actions were extremely positive and encouraging for the future of the student agency.

Entering the second full year of a student-run public relations (PR) agency, the instructors discovered a need for improved client and student feedback. Each of the two PR instructors had years of professional and academic experience, met regularly with their students, and communicated extensively with the agency's clients. Yet, that was simply not enough. Paralleling the general belief "that the fundamental goal of public relations is to build and then to enhance on-going or long-term relationships with an organization's key constituencies" (Hon & Grunig, 1999, p. 2) the instructors initiated a survey of the agency's clients as well as students enrolled in the practicum courses.

Shadinger and Gruenwald (2013) detailed the 2012 experiences of PRomo, a student-run public relations agency at a medium sized, mid-western public university, noting challenges and suggesting revisions to the experience. Starting in the fall of 2013 a new instructor assumed

responsibility for the PR Practicum course. She joined the existing Advanced PR Practicum instructor in supervising the PRomo agency experience. In year two of Promo, students were immersed in activities that exactly meet Gibbons and Hopkins' (1980) key points for individual growth: direct interaction, planning, implementation, responsibility for mastery, and opportunity for individual growth. This approach also directly addresses the societally pervasive issue described by Elmore (2010) where students "are underexposed to real-life experiences" (p. 4). Nearly all of the students come to the PR Practicum course with no experience or knowledge of the PR field.

The PR agency is populated by students enrolled in the PR Practicum and Advanced PR Practicum classes at the university. To allow for the students' lack of PR experience all of the agency clients are campus-based: newspaper promotions, health center events, speech team social media, communication department blog, university tutoring center, and a nationally linked fundraising event. Both practicum classes meet at the same time one day each week.

Students in the PR Practicum class receive one credit hour and have one 50-minute class meeting per week. Three to five additional hours of work are expected outside of the class meeting time, which is used for planning and actively participating in client-oriented projects, events, and/or activities. The PR Practicum course is the prerequisite for Advanced PR Practicum.

The Advanced Practicum students receive two credit hours and attend two 50-minute classes each week. Six to ten additional hours of work are expected outside of the class meeting times. The Advanced PR Practicum students provide leadership for a team composed of PR Practicum students. The advanced student/team leaders meet frequently with the client to review progress on the client's PR project. The team leaders also meet a minimum of once each week with their teams to plan and work on their clients' projects. The team leaders also meet once a week with the instructor and the agency's executive director to review progress on their respective projects and team operations.

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The agency's executive director was an Advanced PR Practicum student during the previous school year. She applied, interviewed, and was selected by an interdisciplinary panel of faculty members. The executive director held periodic meetings with the agency's clients, randomly sat in on team meetings, and attended events the teams implemented for their respective clients.

Early in the fall term the instructors decided that additional information and input was needed from the clients as well as from the enrolled students. The hope was to uncover ideas or issues that would improve the client and student experiences. Schon (1987) supports this type of reflective approach where actions are converted into learning experiences, teaching opportunities, and professional growth through the action research process. Stenhouse (1975) also supported such inquiry as a way to improve teaching skills and test pedagogy.

As the term progressed, issues began to develop between the student team leaders and several of the clients. These issues helped focus the survey questions and gave direction to the ultimate purpose for the research: reinforcing Levin and Greenwood's (2001) statement that "action research focuses on solving context-bound, real-life problems" (p. 105).

This paper views the student public relations agency client experience through the lens of action research. Following Coghlan and Brannick's (2005) clearly identified "action research process of participative data gathering, data analysis, feedback and action planning, intervention and evaluation, the named problem was addressed and improvements made" (p. 121).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the book, *Artificial Maturity*, the author describes what he feels is the "fool's gold" or major problem facing the current generation: "1. Children are overexposed to information, far earlier than they're ready, 2. Children are underexposed to real-life experiences far later than they're ready" (Elmore, 2010, p. 4). This over/under exposure issue leads to situations where students are unable even think critically or to solve problems. Elmore (2010) proposed key elements for addressing the effects of Artificial Maturity, and these were central to the development of the PRomo agency experience. They included community service, concurrent information and accountability, face-to-face experiences supplementing a technology lifestyle, and simultaneous responsibility and autonomy. Todd (2014) found that Millennials rate their professional skills much higher than their employers in entry level positions in areas such as writing skills, oral skills, and job task preparedness. The PRomo instructors consistently noted that entering PR Practicum students routinely believe they have much better communication and problem-solving skills than they subsequently exhibit while working on client projects. A recent world-wide comparative study of students revealed that American students' scores had declined in nearly every category, including reading, science, and math ("Waiting for Su-

perman," 2010). The single exception was confidence. According to the survey, American students think they are awesome. In order to help to reduce the discrepancy in skills for entry level employees, the student-run agency can allow the students to gain valuable experience that will aid them in internships and in their first jobs. Given the students' lack of PR knowledge, along with their limited understanding of professional values and teamwork skills, the need for work in these areas is well documented (Educators Academy of Public Relations Society of America, 1999; Neff, 2002; Brown & Fall, 2005; Bush, 2009; Collier, 2013).

Concurrently, students in the agency setting are exposed to the best-practice findings of team-based operations and direct client interaction (Maben, 2012; Motschall&Najor, 2001; Benigni& Cameron, 1999). Michaelson, Bauman-Knight, and Fink (2004) suggest a team-based classroom learning approach provides a more robust educational environment. Bush (2009) also posits that "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" (p. 35). The Commission on Public Relations Education recommends that one of the key areas for improved education is "supervised work experience in public relations" (The Professional Bond, 2006, p. 7).

METHODOLOGY

Action research was chosen as the lens of this inquiry since the focus of the instructors was to improve the student and client agency experience as a direct outgrowth of the course instruction and activities. In line with Coghlan and Brannick's (2005) key action research concept of "situationality" the students were enrolled in public relations practicum classes, and the students were all campus-based and student-service focused (p. 7). Regarding Coghlan and Brannick's (2005) additional concept of being "out of praxis," there were only four class meetings for all of the students, no lectures, tests, or textbooks. All work was client-driven, team-based, and conducted outside a traditional classroom (p. 7). The team leaders also attended a weekly meeting to debrief the PRomo agency management concerning client project status and the functioning of their respective teams.

The number of clients was limited (seven for fall term, eight spring term) and the number of students was also relatively small (Advanced Practicum: seven fall, 12 spring; PR Practicum: 13 fall, 15 spring). While these limited numbers do not necessarily lead to robust qualitative or quantitative research results, they are important for helping the instructors identify trends and issues that can be addressed to improve the practicum experience for students and clients. Concurrently, and also in line with action research methodology, the survey was augmented with the student team leader's end-of-course reflection reports.

Utilizing a survey to determine additional information about client and student satisfaction with the agency experience and as a method

to improve the teaching methodology is supported by several action researchers (Corey, 1953; Noffke, 1997; Tomal, 2003; Pelton, 2010). The processes of the first year's operation resulted in a basic communication problem early in year two. Identifying the problem and implementing specific changes are labeled a "first-order change" by Coghlan and Brannick (2005, p. 121). This approach mirrors the description by Bartunek et al. (2000) of administratively driven action research, reflection, and resolution of a communication problem between clients of an institution and the institution's employees. Researching, reflecting, and revising the public relations practicum courses and the student communications agency experience is a best practices approach for the utilization of action research.

A survey was initiated in the second year of the PRomo agency experience. The survey was a mixed methods survey of students in two public relations practicum classes and their contact persons for their respective team's public relations project. The questions being investigated were the satisfaction of the students with their overall experience, the satisfaction of each team's client with the services provided by student team, and the overall effectiveness of the agency/practicum classes. The survey utilized the same questions posed by Hon and Grunig (1999) in the Institute for Public Relations booklet titled "Guidelines for Measuring Relationships in Public Relations." On the survey, a five-point Likert scale was used for all quantitative questions, with five indicating Strongly Agrees and one indicating Strongly Disagrees. Questions 11 and 17 were designed to utilize an inverse reaction (using reversed scoring) to validate the respondent's understanding of the agency processes and the respondent's attention to the intent of the survey instrument.

The survey also included some open-ended questions to allow for more individualized and qualitative responses.

All of the student team leaders were new each term. Also, all of the team leaders were required to complete the PR Practicum class before they could enroll in the Advanced PR Practicum course. Finally, all of the Advanced students had taken at least two PR courses prior to enrolling in the agency experience. Several of the PR Practicum students had not taken any PR classes, while a few had taken one PR or media writing class.

RESULTS

Each term the clients were the same seven faculty and staff members. More clients responded to the fall survey (5 out of 7) than to the spring survey (3 out of 7). The two PR Practicum classes had combined student survey responses of 18 (out of 19) in the fall term and 24 (out of 28) in the spring term.

The student opinions were somewhat positive both terms, with a slight overall increase in the average scores in the spring term (See Appendix A). Nearly all of the students were new to the practicum/agency

experience each term. Only four students out of the two-term total of 47 students worked on a team in the fall and then served as a team leader in the spring term.

The client's satisfaction scores reflected a gap between the average scores from the fall to the spring term. At the end of the first term communication between the team leaders and the clients, combined with poor service issues, had become so acute that several clients contacted the instructors for intervention in the agency service process. This displeasure with team service and communication was reflected in the client's low fall 2013 score averages for questions 4, 8, 10, 11, 14, and 16 (See Appendix B). Responses to questions 1, 2, and 13 appear to reinforce the clients' positive feelings towards choosing to be involved in the agency/educational experience, in spite of any concerns about the processes or outcomes (See Appendix B).

Overall, the client responses were marginally positive during the fall term and improved in the spring term (See Appendix B). Client responses to questions 5 & 7 were positive in the fall, improved in the spring, and appear to indicate a continued willingness to work with the student agency, in spite of the fall term communication and service issues. Responses to questions 11, 13 and 17 mirrored the improvements in the other scores and clearly supported the improvement of the client-agency relationship, team leader communication, and service. Implementation of new procedures in the spring 2014 term appears to have improved the client satisfaction with the agency experience, as indicated by the improved client scores to questions 4, 8, 10, 11, 14, and 16.

As a result of several management-initiated steps, the client's satisfaction with the agency experience improved significantly in the spring term. In spite of having limited PR knowledge or related experiences, the students exhibited an overall positive response to their PR agency experiences and slightly higher average scores in the spring term.

The qualitative responses reflected Hon & Grunig's (1999) observations about the quality of public relations being based on the quality of relationships between the clients and the agency. In the fall semester, prior to adding the supplemental communication between the executive director and the clients, several students mentioned that the experience was not positive or productive. For example, one student said, "Our client didn't really give us anything to show for our work, they were not cooperative, and they didn't value our work." Another said, "My ideas were shot down. I felt embarrassed and unimportant." However, in the spring semester, after the implementation of a new communication reporting structure, students reported overall better communication. Students who felt that their team had a strong relationship with the client had a more positive experience in the agency overall. "It was great. My client was there to help me every step of the way," one participant stated. The students appreciate the applied learning in the agency as a definite benefit. As a participant observed, "The class taught me what it will be like to lead an organization's media. It was hard work and I've learned from that experience."

Some participants mentioned wanting even more challenges from their clients. In response to the question to describe their relationship with the agency as beneficial, one participant wrote, "For the most part yes, I think we could have been given more to do but we still learned quite a bit."

The clients appreciated strong communication with the teams. Those who felt that they were not getting good frequency of communication with their teams described a less positive experience. This was much more prevalent in the fall semester than in the spring. One client said, "The communication from the team was not enough in my opinion. Therefore, some of the needs of the program were not met. With a lack of communication, planning was difficult" Statements such as this were indicative of the communication problems mentioned by fall clients. One client wanted more face-to-face meeting times rather than just electronic communication. However, another said, "I think the group does the best it can because I recognize that this is a learning environment. My needs are not *so* immediate that a fluke now and then is a problem."

Other clients tied the quality of their experience with the agency to the quality of the team working with them. Their impressions of the agency were driven by the relationship they had with the team. This echoes a sentiment by Daggs (2011) regarding the concept of organizational face. In her article, Daggs argues that consumers and publics form relationships with organizations through relationships with members, not the organizations themselves. As the members may change or interactions with the members are negative, the perception of the organization is likewise negatively affected. One client stated that she hopes to get a similar team in future semesters because this team was much more effective than her previous team.

ADVANCED PR STUDENT END-OF-TERM REFLECTIONS

All of the Advanced PR Practicum students/team leaders were also required to submit reflections on their agency/practicum course involvement. The students were overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation of the leadership opportunity, agency functioning, client relationship and the general learning experience. While initially expecting exact directions and project details, several students mentioned enjoying the freedom to lead their team and implement the client's project. Additionally, many of the team leaders described the client relationship as a challenging part of the job. As one team leader commented, "For the [team] leader being assigned to this client next semester, I would most likely tell them to be very persistent in talking to [the client] and making sure they know exactly what he wants them to do for the program or whatever else he assigns them to." Several team leaders also mentioned having to learn more about themselves as delegators and how to develop effective follow-up systems with inexperienced team members. In the end the comments are best summed up by one team leader's reflection: "Being a team leader was intimidating for me and

I learned that sometimes I'm not very good at delegating responsibilities and essentially telling people what to do. This class helped me gain confidence in being a leader and facilitating a project that had multiple parts."

DISCUSSION

Every Monday the team leaders met with the executive director and summarized their previous week's client project activities and any team-related issues. Even though the Advanced PR Practicum instructor usually attended, the executive director summarized the meeting in a weekly report to both instructors. As noted previously, fall term problems with team leader communications and follow through were severe enough to warrant intervention.

In the spring term several key communication steps were added that impacted the overall experience for all participants. The agency's executive director had a private meeting with each client before the term began. The executive director also scheduled additional meetings with each client during the fourth and seventh week of classes. These two additional meetings served as direct follow up/feedback sessions to determine if the team leaders were meeting the needs and expectations of the clients. Infrequent communication and miscommunication with clients had emerged as a problem during the fall term.

Despite clear directions for each team leader to follow up with their respective clients, the instructors found themselves needing what Coghlan and Brannick (2005) call a "third-order change," where the instructors had to "question their own assumptions and points of view [concerning student persistence and execution] and develop and implement new ones" (p. 121). The instructors realized that repeated reminders and weekly report meetings were insufficient to motivate a few upper-level students.

Knowing the executive director was scheduling client meetings helped keep each team leader focused on regular communication with their clients. It also gave the executive director additional information to include in her weekly report to the instructors. These additional client meetings appear to have completely eliminated the communication and follow up problems of the previous term.

The surveys and reflections appear to support the instructor's belief that the agency/practicum experience is very positive and offers students an intense and intensive opportunity to expand their understanding of public relations activities and the field in general.

While this study was very useful in helping identify and remedy issues with the experience for both the clients and the students, the study is not without its limitations. First, the spring term response rate involved less than half of the participating clients. Therefore, a full gamut of responses was not available from all clients. In the future, we might consider doing an online survey to encourage more responses. In addition, the same form was used for both students and clients. Some students were a bit confused, even with verbal instructions to fill out

the survey from their own perspective. For future studies, the form will need to be revised to make sure that the form accurately reflects the experiences and ideas of both the clients and the students. In addition, the practicum classes do not attract large numbers of students, making statistical tests and generalizations problematic. Surveys and analyses were further limited by the number of clients, which is also limited by the number of students in the Advanced PR Practicum class.

CONCLUSION

Clients and students generally viewed the agency process as a positive learning experience, especially after the spring term. Regular communication is an extremely important element of relationship building. Students are still learning about the professional world, its practices, expectations, and various working requirements. Consequently, throughout the term students continued to require follow up, feedback, and direction as they acquired new and expanded professional skills.

Future agency/practicum sessions should incorporate the recent communication steps and continue to build on the professionally oriented project and leadership experiences. As PRomo continues, the internal-to-the-campus/client environment can lead into an organizational pattern of feedback loops and interaction sequences that build relationships between the agency and the clients while also integrating communication processes and public relations activities. This approach duplicates the "recursive" systems model where patterns of collaboration become reciprocal for all parties (Senge, 1990; McCaughan and Palmer, 1994; Haslebo and Nielsen, 2000). Senge (1990) postulates that systems, like the PRomo team leader and client relationship, begin to exhibit "dynamic complexity" as a result of the passage of time combined with multiple causes and effects. McCaughan and Palmer (1994) propose that systemic questioning can greatly assist management in understanding how a system is functioning. As a "recursive" system, PRomo could greatly benefit from just such an on-going, introspective effort. Dynamic, actively engaging, non-traditional education operations such as PRomo are not immune from the need for regular reflection and periodic systemic adjustments.

APPENDIX A
Student Survey Responses - Averaged

Questions	Fall 2013	Spring 2014	Two-term Averages
1. The management of PRomo gives people like me enough say in the decision-making process.	3.72	3.83	3.79
2. The management of PRomo believes the opinions of people like me are legitimate.	3.50	3.67	3.60
3. Describe your experience as a PRomo client. How do you feel about how well PRomo listens to and responds to your needs as a client?			Qualitative
4. I believe the PRomo organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.	3.61	3.67	3.64
5. PRomo's leadership treats people like me fairly and justly.	3.56	3.79	3.69
6. What is your opinion of PRomo's ability as an organization to accomplish what it says it will accomplish? Do you think it can? Why or Why not?			Qualitative
7. I would rather work together with PRomo than not.	3.78	3.88	3.83
8. I can see that PRomo wants to maintain a relationship with people like me.	3.89	3.83	3.86
9. Do you feel like PRomo is committed to maintaining a long-term relationship with you as a client? Why or Why not?			Qualitative
10. I am happy with my experience with PRomo.	3.28	3.79	3.57
11. I feel there is no benefit from a relationship with PRomo for a person like me.	2.50	1.71	2.05
12. Describe your relationship with PRomo. Do you find it to be beneficial? Why or Why not			Qualitative
13. PRomo takes care of people who are likely to reward the organization.	3.44	3.79	3.64
14. PRomo will compromise with people like me when it knows that it will gain something.	3.50	3.46	3.48
15. Do you feel that PRomo expects something in return from you as client? If so, what? If not, why not?			Qualitative
16. PRomo is very concerned about the welfare of people like me.	3.56	3.67	3.62
17. I think that PRomo succeeds by stepping on other people.	2.00	1.83	1.90

APPENDIX B
Client Survey Responses - Averaged

Questions	Fall 2013	Spring 2014	Two-term Average
1. The management of PRomo gives people like me enough say in the decision-making process.	3.8	5.0	4.3
2. The management of PRomo believes the opinions of people like me are legitimate.	3.8	5.0	4.3
3. Describe your experience as a PRomo client. How do you feel about how well PRomo listens to and responds to your needs as a client?			Qualitative
4. I believe the PRomo organization takes the opinions of people like me into account when making decisions.	3.3	5.0	4.0
5. PRomo's leadership treats people like me fairly and justly.	4.3	4.7	4.4
6. What is your opinion of PRomo's ability as an organization to accomplish what it says it will accomplish? Do you think it can? Why or Why not?			
7. I would rather work together with PRomo than not.	4.0	4.3	4.1
8. I can see that PRomo wants to maintain a relationship with people like me.	3.3	4.3	3.7
9. Do you feel like PRomo is committed to maintaining a long-term relationship with you as a client? Why or Why not?			Qualitative
10. I am happy with my experience with PRomo.	2.8	4.3	3.4
11. I feel there is no benefit from a relationship with PRomo for a person like me.	2.3	1.3	1.9
12. Describe your relationship with PRomo. Do you find it to be beneficial? Why or Why not			Qualitative
13. PRomo takes care of people who are likely to reward the organization.	4.0	2.0	2.6
14. PRomo will compromise with people like me when it knows that it will gain something.	3.3	2.0	2.7
15. Do you feel that PRomo expects something in return from you as client? If so, what? If not, why not?			Qualitative
16. PRomo is very concerned about the welfare of people like me.	3.3	4.3	3.7
17. I think that PRomo succeeds by stepping on other people.	1.3	1.3	1.3